

*I want you...
even when I hate you.*

**I HATE
YOU**

Wall Street Journal Bestselling Author

ILSA MADDEN-MILLS

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I Hate You
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I Hate You Playlist

Click below to hear the music that inspired I Hate You!

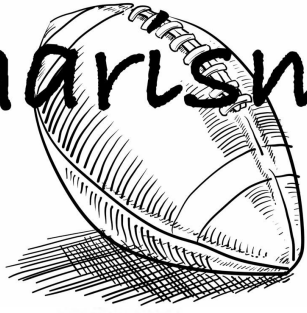
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DEDICATION

This book is for all the cool, smart girls in the world, especially dedicated to those who love hot football players, cupcakes, *Say Anything*, *Big Bang Theory*, *True Blood*, and of course, potty-mouthed parrots.

1

Charisma



Charisma



There are worse things than seeing your ex for the first time since he dumped you: root canal, hairy wolf spider on your pillow, watching your dad kiss your sixth grade teacher.

I shudder at those thoughts as I whip my car into the parking lot of Cadillac's, a local bar and hangout spot. A long exhalation leaves my chest as I turn off the ignition.

Welcome back to Magnolia, Mississippi, and Waylon University, folks. It's time to face the music, which is the guy who broke up with me in front of all my friends at my own freaking eighties-themed sorority homecoming party last October. I'd worn a sleek fedora and carried a kickass whip a la sexy Indiana Jones style, and he'd been in yellow parachute pants and a ladies-sized small tank top that clung to every muscle on his chest. We were totally fine—until it all went to hell.

That was almost three months ago, and I haven't seen him since.

But tonight—*tonight*, I'm going to see him face to face, because I have to prove to myself that I'm over him. I'm not leaving until my eyes meet his and

Dang, I don't know what will happen after that.

My bottom lip hurts where I've chewed on it during the drive from the house to here. Maybe he's not inside. I picture him laid up in his dorm room surrounded by jersey chasers. They're probably rubbing him down with hot oil right now, caressing those bulky, tight muscles on his back, most definitely the wiry, roped ones on his forearms—

Stop. Forget the wide receiver.

Clenching the steering wheel, I scan the parking lot for his black truck and don't see it, but the place is packed for a Wednesday night in January. Everyone is back from the holiday break filled with new optimism for grades, social status, and what the future holds. My future? In six months I'll be out of Magnolia and living a whole new life, one that doesn't involve smoking-hot football players with rock-hard abs who tell you you're beautiful but in the end are just big fat liars.

My eyes land on the door of the bar as a group of students spill out of the entrance. They stumble around laughing and talking, and my heart twinges. That used to be me. I used to be the life of the party—but look at me now, the girl who's basically been in social hiding since Blaze ended things.

New semester, new you, I mutter. I'm not going to be the pathetic creature I was a few months ago. No more Wallflower Charisma! Party Girl is back! It's going to be awesome!

"Car door is open," states the snobby car voice lady who lives inside my older model Nissan Maxima, and I realize I've been sitting here with one leg in and one out, my mind running. I smirk at the technology that was put into these cars in the early 90s—not at the fact that they were able to crack the code on how to record some British woman's voice and play it, but how they decided this groundbreaking technology should be used to alert the driver to the most obvious things.

"Washer fluid is low."

"Parking brake is on."

If Lady Maxima—my nickname for said un-insightful voice—really wanted to help, she would come up with some better alerts.

"Don't chase down the ice cream truck. It's embarrassing and you're lactose intolerant anyway."

"Don't screw that football player. He will only break your heart."

With a nervousness that makes me annoyed, I take one last look in the

rearview mirror to check my hair and makeup. My long, dark hair is braided in two loose plaits, the soft pink streaks peeking out here and there. Makeup is smoky eyes and carefully filled-in brows. Lipstick is dark pink. In a perfect world, I imagine my style gives me a sassy femme fatale look, but the reality is I'm just a short nerd girl with pink in her hair.

I get out of the car and stop at the heavy wooden entrance. Dread, thick and heavy, stirs around in my stomach as I contemplate how I'm going to react when I see him. No doubt he'll be with Dani, the willowy Barbie doll creature he picked up with after me. I swallow down queasiness as a chilly gust of wind blows, pushing me closer to the door.

F him.

You may not be the most beautiful girl in the room, but that's not why people dig you. Show them you're back and better than ever.

The bustling sounds of the bar fill my head as I enter, people laughing and Pat Benatar's "Hit Me With Your Best Shot" on the jukebox. *Fitting*. With tables on one side and pool tables and an arcade on the other, the place is decorated like an old-fashioned diner with black and white floors and red stools at the bar. Vintage cars on neon signs blink on the walls.

Playing cool and acting as blasé as possible, I take off my coat and drape it over my arm. Tiny beads of sweat form on my face, and I chalk it up to the stares of everyone in the place. They aren't looking at me, per se, but they are watching the door, waiting for the football team to arrive. With a deep breath, I inhale the greasy, yummy smell of fried food. My stomach growls, and I tell it to chill out. There'll be no messy cheesy fries with loads of ketchup and ranch on the side tonight. My black mohair sweater dress is too pretty...and this is business.

"There she is! Ladies and gentlemen, I give you a person we haven't seen in these parts in ages. The elusive Charisma Rossi! Give her a hand, y'all!" The announcement comes from Margo, the cardigan-wearing, champagne-drinking president of my sorority.

Color floods my cheeks. "Stop that. Attention is what I don't need right now." I scan the room with lowered eyes.

She straightens the headband on her shiny, straight blonde hair and gives me a pointed look. "He isn't here, Charm," she says, her Southern accent sweet as iced tea. "But he will be."

"Who isn't here?"

"Don't play dumb. You're too smart for it. Nice outfit, by the way. Bold

with the red stilettos—makes quite a statement.” She arches an elegant yet somehow condescending brow as she hooks her arm in mine and tugs me toward the front of the bar. Normally, I wouldn’t be so acquiescent to her telling me what to do, but she’s taller than me, and I use her as a shield, hunkering down next to her as we walk.

She stops at a big table right out in the open with a clear view of the arcade and pool tables.

Great, just great—right in the middle for everyone to see.

I sigh. “What time did you arrive to score a front-row seat?”

“Chi-Os get the best. I aim to please.”

Margo is a Type A tornado on her way to Yale Law. We’re nothing alike, but we manage...mostly. She thinks I’m a little wild, and I think she has a stick up her ass. I like her anyway.

My eyes scour the bar again, and I straighten my shoulders. Be carefree. Be nonchalant. BE THE OLD YOU. Right. Only, there’s a pinch on my right big toe from my three-inch heels, and I end up standing on one foot like a flamingo to ease the pain. To make matters worse, both arms itch, and I glare at the fluffy fabric on my sleeves. It was a big mistake to wear this, yet I know where my head was when I picked out the figure-hugging dress. I wanted to look hot. I wanted him to see me, take a good, long, second look, and wish he still had me.

“You’re scratching yourself. A lot.” Margo squints at me.

“Dude, I’m fine.”

But I’m not. My skin, from the top of the neckline to the hem, feels like a million ants have invaded. *Mohair, why you killing me?* I’m mid-scratch, trying to be discreet as I reach a spot on my neck, when a group of rambunctious partiers pushes past me to get to the pool tables. I stumble in the process, and someone’s cold beer spills down the front of my once awesome but now terrible dress.

Crap.

Double crap.

Well, shit.

I stare down at my wet chest and let out a wail. At least the coldness makes the itchiness feel a tiny bit better.

The guy in question utters a half-mumbled apology and takes off for the pool tables.

“How rude. By the way, I can see your nipples,” Margo says as she takes

a sip from her champagne flute.

“Perfect—a flamingo with erect nipples,” I mutter.
He isn’t even here yet and this night already sucks.

2

Charisma



Charisma



While blotting my dress with napkins Margo pushed into my hands, I take in our group and see Connor Dimpleshitz, Margo's man. He's chatting with some of his nerd friends, and I say that because out of the four guys, three wear identical *Regional Chess Champions* shirts. Digging up resolve, I flash a big pretend smile. Fresh guys—I can get behind that. They check me out with a bit of fascinated wariness, and I *almost* claw and purr at them, but my heart isn't invested. Old Charisma would have. She was outgoing and always ready to party, but she hasn't reared up yet. She might have teased them for their matching shirts or enjoyed a long conversation about the intellectual benefits of chess on the brain. She might have hooked up with one of them if they agreed to her rules: no kissing on the lips and no sleeping over.

The truth is, sex for me is a carefully thought-out plan with the right guy selected. The moment I arrived at Waylon, I set those guidelines in place to keep my heart safe, and I only broke the kissing rule once, but that was way back in freshman year, and I don't think Blaze even remembers that night at the toga party. Not surprising since we were both trashed and didn't exchange

names. Plus, he never brought it up during the three weeks we were hooking up last fall—rules emphatically in place.

Not once did he kiss me. Not once did he ask me to stay over.

“Glad you came out, Charisma. We’ve missed you,” Connor calls out, grinning as he raises his dark beer, and I throw up a wave.

“Blaze and company should be arriving any minute—or at least that’s the word from social media,” Margo says in my ear.

She needs to not bring his ass up.

“Haven’t thought of him in ages. Can’t recall a thing about the guy. Is he well?”

Her eyes squint at me. “They did win the national championship against UT two days ago, so yeah.”

“Good for him. I hope it brings him the millions he wants in the NFL someday.”

“You didn’t watch the game?” Her mouth gapes.

“Nope. I had better things to do. Went to the dentist, washed my hair, cleaned out Vampire Bill’s birdcage.” I avoid her eyes and take in the packed area. Bodies jostle around the bar, bumping and moving like molasses as coeds do a loop from the end of the bar to the pool tables. This place was my go-to party place last year—until him.

My eyes narrow in on a huddled group near the back of the room.

Welcome Back, Wildcats! has been printed on a huge white banner and put up on the wall. Jersey chasers on dick patrol linger underneath it, waiting for their idols. My lips tighten.

“Yeah, the piranhas are circling.” She takes a sip of her drink, her gaze darting from me to them.

“IDGAF.” Acronyms—it’s my thing. They save time and get the point across.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see her frown and give me a searching, almost worried look, reminding me she witnessed my spectacular breakup with Blaze at our party—although, was it even a breakup when we weren’t a *real* couple? I guess not, though the pain of us being over hurled me into a darkness I don’t like to think about, as if we’d been together for months.

And Blaze? Just the memory of his stony face and hard eyes, his hands on my shoulders, pushing me away, telling me I wasn’t—

“Right. Forget him. How was your Christmas?” she asks.

“It’s been almost four years, and Ma’s still upset I didn’t stick around the

Bronx and marry a nice Italian guy across the street. Pop and my two brothers are rowdy as ever.” I manage a smile. “I did miss them though. Paulie’s kids are adorable, and Mattie’s still living at home and going to law school. He’s the one dealing with Ma’s meddling right now, not me, so halleluiah for that.”

She cocks her head. “Nice. You look pale.”

I don’t glance at her, keeping my eyes carefully focused on a point on the bar behind her. “I’m fine,” I say, but the truth is, I haven’t gone a day without thinking about Blaze.

I just...I just...can’t stop thinking about those words he said.

We’re over. You’re not my type.

At the time, we were on the dance floor, jammed between writhing, drunk partygoers, and I thought I misheard him. I knew we weren’t serious, but for the first time in my life, the walls around my heart were cracked, just a little, and even though I had my rules, I wanted *him* to be the one who stuck around. I wanted *him* to ask for more.

He didn’t.

He dumped me and went on with his life, like I was *nothing* to him but a notch on his bedpost.

Anger flares, building and growing.

“Not his type, indeed,” I mutter. Deep down I’m still that chubby girl in school with thick legs and huge boobs. *Chubby Charm, Bouncing Boobs, Thunder Thighs*—those nicknames stick in my throat like cement. Most days I’m past those old insults; I’m not normally one to wallow in adolescent self-pity, but when your thighs *still* touch and the guy you’re with dumps you and starts dating a toothpick who looks like she might break in half if a hard wind blows, it brings the memories back, sharp as a knife.

Margo frowns as she looks at me—*again*. Digging up some of my old flair, I paste on a big smile, catch the arm of a passing waitress, and order a round of drinks for the table: a shot of tequila for me, prosecco for Madame President, and a Guinness for Connor. The other guys decline my offer. Maybe they’re still wary of me, but I barely notice. My senses are heightened and taut, tight as a wire as I try to keep one eye on the door and one on my friends, hoping I look casual and not anxious.

Come on, football players! Let’s get this over with so I can get my ass home and put on regular clothes, raid my fridge, and watch *Big Bang Theory*.

Three tequilas in and only half an hour has passed. Plus, I’m still sober. I

glare at my shot glass, contemplating an entire bottle. Why does each moment that passes feel so dang slow? Still, I look back up and give the group a sweeping smile. *Here I am, happy as a clam*, it says.

The front door of the bar creaks open, and I pause mid-sip. The music is loud, tons of students going back and forth, yet somehow the noise of the door skates down my spine like a ghost brushed past me dragging chains.

I feel the electricity in the room before I lay my eyes on him.

He blows in like a king ready to receive his subjects.

At six foot three and almost zero body fat, he's tall and lithe and tightly muscular—and beautiful. Can a man be beautiful? Fuck yeah. His thick, dark brown hair has grown out, and the top strands are swept back off his forehead, carefully styled, the sides cut shorter. The lengthier hair on top is edgy looking, totally different from how he wore it last fall in a short fauxhawk. Douchebag Extraordinaire has lighter colors interwoven, giving it depth and accentuating ice-blue eyes. He asked me to highlight his hair once during our whirlwind. We never got around to it—but someone has.

Another change? He's sporting dark scruff on his jawline, giving him a slightly dangerous look.

I suck in a gulp of air. I never pictured him with sexy facial hair, and it's...it's...

It's nothing. My heart is pure, hard steel.

The lights from the ceiling bathe him in a spotlight as he presents the entire bar with that famous sexy grin, the one that melts your insides and makes girls fall at his feet.

He turns when someone calls his name, and my eyes eat up the line of his profile, strong and defined and chiseled. His nose is straight and patrician looking, his cheekbones high and sculpted, carving out a perfect face. And even though it's January, his face is sun-kissed from playing football outside for months at a time. He's a damn Adonis.

Piercing, intense eyes are set underneath dark brows. His lashes are long and thick and you'd think it would make him look feminine, but nope. All it does is call attention to the hint of laughter there, as if he knows something you don't, as if he's playing you.

Which he is.

Blaze Townsend *is* a player.

Tonight he's wearing a *Wildcats National Championship* long-sleeved navy shirt that clings to his biceps. I think about the skin under that shirt,

those granite-hard abs he works so hard on. I've had my hands there. I've kissed each rippling muscle, worshipping him with my lips and tongue. *God.* I was crazy about his body.

My eyes move down, taking in the dark jeans encasing long muscular legs. I recall those powerful thighs under my hands, the dark curls I ran my fingers through.

Oh, just stop already!

F'ing hot.

F'ing *asshole*.

My libido frosts over when I see who's with him.

On either side are two gorgeous girls with varied shades of blonde hair. They're everything I'm not: tall, skinny, beautiful. My throat tightens at the perfection of them, and for a second I want to run out of here, but I hold steady. I've had three months to prepare, and I'm tough. I CAN DO THIS.

Yeah, but you can't compete with that, a mean voice whispers in my head.

Applause breaks out inside the bar. Blaze lifts a hand and mimics a Miss America wave, his full, carnal lips tugging up in a slow smile that grows, becoming broader and wider. Dude could be a toothpaste model. I swear I hear a gasp from every female in the room. The effect of his mouth is positively infectious. If he were a preacher, he'd be saving souls left and right.

I roll my eyes.

He's with Dillon McQueen, the backup quarterback, and several other players.

"Oh, yay, the team is back on campus. Let's celebrate. Yippee," I mumble to myself as a girl in a Wildcats shirt nearly mows me down in her quest to get to them.

"I know, right?" She stops next to me, stars in her eyes. "Blaze is just... gorgeous, right?"

My lips flatten. "Totes."

She licks her lips, her eyes darting from him to me. "Wait...did you date him?"

"No."

"You sure? Now that I think about it, I thought I saw you guys together at the Chi-O homecoming party last fall. Aren't you that girl, the one he dumped—"

"We never dated," I practically spit.

We only had sex—three times, to be exact, one time for every week we were “together”. Once in the library and twice in his dorm room. Not once did he buy me a sandwich or offer to take me to a movie—not that I would have accepted, but that’s not the point. The point is he never wanted anything from me except sex.

“That was a banging party though. Glad you came,” I say with a bright smile, keeping my turbulent feelings under lock and key.

She’s not even listening anymore though, her gaze on Blaze and friends. “Yeah. Who are those girls he’s with? You think I have a shot?”

Thetas. The taller one on the right with the slinky navy and orange dress—school colors, of course—honey-colored hair, and blinding red lipstick is the one he escorted all over campus in November and December. Dani. On the nights when I was weak after we broke up, I’d stalk his IG and see pics she’d posted: them at Cadillac’s, in the student center, at a party, *in his dorm*. I walked a narrow tightrope last fall, avoiding places I thought they might be, going straight to class and then coming right back home.

He never sought me out. Not one time.

“Dani is the one on the right. She’s...uh...with him a lot,” I tell the girl, my voice carefully even.

I’m doing good. I really am. Much better than last fall.

I don’t know the girl on the left, but she’s beautiful, her white-blond hair straight and silky. Like Dani, she’s dressed in a low-cut, skimpy dress—nothing wrong with that. I have a plethora of low-cut dresses, and I’ve been known to flaunt what I have. *Hello, mohair dress*.

“Candy with an ‘i’,” Margo says, offering her name, and I guess I must have asked for it. She knows everyone on campus.

My eyes widen at Margo. “Dani *and* Candi? Stop it. Are they related?”

“Nope. Just Thetas. Nice, right?”

“Flipping fantastic,” I mutter.

In typical college fashion, there’s raging competition between us and the Thetas. They’re the beautiful, rich, party girl sorority while Chi-Os are known for being brainy and attractive in a warm, fuzzy kind of way.

“They’re like...pretty, sleek greyhounds,” Margo says with a little growl, her gaze on the girls.

“Guess that makes us adorable spaniels,” I say and Margo laughs.

Random Girl gives us a wary look, and I realize I’d forgotten she was standing there.

“Ignore us. You should totally take a shot at Blaze if micro-penises are your thing.” The words, again, are devoid of emotion. I am over him. I swear. The fact that my chest is heavy right now does not matter. Not one bit.

“Micro-penis?” Her eyes flare.

“It’s a joke,” I say dryly. “Go get him. *Please.*” As in, please get out of my sight because I can’t say one more word about him.

She gives me a weird look and then a rushed *bye* as she heads their way.

The entire place is still whistling and cheering. The applause goes on for an absurdly long time, and my body grows stiffer with each passing moment.

“STL,” I murmur. *Stayed too long.*

Forget facing him. I’d rather touch a hundred wolf spiders on my pillow while having a root canal with no anesthesia than see him with Dani.

I snatch up my purse and try to figure out the best path out of the bar without catching Blaze’s eye. I scan the room as I break down how to get through the crowd and reach the emergency exit near the restrooms. Sure, the alarm will go off, but who’d notice with all the happy times going on?

A warm tingle goes down my neck, and I freeze. Moving slowly, I turn my head and look back in his direction.

Yeah. He’s found me. Cold blue eyes tangle with my brown ones, and all those pep talks I gave myself on the drive over flee my mind.

The crowd falls away, and it’s just me and him in the room. Three months since we were face to face, yet it feels like a million years since I saw him.

For some reason, my mind goes back to that night freshman year at the toga party, the one he and I never discussed, those long passionate kisses and how electrifying they were. His mouth on mine was like falling and flying at the same time.

I haven’t kissed a man on the mouth since.

“Never breaking my rules again,” I mutter under my breath, my gaze lingering on the curve of his lips.

Darkness flits across his face as he takes me in, not a normal expression for him, and the air grows hot around me. The seconds tick by as he pauses, drops his waving hand, and searches my face. A scowl appears on his brow, crinkling his forehead. Icy eyes glitter at me, long and hard, gazing over the heads of the people jostling to get close to him. My hand holding the glass trembles.

Do not be affected by the intensity of those eyes. Don’t. You. Dare.

Right.

Maybe it's the tequila finally kicking in or the painful new shoes or the fact that my skin is itchy as hell and probably beet red as well underneath the mohair, but something insane hits, and I give him my own Miss American wave—only it's really a one-finger salute. It's a whole new level of juvenile, completely childish and revealing. *I'm bitter*, it screams.

I hate you is scrawled across my face.

Same is what he's thinking if the tightening of his lips is anything to go on.

Twin spots of pink hit his cheekbones, and a muscle in his jaw pops. He watches me, his face carved from marble, expressionless, but underneath I sense something deeper, almost there on the surface, but he keeps it hidden. Yeah, that's the thing with him; on the surface, he appears carefree and loose, but below is a lake, still and deep.

He never let me dive into those waters.

A few seconds later, he blinks rapidly, looks away, and pushes through the crowd.

Bye, asshole.

The two girls tag along, a matching set, two pretty bookends.

Margo talks out of the side of her mouth. "Was that rude gesture really necessary? Remember our relationship with the football players. I know you and Blaze had a fling, but we still want them at our parties. We have to keep up with the Thetas—"

"Trust me, that was barely even anything. I'm restraining myself." The old me would have confronted him months ago, would have chased him down and demanded answers.

Only...

I just...couldn't. I have my pride, and he has her.

She huffs. "True. I recall a baseball player you kicked in the shin freshman year."

"He also put his hands down my pants when I clearly said no, Madame President. FTS." *Fuck that shit.*

She gets quiet beside me. "Seriously, I never understood what happened between you and Blaze—"

My chest fills as I inhale. "We were casual. That's it."

I watch as his frame maneuvers through the throng of people. Several clap him on the back, and I even see one girl smack his ass and giggle. He reaches back and gives her a kiss on the cheek, and my hands clench as anger

rushes to the surface.

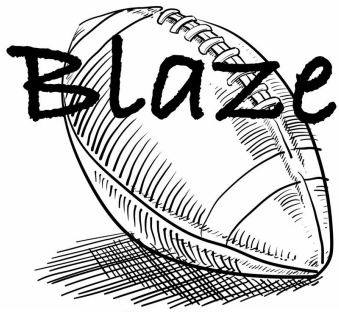
Such. A. Womanizer.

I never should have trusted myself with someone so...so alpha.

Normally, I choose nice guys, sweet and quiet, ones I can easily control. I never let them get too close. When you grow up with a dad who cheats on your mom, when you actually *see* him kiss another woman, you learn to protect yourself.

I flinch. He's changed directions, and he's headed straight for our table. There's a determined set to his face, and my heart pounds, each passing second stretching and tugging at me until I'm breathless and damn near panting. I lick my lips and pat my hair, smoothing my dress with my hands. Dang—it's still soaked.

He halts in front of us.



I walk into Cadillac's like the conquering hero Julius Caesar after he defeated the Gauls, or maybe a gladiator entering the Colosseum after a victorious showing in the games.

Did gladiators go out for a beer after the games? No doubt they did. They probably had hot girls with them too.

Applause breaks out and I flash a big smile, taking in the adulation. The cheers of congratulations continue as we make our way around the room, and a warm feeling grows in my chest. Attention from fans, a football in my hands—it's all I've ever needed.

I started playing rec league when I was twelve—late for the superstar I am—because my aunt and uncle needed a babysitter for me and the field was just down the road from our house. Convenient for them to get me out of their hair, and a good way for me to channel my restless energy.

"Blaze! Great game!" shouts a guy I remember from class last semester.

I wave.

"Dude, this place is packed," Dillon says. He's got that glazed-over, I'm-

going-to-party-till-I'm-trashed look in his eye as he takes everything in. Tall and muscular with a freshly shaved head—he promised he'd shave off his blond dreadlocks if we won the championship—he's originally a California surfer boy who moved to Alabama when he was ten just to play football in the South, a rich kid. We came from completely different backgrounds, but he's the closest thing I have to a brother.

I grin. "Wish Mav and Ryker were here. Losers."

"Yeah, well, they're getting some girlfriend action right now. Their player days are over."

True. Maverick practically bolted off the bus and ran straight into Delaney's arms as she waited for him in the parking lot, and Ryker was pretty much the same. He didn't even say goodbye before peeling out to go to Penelope's.

Dillon grins at a pretty, brunette co-ed who rushes up and throws her arms around his big frame.

The athletes run this small, exclusive university, and football really is king. I roll my shoulders. I'd do well to remember that. No matter my family and scholastic shortcomings, this year is mine.

At the end of the big game, I started doing the Miss America wave for the fans, and the crowd in the bar goes nuts when I whip it out. I'm feeling good, then my eyes sweep the room and land on a table near the front.

Charisma.

I freeze.

I haven't seen her—even in passing—for months, and the effect is like a bucket of cold water in my face.

She flips me off, and I feel red starting at my neck and rising up to my face. Something about her always...always...

"You good?" Dillon asks me, his gaze following mine.

"Fresh as a goddamn daisy."

"Charisma is over there."

"Thanks, Captain Obvious."

His eyes check her out. "Can't blame you, man. She's not my usual, but I'd tap it. I tried sophomore year. She turned me down cold, said I was too popular. Weird."

"Don't even think about her like that." I frown. "And why didn't you ever tell me?"

"Didn't seem important. You were only with her for a hot second."

“It *is* important. And it was three weeks. Stay away from her.”

His lips kick up. “Didn’t think you cared, dude.”

“I don’t. I’ve moved on.”

“Then why can’t I even talk about her—”

“No,” I snap. “End of.”

“Fine, chill out.” He eyeballs Dani and Candi chatting with their sorority sisters as they hang on to me. “You’re winning if it’s a competition. You have two and she has none.”

“It isn’t a pissing contest.”

I can’t help but stare in her direction. Jealousy pulls at me when I see how some of the guys with Connor are giving Charisma little glances. With long nearly black hair that has pale pink streaks scattered throughout, she’s a petite thing but feisty as a colt. I take in the creamy pale skin, intelligent light brown eyes that don’t miss a thing, and that perfect pink bow of a mouth. Yeah, she got under my skin so fucking bad last semester I thought I was going to lose my mind—until I cut her loose.

A beer gets pushed into my hands by Dani, and I lean down to give her a quick kiss on the cheek. “Thanks.”

“I’ve missed you,” she murmurs, her hand caressing my jaw.

I pull back before she can take it any further. “Yeah. Time to party,” I say.

Maybe five minutes pass, and when a break appears in the crowd around us, I step away from the girls and my feet lead me to Charisma’s side of the room.

Sure, I shouldn’t talk to her. I really shouldn’t, but hell, it’s been three months and I’m over her. She doesn’t have power over me. No one does. I haven’t thought of her since...shit, since right before we walked into this place. I saw her car in the parking lot, and unease mixed with something darker took up residence in my bones. Might as well get it over with and rip the Band-Aid off. I wince. More like wax ripping off my chest hairs.

She watches me approach, her face flat and expressionless before she drops her gaze and looks down at her phone, scrolling. Her grip is tight, fingers white with pressure.

Margo jumps up and throws her arms around me with a big hug.

“Blaze! You guys played amazing,” she says. “I’m so stoked for you!”

I smile and give her man Connor a fist bump. “Thanks. Greatest day of my life when we won.”

I reset my gaze on Charisma.

Pretend like nothing happened between us, I tell myself. Be cool. She's not anyone important, just a blip on your way to the NFL.

"What's up, city girl?" My voice is gruffer than I intended.

She tosses her head back and looks up at me. "The sky. Heard you had a good game."

"Good game?" interjects Conner. "He only set the record for number of touchdowns and yards from scrimmage during the game. You were on fire, Blaze—no pun intended."

"Thanks, man. I appreciate that." I smirk. "So you didn't watch the game?" I ask her, sticking my hand in my pocket. My fingers brush over the secret note I keep tucked in there, hidden away.

"Missed it."

"Not surprised. We never did have much in common—oh, except for that one thing."

She flutters long lashes. "You have your entire life to be a jerk. Why not take tonight off?"

I throw my head back and laugh before sobering and leveling my eyes back on her. Damn, she's funny. I recall an hour-long giggling session we had in the library once about the weirdest dreams we'd ever had. Mine was about cows who took over the world by killing humans with their methane farts. Hers involved golf-ball-headed aliens kidnapping her and sending her back to Earth to become the next female Tiger Woods.

My chest tightens at the memory, and I shove it away from me, stuffing it deep inside my box of Charisma memories.

"Still quick-witted," I say. "Haven't seen you around much. You look good." My gaze holds hers.

"You gonna ask me about the weather next?" She cocks her hip.

"I'm just being pleasant. Am I annoying you?"

"Annoyance would imply I care."

My teeth grit when my eyes betray me and land on her tits. Her curves are insanely lush, full hips and breasts, a Marilyn Monroe type. "You're soaked. Planning on entering a wet dress contest?"

"As if. One of your fans spilled a beer on me," she says just as Dani appears, her smell arriving first, a floral perfume, sweet and thick.

"Blaze! Thought I lost you. Hey, guys, so glad you came out to celebrate," she gushes at the group, her hand curving around my bicep.

Charisma's eyes watch Dani. "Yes, you did find him. A plus. He's all yours."

There are a few moments of tense silence as we all look at each other. Margo and Connor have wide eyes on us, and even the guys in the back seem to be waiting for something to happen. One of them keeps giving Charisma a sheepish grin, a clear look of appreciation on his face. Heat rises inside me. He's right up her alley: nice, subdued, smart...*malleable*. Everything I'm not.

"Aw, thanks, honey. What's your name?" Dani says as she gives Charisma a quick, assessing look, sizing her up.

"Charisma. No 'i' on the end, in case you were wondering." Her elegant brows arch. "My friends call me Charm. You don't have to."

"Lovely name with just a touch of tacky. Very hipster." Dani scrunches up her pretty face.

I watch Charisma—you never know what she might do—but there's no discernible reaction to Dani except a slight curl of those pink lips.

Charisma grabs a glass off the table and raises it. "To tacky names, Blaze's included," she says dryly.

Touché.

I lift my own glass. "My mom was stoned when she picked mine. She said the world was 'ablaze' when I came out."

"I had my pop's eyes, and that's why Ma gave me mine. He's one charismatic guy," Charisma mutters before tossing back her drink.

"Both of you have lovely names," says Margo, her eyes bouncing between us.

"At least it's not Dimpleshitz," Connor adds, and everyone laughs—everyone except for Charisma and me.

I stare at her. Fuck, I can't help it. My hands twitch at my sides and the muscles in my jaw tighten while her face is void of emotion, carefully blank, her eyes leveled at some point across my shoulder.

How can she keep her cool when she hasn't seen me in months?

She's ice. Subzero. Antarctica in a wet dress.

She hates you.

Dani clears her throat. "They cleared a big table for us, Blazey. Let's do some shots." She attempts to tug me away from the group.

I don't budge.

"You guys wanna join us?" My gaze sweeps over them, lingering on Charisma.

“No,” she says coolly.

Margo and Connor say they’re in and the chess guys look semi-interested, except for the one who keeps giving Charisma *Hey, wanna play with my knight later* glances.

Whatever.

I should walk away, but I want a reaction from her, and I don’t even know why.

I lean into her space, pulling Dani along with me. “Sure, babe? The owner said all drinks are free for us.”

She gives me a long, slow blink. “I have better things to do...better people to associate with.”

Margo gasps, but really, she should know Charisma says whatever the hell she wants, which is part of what attracted me to her—her spirit and fire.

“Better people, huh? Like who?” Is she seeing someone? I throw a look around at the guys with Connor, and they visibly shrink back.

“Like...it’s none of your business, football player. Now, if you’ll excuse me...” She snatches her coat off the back of a chair and throws it over her arm.

I take a step closer, blocking her path, and her scent hits me, fresh and clean with a hint of peppermint. You’d think such a regular smell wouldn’t get my dick hard, but it does.

I stare down at her. “Just one drink?” Shit. What is wrong with me?

Dani laughs, the sound a little forced as she caresses the inside of my bicep. “Some people just aren’t in the party mood, right? Come on, let’s go, Blazey.”

“Not yet,” I say firmly.

Charisma’s mouth tightens. Some of her control is slipping, and part of me is glad. Because standing here close to her...it feels like I’m winded, and I want her to feel the same.

There’s a slight tic under her right eye and her hands are tense and balled up, one at her side and one holding on to that coat. She blinks rapidly and glances away from us, chewing on those full lips, working the bottom one with her top teeth as she answers my question. “Sorry, no more drinks for me. I need to run. Sheldon, Leonard, Howard, and Raj won’t wait forever.” Her voice has an ever-so-slight quiver around the edges.

“Who are they?” Dani asks, her expression bored.

“*Big Bang Theory*,” I tell her, still looking at Charisma even though she

won't return the favor. "Popular TV show."

"Never heard of it," Dani says. "Sounds lame."

"The characters are hilarious, smart people. You wouldn't enjoy it," Charisma says, her expression tight as she stares at Dani's hand on my arm.

Her eyes finally lift to mine, and she seems to take a deep breath. "Congrats on the win. I mean that. I know it was...everything you wanted." She looks at Dani and then back at me. "I'm happy for you."

Oh.

She's being nice. She's...over me.

I frown, feeling off balance, but I rein it in. Good. Good. This is how it should be.

I open my mouth to say something—I don't know what—but she's already walking away, her heart-shaped ass sashaying to the door. My hands tighten when I see the appreciative looks she gets from guys around the room. I'm not surprised. She has this are-you-brave-enough-to-handle-me attitude that makes you want to tame her.

I hadn't been up for it, not with football hanging over my head.

Before she walks out, she pauses at the door and partially turns to look back at me.

But this time...

Her face is completely unguarded, anger and hurt and vulnerability there, as if she didn't think I'd be watching.

Her face is like a bullet to my chest.

You dumped her. You went on with your life.

So why did everything about that night make *me* so angry?

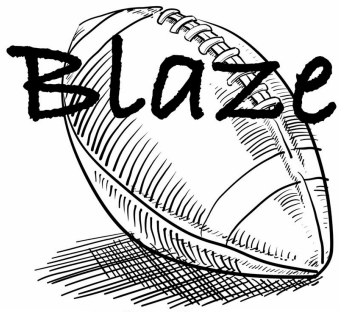
Coach says I played the best game of my career after that party. He suggested I needed a full-time assistant just to call me ugly before games so I would play pissed off all the time. The memory of that night resurfaces, sneaking into my head and throwing images at me. Us dancing...my body pressed against hers...and then the words I pushed out of me with force, words that saved me from falling into a deep hole with her.

She opens the door and walks out.

End of. Done. We are over. I don't want to be near her again.

So why does my chest...

I'm still looking at the door when Candi, Dani's sorority sister and lookalike, joins us. I feel like I'm being squeezed by two beach balls as the girls latch onto my arms and pull me back to our table.



At the table, Dillon is recounting to everyone the only big play he was part of during the game where we ran a fake kick in the first quarter and he threw me a touchdown pass. "...and then out of nowhere Blaze rises up and catches the ball with one hand. He cradled it like a little baby and landed on his back. I thought my pass was intercepted for sure, but he bailed me out!" He raises his glass. "To Blaze! A Wildcat legend!"

Yeah, right—but what's next? A tingle of dread goes down my spine. If the NFL doesn't work, I'll probably just end up selling cars like I do in the summer to earn extra money.

"Lighten up, man!" Dillon says as he claps me on the back. "Lose that frown and let's celebrate."

Right, right.

"Maybe he just knows deep down that he didn't have anything to do with our big win," adds Archer with his Cajun drawl. "Defense won that game. Then you pretty boys get all the glory. Please."

I swivel my head and take him in. Tall and lean with a sleeve of tattoos

up his arm and short Billy Idol bleached hair, he thinks he's the best thing on our team. *Pompous dickhead.*

I just grin because he hates it. "Poor Archer. Your feelings hurt by all the attention the offense gets?"

His lips curl. "Fuck you, Townsend. You may have made some big plays, but who really cares? NFL scouts don't."

"No arguing tonight," Dillon says subtly as he slides between us and squeezes my shoulder.

"Later, assholes." Archer laughs and heads off to another table of defensive players and a few jersey chasers.

I shake off the comment, determined to not let Archer ruin the win for me by bringing up my lack of media coverage. We haven't gotten along since last year when he was a little too aggressive with Ryker, our first-string quarterback and one of my roommates. Sure, that all turned out fine, but there's a thick line drawn between us. We may play on the same team, but both of us are fighting to get into the NFL now. So far, he's winning.

Later, after we've played several games of beer pong, the crowd has thinned and the party breaks apart. Margo and Connor leave, and Dillon heads out with a brunette tucked up next to him. He drove me here, but I don't want to block his game. I can always find a way home.

I stand to leave and weave on my feet just a tiny bit. Truth is, it's mostly exhaustion fueled by a few beers. I'm not trashed. I don't get trashed, not when there's so much at stake with football.

"I'll give you a ride home," Dani says. Her eyes are sweet and imploring, and I wince. I like her, I really do, but...

"I'll call an Uber."

"We'll both get you home and safely in bed," adds Candi with a crafty smile as she and Dani exchange knowing glances.

A couple of the guys overhear and again raise their glasses.

"BLAZE! A Waylon legend in more ways than one."

"Whatever." I say it with a wide grin, but inside, something else is pricking at me—and I know exactly what it is. My head is still on Charisma's face when she walked out the door, that bruised expression...

I was fine, *totally fucking fine*, until I saw her.



* * *

Outside, the cold wind slaps my face. Dani leads me to her little BMW, and I get in the passenger seat while Candi gets in the back. The car ride is quick, the girls giggling about how excited they are for a new semester and all the plans they have.

I keep quiet and stare out the window. I don't know what my plans are. My life is on hold until April when the NFL draft happens, and if that doesn't work out—shit, I don't want to even think about it.

Inevitably, my thoughts drift to Charisma. What's she doing now? Is she watching *Big Bang Theory*? She left Cadillac's alone, but that doesn't mean she doesn't have some guy over. My hands tighten in my lap. She's probably fucking him right now, and afterward, she'll be ready for him to leave. Her and those rules.

"Thanks, girls," I say later when they've walked me up three flights of stairs. "You really are sweet to get me to my door." I work the key.

"Need some help with that?" Dani scoots in close to me, her tits brushing against my back.

"Nah. Hey, did you know locks for doors were invented in Ancient Rome to create privacy in brothels? Think about it—if they'd put socks on the doorknobs, we might still live in a world without locks. Of course, they all wore sandals, so duh, locks came before socks." I chuckle at my randomness but just get blank looks in return. Tough crowd. No one gets my sense of humor.

Charisma did.

I sigh internally.

Don't go there.

They follow me in, and I face them in the small kitchenette of the apartment-style dorm I share with Dillon and Ryker. It's a nice space with a den and three bedrooms. Unfortunately, it smells like old fajitas and feet.

I give them a level look. "All right, ladies, I'm not interested in a ménage-a-jersey-chaser tonight. I need rest. I do appreciate the ride."

"You sure?" says Dani, her eyes gleaming. "We don't mind sharing, you know."

I avoid the topic and open the fridge to grab a Gatorade. "Positive."

"What about a massage?" Candi asks, giving me a lingering look.

I shake my head. "The trainers will take care of that tomorrow."

"What if you watch us?" Dani asks, edging closer to me. She pulls Candi along with her, lacing their hands together. "Then we work on you, whatever

you want...” Her voice trails off, a hungry look in her gaze.

I rub the back of my neck and stare at the floor. “Tempting, so tempting. Maybe next time, girls.” I guzzle down my drink as they whisper back and forth, probably plotting how to change my mind. I can’t make out what they’re saying and don’t try to. My mind is scattered in too many directions.

All at once, I feel utterly exhausted, beat down. My bruises from the game are still healing, and all I can think about is crawling into my bed. Murmuring a final goodnight, I head down the hall to my bedroom. Just as I get my shirt off, I hear the front door slam. Dani’s disappointed, no doubt.

I take my jeans off, pull the small Ziplock bag out of one of the front pockets, and set it on my nightstand. I stare down at the small piece of paper inside, a note written on the back of a silver Big Red gum wrapper. It’s carefully folded into a square, the corners nice and sharp. I contemplate unfolding it and reading it, but in the end, I can’t.

A sigh of relief hits me as I crawl under the covers. The ceiling fan whirls over my head, and there’s enough light coming in from the window to watch it spin. I like it on even in the winter, gives me something to focus on as I try to tamp down the thoughts in my head.

Yet...

I keep circling back and worrying about football and classes.

I turn over and beat my pillow as emptiness creeps in. I don’t normally let dark feelings invade my thoughts, but I can’t let go of the fact that not one fucking person came to see me play my big game. Aunt Lorraine and Uncle Jack, the people who raised me since I was ten, weren’t there, even though I left tickets for them at the gate. Sure, I get that they’re busy and it’s hard to travel, but still, they haven’t shown up for any of my games, even the home ones. It’s as if I went away to college and became a distant memory for them.

And Charisma? My hands reach up and scrub my face. She didn’t even watch on TV.

I close my eyes and pray for sleep.

A Wildcat legend indeed.



* * *

I’m eight years old and walking down the candy aisle of the Exxon gas station, my hands holding a Snickers bar and a bag of Cheetos. My stomach

rumbles, already imagining devouring them. I haven't eaten today. Mama likes Fritos, so I grab those. Daddy likes Twix, so I balance that on top of the pile. Drinks, we need drinks. I head to the soda aisle. I'm feeling overwhelmed by the variety when the bell goes off inside the busy store, signaling someone entering or leaving. Instinctively, my head turns to the door as my parents walk out, both of them weaving. Mama stumbles over the curb outside and laughs, her eyes overly bright as she looks up at him. "You overdid it." I heard Daddy tease her earlier. I know what that means. It means she'll get that vacant look on her face and stare off into space. Daddy just grins and hooks his arm through hers then leads her to our car, an old white Volvo with a dent on the front fender. I dash back to the candy aisle and put everything back, but by the time I reach the front door, they're pulling away, a cloud of smoke following the beat-up car. My heart drops and fear slides down my spine. No, no, no! I'm sorry I took too long in the restroom! I'm sorry I talked too much in the car! I'm sorry I can't sit still! "Wait for me!" I scream as I run outside—

I snap awake in the dark and sit straight up in the bed, stomach in knots. I...I haven't dreamed about my parents in forever, always able to push those memories away when I need to. I heave in a big breath and stand up, my mind lingering in the past. I recall the gas station incident with absolute clarity, down to the pimply-faced employee who found me hiding in the restroom hours later. He held a toilet scrubber in his hands, and I had packages of eaten food littered around me. I wiped my tears, stood up, and faced him, trying to be brave, terrified he was going to arrest me. I'd never stolen anything, and it had been easier to do than I'd thought it would be. He asked for my parents' cell and had all kinds of questions, but I didn't know their number, plus I knew to keep my mouth shut. Once I told a teacher I didn't have my field trip permission form signed because my parents hadn't been home the night before, and that turned into a visit from a stern-faced social services lady who sat in our trailer with a clipboard and asked if I was *okay*.

No, I wasn't okay.

I fucking wasn't.

But I didn't even know it then, didn't know my family was screwed up.

How was a kid supposed to know what normal was when he'd never seen it?

Somewhere down the road, though, my drugged-out parents remembered me and rolled back into the parking lot. I recall Mama running inside the store and plucking me from behind the counter where I was sitting. She hugged me tight and swore she'd never leave me again.

But she did. They both did.



* * *

After I've showered, I bring up ESPN's draft page online to see if they're mentioning me at all. Disappointment hits hard when I see I'm still listed as only a possible late-round or free-agent pickup. I need to be first or second round. I need reporters talking me up.

I shut the laptop, grab a protein bar, and head to the athletic center to work out.

What the hell does ESPN know anyway?

The facility is deserted since most guys are still recovering from the game or nursing a hangover from last night. Not me. After spending half an hour lifting, I jump on the treadmill and pound my shoes on the rubber, hoping to get ten miles in.

Coach Sanders, one of the wide receiver coaches, enters, and I hit the stop button on the treadmill.

I grab a towel and dry the sweat off my face. I'm out of breath but manage to call out. "Coach, you got a second?"

He looks back and pretends like he didn't notice me when I'm the only one working out. Not a good sign.

"Uh, sure. Let's hit my office."

A big man in his early thirties with dark clipped hair and kind eyes, he's one of the youngest, sharpest coaches in college football and the main reason I signed with Waylon. I still remember the night he came to my high school game and met me afterward then took me to dinner at a fancy steakhouse one town over from Alma, Mississippi. The waiter pulled out my chair, and when he draped the napkin over my lap, I barely kept myself from jumping up and punching him in the face. I legit thought he was trying to touch my cock. So dumb. Even the utensils on the table stumped me. I ended up just watching Coach to see which one he picked up. I mean, how many forks does a person need to eat? Apparently three. I've beefed up my knowledge these days to

know that forks go on the left and the smaller one is used for salad. On the right—this is where it gets tricky—is the knife, the salad knife, the regular spoon, the soup soon, then a tiny little oyster fork. At the top of the plate is a dessert spoon and another freaking fork. I get overload just picturing it.

Coach gestures toward his office down the hall.

I follow him inside, anxiousness sitting heavy in my gut. I shut the door behind me and sit down in a chair in front of his desk. Clasping my hands in my lap, I try to feign nonchalance, but he has to know why I'm here.

“Have you heard anything about the Combine? Am I invited to Indianapolis?”

The Combine is a huge opportunity. It gives the NFL scouts a chance to look over the top college players and figure out how they compare, see if they want them on their team. It's crucial if you want to be drafted. Ryker, Maverick, and Archer have all been invited. I haven't. Dillon hasn't, but he's not ready to graduate like I am. He still wants to finish up another year at Waylon and rack up stats.

“No word yet, son,” he says as he shuffles some papers, not making eye contact with me. “Even if you don't get the invite to Indianapolis, you'll have a shot here at our Pro Day workout.”

Yeah, but hardly anyone important comes to Pro Day. It's mostly for the fans.

Swallowing down disappointment, I sit for a second, not sure how to react. My hands clench. I felt sure I'd get invited after how well I played late in the year. Inside, I start to panic, but I battle it down when I see Coach is staring at me with worried eyes. How many times has he had to have this conversation with players? It's a rare man who makes it to the NFL.

He must read my face.

“Don't lose hope, Blaze. They haven't finalized the list. My advice? You need to focus on training hard. Do you understand?”

My hands tighten around the armrests on the chair. “No one comes to Pro Day.”

He lifts his hands. “It's all you have, son. Take what you get.”

Fine. It's like that. I give him a sharp nod. “I'll be flying around the gym like Superman, sir. I'll be a Blaze blur every day, all day.”

“Good. You always are, but level up for me.” He gives me a concerned look. “You need that degree too. You need a fallback.”

My body tenses. “Right.”

“What’s your major?”

I’ve been staring at the floor. I look up at him. “History, sir. If the NFL doesn’t work out, I want to teach high school and coach.”

He nods and gives me a small smile. “I did the same thing. I was planning on being a PE teacher until I got a college coaching position. You’d be a fine teacher, Blaze. You’ve got an outgoing personality kids would gravitate to. Fine choice.”

“I failed a couple of classes last semester. I’m not the best student.” I try. I really do.

He frowns, maybe because he knows how much I struggle academically. “I get it. You’re a star here, and it’s a fine line balancing athletics and classes. You know the drill: get a tutor, study, lay off the alcohol.”

“Doing that already,” I say. “I’m dedicated, Coach. Any team would be lucky to have me.”

“I know, but we’ve got to get them to notice you first.”

My lips flatten. “If a national championship doesn’t get their attention, what will?”

He frowns and scratches his jaw. “I don’t know. Truthfully, I thought you’d be talked about more.”

Ah, shit, so I wasn’t wrong. For some reason, they just don’t want me. My shoulders deflate as all that anger whooshes out.

I’m not good enough.

Never have been.

Just the product of two meth heads from a nowhere place in Mississippi.

He toys with a pen. “Let’s not dwell on that. Put the media behind you, get out of here, and get back on that treadmill. I need you in tiptop shape, you feel me?”

“Yes, sir. I’m ready for it.” I stand, my legs heavy and tired as I face him. I don’t want him to see that he’s spooked me. I’ve got to bulldoze my way into the NFL; I just have to figure out how.

I think about the quotes I have taped up on my bathroom mirror.

Push yourself because no one else is going to do it.

You are responsible for your success.

You is all you have.

And fuck, that last one crawls around inside me and sticks.

5

Charisma



Charisma



“Wake up and get me a cigarette, bitch,” cries Vampire Bill, the African grey parrot that’s in his cage on my nightstand.

I ease up and glare at him from my bed.

Ryker stayed over with Penelope, my roomie and best friend, last night, so I pulled the parrot from her room into mine. Nothing kills the lovey-dovey mood like a parrot telling them to “Get your bony ass down the road and get a job.”

He was rescued by Penelope from a bunch of cigarette-smoking, belligerent, low-class morons. Our neighbors from across the street, they left him on the side of the road on their move-out day, and Penelope ran out to save him. She says he’s hers, and I guess he is, but I like to think of us as co-parents.

When I stretch and reach out to pet him, he fluffs his feathers and rubs the back of my hand with his head. I study his misshapen right wing, the one that keeps him from flying, and hand him a cracker from the box on the table. Regardless of the things he says, he’s an affectionate creature, and I have a

soft spot for him. He reminds me of, well, me—a little broken but still fighting.

“Time to make this day my bitch, but no smoking for you,” I say, hopping up out of bed and putting on some new workout leggings and a T-shirt. Deadpool is on the front saying, *Yeah, I’d do me*. I sweep my hair up in a high ponytail and head out to the den of the house I share with Penelope. Her mom left it to her after she passed away, and it’s in a quiet neighborhood near campus.

No one else appears to be up yet—thank God—so I bring up the YouTube channel on the TV for my yoga session of the day.

Later, after several attempts at this ridiculousness, sweat drips off me while I push my legs as far apart as they’ll go and grasp my toes. I call it The Crotch Widener Pose, but I don’t think the trim girl in the video would approve. She moves into another position, and I fumble around on my mat, trying to get up. “What’s the point of this,” I mutter, weaving as I try to stand still on one foot, my arms straight and pointed at the ceiling, one foot tucked into the bend of my knee. “Look, I’m a rocket man,” I announce to no one. “Should have brought Vampire Bill out here so he could critique,” I say on a laugh. Then, I catch a glimpse of myself in the glare from the television and wince at the scrunched-up face and strands of hair that have fallen loose from my up-do. *Ugh*. Definitely not a Dani kind of girl.

Ryker walks into the room wearing flannel pants and no shirt. He comes to a halt when he sees me and rakes a hand through his golden-blond hair. “Damn. Any clue how many captions I could put on this image—”

“Trust me, she can caption them herself,” replies Penelope as she follows him into the room and swats him on the ass. With her copper hair up in a messy knot and her red glasses perched on her nose, she looks slightly mussed and happy in her pjs. I’m not surprised considering the number of times I heard her calling out his name last night. I’m thrilled they’re in love and all that jazz, but dang, enough with the awesome sex already. I make a mental note to pick up some earplugs at the Piggly Wiggly.

“Bedsides,” Penelope adds. “No one likes an audience while they’re exercising.”

“Especially when they’re short and gravitationally challenged like me.” I laugh and continue into the next pose. “Be glad I wasn’t in downward-facing dog.”

“Namaste, Charm. Please continue your workout,” Ryker says then gives

me a broad grin as he heads off for a shower.

I finish up just as my phone rings with a call from an unknown number.

“Hello?”

“Charisma Rossi?” It’s a man with a distinct Boston accent.

I grip the phone tighter. The only people I know who’d be calling me from that area is the design firm I signed my graphic design internship with.

“This is she.”

He clears his throat. “Ah, yes, this is William Connor. We met a few months ago when you came up for an interview at Prescott Designs.”

I nod even though he can’t see me. “Yes, hello! It’s great to hear from you. I’m so excited to see you in May.” I let out a nervous laugh. Getting that prized spot was the highlight of my year. “I even already have a place to live. My cousin has a great apartment near downtown and she’s setting up a room for me. All I have to do is graduate and move—”

“Ah, well, I have bad news. We’ve had to make some cutbacks here at the firm, and we’re canceling.”

“Oh.” I take a seat on the couch. “Why? Was I not right for the program? I mean, I know the competition was tough, but I’m one of the best. Are you—are you sure there hasn’t been a mistake?” I nailed that interview. I know I did. My GPA is stellar and my portfolio is kickass. Ma even bought me a pale gray power suit from Barney’s, and my makeup was demure but stylish, my pink and black hair slicked back in a tight bun—

“No mistake, and I’m sincerely sorry. It’s not you. We’re cutting the program entirely.” A long sigh comes from his end. “I’m in the process of calling several interns and letting them know, Ms. Rossi. You aren’t alone.”

My hand rubs my forehead. Boston was the only thing keeping me going, knowing I’d be out of here soon. “I see.”

“I’m aware it puts you in a bind, and I’d be happy to suggest a few places that may have openings for interns. I’ll email them over to you. My advice is to apply immediately.”

What he isn’t saying is that all the spots at the best firms have been filled. *Shit.* Boston was the perfect city—close to home yet far enough away that Ma couldn’t pop in and surprise me.

“If you want to take a gap year and reapply next year, we may reopen it then.”

A gap year would mean moving back in with my parents. NIAMY. *Not in a million years.*

We end the conversation, and I stare down at my phone for several seconds, resisting the urge to throw it across the room. Instead, I head to the kitchen for some much-earned coffee.

“How was Cadillac’s last night?” Penelope asks a few minutes later when she comes into the kitchen. She’s changed from her pjs into jeans and a Wildcats shirt—another one. *Nice.*

I sit down at the table near the bay window. “Margo, Connor, and the chess champs were there so I hung with them.”

“Did you see him?”

My hands tighten. “He had two girls with him. Looks like he’s expanding his harem.”

She frowns and takes cinnamon rolls out of the oven. She must have put them in earlier. “You okay?”

“Yeah.” I decide to not dwell on Blaze and give her the rundown from the phone call. She listens, her head cocked, eyes studying me. I see worry in her gaze.

“Dang. Sorry, Charm. I know this isn’t how you wanted to start off the new semester.” She pours sugary icing on the rolls and brings me one. Like Ma, she thinks food solves everything.

I look down at it, mentally tallying up the carb points. “I shouldn’t eat this.”

Her hands go to her hips and she gets a little scowl on her face. “Are you on this diet thing again?”

I snort. “I’ve been on a diet for seven days, but all I’ve lost is a week. Heck, all my cardio consists of is walking to the fridge—hence the attempt at yoga.”

“You’re talking crazy.”

“No, I’m serious. Ma is short and curvy, and I got the gene. My muffin top is a three-layer cake!”

“Why do this to yourself?” She exhales a breath and sits down across from me. I sense a lecture coming.

“Pen, you don’t get it.”

Her eyes are kind as she takes my hand. “Stop comparing yourself to others. That isn’t the Charisma I know.”

“I know...but I keep thinking about those horrible nicknames—”

“That was a long time ago.”

“But,” I remind her, “you never heard people call *you* those things.” I run

my fingers over the rim of my cup. “And then Trevor...” I blow out a breath, my head going back to the popular, crazy-good-looking guy I was in love with back in high school, the one who admitted at prom he’d only asked me because his friends dared him to take the chubby girl to the last big party of the year. Most of the time I don’t think about him or the horrible, awful feeling that crawled inside me when he pulled that, but I’m slipping. I’m losing my confidence. My mojo is MIA, probably hiding in a corner eating a bacon salad.

“Trevor was an asshole, a stupid immature boy. I’ve never met him, but if I do, I will slay him for you. Heck, I’ll sic Vampire Bill on him. His claws are sharp.”

“I know life is too short for self-hatred and carrot sticks every day, but damn, have you seen Dani up close? She’s practically a supermodel.”

“Enough of that.” She jumps up, opens a junk drawer, and comes back with a compact mirror. Flipping it open, she holds it in front of my face. “Look at you. Your eyes have these little golden sparks, and...come on... your boobs are amazing—much better than my titlets.” She smirks. “Hey, remember those two tennis guys who got into an argument over who was going to buy you a drink at Caddy’s once? They nearly came to blows over you, Charm, and you dissed them both. You have something about you, a little extra sparkle that makes men nuts.”

I laugh. “Pretty sure it was those kickass shoes I had on that night—you know the ones, the four-inch leopard heels.”

“Those are great shoes, not denying it, but...it was *you*. You’ve got sass, baby.”

I sigh. “My sass packed her bags and left three months ago.”

Her lips tighten, and I figure she’s remembering how I moped around the house and refused to go anywhere he might be. “I know, I know. You haven’t been your usual confident self. Don’t let seeing Blaze with *her*—”

“Blaze?” asks Ryker as he waltzes into the room, fresh from a shower.

I arch a brow. “No offense, QB1, you’re my boy and all, but you are the last person I want to talk to about him.”

He holds his hands up. “Message received. Don’t talk about one of my best friends in front of you ever.”

There’s an awkward silence, and I frown. I don’t want that. I don’t want to be the friend everyone walks on eggshells around.

“I know he’s your friend,” I mumble. It makes things even harder.

Normally, I never would have chosen Blaze for a hookup—too hot, too aware that every girl in the room wants him—but we were thrown together in the same friend group, and things just happened...like his cock inside me.

Whoa. Don't even think about him and his—

See, there I go.

I take a sip of coffee as Ryker exchanges a long look with Penelope and then glances back at me. “He’s my friend and you are too, so don’t sweat it.” He shrugs then moves to the sink to wash out his mug and tells Penelope he needs to check in with his advisor.

My ears perk up. “I thought you senior studs would be focused on the draft instead of classes.”

He nods. “Some are. Blaze and I are still working on our degrees—” He gives me a sheepish look. “Shit, there I go again. Sorry, Charm.”

I clear my throat. “Pfft, it’s fine. So you might be the number one draft pick, right? Some kind of NFL superstar?” Yes, I’ve been keeping up with the media coverage even though I haven’t let on.

His blue-green eyes gleam. “Right, but I don’t want to be *an* NFL superstar—I want to be *THE* NFL superstar.” He says this with a lilting Game-of-Thrones style accent and places his hands behind his head, flexing as he preens.

I snort.

“I’m so proud of you, baby.” Penelope sashays over, wraps her arms around his shoulders, and kisses him.

“PDA much?” I consider tossing a cinnamon bun at them, but it looks too pretty.

They ignore me.

My hands curl around my mug, and I stare down at the table, thinking about Blaze.

I let myself get sucked in by a player, and I should’ve known better. I know how guys like him operate.

Thoughts of my father creep in. Frank Rossi’s the kind of man women have always gushed over. Even nuns blush when he walks in a room. A tall, strapping, handsome man with a wide smile, he and my older brother Paulie own a successful plumbing company back home. And Ma? She knew he was a cheater. I heard the whispers about him in the neighborhood and even from my friends. *He can unclog my pipes anytime. Can't keep it in his pants.* I recall a morning when I walked in on her in the laundry room with my dad’s

shirt clutched to her chest as she picked at the lipstick there. But the biggest, most awful part? I watched him come out of a former teacher's house and give her a passionate kiss once. He never saw me, and sometimes I wonder if I'd said something, maybe things would have changed. Perhaps. Perhaps not. I was only twelve and terrified my parents' marriage was over, but that same night he sat down to dinner with us as if nothing was amiss.

And when Ma brought him pie, he pulled her close and kissed *her*.

Beautiful men with enough charm to win over a nun are trouble. It's why I pick the nice quiet ones; it's why I have my rules.

Ryker's moaning brings me back. His hands cup her ass.

"Geeze, guys! Your bedroom is literally down the hall." Grabbing my coffee *and* the cinnamon roll, I flounce out of the kitchen and go to my room.

"Sexy mama, gimme a bite!" greets me as I walk in.

I snort at Vampire Bill. "Ah, you can be sweet. Sorry, dude, this bun might make you sick. How about a celery stick? They're in the fridge, and we both know I'm not gonna eat them."

He cocks his head. "No!"

I rub his head. "Smart bird."



* * *

Later that day, I head to my appointment with my advisor in the fine arts building, a huge modern structure full of classrooms and personal student studios. I spent a lot of time there last fall, prepping my portfolio. Waylon has one of the best graphic design programs in the country, which was a deciding factor in me coming so far south to attend college.

"Charisma! So wonderful to see you," says Dr. Alfonsi as I walk into his office. A handsome man in his fifties with a broad grin and gray at his temples, he's elegant and stylish in an expensive, well-tailored suit. He'd fit right in at a street cafe in Rome sipping a morning espresso.

He's from the Bronx area, and when he saw my hometown on another professor's advisee list a few years ago, he traded to get me on his.

He gives me a smile and indicates I should take a seat. "You must come to dinner soon. Anne and I have a pre-med student you should meet. I never brought him up before because he was seeing someone, but not anymore. He comes from a good family in Brooklyn—"

“Don’t start with the matchmaking, Dr. A. I’m over guys right now.”

In the past, he’s asked me over for dinner and then a “nice young man” shows up and joins us. One was gay, one picked his nose, and one asked to borrow money from me. I usually go along with those setups because, well, Anne is a great cook, and the food reminds me of home.

He frowns, the deep lines on his forehead creasing. “Is something bothering you, dear? Has some young man broken your heart?”

I sigh, not going there. What would I say? The hottest guy on campus left me for an upgrade? “I’m fine, but Prescott canceled my internship this morning.”

“Oh, no.” His brow knits, and I guess I should have smiled more when I walked in the door, but it’s hard to pretend when this *new semester, new you* thing isn’t working for me no matter how many pep talks I give myself.

“I’m sorry, dear. You look terribly unhappy. Let me know if I can write you a new letter for any applications. I’ll do some checking to see if I can find some open spots, but odds are it will be tough.”

I sigh. “I know.”

He takes my schedule from my hands and looks it over. He’s wearing a smile when he looks up at me. “This lineup of classes will put you to sleep, Charisma. Come on, spice it up a little. Let’s switch one of these out for something exciting.”

“Just a few easy classes and I’m out of here.”

Sayonara Waylon, sayonara Blaze.

He glances down at the paper and taps his chin. “I’m thinking you need a humanity elective. How about Social Psychology 410 with Dr. Cartwright? He’s very entertaining. No pillow required.”

A tingle of excitement hits. “Oh! That class is legendary. Rumor is you need special pull—or you have to be an athlete.”

He smiles. “You have pull with me, and Dr. Cartwright owes me. Would you be willing to take it?”

Why not? “Sure.”

He pats me on the back. “Good. I’ll take care of updating your schedule. Now, let me set you up with this fellow. Did I mention medical school already? Mike is very, very handsome. Your mother would be thrilled.”

He met my parents when they came to visit me one year and had us all over for a cookout.

I shake my head. “Pass.”

He cocks his head, his face growing serious as he studies me. “I don’t mean to meddle, dear. I just can’t help myself.”

I shake my head. “You and my ma are a lot alike.”

He grabs a Post-it from his desk, scribbles on it, and hands it over to me.

I take it, staring at the phone number. “Dr. A—”

He waves me off. “Do what you want with it. You never know, he might just be a good friend. You look like you need one,” he finishes quietly.

Dang. I must really be off.

A long exhalation comes from me as I tuck the number in my purse. “Fine.”

6



“Need some help?”

I’m on my tiptoes when the question comes, trying to reach a book on the top shelf in the bookstore at the student center.

My heart does a nosedive off a cliff as that familiar gruff voice washes over me, his accent a smooth drawl that’s reminiscent of hot summer nights and slow kisses—kisses we never had...well, except for that one time freshman year.

I ignore him and try to grab the book.

“You’re too short. Let me,” Blaze says, this time closer, his voice soft, almost placating.

I suck in a breath. The artist side of me was always drawn to the colors I saw when he spoke, shades of gold and gray, one side of him sunny and easy, the other part wrapped in fog and smoke.

I ease back on my feet and whip around, internally wishing I’d worn something more *I hate you and don’t you wish you still had me*, but sadly, I’m not in my kickass shoes and itchy dress. Today it’s flat-soled red

Converse, black joggers, and a Yankees sweatshirt. I blow at a piece of hair in my face. *Shit.*

Of course, he looks magnificent in a tight long-sleeved black shirt that clings to his broad chest and tapered jeans molded to those leg muscles. His face gets most of my attention, the darkness on his jawline adding a broody look.

Curse him and his hotness.

I stare at him a little too long, until I snap out of it.

“I don’t need help.” My voice is strangled as I move to brush past him—forget the textbooks—but he reaches out and takes my elbow.

“Charisma—”

His fingers are a hot brand on my skin—it’s the first time we’ve touched in three months—and I pull away. A tremble starts in my legs. *How dare he?* It was one thing to see him in a social setting and pretend I was fine, but when we’re face to face without people watching... “Don’t put your hands on me. I’m not your hookup anymore, football player.” My words are sharp, layered with bitterness.

His face reddens, and he drops his arms. “I didn’t mean—” he stops, not finishing as he studies my face.

I wonder what he sees. *You know what he sees, Charisma—someone who wasn’t up to his usual standards.*

Everything I didn’t say last night rushes out. “Didn’t mean to what? Dump me in the middle of my own sorority’s party in front of all my friends and half of campus? And you know, that’s totally fine. We both knew I wasn’t enough to keep your attention.”

His jaw clenches and he frowns, his brow furrowing. “I didn’t plan for things to happen that way.”

“How did you want to break up with me? Over candlelight? A text would have worked just fine,” I bite out.

He seems to grind his teeth, and his hand balls up as he puts it to his lips. “Things were complicated. It was the middle of football season—”

“Yeah, too difficult for a jock?”

It’s not true. I know he’s sharp, but anger eats at me—plus, Dani dances in my head, her hand curled around his arm, staking her claim.

The silence builds between us, and he watches me intently, as if trying to figure me out. He starts at my hair and works his way down to my feet, then comes back to my face. Just when I think I might combust from the intensity

of his eyes, he looks away. “Is that really what you think about me? Just another dumb athlete with a hard-on for every girl who walks by?”

“ITSF.”

“If the shoe fits?” he asks.

“Damn you for always knowing my acronyms.”

His lips tighten.

“What?” I cock my hip. “You look like you want to say something.”

He taps his hand against his leg. Ice-blue eyes, ones I used to stare into and get butterflies from, glitter down at me. “You just can’t handle that *I* ended things, sweetheart.”

“Not your sweetheart.”

“Never were.”

Shit...shit... my heart feels like an anvil just landed on it, heavy and hard, and I can’t breathe for a second at his words, part of me pissed, the other part devastated. I wanted to be his sweetheart, I did, but he...

You’re not my type.

“Thanks for the reminder,” I say quietly, my anger folding away piece by piece and slipping into that horrible self-pity I despise.

He closes his eyes and scrubs his face with those talented hands, strong and big and capable, skillful with a football. I’ve never met someone as devoted to a sport as he is. He doesn’t seem to get enough of training and working out. Perhaps all players are as focused as him; I don’t know. I do know I went to every home game he played at Waylon, way before we hooked up. Part of that was sorority driven—gotta support our players—but he was the one I watched. Number eighty-two.

Someone slides by us, and I realize we’ve been standing here looking at each other for too long. It’s time to go. I step back from him, and my hands shake as I cling to the books I already got, needing something to keep me anchored.

He steps in front of me, much like he did last night, blocking me, and I tilt my head back to take him in. At my height of five feet, three inches, it’s hard to glare at a guy who towers over you and not look ridiculous, but I manage—until his eyes flicker with lingering emotion. I drop his gaze. I can handle the smooth-talking Blaze, the one he shows everyone, but it’s that deeper side of him that intrigues me. And I can’t have that.

I dart my eyes around the store, searching for a way out, but I’m stuck between him and a bookshelf. “You’re blocking my path.” I focus on his

legs. No sexiness there—well, except for the tight muscles under that denim.

“This is what I know,” he says in a low voice, ignoring my statement. “You told *me* we were just *messing around*. You set all the rules. Isn’t that how you operate? So why does me ending things with you even matter?”

“You never asked for more. You could have.” The revealing words fall around us, tinged with hurt, and I want to pull them back.

Protect your heart, Charisma.

The silence between us crackles, yet I’m aware of other people around us. There are a few girls on another aisle, and I glance over as one of them pulls out her phone. No doubt she’s taking a picture of him. Part of me retreats, anxious she’ll get me in that photo—a girl who clearly doesn’t belong. He doesn’t notice. Everyone knows who he is, and they’re probably wondering why he’s talking to me.

I inhale then immediately regret it when his scent hits me: freshly showered male with undertones of crisp pine. I shouldn’t be surprised I smell him. He’s standing way too close. What’s his deal? I decide I hate all pine trees. I will never look at another one again.

“No, I didn’t,” he finally says, the words taut as if pulled from him unwillingly. He taps his leg, his tell that he’s anxious or angry. We weren’t together long, but every moment we spent together, I studied him like a wine connoisseur given a glass of rare cabernet. I know what makes him laugh, usually random things that make no sense. I know that groan he makes deep in his throat when he slides inside me, like he’s home. I know the feel of his hand when he cups my face and stares at me, a hesitant expression on his face —

“You can’t even look at me anymore. I wonder why,” he says, his voice a challenge.

Steeling myself, I face those baby blues. “You know why. I wish we’d never met up last fall. I wish you’d never flirted with me. I wish I’d never fucked you that first time in the library. I hate you—”

“Same page. Same fucking page, Charisma.” And then he’s walking away, broad shoulders swaying as he stalks down the aisle, straight to where Dani is—staring at the lipstick counter. All hail the beauty queen.

Seriously, she was crowned Miss Waylon her sophomore year.

She looks past him and sees me. With a frown, she checks me out, from the top of my ponytail to my red shoes. I know what she sees—a blob in a sweatshirt with no makeup—and obviously, I’m not her competition, but I

guarantee she knows I slept with him. She knew at Cadillac's. Not much gets past those pesky, pretty Thetas.

His back is ramrod straight, his fists balled up at his sides as he walks past her.

She tosses back her mane of blonde hair and looks over her shoulder at me with a triumphant smirk as she trots after him.

He's mine, her gaze says.

You can have him! mine shouts back.

I can't breathe watching his frame fade away from me as they exit and head out into the student center. There he goes. With her. I lean over and hang on to a nearby shelf, shoulders heavy, emotion building inside me as I replay the night we broke up.

He said I had rules, but he never asked for more.

He pushed me away and stalked out of that party and out of my life.

Memories wash over me, the ones of him pacing on the side of the dance floor, hands twitching at his sides, his face pale as he watched me dance with my sorority sisters, a look of dread on his face. Later, I chalked it up to pre-breaking-up-with-Charisma nerves. He knew he was going to dump me when he walked in that party.

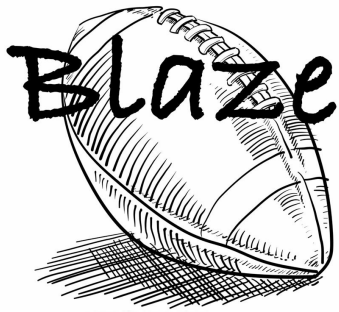
And what did I do after he left? I ended up in the dark basement of our sorority house, huddled in a corner alone as the party went on upstairs, my arms wrapped around a body that didn't fit the mold of his perfect type. Blindsided, I cried my eyes out. I fucking cried because he fooled me so, so good. Because underneath, I thought, I thought he was on the same wavelength I was. Wrong.

But why is he so...angry with me? What have I done? I let him go. He asked for it, he got it.

A student walks past me and then looks back at me, giving me a lingering glance, and I straighten, realizing I'm still hunkered over on the shelf.

God, dig up some backbone, Charm. The Blaze era is over. Stop wallowing in this misery and move the F on.

I pull out the phone number Dr. A gave me and fire off a text to Med School Mike. Might as well get back in the saddle.



It's past five on a Friday, and I'm leaving the gym when my phone rings. Aunt Lorraine. I grapple with my bag to hit the answer button before it goes to voice mail. I called last night but she didn't pick up. Uncle Jack never does, so I didn't even try him.

"Hey, Aunt Lorraine, what's up? Guess you saw I called?"

"Yeah. How are things going?" Her voice is distracted, and I hear the girls in the background. I picture them in their house with the huge cotton field behind it. Over fifty years old, it's a ranch-style brick her parents left her along with a small farm. She lost them at nineteen, married Jack at twenty, and started having babies at twenty-one. Then I came along.

"About this dinner thing..." Her voice trails off as one of the girls starts whining, and I can tell by the rustling that she's covering the phone and telling someone to be quiet—Suzie, the youngest, I bet. Last time I was there was Christmas Day, and she'd grown nearly a foot since the summer.

Her voice is back, a hint of exasperation there. "Sorry. Kid drama. Suzie and Carrie don't want to clean their room."

“Ah. Well, give my sister-cousins a hug from me, will you?”

“Sure.” She pauses.

I tense up, waiting for her to speak. I really want them to make the awards dinner for the national championship, and it’s just...stupid.

“Look, Blaze, I’m sorry we didn’t make the game, but I’m sure you understand. It was in Miami, and we couldn’t really afford to fly down, plus with the girls...”

I stop at my truck, an older model black Chevy, and lean against it. We had this conversation after we won, but I let her go on, knowing she’s building up.

“I get it. Work and the girls...it’s hard to get away.”

“Exactly.”

“The awards dinner is here in Magnolia,” I say. A three-hour drive, no plane necessary.

She sighs. “Ellen has a play that same night. It’s a big deal now that she’s in high school and convinced she wants to be an actress. Gah, fifteen and killing me with the boys.”

I picture Ellen, tall and pretty with a big smile and bright red hair. Disappointment brushes at me, but I’m used to it from them, and I shove it down. I make my voice upbeat when I speak. “That’s awesome. She didn’t tell me that the last time she texted. What play is it?”

“She’s Ariel in *The Little Mermaid*. Her performance starts at six and your dinner is at seven, and I just don’t know how we can be in two places at the same time.”

“That would be difficult.”

“Blaze...I’m sorry.”

But is she truly? Dry as dust and religious, she and my uncle are small-town, hardworking people who face the world with resolve and grit. Emotions aren’t expressed. Affection, at least for me, was rare. They took me in because duty demanded it.

“Ah, it’s okay, Aunt Lorraine.”

I’ll be the only person there without a family member, but I can play it off like I usually do—big smile, lots of jokes.

She goes on to tell me about the girls, and I end up pacing around the lot and talking to Suzie and Carrie, too. Eventually I end the call and tuck my phone in my side pocket.

The smell of peppermint hits me and I falter, nearly tripping as I stop and

walk back to see if she's behind me. *Shit*. She's not. Of course she isn't. Why would she be in the parking lot of the field house?

It's just my imagination.

And why would she look for me?

She can't stand the sight of me; that much was apparent in the bookstore yesterday. Besides, I pushed her away so hard, I made sure she'd never want me again. My head goes to that party where we broke up. *Shit*, can I even call it "breaking up" when we weren't really together? Yet, it felt like we were a couple, every moment we spent together layered with heat and long glances.

Dillon waves as he comes out of the gym and jogs over. Dressed in shorts and no shirt, I can't help but laugh at him.

"Dude, it's forty degrees out here. Are you crazy?" I say when he reaches me.

He waves it off. "Can't feel the cold when you're as hot as I am."

"Yeah, you'll be hot with a fever if you don't put some clothes on."

He studies me. "Saw you talking on the phone. Girl?"

"Family."

He leans down and touches his toes, still in workout mode. "Awards dinner, I assume? They coming? Mine are flying in."

"Nope."

"Huh." He rises up and studies me, putting his hands on his hips, a frown on his face. "You good with that?"

I nod. "Cool with me. Don't need them."

That isn't true. It isn't, but I say the words because I don't want pity. I didn't think they'd come anyway, and I'm used to doing things on my own. Even in high school, they were too busy to attend most of my games.

"You sure?" His green gaze holds mine, but before I can reply, his eyes go over my shoulder. "Fuck me. Archer and company approaching."

"What?" I turn to see a new white Mustang convertible with the top down rolling toward us. Looks like someone else doesn't care about the cold.

Archer stops the car next to us, a few of the freshman defensive players sitting inside. He's wearing a smirk with a haughty look in his eyes.

My spine stiffens.

"Yo, Blaze, didn't hear your name on the news today. Looks like you're still not invited to the Combine. Sucks, not that I would know." He revs up the engine and grins, stretching his arms out of the vehicle and sweeping over it. "Check out my sweet ride. Got my advance from my agent this week. You

got an agent yet?”

My jaw pops. No, I don't have an agent, but fuck if I'll tell him that.

I study the lines of the car, all sleek curves and custom wheels. I've never been into material things—can't afford them anyway. Cars and big-ass houses don't motivate me. The game does.

“Nice,” I say, trying to keep my cool and not let him know his digs get to me.

He rakes a hand through his white-blond hair and smiles. “Ah, sour grapes don't look so good on your face.” He laughs then sobers, giving me a steely glance. “My bet is you won't get an agent. You just don't have what it takes, farm boy.”

I toss my gym bag down to the pavement, roll my shoulders, and step—

Dillon's hand stops me. *That's exactly what he wants*, his gaze says.

“Yeah, yeah, it's a sweet ride, Archer,” Dillon mutters, still holding my arm. “Now run along and enjoy yourself, asshole.”

Archer tosses up a little wave, looking nonchalant, but I know that look in his eyes as he drives away. He loves messing with me. He knows how important the next few weeks are, and if I don't get invited to the Combine or get an agent or *something*, I'm done.

We watch as he peels out of the lot and heads to downtown, probably to a party. Some of the guys have been nonstop since we won the natty.

“He's a dick,” Dillon mutters. “I'm glad he'll be gone soon. I'll have next year all to myself.”

I refocus, doing my best to shake it off and be my normal, goddamn fun self—which is quite a feat these days. It doesn't matter that he's got an agent. I'm fine.

I slap Dillon on the back. “You'll make a great QB1.”

“Gonna miss your ass though.”

I laugh. He won't. He's got so many friends I can't keep up with them. I'm more of a small-inner-circle guy, with tons of acquaintances I talk and laugh with but don't open up to. “Maybe I'll come back and try to finish my degree if I can't wrap it up this term.”

He gives me a look. “You'll get it. Nobody's got drive and ambition like you.”

Yeah, but other wide receivers are beating me—according to the media.

Maybe I need another workout. I grimace when I realize my muscles need downtime.

I stick my hands in the joggers I threw on after my shower and pose, showing him my profile. “You think this face could sell cars? Is it pretty enough to rack up some commissions?” I give him a grin.

“You’re the prettiest boy on the team after me, but you aren’t going to end up selling cars.” He punches me in the arm. “If you do, it’ll be at one of those high-class Maserati places and girls will be crawling all over you.”

“Hmmm.”

He watches me open my door and toss my bag in. “You wanna get out of here and grab a drink at Cadillac’s? Or hit up The Purple Iris? I hear they’ve got a good band tonight. We’ve got the weekend before classes start and then it’s game on.”

I shake my head. “Told Coach I’d be in bright and early tomorrow to train.”

“You’re a machine, but all work and no play can be borrrring.” He pauses as if he’s going to say something else but stops.

“What?”

He looks away then back at me, rubs his neck. “Saw Charisma on campus earlier today. Seemed like some kind of sorority meeting. She looked hot, had on this black dress and these big heels—”

“Are you trying to piss me off?” My hands ball up.

“Dude.” He takes a step back. “Bros before hoes. I know the code and all. I just thought you might want to know. I didn’t see her with anyone, but then, it was a bunch of girls. You don’t care though, right?” His gaze searches my face. “You were a bit of a bear after that party last fall, and well, you kinda look like you might be headed back down that road again.”

Because ditching her was like tearing a limb from my body. Three times we had sex, and you’d think it wouldn’t mean much, *but it had*, and that was the problem.

I picture her smiling and laughing with her sorority girls. *See, she’s happy*, I tell myself, even though there’s a tug inside me that says she’s not, that maybe she’s hurting—

“That ship sailed. I’m done.”

He lets out a low whistle. “I’ll be honest, *done* doesn’t sit well on your face. I get you’ve got football putting the screws to you, but, man, *she’s in your head*. You think I didn’t see how you were looking at her at Cadillac’s? Like you’ve got an itch and only she can scratch it. You need to forget her and come out with me.”

I get in my car. She is in my head. Her note is sitting on my nightstand right now because I'm a dumbass who can't let go of what she wrote.

"Come on, man. Dani and the girls will be there. I'll invite my cousin Mary if you want. You know, she's been asking to meet you, and I keep putting her off."

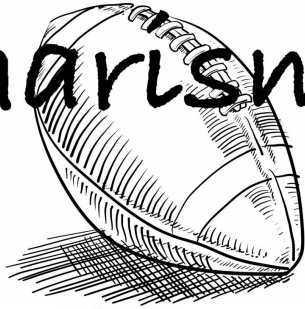
I crank my truck. "Maybe next time. I want to be fresh tomorrow."

He shakes his head at me. "I'm gonna hold you to that. Me, you, and some hot girls—it's going to happen." He grins.

"Yeah. Soon." *Just let me figure out football first.*

8

Charisma



Charisma



On Sunday, I'm ready to eat my arm off by the time I pull into the parking lot of Piggly Wiggly. It's the night before classes start and I'm stocking up.

After grabbing several packs of SlimFast, I find myself standing in front of the pasta aisle, salivating over an image of Ma's ravioli in my head. Who am I kidding? Dear Diet, you're boring and tasteless. Instead of losing weight, I'm going to look into those stretching machines and see if I can just get taller.

Feeling frustrated, I zoom past several aisles, aimlessly grabbing salad mix, low-carb chips, and diet soda.

I pass by the cupcakes in the bakery, and my mouth waters at the smell of sweet sugar. I shove on past, muttering under my breath. I glance down at my shirt, which reads *I Just Finished My First Marathon (Just Kidding—I'm On My Third Cupcake)*, then roll my eyes.

Not today, Satan. Not today.

Head to the alcohol! That will help. Do they make low-calorie wine? Yes, yes they do.

I walk past a few people and maneuver to the liquor aisle—then I see him.

Facing away from me, he's bending down to check out the beer. From this angle, he could be any hot college guy at the grocery store, but the new, longer hair is unmistakable, and I'd know that frame anywhere.

That tight, muscular ass? Best on campus.

I don't see Dani, and relief washes over me. I'm wary, though. She's probably back at the makeup section a few aisles back.

He's about ten feet away, yet his chiseled profile is enough to make me pissed, those broad shoulders enough to make my heart stutter. In his cart are packs of Big Red gum, a giant bag of Cheetos, protein drinks, and beer.

I look around to reroute my shopping and avoid him. The last thing I want is a replay of our bookstore argument a few days ago. Avoidance is the best course of action.

An older lady, maybe in her sixties, appears at the other end of the aisle, facing him. She seems distracted with her phone up to her ear as she talks to someone and bumps into his cart. I hear him apologizing as he moves out of the center of the aisle.

Her phone drops to the floor with a clatter.

Moving like lightning—as usual—he bends down, picks up her phone, and hands it back to her.

She doesn't take it; her mouth flops open like a fish as she takes him in.

Yeah, he has that effect on most females, but this is different. This isn't awe.

Blaze is still holding out her phone, and she snatches it out of his hand.

WTF?

Before I know it, I've eased in closer, moving slowly as I browse the Zinfandel selection, one eye on the pink wine and one on them.

His feet shuffle. Someone is antsy.

I pick up a bottle of something and pretend to study it.

"Mrs. Wilson...how are you? I—I—" he says softly.

She crosses her arms, seeming to gain back her composure. "Blaze Townsend. What are *you* doing here?" Her voice drips with a deep, thick Southern accent, someone who's lived in Mississippi her entire life.

"Ah, I attend Waylon. Just restocking before class—"

"Of course, with alcohol I see." Her eyes dart to his cart. "Are you even twenty-one?" She purses her lips and continues. "Why wouldn't you be? You

get to grow older. You have a *life*. Aren't you the lucky one?"

My hackles rise.

"Yes, ma'am. Have you, um, moved to Magnolia?"

She sniffs and looks down a rather long nose at him. With faded blonde hair up in a French twist, cream slacks paired with a green sweater set, and a silk scarf that looks more expensive than my rent, she smells like old money. I picture her living in a plantation-style mansion, probably with a big porch and Greek columns in the front.

Her voice is cold. "No. Visiting some friends here for the week. They have a house on the lake. We're retired now. Not much left for us to do in Alma. No grandkids."

"Right, right. Guess Mr. Wilson isn't mayor anymore." He pauses, his hands moving from his legs to his cart, which he clenches like a lifeline. "I—I don't get back to Alma much—"

"Don't blame you."

Her face is scrunched up, as if she smells something horrid, and I set the bottle back down on the shelf. Forget the Zinfandel; I'm outright staring now. FBI mode is *on*.

He hunches over the cart, leaning his arms on the side. "Right. I love Magnolia, so there's no reason to go back."

Bitterness flits over her face. "Good for you. You got the perfect life while my daughter is dead."

He seems to take a deep breath. "I'm sorry. My parents—"

"Your parents." She spits the words out. "They deserve what they got for killing my Carry-Anne."

What?

He bows his head and stares at the floor.

"They were useless druggies. Everyone knows that. Only they took her with them." Her face compresses. "You might be a big football player here, Blaze, but everyone in Alma knows where you came from."

"I...I'm sorry for what happened to your daughter. I think about her—"

She jabs an unsteady finger at him. "No, don't think about her. She should be alive right now. She should be married and happy and having babies, but your parents ruined our lives and...and...here you are living yours." She takes a breath, and her hand rests across her chest as if she's protecting herself. "Why, you've ruined my day."

"I'm...sorry," he says, and there's a crack in his voice.

I swallow. He's apologized three times, and each time is worse than last, his voice leaning toward that dark sound that wraps around my heart and squeezes.

"Sorry means nothing," she mutters before whipping her cart around and speeding away until she's around the corner, the *tap tap tap* of her heels loud as she picks up her pace on the next aisle over.

"Blaze?" I call out, not intending to, but it's a reflex.

He hasn't responded, and I forget my cart and walk up to him. I put my hand on his shoulder tentatively, not wanting to startle him. "Hey."

He turns slowly, and I wince at the haunted look in his blue eyes, his usually sun-tanned face white.

His gaze locks with mine, and then it drops. "I wondered how long it would take you."

"You knew I was listening?"

"Figured. You flew right past me in the cookie aisle and never looked up. We always seem to find each other."

I grimace. "I didn't want to see those frosted cookies with the sprinkles. Ah, sprinkles, my old nemesis." I shake a fist in the air, but he doesn't even crack a smile.

"I smelled your perfume when you hit the liquor aisle. Figured you were back there somewhere."

"Dude, that is not perfume. I need to tone down the peppermint body wash and the essential oils I diffuse."

He looks down at his hands. "Don't. I like it. Reminds me of Christmas."

I huff out a laugh. "Just call me jolly old Mrs. Claus. All I need is a big red velvet dress with white fur. Maybe I can get a side gig at Macy's during the holidays."

He raises his head and looks at me, his brows lowered. "You're too hot for Mrs. Claus. If anything, you'd be one of those little elves with the pointy hats and green leggings."

Oh.

It feels as if we're having a nice conversation. I clear my throat. "Who's the lady with the attitude? I'll go after her if you want. I have a mean right hook. My brother Mattie taught me. The trick is how you hold your fist." I demonstrate. "See? Knuckle is out."

"Beating up old people? That's not your style." He shakes his head and reaches into his cart, takes out a beer, opens it, and takes a long swig. A

grimace flits across his face.

“Blaze—”

“Trust me, don’t ask. It’s not a pretty story.” He pauses. “Besides, you were never that interested in my past before. You were too busy lusting after my hot bod.”

“I see you’re feeling better.”

“Not really. I think I’m going to throw up.” He holds up the bottle of Fat Tire beer. “This piss is not what I need, but my throat is dry...” He leans a little too far to the right, in danger of crashing into the cold storage, and I grab his elbow.

He takes in a deep breath, his chest rising as he gasps for air. “Shit, Charm. Don’t feel so good. Do you...can you...” Before he can finish his sentence, his eyes roll back in his head and he slips straight down to the floor of aisle 9.

FML.

My knees drop to the floor next to him, cradling his head in my lap, which thankfully didn’t hit the tile as hard as it could have. I say his name a dozen times, my tone escalating with each one. I give him a tiny slap and then another one that’s hard. “Blaze! Wake up, you...you big oaf!”

One of the Piggly Wiggly cashiers comes around the corner. With acne and braces, she can’t be more than sixteen. She drops the box she has in her hand. “Oh my God, did he slip and fall? Should I call the manager?” Her eyes flare. “Is that Blaze Townsend? Do you think he’ll sign something for me? I’m a big fan.”

I’m about to tell her to stop talking and call an ambulance when he speaks, his voice low and husky.

“You’ve been wanting to slap me for months,” he mumbles as he struggles to push up on his elbows. “What the hell is an oaf? Who talks like that?”

“It just came to me. I think it means *crazy big guy*. Seemed appropriate. Are you okay?”

“Just woozy. My workout was intense today, and I haven’t had dinner.” Red appears on his face as he looks around and sees the wide-eyed girl who’s gaping at us. His eyes lock with mine. “Damn, this is embarrassing.” He rubs his cheek and huffs out a small laugh. “Nice slap.”

I smirk. “Sorry. Don’t be embarrassed. Once a lizard got in Vampire Bill’s cage and he eviscerated it piece by piece. All I could do was scream,

and when he ripped its head off, I keeled over like a piece of fluff in the wind.”

“I never took you for the kind who passes out at the sight of blood. Nothing scares you.”

Yeah. I’m the girl with the rules to protect her heart. That’s not brave. It’s insane and a little ridiculous, but it keeps me steady and focused on my goals—or it used to.

“Pfft. There’s plenty you don’t know,” I say.

“I know.”

I let that pass and help him stand. He weaves for several seconds but seems to find his balance, shoving back hair that has fallen in his face.

“Nice highlights,” I say before thinking.

He gives me a surprised look. “Dillon did them.”

I snort. “OMG. That’s crazy.”

He gives me a ghost of his usual smile, and I guess he’s still finding his equilibrium. “You should have seen it: me and him in a tiny bathroom with a box of bleach, a hair net thingy, and these little gloves that wouldn’t fit on either of our hands. It’s a wonder we didn’t pass out from the fumes.” He puts a hand to the bridge of his nose and presses.

“You sure you’re all right? I’m supposed to report any accidents in the store and fill out a form,” says Cashier Girl.

He waves her off. “I’m good. Just didn’t expect…” His words trail off and he glances around as if expecting the older woman to reappear.

“She’s gone,” I say.

“Thank fuck. I need out of this place.” He grabs hold of the bar on the cart and clings to it.

Cashier Girl pulls out a walkie-talkie, never taking her eyes off us. “I better call Steve—that’s my manager. He’d want to know you fell. Just last month a baby opened a jar of strawberry jelly and made the biggest mess. His momma kept yelling that he might be allergic. I had to file a report and everything. Plus, it looks like you opened a beer and drank it. That’s stealing, if you think about it, and we didn’t even check your ID—”

Seriously? I pull a ten out of my purse and push it into her hand. “This is for the beer. Run along—and don’t move my cart. I’ll be back.” I turn toward Blaze. “Come on, let’s get you out of here.”

Cashier Girl takes a step forward. “Wait—does this mean he’s not going to sign something for me? I have some paper in my locker!”

Geeze. Is every female alive in love with him? “No, he’s not.”

I grasp his upper arm, even though I think he’s fine, and we head down the aisle just as I hear the girl radioing her manger to let him know two carts were left in aisle 9.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Mrs. Wilson getting in line to check out, and I purposely lead him in a different direction.

We walk side by side, my body acutely aware of his, the sound of his breathing, the movement of his legs, the tingle of heat from his hard muscles under my hand. I drop it from his arm. *He’s fine, Charisma. He doesn’t need you hanging on him.*

The cold wind hits us in the face, and he looks up to get more air as we make our way across the parking lot. He walks to his truck, which is parked just a few rows away from my car.

He stops at his driver’s door, leans back, and tucks his hands in his jeans. Relief is evident on his face. “Thanks for that.”

I nod. I should go, should just leave him be and go back in the store to finish getting my groceries...

“You’re sure you passing out was just a reaction to her? You’re not sick? I—I can give you a ride home?”

What the hell am I saying?

I can’t handle him next to me in my car. Plus, I’d probably offer to walk him up to his dorm. Where we had sex.

He gives me a small smile. “Not sick. I feel better.”

“Tell me who she was. Like you said, we didn’t really do a lot of talking...”

He arches a brow. “I recall you saying, *Yes, yes, yes, just like that you handsome, talented sonofabitch.*”

I laugh; I can’t help it. “I never said you were handsome. Who was she?”

“Well, damn, if I’d known all I have to do to get your attention is pass out, I would have been falling at your feet all day long.”

I roll my eyes. “Fine. Don’t tell me. I don’t want to know.”

“Liar.”

“You’re a liar.”

He stiffens, and tension fills the air. “Never lied to you. Not one time.”

“No, you were brutally honest. Maybe that was worse.”

We stare at each other, and the only sound is the cars zipping past us on the highway out in front of the store.

He gets this faraway expression on his face, and his gaze lowers. “Carry-Anne was seventeen when my dad ran a red light and hit her. She was the perfect little Alma girl, prom queen, sweet as pie, and the mayor and his wife’s pride and joy. My parents, on the other hand, were trailer park trash who lived to get their next fix. Carry-Anne died at the scene. My dad was stoned. That’s pretty much it in a nutshell.”

My eyes flare wide. *How did I not know this?*

It’s as if he reads my mind. “We never really talked about serious shit when we were together, did we?” He pauses. “Only three people at Waylon know that story: Dillon, Ryker, and now you.”

I shake my head. “I’m so sorry. That must have been awful—for everyone. What happened to your parents?”

“My mom died—thrown from the car. My dad lingered on life support for several days until my uncle pulled the plug.” His mouth twists. “I was ten when it happened, old enough to know everyone in the whole town despised them. They’d both been in and out of jail for one thing or another.” A resigned look settles on his face. “My dad’s brother and his wife raised me.”

“Were they good to you?”

He reaches back, pulls out his wallet, and shows me a picture. “I was eleven here, I think, and had only been with them for a year. The girls were five, two, and one. They’re a mess.” His lips curve up as if he’s thinking of them in particular, and I suck in a breath, afraid he’ll turn that megawatt grin on me.

I stare down at the image he shows me.

It’s a family portrait with him as a skinny boy, tall for his age even then. He’s wearing a baggy blue dress shirt and high-water jeans that show the edge of white socks. Worn out sneakers are on his feet, but it’s his face that gets to me. No smile.

His uncle must be the man with his arms around a petite lady holding two babies in her lap while an older child hugs her leg. The little girls are sweet, their faces round and adorable—but Blaze stands apart from them, just a little. His eyes...they’re squinted with a faraway look, his face flat. His hands are clenched tight against his legs, as if he’s holding himself as still as possible.

I look up at him, my eyes skating over the chiseled face that looks like nothing could ever penetrate the surface. I could say, *You look lonely, and if I’d been there, I’d have been your friend*, but I don’t. He’s a proud person; I

can tell by the hard, set planes of his face right now.

He doesn't meet my gaze, just stares at the photo. "I know what you're thinking when you look at it, that I didn't fit in, and I didn't, but my aunt and uncle weren't unkind. They just didn't expect me to be added to their new family, you know? Plus, they didn't have much, and there I was...taking up space and eating their food."

"I see." *He saw himself as a burden.*

"The church we attended did one of those free portrait things for our directory. That's why the background is so crappy. Don't know why I keep it, but I can't seem to throw it away. I miss the girls the most."

I stare at it and chew on my bottom lip, searching for something to say. I recall all the pictures of me and my brothers around the house. There's even a high school graduation picture of me in our guest bathroom across from the toilet, and no matter how many times I've begged Ma and Pop to take it down, insisting no one wants to see me while they poop, they refuse to take down my "shit picture".

He tucks the photograph back in his wallet.

"Blaze, I—"

He grimaces. "Nah, don't tell me you're sorry about how I grew up. If anything, it's given me my drive. Someday I'll prove to them and everyone in Alma that I'm not just the product of two losers. I'm going to get out of Mississippi and be someone."

"I believe you." Unexpected emotion flies at me, clogging up my throat as I think about him never having a family like I did.

He gives me a look, his gaze drifting over my face for what seems like several seconds. "Thank you for those words."

"I've always known you have the guts to shoot for the stars. It's plain as day when you take the football field."

"Didn't know you came to that many games."

I shrug. "You know Margo. She wants us there to cheer on the team, rah-rah-ree. I did my duty."

"Yeah, of course." A rare, vulnerable expression crosses his face, and I don't like it. Not one bit.

"All great and precious things are lonely," I murmur, the words slipping out. "John Steinbeck."

His face stills, and he gives me a long, lingering look, the air between us thicker, intimate.

“Is that...is that a compliment from the girl who hates me? Are you saying I’m precious?”

Uh...

“You do hate me, right?” His eyes hold mine, those baby blues that make me weak, and even though I don’t want to feel desire for him anymore, it rears its head, my senses lighting up at his smell, at our close proximity—

I back away from him, my feet knowing instinctively that it’s time to go.

“Charisma?”

“I—I have to go.”

“Don’t. We’re talking.”

“I have to. Got to get those rice cakes before someone else does.”

“You don’t want to leave. I know you don’t.”

“You don’t know anything,” I say, my hands tight on my purse. He has no right to ask me to talk to him.

“I know you’ve got walls so thick no one can penetrate them.”

“Yeah, well, so do you, but Charisma Rossi doesn’t need walls. Charisma Rossi is tough as nails.”

“She’s also talking about herself in the third person.” He lets out a small laugh. “Damn, you’re funny.”

His laugh...it makes me sad, reminding me that I won’t be hearing it anymore. “See you around, Blaze.”

I turn my back, and each step feels as if I’m wading through thick mud. I can’t look back. I can’t...

“Charisma.”

His voice is soft, yet it carries to me. “What?” I say, though I keep walking.

“I’m not fucking her.”

The air goes out of me, and I feel lightheaded as I whip back around.

I don’t have to ask who he means.

“I haven’t been with anyone. Not one single girl.”

“So?” My voice is raspy. “Why do I care?”

He studies me, those crystal eyes glittering at every detail of my person. He works his way over my face, lingering for a long time on my lips.

“Maybe I’m wrong, maybe you don’t give a shit, but at least now you know.”

“Why tell me now?”

His eyes hold mine. “I don’t know. What do we have to lose?”

Only the rest of me.

Doesn't he know I would have kept on with him for as long as he wanted? The worst thing of all is that even after he ended us, I might have taken him back if he'd tried.

How awful is that? To know a guy has power over you, to know he can tear down your defenses so much that you'd take any scrap you could get?

I wanted to be *his*.

"I'm *not your type*, remember?"

He never moves his gaze from me. "You were fire in my hands."

My heart clenches. "Don't say things like that. You don't mean them!"

He inhales sharply at my raised voice, and I study his expression, seeing a hesitant look in his eyes as he watches me, as if he's unsure, as if he wants to say more, but something holds him back—

And doesn't that remind me.

Something will always hold a guy like him back from me. He's out of my league. He's got a big future in front of him, one that includes the NFL and supermodels. It may not be Dani today, but it'll be another girl soon. Guys like him don't go around without women all over them.

A horn blares in the distance and I flinch.

"I have to go," I say quietly, reining in my emotion. He's part of my past and that means moving on.

"Yeah." He jams his hands deeper into the pockets of his jeans.

My hands clench around my purse, and I pivot to head into the store. I think I can feel the heat of his stare. My body trembles, pissing me off, and I pick up my pace.

Don't. Do not look back.

Because if I do, if I let myself talk to him, if I let him back into my world, all the ground I've gained over the past three months will crumble beneath my feet.

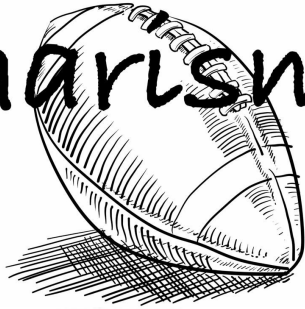
Remember how he shoved you out of his life without even an explanation?

Keep walking. One step in front of the other.

I have to. I have to. I have to.

9

Charisma



Charisma



First day of class, I arrive at Dr. Cartwright's lecture hall early to get the best seat, which is center and front.

I'm working on setting up my workspace when I hear loud laughter from outside. The doors burst open, and in walk Dillon and Blaze, two peacocks entering a new courtyard. You can almost hear "We Are The Champions" blaring in the background as their theme music. Puffed up and preening, they walk down the center stairs of the lecture hall toward the front row. Everyone in the room goes silent, and I gape as some of the students sitting around me on the front row get up to make room for them.

FTS. I'm not moving.

I've been in classes with football guys, and they always do this. They should just walk up and piss on the chalkboard to mark their territory already.

Blaze walks forward, getting perilously close to where I am, and looks for a seat.

"Hey, Blaze. You can sit here," says the pretty girl who was sitting next to me.

“Thanks. You’re the best. Coach loves for us to be at the front.”

“No biggie.” She pats his shoulder as she walks by, her eyes all over him. “Great game, by the way.”

“Go Wildcats.” He gives her that deadly grin and her face flames when she blushes, her eyes glazing over.

Ugh. He’s a sparkly, sexy unicorn. And everyone wants to ride him.

I put my hand up to block my face but it’s too late; he’s staring directly at me. His brow goes sky high and he plops down in the seat she vacated as Dillon takes the one on the other side. “You keep turning up wherever I go. You stalking me?”

“Fate’s a cruel bitch. We’ve been here almost four years, and this is the first class we’ve had together. Lucky me.” There’s no heat in my words. Last night changed something for us, but I haven’t wanted to think about it. I saw a different side of him, something vast and deep, and my brain is still processing and rolling it around in my head.

The lecture hall has small chairs, and I can’t help but brush up against Blaze’s broad shoulders as he gets settled. Goose bumps pop up on my arm each time it brushes into his.

I nonchalantly ease away from him.

“You got a pen I can borrow?” he asks me, and I turn my head, which has been staring down at my notebook, looking intently at nothing.

I take him in up close. He looks hot AF today, his damp wavy hair brushed back off his face, still wet from a shower, probably.

“Seriously? Aren’t you prepared?”

He pulls a handful of pens out of his backpack. “Just messing with you. I’m uber prepared. I’ve got to ace this class.”

He fiddles with his notebook, getting it situated on his desk just so. He moves it forward and then back, then to the side, then—

“Can you ever sit still?” I laugh nervously. I’m not sure what to say after our convo last night. Have we called a truce? Do I want a truce? Maybe. Regardless of the fact that he hasn’t been with Dani—and *why hasn’t he*—he didn’t want to continue with me.

“Just, you know, I’m antsy. Always have been.” A pink blush rises on his face. “You never noticed before?”

I did, actually, but we happened so fast and then it was over so I never commented on it. On the football field, I’d noticed how he would always be on his feet, walking up and down the sidelines, slapping other players on the

back when he isn't playing. When I'd see him at Cadillac's, I saw how he rarely sat down, preferring to pace the room and talk to people. I wonder if being busy keeps his head clear? I wonder...

Dang.

We really didn't *know* each other.

"Why are you antsy?"

"Are we about to have a real conversation?" he asks.

"We did last night."

"Indeed. Did you dream about me?"

And there he goes with the cockiness.

"Nope. I dreamed about cupcakes, lemon ones called Pucker Up. I shoved two in my mouth and may have had an orgasm."

"Did you dream about golf-ball-headed aliens too?"

Oh, he went there, the first time we had sex. Memories bombard me of us in the library when we ended up in the Dead Zone, the deserted top floor of the library where no one went. We sat on the floor in the dark between two bookshelves and talked about dreams. Later, using our phones as lights we giggled and stared at drawings of sexual positions in a Kama Sutra book. We studied a particular one, both of us transfixed on the image of a long-haired woman bent over a dining table laden with grapes and fruit as a tall man took her from behind, ecstasy on both their faces as they had sex. "Let me do that to you, Charm," he said to me in a low voice before he kissed my neck. I nearly levitated off the floor we were sitting on. Here was this guy, so freaking out of my league, but I didn't hesitate. I whispered my rules to him, and he stared at me for a long time, his chest held so still, studying me as if I was a puzzle he couldn't figure out. I *knew* his reputation as a player. I knew we were just friends because our friends were dating, but I held his gaze and unzipped his pants. His hand unbuttoned my shirt, unclasped my bra, and once he flicked his tongue over my nipple piercing, any leftover reservations flew out the window. We didn't even make it to a table, not that there was one nearby. He put me on my knees, flipped my skirt up, rolled on a condom, and fucked me, my name a litany on his lips. His skilled fingers—Jesus, they knew how to play me. I came so hard I saw stars. I came so hard the second time, he laughed and put his hand over my mouth.

When it was over, we adjusted our clothes, stood up, and just looked at each other. We both wore stupefied, astonished expressions. His hair was mussed from where my hands had tugged. He'd yanked mine out of my

ponytail and it was down, sticking to the sweat on my face. I hadn't planned on having sex with him. I don't think he had. He was the wrong kind of guy to hook up with. We just happened, like all delicious mistakes do. "We can do that whenever you want," he finally said, eyes low and heavy, lust still swirling. "Your rules. Call me." I gave him a jerky nod and bolted out of the Dead Zone, out of the library and into the coolness of the fall air. And shit, I did call him a week later. I got sucked in, knowing he was not my norm. Maybe that was part of the attraction—a guy I'd never give a second look except to admire him in a passing kind of way.

"Your face is super red. Like really. You hot? I can fan you with my notebook?" He chuckles.

I blink, coming back to the present. He totally brought that night up on purpose.

I cross my arms and circle back to our earlier conversation. "Why the fidgeting?"

He rubs at his jawline. "I have an attention issue and get distracted. A bird that flies by the window, someone coughing, you—especially you. Doesn't mean I'm not smart. It just takes me a while to take it all in." He taps one of the pens on his desk.

Especially you.

"ADD?" I've read enough to know a little about it.

"Technically, ADHD, but I don't jive with putting a label on it."

I feel him. "We put labels on everyone. Greeks, jocks, nerds—it's how our society works. People need a name to understand it. I'm not saying it's right, just human nature. It's a fascinating topic."

He nods and leans in. "Right. It's just a trait I come with, not a disability. Got diagnosed in third grade when I wandered out of the classroom and the teacher found me in the gym shooting hoops." He grimaces. "I spent most of middle school in the principal's office. My meds didn't work, and it wasn't until I put a football in my hand that I felt right."

Dillon leans over. "He's a kickass football player with the reflexes of a cat. He's a dynamo."

Blaze smirks. "He's my biggest supporter, obviously."

DING!

We stop talking as a bell rings, something similar to those little metal ones used at old hotels.

Dr. Cartwright walks out from the office door at the front of the room. An

older man with a shock of wiry gray hair and a barrel chest, he looks a little intimidating.

“Ladies and gentlemen, get settled. Class has officially started, and that was your first prompt. From now on in this class, you will hear that bell randomly. When you do, I want you to write down exactly what you were thinking at that moment. Whether you are intently concentrating on my lecture or thinking about clipping your toenails, I want the truth. I will be using this information for a study you all agreed to participate in by walking through those doors.”

Everyone dutifully pulls out a piece of paper and starts to write down some comments. I was thinking about Blaze when the bell sounded. Not fair; I didn’t know the thought police would be listening this morning.

I write down **Reflexes of a cat.**

Without being too obvious, I sneak a look at Blaze’s paper. **Must pass this class.**

“Also, write on your piece of paper your major and the number on your seat, but not your name. This will keep your responses confidential while allowing us to correlate all of the data to make it useful. I’m working on a new study, and you’re the mice in the maze. Also, I hope you enjoy the seat you are in, because it’s your seat for the entire term. To gather good data, I need it to be consistent.”

“I guess that makes us psych buddies,” Blaze says with a slight grin, nudging my shoulder with his. It’s just a light touch, but the pressure sparks fire straight to my core.

Down libido. I own you—you don’t own me.

“Just as long as you know we are no longer fuck buddies,” I say.

He frowns.

DING!

Great. I look down at my paper and decide it’s time to start not caring about this shit.

I write **Fuck buddies** on my paper and show him. What is wrong with me?

I glance over and notice Blaze has written **Not fuck buddies.**

“This semester we are going to focus on what people think, how they think, and why they think. There’s nothing off limits in this class, including speech. We want to understand why words have meaning and power, so we will let that shit fly. This will include taboo words associated with sex and

anatomy. We do this to understand our world and to make it better, not to belittle or put anyone down. If this bothers you, feel free to leave now. I have special permission to allow anyone to drop the class without explanation this week. But, if you stick it out past Friday's lecture, you are locked in, and I expect everyone's honest and thoughtful participation in class discussion as well as the concentration study we will be conducting. Our goal is to understand society and, more importantly, each other."

There is an awkward silence as Professor Cartwright surveys the room. No one moves.

"I don't see anyone heading for the door. Good, now, let's talk about menstruation and why this topic bothers some people. Show of hands, how many men in the room have ever bought feminine products?"

The room is as quiet as a church, and a slow laugh comes from the professor.

He points his finger at all of us. "The guys are lying, and we can't have that. I know there are some real men in here who've run errands for a mom or a sister or a girlfriend. Don't be shy. Let's discuss."

He proceeds to ask people to offer their opinions on why we should or shouldn't be able to talk openly about these topics.

DING!

Real men buy tampons. Lord knows my two older brothers were all up in my business and took care of anything I ever needed growing up.

I smile down at my paper, drawn into the lesson—a great distraction from the hotness next to me.

Logical, human brain: one point. Illogical, sex-starved, lizard brain: zero.

Easing over a hair, I try to see what he wrote. **Suck on a peppermint and jack off.**

I bite my lip. *WTH.* My shoulders shake as I try to not laugh.

"Stop peeking. This is personal," he whispers out of the corner of his mouth.

"Jacking off usually is," I whisper back, holding my head down so the professor doesn't notice. "No wonder you like Christmas. How many peppermints does it take to get you there?"

I sneak a look at him when he doesn't respond. His eyes meet mine, glinting with laughter. "There's the sassy girl I know. Smartass."

The professor continues and I try to focus, but shit, he's going to be in this class—right next to me—for the whole semester.

DING!

He's going to drive me crazy.

He wrote, **Where's that Kama Sutra book? I bet she still has it. Get a copy.**

I take a deep breath. This *is* going to be a long semester.

He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a piece of Big Red gum, unwrapping the red rectangle, popping it in his mouth, and chewing. How can a dude look hot chewing on a stupid piece of gum? I don't have an answer for that, but of course he manages to pull it off.

I can't help but see that his fingers play with the foil the gum came in. He presses it flat on the desk and runs his hands across it. Slow and easy, straightening out the lines until it's smooth as paper. Then he picks it up, folds it, kisses it, and tucks it back in his pocket.

How...strange.

Then I remember.

My heart stops for a second before stuttering back to life.

That gum.

That wrapper.

The words I wrote—

Tears—*shit*—tears threaten, and I blink them away and clench my fists. *Don't, Charisma. Don't remember.*

DING!

Big Red, I write.

This time I hide my paper, and he does too, cupping his big palm over it. Guards are up. I know mine is, and I can feel his emanating from him like a force field. He doesn't want me to read what he wrote, and frankly, I'm terrified to know *what* he remembers.

Did he get the note I left on his door the night he dumped me? It was after three in the morning and dark out, and his place was dead silent.

Did it blow away in the wind?

It totally blew away. It did. Must have. It was a windy evening and his door is in an alcove that invites the air—or at least that's what I've been telling myself these past three months.

I bite my lip again. *Dear God, Please let him not have seen what I wrote in a drunken-crying-my-eyes-out-weak moment.*

DING!

He saw my note. I feel it in my bones. Fuck, fuck, fuck. He knows—I

begged him back.

I glance over at him, but he's bent over now, clearly being secretive.

Somehow, I manage to push him out of my head and focus. The lecture continues for the next hour with several more dings.

Dr. Cartwright says, "Before we end class, I would like to hear a few of the random thoughts you recorded. We need honesty if we are going to better understand each other, so I would appreciate your cooperation. Here in the front row, please share your third response."

The girl in question is next to Dillon and crosses her arms like she's trying to protect herself as she blushes.

"Please, you're amongst friends. There is nothing you can say that will shock or embarrass any of us."

"Well, the third thing I wrote down was **I need to pee.**"

Chuckles drift across the lecture room.

Dr. Cartwright grins. "Good, good. Thank you for being honest. That is surprisingly common when we do this exercise. Now, how many others wrote that down at some point this morning?"

Around twenty students raise their hands, including Dillon. Blaze and I both give him a look, and he just shrugs. "I had a huge protein drink right before class."

Professor Cartwright continues, "My suggestion to you all is to try to take care of peeing before class so we can better focus. Okay, now how about a celebrity in our midst. Mr. Townsend, what did you write down as your seventh response?"

He moves around in his seat and gets a hesitant look on his face before he speaks. "Uh, let me see. Seventh response I wrote down: **Charisma.**"

I blink.

"I appreciate the compliment," the professor says with a smirk. "I've been told I have lots of charm and charisma while I teach. Feel free to elaborate on your responses next time, especially if they are complimentary of me. Let's get one more. You in the middle..."

I glance over at his paper, and Blaze catches me peeking. He lets me see a few of his responses, but not all of them.

Charisma has been jotted down several times.

I smirk and whisper, "Please."

"Show me yours?"

I shake my head.

He pulls out that gum from his pocket. “Want a piece?” His gaze holds mine steady, clear and wide and so blue, too damn innocent for my liking. I search his face for answers, trying to determine if he’s dropping a hint about the note, but he gives me nothing.

“No. Thank you.”

He shrugs and keeps his voice low. “Fresh breath and all that. You been hooking up with anyone lately?”

The question comes out of nowhere, and I pause and look over at him, seeing that questioning look in his gaze and the way his hand taps at his leg.

“No,” I murmur, staring down at my notebook.

“Huh. How come?”

“I’m working on it. Got a couple of chess guys calling me.”

He frowns. “Which ones?”

“Why?”

“No reason. Just curious. I haven’t seen you anywhere for three months. Thought maybe you had a guy on the line.”

“And if I did?” I arch my brows. I do have a date planned with Mike soon, but...

His gaze holds mine. “Then he’s lucky. You need a good guy, Charm. It wasn’t me.”

It wasn’t me.

I lick my lips and dart my eyes back to the front of the room.

The professor ends the class, thank goodness. “Please turn in your response notes and remember to sit in the same place on Wednesday. Thank you all.”

“Wanna walk to our next class together?” Blaze asks as we turn our papers in.

“Uh—” I’m surprised. Why does he want to?

“We can talk more,” he adds.

“Um, that’s okay. My next class is clear across campus near the planetarium.”

“Mine too.”

“Really?”

He blushes, the color rising slowly from his neck to his face. “Uh—”

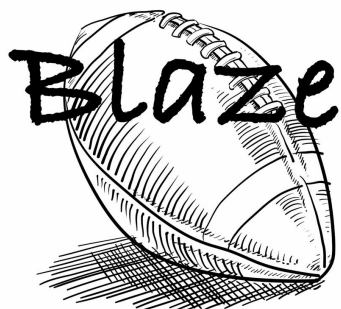
“Blaze!” The girl who gave up her seat for him is back and standing close. She’s got her hand on his shoulder *again*, only this time it lingers, brushing him off as if he has lint on his shirt. She rambles on about the game

and how great he played.

He's polite with a grin, that usual laidback, Southern charm thing going on, and I mumble a quick goodbye then dart between other students.

Yeah, hanging out with him, even if it is just a walk across campus, isn't a good idea.

You barely knew him before, and look how he broke you then.



I reach the stairwell where she's headed. "Charisma?"

She freezes when I catch up and touch her shoulder, but she doesn't jerk away. Progress.

Wait? Do I want progress with her?

She throws her head back in that defiant way of hers, and her dark hair falls over her shoulders, long and thick, the curls soft. Part of me wants to touch them, to wrap my finger around those strands. Her whiskey-colored eyes flash fire at me, and she's wearing a hole in her bottom lip as she chews on it.

I can't seem to stop myself from taking the rest of her. I mean, how can I resist? Those curves, the way her...

My hands twitch. *Don't stare at her boobs, moron. Right, right.* Charisma's more than just a girl with a banging body. She's smart as hell... and on her way to Boston soon.

Yeah.

We'll be going in different directions after graduation.

Who knows where I'll be, but it won't be where she is.

"Can we be friends?" It's not really what I wanted to say, but it's what comes out.

She blinks. "Why?"

I adjust the backpack on my shoulders. "Maybe we were just fuck buddies who never talked about real shit before, but it's a new semester. Maybe we can make a fresh start. Our friends are dating."

She gets a wary look on her face. "Okay, tell me something about you. Surprise me."

I rack my brain trying to decide what I can tell her. She probably wants me to say something really intelligent, and while I could do that, what I come up is: "I hate mayonnaise."

A full smile crosses her face, and I blink at the force of it, the way her plump lips curve up. They've always fascinated me, and shit, I know they're just regular lips, but she—

"Shocking," she murmurs. "You're a mayo hater."

I lean against the wall. *Be cool. Be cool.* I shrug. "Well, did you know that about me already?"

"Fair enough. Continue. Please elaborate."

I grin. "Mayo's disgusting, and people put it in everything—slaw, potato salad, dips, burgers. I've thought about starting a club for people to get together online to talk about how much we despise it. Maybe a website called MayoNOaise.com. Catchy, right?"

Her eyes dance, and it makes me laugh.

"I love mayo," she says. "You might actually know that if you had taken me out for a sandwich or something."

"You never asked for a sandwich, but okay, point taken. Let's go to the student center right now and grab one. I'll pay and you can have all the mayonnaise. I may make you sit at a table a few feet away though."

"It's too early for lunch, and I have a class."

"Fine, but we're marking this down: I asked you if you wanted a sandwich. It shall be proclaimed on banners and described in song around the annual Waylon bonfire *and* the toga party for ages to come. Blaze Townsend asked Charisma Rossi if she wanted to do lunch and she said no. Her loss, really. Blaze is super good company."

"Now who's using third person?"

She just shakes her head at me and we walk together out the entrance. It's

freezing. I offer my varsity jacket, and she shakes her head.

Fine, fine. Move slow, Blaze.

“Where you headed?”

She gives me a side-eye. “Class.”

We head down the path, passing several people who call out to me along the way. She makes a left at a fork in the sidewalk, and I follow.

“Don’t tell me we have our second class together too,” she says as we pass by a couple of buildings. She darts a look at me.

“You never know.”

She turns right and takes the steps up to the Crest Building, an ancient-looking structure with thick windows and heavy molding around the entrance. I’ve never been inside it, but it looks interesting. *Here goes nothing.*

We enter a huge, spacious room on the ground floor with not a chair in the place. There are long yoga-looking mats on the floor, and the air has a musty quality to it. It reminds me how nice our gym facility is.

Against the wall is a rack of wooden and metal sticks, and next to it are wire mesh masks hanging from pegs. *Ah.* I give her a surprised look. I picture Charisma in a white fencing uniform—*is that what they call it?*—her lush body bouncing around, poking her opponent with a sword. *Nice.* I could get behind that.

“Fencing? I like your style, city girl.”

She blows at her bangs. “Why do you keep calling me that? I’m not, like, sophisticated.” She does a twirl. “Look at me. I’m in Chucks and leggings.”

“To this Mississippi boy, you are totally sophisticated.”

She pauses, a shuttered expression on her face as she sets her backpack in a cubby. I do the same. I’m all about going with the flow.

“Welcome to class,” states a tall, thin man who’s come out of a side door. In his late forties with a blond man bun, he speaks with a slight Russian accent. He claps his hands fast and does a little dance, one step forward and two steps back, frisky like. “Grab a partner, preferably someone similar in height and wingspan. Take a mat.”

Charisma walks to the other side of the room and stands on a mat. I hang back for a second. Even though I said I had a class so I could walk with her, I don’t, and if I want to leave, now’s the time. I could get in a quick lifting session—

“Charisma, do you have a partner?” The words come from a male.

My head swivels and I take in a guy with short auburn-colored hair who’s

walked up to her. *Wait a damn minute.* Isn't he the one I saw giving her a once-over at Cadillac's?

Oh.

Hell.

No.

"I'm her partner," I say as I walk over and stand next to her.

Chess Guy looks up at me, gets a load of my *I'll pulverize you* look, and backs away slowly.

What the fuck is wrong with me? I don't own her. Not even close.

"So, you ARE taking fencing?" she asks, exasperation in her voice.

"Depends how I like it today. I can always add it." I arch a brow.

She stills and frowns, the soft lines of her oval face flattening. "Blaze... please don't take this class."

Shit. She really doesn't want to be near me. My heart twinges as her words snake around inside my chest. I did that to her. I removed her from my life in a public way that everyone knew about, even though that wasn't my intention, and it made her hate me.

I stare at her. "Can you handle being close to me for just one more hour? Will you give me that? I'm not going to register for this class, okay?"

Her lashes flutter, but she nods.

"Everyone grab a practice foil," comes from the instructor. He goes on to tell us his name is Chaz then he runs through the syllabus for the semester, which is basically us learning how to poke at each other. No books involved. I got this.

We grab the swords, each one a thin wooden blade with a ball at the tip covering the pointed end.

"Barritus!" I call out with the sword in the air, and a few nearby students glare my way. I wave and give them a grin. "What's up? Cool class, right?" They blink and turn back to each other. I look at Charisma; she's glaring too, but her lip is twitching.

"Dammit. Stop making people dizzy with that smile...and what the hell is 'Barritus'?"

I laugh, feeling lighter than I have in days. She likes my crazy—or she did.

"War cry of the Roman soldier."

"Of course it is." She smiles and...I think...I think I'd do anything to keep that smile there.

I shake myself. *You're done with her, dude. DONE.*

I wave the foil around. “Did you know the legions usually marched in silence to maintain order in their ranks? But once they encountered the enemy, they would erupt with that war cry and freak everyone out. They’d use their shields to roughen the sound, making it rumble and reverberate across the battlefield.” I tap my head. “The Romans were masters at battle.”

“Is that what you call out when you take the football field?”

“Nope, but I should.”

She toys with the ball on the end of her sword, her words nonchalant. “I watched the big game. I saw you make a few big plays.”

My breath hitches. “Yeah?”

“Dammit. Stop grinning. You were amazing and you know it. I had my whole family around the TV watching!”

Awe fills my mind. She watched. She...watched me. Something stirs deep within, soft and warm, shifting, aching to get out, desperate to walk up to her and just wrap my arms—

Chaz approaches our mat and grimaces as he takes in my tall body and her petite one. “You two really don’t go together.”

“I know, but he insisted,” she says dryly. “I suspect he wants to pulverize me.”

Chaz gives me a long, lingering glance, brushing over my frame. He comes back to my face, blinks, and then blushes.

I just smile. I’m used to men checking me out since coming to Waylon. I don’t lean that way, but I don’t have a problem with people who do.

We have a player on the team, Kent, a linebacker who told us he was gay our freshman year at training camp. For the most part—except for assholes like Archer—everyone supports him.

That wouldn’t have been the case with my aunt and uncle. They attend a small judgmental church in Alma. At fourteen, I announced I was done. I didn’t feel at home sitting in that pew every Sunday, especially with the folks who knew my parents, people who had gone to high school with them.

I heard the whispers.

What a terrible tragedy.

He’s never going to amount to anything.

My hands tighten around my foil, and I shake myself and tune back in to the conversation I’m missing. *Focus. Save your randoms for later.*

“...his size will put you at a severe disadvantage,” Chaz is saying to her.

“That’s what I keep telling him, but it fits better than you’d think,” she replies.

Nah, oh nah. She did not just...

Her amber eyes glint at me. She did. I put my fist up to hold back a laugh.

Chaz stares at her without comprehending.

I clear my throat. “I’m sure she’ll hold her own against me. Don’t let this body of mine fool you, sir. I’m a pushover.”

He sighs and walks away with an *if you say so* look on his face.

“Where did you go just now, while he was talking?” she asks.

“Random thoughts.” I shake my flimsy sword. “So why are you taking fencing?”

She moves into the beginning stance Chaz demonstrated for us. “I figured it would be a good skill to have when the zombies finally rise up and try to kill us all.”

“I spent a summer cutting down trees on my uncle’s farm with a chainsaw for the same reason. To be honest, I don’t think that would be my weapon of choice on that fateful day. Too heavy.”

Chaz holds up his sword in the center of the room. “The foils we’ll be using today are very flimsy, but after you learn the basics, we will move on to something stiffer.”

Stiffer?

I glance at Charisma, but her face is carefully blank.

“First we will work on proper positioning to line up your partner for a firm thrust.” Chaz does a little move with his feet, looking amazingly light as he jumps around. “Like so. If you are positioned properly, you can easily thrust in, out, in, out, and not run out of energy. Stamina is very important.”

“Do you think he hears himself, or is he completely oblivious to the sexual innuendoes?” I’ve walked closer to her and whisper in her ear.

“He has to know.” A blush rises on her cheeks, and I’m fascinated by it. Is she thinking about us? About me inside her?

“Maybe. Some people are oblivious even when shit is right in front of them.”

Her eyes study me. “Sometimes obliviousness is a defense mechanism.”

“Sometimes you need to remember that not everyone has ulterior motives.” I pause and step back. She smells too fucking good, and I’m saying things I shouldn’t be. “What is your parents’ relationship like?”

Her mouth opens. “You’re doing twenty questions in the middle of

class?”

“Trust me, my ADHD lets me do a hundred things at once. Sometimes it’s a curse, but I’ve learned to roll with it.”

She purses her lips. “Pop, like you, has enough charm to get in my sixth grade teacher’s panties, but Ma still loves him. I suspect he’s cheated more than once.” She pauses. “I won’t ever be that girl.”

Whoa. I didn’t expect that, and I read her face, seeing the way her forehead furrows.

Like you? What the hell?

“Don’t get me wrong—I adore him. He’s my dad, but Ma...that kind of love is either stupid or so committed and deep that I’ll never be able to understand it.”

“Huh. Any high school boyfriends you left behind?” I know for a fact she’s never had a serious boyfriend at Waylon. I asked Ryker, who asked Penelope.

Her face hardens. “I thought I was in love with this guy once, but...”

“What?”

She lifts a shoulder. “It doesn’t matter. He taught me a good lesson.”

I frown. “Which was?”

She gives me a long look, her face unsmiling, eyes crinkling as if she’s thinking hard about what to say, as if she’s reliving something...

“What the fuck did he do to you?” My voice has risen, and a few students look over at us.

“He asked me to prom on a dare. Once he got the money for doing it, he left me and hung out with the girl he really wanted to take.”

I’m full-on frowning. “Why would he do that, Charm?”

She stills, blinking rapidly. “I didn’t hit my growth spurt for height until the summer before college. In school, I was even shorter than I am now, with no waist, you know, like...like a blob walking down the hall.” She stares at the floor and then looks back up at me. “Chubby Charm. That’s what he called me.”

A muscle in my face pops. “What’s his name? Where does he live?”

“You going to defend my honor?”

“Hell yeah—with my fist in his face,” I growl.

“I’m over it. Look at me now—city girl.” She attempts a smile.

“Are you really over it?” I had names thrown at me from my parents, and I still stew on them. *Piece of shit* sticks out the most.

“Most of the time. I’m tougher now, older, and I know kids say mean things, know it usually points back to what’s wrong with *them*. I came to Waylon and put it behind me.”

Is this and her dad the reason for her rules?

Is it why she’s never let herself have a real boyfriend?

I’m about to ask her when Chaz continues, “And if you are really good, you will find that you can create one final satisfying deep thrust at just the right moment to ensure the total annihilation of your partner.”

Charisma’s face gets pink again and a giggle escapes. “OMG. He is killing me. Make it stop.”

“Please spend the rest of class thrusting at each other to gain experience,” Chaz instructs.

We lock eyes and try to hide our laughter. I take advantage of her distractedness and poke my foil at her shoulder.

“Your turn,” I say as I pull back.

“To poke you?”

“To tell me something.”

“I just told you all kinds of stuff about my pop and some stupid guy! Hardly anyone knows that except Penelope!”

“Tell me something good.” I poke at her and she dodges.

“Fine. I love horror movies, even though blood grosses me out.” She plunges her foil into my chest with proper form.

“Really? You like being scared? Huh.”

She nods. “Being terrified is kinda the point, to be sucked into the mind and body of the lead character to the point where you feel what they feel and hurt when they hurt. What’s your favorite movie?”

“*Say Anything* with John Cusack.”

“STFU.” She drops her foil to her side, and I take the opportunity to lunge toward her and hit her in the leg.

I grin. “First love really gets to me, and John’s character...man, he went all out when it came to winning the heart of the girl everyone told him he couldn’t have. Dude had balls, and I admire that. Plus, he had a kickass sister and a cute little nephew he taught kickboxing to. I watched a lot of movies growing up.”

“Just a movie buff?”

“Mostly enjoyed seeing families on TV, you know, how they interacted and cared about each other.”

She gives me a stunned look, her mouth parting. “Because your parents died?”

“Yeah.” I’m surprised the admission about my preference of movies came out of my mouth. I never talk or hint about how it was for me growing up. But it’s her. And things feel different since the grocery store.

“Less talk, more work, students!” Chaz says, clapping his hands at us.

We move around each other, each of our foils raised as we continue the poses. She seems distracted, and I am too, thinking about her past and mine and how it’s shaped both of us.

“Put your foils on the rack and dream about the stiff ones we’ll have next time in class,” Chaz announces.

“He’s doing it on purpose! Has to be!” Charisma whispers, and we chuckle then put our swords away, grab our bags, and head out of class.

We stop on the steps. “What’s your next class?” she asks.

“History of Rome. You?”

“I have a break.”

“I’ll see you in psych on Wednesday then.” My eyes search hers; I’m not sure what I’m looking for.

People spill out of the buildings and walk around us, yet we’re unmoving.

She chews on that lip. “I actually took that Rome class last year as an elective and loved it.”

“Great. I could use some help with it. You free soon?”

She stiffens. “Oh, I’m really busy—”

“Come on, help a guy out.” I’m not sure what’s come over me, but she gave me an opening, so I’m jumping in and taking advantage.

Her eyes fly up to mine. “I’m not sure that’s a good idea, Blaze.”

“It totally is a great idea. You’re smart, and I struggle. I—I usually go over notes the day after classes and before the next one. I mean, I hate to be presumptuous, but are you free to help me around eight tomorrow night?”

She thinks on it for a while, her gaze averted as she looks down at her books.

Shit. What am I doing? She and I...we need to stay away from each other.

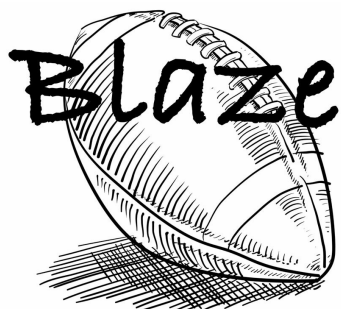
“I mean, if you’re busy, it’s cool.”

Her chest rises. “The library? Tomorrow?”

“Hell yeah,” I say, feeling breathless.

She gives me a curt nod. “Okay. No funny stuff though, Blaze. Just studying.”

I smirk. “Course not. Just me and you and a textbook. Friends, right?”
She pauses, her face unsmiling. “Right...friends.”



I'm lifting weights when Ryker and a man I don't recognize waltz into the gym. The guy he's with is tall, maybe forty, and wearing a slick gray suit. Big and bulky, he looks like a former player.

Ryker sees me and throws up a wave as they make their way over to me.

I let the weights go and stand up taller, straightening my shoulders.

Ryker slaps me on the back. "Blaze Townsend, meet Cedrick Clemmons."

I nod at the smiling man and shake his hand. Big money, no doubt. I feel it oozing out, from his expensive leather loafers to the styled hair and spray tan. "Sir. Nice to meet you."

Ryker smiles. "He's a scout for the Giants and came down to talk to me. They get the number one pick this year." He waggles his brows. Dude is flying high with all the attention he's getting. Rightly so. He's got an agent already, and I haven't asked what his signing advance was—not my business—but I bet it was better than a convertible Mustang.

"Awesome," I say. "Glad you could make it down to check him out."

Ryker is a sure thing, the real deal.”

We exchange small talk, but soon they’re discussing the offense of the Giants, and I just stand there, unsure of how to extricate myself and get back to my workout. I drift off and think about my study session later with Charisma. I saw a chance to spend more time with her and I took it.

Why? Am I insane?

Why would I put myself in the position to be with her again, especially in the library—

I come back when I see that Ryker is looking at me, his forehead furrowed. I guess they finished their conversation.

Get your ass in the game, his eyes say.

He glances at Mr. Clemmons and then me. “I thought it would be good for Cedrick to meet my main target for the past four years. We kicked ass, right, bro?”

Ah, I see. He’s working it, getting me an intro.

I smile broader. “Yes, we did.”

Cedrick studies me, an analytical look on his face, sizing me up, probably trying to figure out if he needs a wide receiver.

Sweat pops out on my forehead, more than just from the workout, and drips down my cheek. I rake a hand through my hair to get it out of my face. If I’d known a scout was going to be here, I would have planned better, maybe a shower with real clothes on. *Shit*. But then, I guess he wants to size me up, and the gym is the perfect place for that.

Cedrick’s got super white teeth when he smiles. “Ryker tells me you’re an overlooked commodity and you’ll make some pro team happy if they take a shot. People aren’t talking you up much, but you never know.”

I know they’re not. I wake up every day and check ESPN.

“Good to know, Mr. Clemmons.” My voice is stilted. He’s standing there in probably a thousand-dollar suit, and I’m just a kid from Mississippi.

“Cedrick, please. Mr. Clemmons is my daddy,” he says with a Southern drawl, but it almost sounds like he’s overplaying the accent. I’m sure it isn’t for my benefit, but Ryker’s.

He continues. “Of course, if you run well at the Combine, you’ll rise up everyone’s boards. You know what they say—you can’t teach speed.” He chuckles.

I have speed. I fucking have it all, but no one’s going to see it. “I haven’t gotten an invitation.”

Cedrick pauses, surprise on his face. He looks uncomfortable as he straightens his tie, and I can feel him losing interest with every second that passes. “Oh, I didn’t realize that.”

“Yeah,” I say, crossing my arms.

Ryker gives me a brief frown, and there’s a long awkward pause—and I should probably say something right now, but for some reason I can’t.

I didn’t get invited.

Everyone knows, but he didn’t, because he doesn’t even know who I am.

He glances back at Ryker. “Well, I need to get to Jackson to catch my flight. Good talking to you, Ryker. I’ll see you at the Combine. Nice to meet you, Blaze.” He gives me a nod and a quick smile, but it doesn’t seem encouraging.

“Let me walk you to the door,” Ryker says and they head off to the front of the gym.

With a deep exhalation, I watch them leave for a few seconds then turn back to my workout.

A chuckle comes from Archer as he works a butterfly machine. “Smooth move, Blaze. An NFL scout in front of you and you went all pussy.”

My jaw tightens. He’s right. I should have been charming; I should have been on my knees begging him to watch me run.

Ryker comes back into the gym and stalks over to me. “What the hell was that? I just introduced you to the lead scout from the Giants, and you were off in la-la land. You need to be buttering these guys up, Blaze.”

I heave out a breath.

He frowns at me. “That was your shot.”

I settle the weight back down on the pole. “My shot for what? If they don’t see what I can do on the football field, that’s their loss. I don’t need you trying to get me pity-drafted.”

I don’t know where the words come from, only that I’m frustrated with myself.

His face goes red. “I’m just trying to help, dickhead.”

“I fucked it up. Fine,” I say tightly, anxiety churning inside me.

Ryker stands there for a moment, shakes his head, and walks off.

I finish my workout, pissed I didn’t say the right things. I never know what to say, not when it really matters. Give me a room full of fans and I’m the wittiest dude there, but put my future on the line and I hesitate.

Why do I do that?

Because deep down, no matter how hard I fight, part of me thinks I'm not worth it, that I'm not good enough to make it.

Later, Archer is in the locker room with two of the younger defensive players when I come in for a shower.

He eyeballs me. "Hey, wide receiver, maybe that scout wants to hire you to be Ryker's water boy in New York."

I roll my neck. "He clearly didn't notice you."

He stands from the bench he was sitting on, and his buddies follow. "You trying to piss me off, pretty boy?"

I turn to him, and he puts his face directly in front of mine, almost nose to nose. I take him in, assessing his height and muscle tone against mine. My hands curl. I can take him. We've been picking at each other for months now, and I can only take so much before I blow up. Normally, I'm not a hothead; I keep myself on a tight leash, keeping my goals front and center, but I'm sick of him. Schoolyard fights flash in my head, messy brawls I got tangled up in, usually over a comment about my parents and how they killed the mayor's daughter. I learned how to use my fists then, how to stick up for myself.

He slaps his bare chest, where he has a tattoo of five huge stars, his high school recruiting ranking. "Don't you know who I am? ESPN's been talking about me since I was a sophomore in high school. *Five*, boy!" I was barely a three-star high school player.

I bark out a laugh. "It doesn't matter what people thought when you were young. They're looking at what you've done lately, and when it comes to you, I'd *say not fucking much*." I give him a grin, but inside, my body is ready, coiled and tense.

He pushes my chest, but I immediately square back up and shove him until he stumbles over the bench behind him.

"Hold him!" he yells out to his posse as he scrambles to stand.

Hands grab each of my arms.

"Fuck that," I say as I struggle to get out of their grip. I manage to shake one of his minions off and grab the other by the shirt just before Archer punches me in the stomach.

All the air surges out of my body, and I bend over to catch my breath.

He's not stopping and comes right back at me. I duck under his next punch, which was intended for my face.

"Too slow," I mutter.

He swings wide over my head, and I counter with an uppercut directly

under his jaw. His head snaps back, his eyes pure evil when he focuses back on me. His leg kicks out at me and hits my shin.

Pain ricochets through me, and my teeth grit.

“You trying to injure me where it counts, huh? Asshole,” I call out, rushing him and landing my fist in his stomach like he did to me.

He gasps and clutches his waist.

Feeling someone behind me, I swirl around and face his buddies, but they step off.

“Whoa, whoa, we’re done,” they say, hands up, eyes wide. “Don’t want any trouble.”

“You better be. That shit isn’t fair,” I bite out.

Archer has straightened and wipes blood off of his lip.

“This is over,” I snap, pushing past him. “Let it go.”

“Not for me.” He grabs my shoulder and slams me into a locker.

I rub the arm that took the brunt of the impact, and every logical thought in my head, the ones telling me I need to end this, click off. I wrap my hand around the thick gold chain around his neck and yank on it, forcing him to get back up in my face.

“You want to get me riled up, Archer? You’ve got no clue what I can do to you. It’s a conscious choice every single day to not slam my fist into your face.”

“What the hell?” shouts Coach Sanders as he bursts into the locker room. He scans the place in a heartbeat. “Are you two crazy?”

Archer puffs out his chest and shoves my hands off him. “He started it, Coach.”

“Not true. He threw the first punch, sir,” I say, shaking myself off. I don’t mention his buddies holding my arms.

His lips press together as he walks farther into the room. He waves his hands at the younger guys. “The rest of you have work to do. Get out of here.”

He grabs Archer and me by the arm and makes us sit on the bench. Leaning down, he gets in both of our faces. “This is bullshit, boys. Everything matters now. If you two start raining blows down on each other and that news gets back to the scouts, you’re fucked. Teams don’t want troublemakers in their locker rooms, and neither of you are special enough talents to convince them to overlook that. Grow up.” Looking straight at me, he adds, “Frankly, I’m disappointed, especially since so much is on the line.”

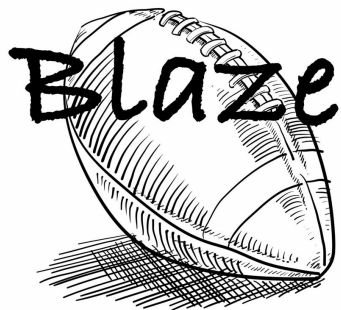
“Yes, sir,” I say, giving him a nod. “You’re right. I apologize.” To him.
Not Archer.

Archer curls his lip. “Yes, sir.”

Coach says we can go, and when I stand up to leave, my eyes land on Archer’s face.

His snarl promises retribution.

Back off, my eyes say. I stalk past him.



That night, I arrive outside the library and take a deep breath. It's a clear Mississippi night and the stars are out everywhere. The temps are above freezing, a perfect night for my study not-date with Charisma. I jogged over here with my backpack on, and now I'm wishing I hadn't because I'm sweating slightly under my hooded tracksuit.

My heart races. *Weird*. I'm in the best shape of my life. A short run shouldn't be a strain, but, hell, I know what's got me pumping. It's not my failure to smooze Cedrick or my fight with Archer.

It's me and her in the library. Alone.

With textbooks, I remind myself.

Still...our first time was here, and I can't get those images out of my head.

But that is over and done. Friends. *Right, right*.

A few students walk past me to go inside and I shake myself, realizing I've been standing here a little too long.

Pulling out my phone, I take a quick selfie with a nice stoic expression.

It's ridiculous, but I do it anyway. I look the picture over and run my hand through my hair. "Needs just a slight more mess to it," I mutter.

I reach down and adjust my snug jogging pants, pushing them down just a little to show more of my hip bones and checking to make sure that if I raise my hands to the right level, both my sweatshirt and T-shirt rise enough to reveal the bottom layers of my six-pack. Yep, there's a bruise there from Archer's punch, but it's nothing I can't handle.

Satisfied, I inhale a deep breath and walk into the library.

Charisma stands just inside the door next to the staircase. "That took you long enough."

I feel the flush starting at my neck and rising to my cheeks. Goddamn I'm an idiot. And all this red face shit—she's the only girl who gets to me like that.

I spread my arms and do a full circle. "Just wanna be perfect for any fans I might see."

"Uh-huh." Her gaze slides over me like silk, lingering on the hint of abs.

Mission accomplished. "Were you watching me, city girl?"

Now it's her turn to blush. "The extra effort was worth it. That one inch you lowered your pants makes all the difference." Her gaze drops and she clears her throat. "We better find a table and get started."

I walk toward her, taking her in, the black heels, tight jeans, and a black sweater that fits tight across her tits. Damn, no one wears heels better than her. I'm not saying I have a shoe fetish, but I have a shoe *something* when it comes to her. Her lips are a deep red tonight, her lashes thick and fluttery, and her dark hair flows down the center of her back. I hide my grin. Whatever she says, she took some care before she met me.

We walk next to each other up the staircase to the upper level where the study carrels and tables are. I tower over her, her head just below the top of my shoulder. She's small next to me, and it brings out all my protective instincts. My hand brushes against hers, and she moves it away, curling it up to tuck her textbooks against her chest.

She picks out a large table near the back. I whip off my backpack and set it on the surface as she takes the seat across from me.

"You think we'll be able to hear each other? You know, since you're a mile away from me?" I point at the chair next to me. "Wouldn't this seat work better?"

A shrug comes from her. "This one's just fine."

I mutter under my breath.

“What did you say?”

I look up, grin, and cup my mouth. “I said, SHOULD HAVE BROUGHT TWO TIN CANS AND A PIECE OF STRING!”

Everyone around us stares, giving us dirty looks.

“Now look what you’ve done,” she hisses. “Next thing you know, the librarian will be up our asses.”

“Dead Zone’s always free. It’s dark up there and no one’s around. Remember?”

She throws a pen at me and I dodge it, laughing.

“Blaze Townsend, you better shut your mouth, get those notes out, and start studying. Focus.”

Damn. “I like you bossy, as long as you know I’m really in charge.”

“Weren’t you always?” she grumbles.

I curve my hand around my ear. “What was that? Did you say I was always in charge?”

She rolls her eyes. “Yes, you’re the alpha male. Everyone knows it. Girls beg to be with you, and men adore you.”

“You trying to hurt my feelings? It won’t work,” I say with a grin. “Know why? Cause this place has memories—good ones. I had you begging for it, right upstairs.” I’m teasing, of course, but her face stills, and I backtrack and clear my throat. “Hey, I didn’t mean to say it like that. I don’t want to make you feel weird—”

She blinks, as if clearing her mind. “Fine. We had sex here and it was awesome. Whatever. Friends, right? We can joke around.”

I lean back. “Awesome? Good to know. Of course, I thought it was—”

She holds her hand up and smirks. “You want to pass your classes, right?”

That knot of worry settles in my chest again, and I sigh. “Yeah.”

I tap my pen against my notebooks and stare down at the notes. Regardless of what happens with the NFL, I want my degree more than just to get by and have a fallback. I want it because no one in my family has ever had one.

“Tell you what—I can hunker down for a good stretch if I know I get a prize at the end.”

Her brow arches and my hands twitch, wondering what it would feel like to have her face close to mine, to trace the lines of her features—

“A prize? What are you, a toddler?”

“Just my personality.” I dart my eyes around the room, thinking. “How about once I get my notes copied, you come sit next to me? No funny stuff.” I lean in over the table. “Truth is, it’s cold over here, and I could use the warmth.” I’m on a total roll, and I can’t stop the stupid shit from coming out of my mouth. But, it’s like she’s *here*, and I...

“Fine, but...”

My lips part. I can’t believe she agreed. “Yes?”

“You have to walk me to my car after we’re done. It’s late already and it creeps me out.”

My eyes widen. “Of course. You don’t even have to ask. I’d have done that anyway. Isn’t there something else you’d rather me do? Rub your shoulders, maybe? You know, to work out the tension from all that studying?”

“Nope.” She pops the P and looks back at her notes.

An hour in and I’m done rewriting notes and reading. My mind is jumping, and I know why. She’s just a few feet away from me, and I’m in Charisma overload. I went three months without a glimpse, and now I can’t stop staring at her. She’s got a little pucker on her lips, and she keeps bouncing her legs under the table like she’s jittery. She’s never jittery. She’s cool and controlled, the exact opposite of me.

I tap my pen on the table.

She doesn’t even look up, and I take in her face, the curve of her cheek, the way she chews on her pen. I’m back to her mouth, staring, taking in the way the lower lip is twice as big as the top, giving her a just-kissed look. I imagine her mouth on me—

“I’m bored.”

“Uh-huh,” she murmurs. “Ten more minutes. I’m still working on something.”

Sooner or later, she’s going to let go...she’s going to look at me...she’s going to see the real me. She’s going to see the truth.

I start at the thought as it enters my head, swallowing thickly. I mean, I’ve shoved everything about her so far down inside me, and most days I think I have it beat, but...damn, I’m losing my mind—

I stand up and stretch my arms over my head then run in place. A few people look over and I toss up a wave. “Ignore me.”

Finally she drops her pen and shakes her head at me. “Are you for real?”

“You act all prim, but I know you’re laughing on the inside. Plus, I legit can’t help myself. Probably just need to get laid.”

“Indeed.”

I’m at her side of the table and sitting next to her before I know it. “You didn’t come to me, so I’m coming to you.” I push her notes away. “Let’s talk.”

“It’s a library. We aren’t supposed to.”

“Never stopped us before.”

Her face flushes.

I exhale and ease closer until our legs are pressed together. Her body stiffens, the way it did in class yesterday when I walked in.

Shit. I want a redo button.

“Do you ever think about freshman year?” I ask, rather abruptly, and she darts those brown eyes at me then glances away.

“In general, sure. Doesn’t everyone at some point?”

My hands tighten under the table. This *is* important to me, a memory I never brought up before because something always held me back. Fear? Maybe.

“Remember the field party that year? Everyone wore togas?” I watch her face, but she keeps it carefully blank. “Mine was blue and I looked amazing. I even had those olive leaves in my hair—Ryker’s idea, not mine.”

“Don’t recall that. I must have missed that shindig.”

“Really? Huh. A group of us went in the barn to play spin the bottle, and my turn landed on *you*.”

She toys with her phone. “You have me mixed up. All those girls you’ve been with must be running together in your head.”

“It’s not that many, Charm.” I lean back in the chair, stretching out my legs, feigning nonchalance. I let a few seconds go by. “There’s a legend about those parties freshman year—the first person you kiss is the one you end up with. Did you know that?”

I watch the pulse in her neck, fascinated by how rapid it is.

“Fairy tales for frat boys and jocks who want to get laid,” she murmurs.

“Hmmm.”

Her eyes tangle with mine. “It wasn’t me.”

“Right, right. Just some other hottie I kissed.”

She clears her throat and swiftly changes the topic. “Penelope mentioned the awards dinner next week. She’s already cleaning our house to meet

Ryker's dad. Vampire Bill is freaking out every time she turns on the vacuum." She pauses. "Are your aunt and uncle coming up?"

"Nah, they're too busy." I keep my face carefully blank. "One of the girls has a play that night."

Her head cocks, a little frown worrying her brow. "Can't one of them come? Alma is just a few hours away, and it is a national championship."

My chest rises, and I look away from her, tapping my pen. I hear the questioning tone she's using, almost gentle.

Several seconds go by, and I count the tiles on the floor.

"Blaze. Look at me."

I turn back to her, my eyes showing no emotion. "What?"

She takes in my face and her lips turn down. "I'm sorry I brought it up. It seems to have ruined your good mood. If you ever want to talk about them or your parents, I'm here."

I'm here.

Something in my chest loosens. "I don't have that kind of relationship with them. I mean, when I first moved in, I was messed up from my parents dying, but part of me was excited. A real family..." I shrug, trying not to let my emotions show. "I walked into their house and vowed to myself I was going to be the best kid ever. I wrote down this stupid oath thing in my notebook about how I was going to sit still, take out the trash, help with the babies, and work on the farm. I would be the best son ever." I stare at my pen, not really seeing it. "I don't think they noticed. The day I came home from high school after signing my acceptance to Waylon, all I saw was relief in their eyes—relief that I would finally be gone and they wouldn't have to pay for my college."

I raise my gaze, and she's staring at me. I guess she has been this whole time.

"And look at you now. Do they have any clue what an incredible person you are?" she says softly. I like that she didn't berate or criticize them. I *do* care for them. I just don't think my level of commitment to them was ever returned.

"You think I'm incredible? In what way?"

She gets this wistful expression on her face. "You're hilarious, for one." She chews on her lip. "I see underneath that too. You're a layered person, much more than people see."

"Like an onion? But with fresh breath?" I laugh, then get distracted

thinking about her note. I can't stop my next words. "I have some Big Red in my backpack if you want a piece."

Her lashes flutter. "Probably shouldn't. It is the library and there are rules."

"Yeah, rules," I murmur. "Not a fan."

She looks as if she might say something, but she doesn't.

I take in that erratic pulse at her throat again.

Everyone fades away as we just...stare.

I glance at her lips. *God, that mouth. I want...*

Her eyes flicker with something I think is desire, and I inhale sharply as memories surface, of us, of her showing up at my dorm room for our third and final hookup, although I didn't know that then.

Head high, she'd waltzed into my bedroom like she owned the damn world and kicked the door shut with a red heel. "You want this? Come and get it," she said, throwing off her black coat and twirling around. Fucking goddess. She was completely naked, her tits big and perfect, her pussy already wet. I know because she told me in delicious detail about driving in her car to get to my dorm, how she couldn't get me out of her head, how she'd masturbated all week to mental images of me. She had a dirty, dirty mouth, and everything inside me wanted her words, needed them. I stared at her while she stood there and played back the previous time she was in my dorm room when we had sex on the floor with me behind her, a redo of the library, neither of us even able to make it to the bed.

"Afraid, football player?" she asked after I stood there too long, probably with my mouth open. She was the sexiest fucking thing I'd ever seen, all curves and big eyes. She gave me a little smile, brushed a finger over her piercing—and I was gone. I ripped my clothes off, barely got a condom on before I picked her up and pushed her against the wall. I slid inside her all the way to the hilt, shuddering. I recall how her heels dug into my back, the feel of her ass in my hands, that whimpering noise she made when I pulled her hair to the side and bit her neck like an animal then kissed it like a lover.

I fucked her until I couldn't breathe and my legs shook.

I fucked her until she called my name like a prayer.

I fucked her until she was all I could see.

Until *she* was all I wanted.

Until I thought I might scream from just the need to make her mine.

Afterward, she picked up her coat, slid it back on, and told me she had to

go study. I sat stunned on my bed, spent and shaking, watching her, my heart a sledgehammer as I grappled with the realization that I didn't want her to go. She ran from the library the first time, and she ran the second time, but this time—this time she hesitated at my door, lingering and looking back at me, as if waiting for me to ask her to stay. With vulnerable eyes, she chewed hard on her lush lips, a questioning look on her face as we stared long and hard at each other, our eyes having a conversation neither of us wanted to put out there. *She wanted to stay.* She wanted me to ask her to stay and see where it went.

But I didn't. *I couldn't.*

My heart belonged only to me. It had to.

Everyone leaves me. *They always do.*

And football *is* first. It has to be. It's all I've had that felt right.

Someone in the library coughs, and I start, scrubbing my face and shoving those memories out of my head.

I jerk to stand. "I need to go."

She frowns. "Now?"

"Yes. Early class tomorrow." My words are gruff.

She reads my face, and I imagine what she sees. I'm shutting her out.

I...I can't be near her anymore. Studying together? What the fuck was I thinking?

We're over, I repeat in my head for the hundredth time since getting back to Magnolia.

I walk back to my chair, get my things, and put them back in my backpack. We don't speak as we start back down the stairs. Our hands brush against each other, and I stuff mine deep in my pocket.

We reach the foyer of the library, and two familiar girls lingering at the entrance run up to me.

"Blaze! Oh my God, I haven't seen you since Cadillac's," says one. I recognize her as one of the girls who played beer pong with us. She starts talking, but I'm not even listening, my gaze on the girl walking away.

Charisma hasn't even stopped. She's got her head down, and she keeps on marching right out the door of the library without even saying goodbye.

She felt that tension up there; she knows I'm retreating.

I brush them off and jog to catch up with Charisma.

"Hey, I'm walking you to your car," I say.

"You don't have to," she says coolly as we pass the crosswalk to one of

the lots. “You can go chat with your fans, *get laid*. I can’t believe you’ve gone this long. I’m starting to wonder why, in fact.”

I ignore that and keep my longer stride matching her pace until we reach her car at the back in a dimly lit area. She gets it unlocked and turns to face me.

I stare at her, eyes searching hers. She’s got that exposed look again, that bruised one, the one I saw at Cadillac’s. I know I should just walk away right now, but my body isn’t listening to my head.

“You’re upset,” I say after a few moments.

“I’m not. Go back and flash your abs at those girls. See if I care.”

This feels like it’s about more than just the girls in the library.

“I don’t give a shit about those girls. I can read your face, Charisma. If you’ve got something to say, just let it out.” I lean against her car door and cross my legs.

Her mouth tightens. “Fine. You want to know what’s been eating at me since I saw you? Why did you dump me? I thought we...” Her words trail off, her fists at her sides.

A long sigh comes from my chest, and I grimace and look off across the lot, avoiding her eyes. “You were going to cut me loose eventually.”

“Blaze, that’s...not true. I wanted...” She stops. In my peripheral, I watch as she swallows and blinks. “You said I wasn’t *your type*, goddamn it. You hurt me.”

I close my eyes. I did say that. I rake my hands through my hair and pace around the parking lot. I stop and face her. She is my type, scary smart and hot as hell.

And I’m not worthy of her.

Good girls like her don’t stick around with a guy like me. Sure, I have a talent for football and people tell me I’m handsome, but underneath...

Why would she want *me*?

“Charm, I’m so sorry I said that. It came out wrong. I bungled it up, and you didn’t deserve that. You are my type, and I think deep down you really know that.” I pause. “I’m not *yours*.”

“How do you know my type?” she says, her face hard.

“I just do. I’ve seen you, Charm—since freshman year. I know you like them nice and quiet and smart. Chess guys, whatever. That’s not me.”

She shakes her head, as if realigning everything in her mind. “Let me get this straight: what you really meant was that *you* weren’t *my type*?” Her

words are incredulous, still tinged with hurt.

I nod.

“And *that* was all it took for you to break it off?” She huffs out a laugh, but there’s no humor there. “We’d just had sex the night before.”

I swallow and start pacing again. “I didn’t intend to do it like that, okay?”

“Then why did you?”

Why? WHY? Because after she left my dorm room, I knew if I didn’t do it at the party, then I never would.

“I...I was worked up from the game, and it just happened. Plus, you... you looked like you’d be okay without me. You had your sorority and friends, and I realized I needed to focus on football. I didn’t want things to get serious between us, and it felt like...like it was going there if I didn’t put a stop to it.”

It’s on the tip of my tongue to lay it all out, to try to explain that she had the potential to hurt me, but my mouth won’t say the words.

She dips her head, but before she does, I think I see the shimmer of tears in her eyes, and it makes me freeze. I take a step back. Nah, I can’t go there. *I can’t*. If she cries, I’m gonna lose it. I’m gonna hold her in my arms and I’m going to try to kiss her and she’ll tell me to stop—

The words are wrenched from her, and she clings to her backpack as if it’s a lifeline. “I didn’t know you were a coward, Blaze.”

My throat is suddenly tight. “Yeah, well, now you do.”

She takes a deep breath and seems to gather herself. “We should have had this conversation months ago, but you plastered Dani to your side. For what? To keep me away from you? Why?”

Unease prickles over me. She’s got me there. She does. I used Dani as a shield, because I knew if I got within one foot of Charisma—

“Tell me how you feel, Charisma. Wasn’t I just a good fuck? Weren’t you just using me?” This feels crucial to me, and I tuck my hands in my pockets to hide my nervousness.

Her head shakes. “Don’t turn this around. It doesn’t matter how I felt. We’re over anyway...right?” She stares at me, waiting for a response, and my chest feels tight.

“Right.” I rub a hand through my hair and hold her gaze. “Charm. I am sorry for how it ended.”

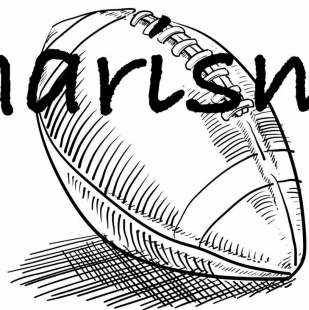
“Yeah. Whatever.” She turns her back to me, gets in her car, and cranks it.

I don't try to stop her. I've pushed myself as far as I can when it comes to talking about this.

She pulls out, and I stand there until she's gone, her taillights glowing in the dark.

13

Charisma



Charisma



“I hope we don’t get caught,” Margo mutters as we slip like ninjas through the stately front door of the Theta mansion on sorority row. It’s bigger than our house, rumored to have at least twenty bedrooms upstairs for upperclassmen. We’ve crashed parties before, and the opulence and over-the-top decor is enough to make me grit my teeth. We aren’t the “rich party girls” the Thetas are, and we’ve accepted it, but Margo is determined to get the latest scoop on our competition. I don’t know why since it’s our last semester, but that’s just her. No one gets the best of her. She’s on a mission, and she’s dragged me and Penelope with her.

Might as well.

It’s the Friday after a long week of classes, and my plan was to watch TV, but after Penelope gave me a rousing pep talk and reminded me we’d be incognito and then proceeded to say, “*You never know who you might see,*” ... well, I jumped at the chance.

Margo adjusts her feathered black masquerade mask with red jewels on the side. Penelope and I do the same. We. Are. Ready.

“If anyone asks, we’re three freshmen, green as a blade of fresh spring grass. Got it?” I say.

Nods come.

“Right on,” Penelope says. “This party will blow.”

We’re dressed in all black, the theme of this fabulous shindig. Margo’s in jeans and an expensive-looking cardigan set—which I told her is a dead giveaway, but she ignored me. Penelope’s in a short leather skirt and a cropped sweater. Her red hair is swirled up in a tight bun, her mask loaded with feathers. She keeps blowing them out of her mouth.

I’m in three-inch strappy black heels, primo cropped leggings—the kind that suck everything up—and a snug gold vest with intricate black embroidery and cloth-covered buttons. With a deep plunging neckline that displays my cleavage, it’s a snazzy little vintage piece that caught my eye at a consignment store in New York. It breaks the “black only” rule a little, but I couldn’t resist it.

“Thanks for helping me spy on their party. Ugh. Why didn’t we think of a cool party for back to school?” Margo complains.

“Madame President, think of our high GPAs. Remember our kickass homecoming gig where everyone in the world showed up, even townies! This party will never top any of ours!” I say.

We do a fist bump. We had a few glasses of pre-party wine back at the house.

I adjust my own mask, which is made of soft velvet and has sparkling faux diamonds in the corners. My hair is slicked back in a high ponytail, the pink strands brushed with temporary brown hair paint Penelope swore would wash out later.

I could be any girl tonight.

There’s a long line of people in the foyer as we ease closer, the Theta standing there checking IDs and handing out wristbands for alcohol.

“Uh-oh,” I say. “ID check.”

“Dammit, how are we going to get past her?” Margo mumbles.

I’m in the middle of them and throw an arm around each of their shoulders. With me in heels and them in flats, I’m almost as tall as they are. “I’m sick and you’re taking me to the bathroom. Remember freshman year and that dance club we wanted to get into—do that, got it? Go with it!”

My head falls down to my chest and I force out a retching sound. It’s loud and gross. I have my brothers to thank for that—I’ve heard them barf plenty

of times.

The crowd moves as Margo and Penelope support me, pushing through the people and carrying me straight to the front where ID Girl is at a podium, a little clipboard and earphones in her ear. *Shit, they're miked. Super cool.* She's talking into her headpiece as a guy in a Kappa Sig shirt stands there waiting, annoyance on his face.

"Girls! Get in line with everyone else!" she yells.

Penelope's words run together. "She needs a restroom stat, please, plus we're not twenty-one, don't need a band, 'kay? Gotta go!"

"I'm gonna puke!" I call out in a Southern accent.

"Gross!" someone shouts as I make myself gag. People jerk away, some muttering and pushing closer to the podium to put distance between us.

Headpiece Barbie looks at us and frowns as the Kappa Sig gets a frustrated look on his face and pushes his ID at her.

She tightens her lips and looks down at the long line of people waiting to get in. I feel her gaze on us and push forward, dragging Pen and Margo with me as I mumble, "Move it, girls. Don't give her time to say no."

"Just come back when you're done, and let me check your ID! I'm keeping a tally so we don't break fire code," she calls as we make our way down a hallway and then come to a stop a few feet away and out of her sight.

I straighten up and laugh, fixing my hair. "Works every time. It's like telling a guy you got your period."

We chuckle as we leave the hallway and walk through the crowded den. Masked people roam everywhere, wall-to-wall students. *God.* I needed this night out. It's been three days since the talk with Blaze at the library, yet I can't get his words out of my head.

Pfft. He said I have walls up, but his are bigger than I ever imagined.

Forget him.

"Let's check out the bar," I say, and we brush past co-eds, loud music drifting up to our ears from their party room in the basement. They have a DJ. Margo won't be happy.

I chance a look, and she's scowling behind her mask, her eyes bouncing over the black balloons and streamers, the banner on the wall displaying their Greek letters. She curses, her hands clenched.

"Madame President, let it go! Alcohol!" I say with my fist raised. "Let it be so!"

"Fine!" Margo blazes a path for us until we reach the makeshift bar set up

on a granite-top island in the spacious kitchen. *Shiiiiit*. They've redone their house, and the space is airy and bright with sparkling stainless steel appliances and pretty white cabinets.

The bartender, a handsome fellow in a Theta shirt—boyfriend to some collegian, I assume—leans in.

“I need to see your bands if you want a drink.”

Margo pouts. “We lost them.”

“True story,” Penelope adds. “Some girl grabbed all three when we were in the restroom. You know how those underage kids are.” She makes a tsking noise and shakes her head.

“Uh-huh.” He arches a brow. “Move along now. Go back and get some new ones.”

I push them aside and look up at him. I know him from one of my design classes, Theo something.

“Look, Theo, we have an upper level design class together with Mrs. Owens. She's a real ballbuster, right? I still haven't done that website design she wants us to do.” I give him a big smile, my red lips curving up. Tonight the color is Red Hot. “Please, have some sympathy for us. Besides, it was nerdy Chi-Os who stole our bracelets. They're probably drinking all your good alcohol right now. Bitches.”

Margo elbows me.

He grins. “I ain't got a thing against Chi-Os. Sorry, can't serve you.”

I lean down farther until my cleavage is more visible. “Sure, but come on, you know me. I'm of age. You even got an A on that last font project. Sharp and original. I dig your use of bold color. I want to be like you.”

He cocks his head. “Yeah, that was a good one.”

“Spectacular! Give us some drinks...please.” I smile.

His gaze brushes over my face and lingers on my breasts before coming back up. “Ah, I don't know. You're pretty, though. Wish I could.”

“Aw, you think I'm pretty? You're so sweet. Who's your girlfriend?” *Cause we both know you've got one, buddy.* I keep my smile on. I've played this game before—show cleavage, flirt, get what you want.

He mumbles her name, but I don't know it.

“I know her! I'm going to tell her how awesome you are—and that you said I was pretty, maybe how you looked at my tits.”

His face reddens.

I smile. “Don't be mad. Now, how about those drinks?”

“Uh, sure, I guess it’s okay. What do you want?”

“You’re the best, Theo,” I say brightly as I shove a few dollars in his tip jar. Drinks are free, but I feel bad about manipulating him. Sometimes a girl just has to do what it takes.

We all three ask for two tequilas each and then shoot one back. I wince. Not top shelf, but it gets the job done.

“Beer, please,” comes a deep voice behind me, and I pause mid-sip on the second one. I’d know him anywhere, that husky gold and gray sound and the heat from his skin. He’s close, just inches away.

Don’t turn around. Don’t turn around.

It’s been a tense week after our study session. I won’t be making that mistake again.

He came into class the next day a little cool. I caught him giving me long glances, and part of me—the stupid side—wanted to talk to him more, see if I could get more out of him, but he got up and left as soon as class was over.

After he gets his beer and steps back a few feet, I let out a sigh of relief.

Penelope, who I elbowed when he showed up, studies him over my shoulder. She recognizes him too. “Ah, Blaze. He’s not the same, you know. I mean, I see him smiling, but Ryker says he’s moody.” She frowns and looks back at me. “I feel like we haven’t talked much. Are you doing okay?”

I toss back my drink. “I will be as soon as I get another one of these in me.” It has been difficult sitting next to him in class. How am I going to be able to finish the semester?

Her eyes take in my face. “You aren’t seeing anyone. You won’t even entertain the idea of me setting you up. There’s a cute guy in one of my classes. I think you’d like—”

I stop her with a pointed look. “I have a date coming up. I’m fine.” I consider telling her about Mike, but I don’t. The truth is, I’m not looking forward to it.

She sighs, clinking her glass with mine. “Fine, I’ll shut up. I’ve missed this with you.”

“Well, good thing Ryker wanted to study.”

She blushes. “He’ll see me later at the house.”

I exhale. Of course. Glad I got earplugs.

We order another round, and I’m acutely aware that Blaze hasn’t moved from a spot near the fridge. I refuse to look at him head-on, in case I’m not incognito enough for him. I keep facing the bar, but my ears strain to hear

him talking.

And why? Hasn't he made it plain he doesn't want me anymore?

FTS.

"Let's go downstairs," I say, and we head that way.

The basement is dark and we take the steps carefully, passing people with different styles of masks. I take in every person, and it's easy to recognize a few. Dillon, shaved head and all, is on the dance floor with a girl in his arms. I recognize some Thetas and keep my head down. You can't go to school here and be Greek and not know other Greeks, but with my pink hair covered, I'm feeling confident, especially when we breeze past the Theta president and she doesn't give us a second look.

Margo drifts away to check out the back sitting area where a group of Thetas are talking—eavesdropping, probably. Penelope darts to the restroom, and I lean against the wall and watch the gyrating bodies on the dance floor.

A few minutes later, a tall guy appears in front of me. Broad and muscular, he's dressed in a black long-sleeved fisherman-style sweater. His mask fits smaller on his face, plain and simple.

My heart dips as I take in the way his free hand taps his leg.

I'd know him anywhere.

He could be in a football stadium with no number on his jersey, and I'd be able to point him out.

Being nonchalant, I move to walk around him, but there's nowhere to go. People block me at every point.

"Hey there, great party." He sips on his beer, eyes on my face. "Think I'll stand here a sec and let the place clear out. You mind?"

"Sure. Great party!" I squeak. *Crap*. It sounds like I've been sucking helium. I clear my throat and try to ease the tension in my shoulders.

He's right here in front of me and he looks...sexy as fuck. His hair is swept back, and my eyes graze over him, lingering on that spot of bare skin I see around his wrist, how the dark hair curls, how strong his fingers look as he holds the cup and takes a sip of his drink. All it takes is a wrist and fingers and I'm hot and bothered. SMN. *Shoot me now*.

"This your first party of the semester?" he asks me.

"Yeah, freshman here," I say, smiling as I throw some Southern in my voice. At least it's not squeaky.

His lips kick up. "Nice. Me too, go figure. You look familiar. Have we met?"

I shake my head no.

“Really? Huh. Guess not.” He glances around at the people milling past us, and I wait with bated breath to see if anyone recognizes him, but it seems we’re blending in for the moment.

Someone pushes against him from behind, and he’s jostled forward. He bumps into me, his chest pressing into mine before he steps back. I inhale his scent and it washes over me, making me shiver.

His hand takes my arm when I lose my footing. “Did I step on your toes? I’m sorry. These parties are ridiculous.”

We look down at my newly painted red toes. He did give me a good crunch, but I mumble a *no*.

“Let me see.” He bends down to take a look at my feet, and my breath hitches.

“I’m fine,” I say, still overdoing the accent, but he doesn’t seem to notice.

He comes back up slowly, his eyes tracing my curves, lingering on my breasts before rising to my face. He stays there a long time, looking at me over the rim of his Solo cup. “Hmmm. Nice shoes, by the way.”

“Why did you come if you thought it would be ridiculous?” I ask, surprised at the question coming from me. I shouldn’t invite conversation. I should get my ass out of here, but it’s him, and my body has other ideas. I want to draw this moment out, talk to him and pretend we don’t have a past. I really do, so much.

He huffs out a laugh and leans in. The music has gotten louder, and the only way to talk is to stand close. “Thought it might be fun if no one recognized me. Plus, there’s this girl. Thought she might show up.”

“Did she?”

He lowers his gaze on me in the dark room, searching my face. His lips curve up. “I don’t see her yet.”

Ah. I swallow. “Maybe any girl would do. No need to wait for just one.”

“Hmmm, you think? I really want to get to know *her* better. Crazy, right?”

“What makes her special?”

“She’s hot. Like fucking amazing.”

“There’s a plethora of those around.” I wave my hand at the darkened room.

He laughs. “Who says words like ‘plethora’?”

“Smart girls.”

“This girl...she’s smart. Smarter than me. She’ll be somebody cool someday.”

“Good. You should lock that down.”

His eyes flicker with a penetrating look as he reaches out and touches the corner of my mask. I stand immobile, letting him trace the outline. “Thought about it. Wasn’t worth the pain.”

Wasn’t worth the pain.

He drops his hand when Penelope shows back up, looking harried. She comes to a halt in front of me, does a double take at Blaze, then leans over and whispers, “Came out of the restroom with Margo waving at me. She’s cornered. Theta inquisition time. You good if I dash over and help then come right back?” Her eyes sweep from me to him. “I can’t leave her. You know how she mouths off when it comes to them, and we don’t need a war with these girls.”

I send her a pleading look—to not leave me or leave me, I don’t know—then she pivots and quick-steps it away from us.

“She ran off fast. She seemed super familiar too,” he muses, smiling.

“She’s a freshman. I doubt you know her. She doesn’t get out much. Neither of us do.”

“Ah, I see. You gonna leave too?” he says.

“No.”

He mulls that over. “Thought you might.”

“Well, I’m not.”

It feels as if our words are layered with more meaning, but I brush them off.

The DJ switches to a faster song and a strobe light kicks around the space, flashing over his face before bouncing off. It’s a funhouse on steroids, and the buzz from the tequila warms my blood.

People squeeze by us, and he maneuvers closer to me, pressing a hand on the wall behind me to keep a few inches between us. *Shit.*

He stares down at me, and I avoid his gaze.

“Man, this place is nuts,” he murmurs in my ear. “It’s better upstairs. You want to go?”

I lick my lips. “What about this girl? Are you like, in love with her?”

My breath holds tight in my chest, and I don’t move a muscle as we stare at each other.

“I don’t know what love is, actually.” He tucks his hands in his pockets,

straightening and pulling away. “Do you?”

“I think it’s when you can’t think of a person without aching to see them.”

“I see.”

I nod. “The person you love can hurt you, though. You have to be careful.”

“Maybe I don’t want to be careful anymore. Sometimes you just have to let go, right?”

“Maybe.”

He leans in closer, and my body trembles.

He looks down at me and whispers in my ear, his lips barely touching the top. “I don’t want to be careful tonight, babe. Are you with me?”

Several seconds pass as neither of us speaks.

I should walk away. I really, really should.

He gestures to the drink I’m holding at my side. “You gonna drink that or just stare down at it all night?”

“Why do you care?” I laugh, looking up at him, my mind circling back to his comment about love.

He doesn’t know what it is.

How is that possible? Hasn’t he ever been in love? He wasn’t with me, but surely at some point...

He touches a piece of my hair from my ponytail. “I want to dance. Finish it. Let’s see how good a dancer you are, *freshman.*”

I drink it down. “I have skills that will blow your mind.”

“Oh, I bet you do.” He takes the cup from me, his fingers touching mine, and puts it on the floor next to my feet along with his own.

The music changes to a slower one, “I Hate U, I Love U” by Gnash, the lyrics low and sad, a dichotomy of opposing emotions mixed together.

Frowning, I pull back. “No. Maybe another song.”

“This one,” he insists. “I like it. It reminds me of someone...” He shakes his head. “I don’t want to think about her. Come on.”

But...

I’ve listened to this song on repeat for hours, and I...can’t. I cried my eyes out over the lyrics in my bed. I don’t want to go back to three months ago.

But there’s a determined set to his face, and when he says *come on* again in a teasing way and gives me that smile I can’t resist, I take his hand. He

leads me out to the dance floor, his broad shoulders maneuvering through the crowd. He places us in the center of the room.

We don't move for a second, both of us unsure. There's a hesitant look in his eyes as he watches me, a reserve, as if he's not certain what to do next, and for a second I think he's changed his mind and might walk away.

He doesn't. His arms curl around my waist slowly, slowly as he takes his time, savoring every slide of his hands as he palms the curve of my hips then moves them to rest at the top of my ass. He inches me forward in my heels, pulling us close. Butterflies flutter when his gaze warms, a slow, almost knowing smile on his lips until we're aligned, our legs brushing.

I start slow, my hands on his chest, trying to keep a small bit of distance between us, but I'm into it. The speakers blare, the lyrics and piano from the song throbbing in the air. It wraps around us, settling inside me, beating. My hands curl up around his neck.

We've danced before, but this is different. New.

He doesn't know me.

We have no past.

Who would he be with a new girl?

How would he woo her?

His head dips and his breath skates across the skin exposed on my neck. "You smell fucking good," he whispers. I barely hear him over the music, but I can't hide my shudder when his nose glides up toward my ear.

He leans back to stare at me, and even though it's dark out here, I see his eyes glow, low and heavy, a question there.

I press my nose to his chest.

"Shy?" he says. "I can't imagine it."

"Sometimes," I murmur back in his ear, my hand brushing at the hair there.

His finger tilts my head up. "Me too."

I didn't know that.

"It's hard for me to say how I feel sometimes," he adds.

"Well, you seem to be doing great right now."

"It's the mask. I can pretend."

Swallowing, I take in his angular face, the way his eyes glint—his lips. They're pouty and full, like two fluffy pillows, and I can't stop studying the way they curve.

"You feel like heaven," he says on a little groan, and his hands are lower,

splaying out across my ass.

“Same,” I reply breathlessly, melting into his body.

God, I’ve missed this. The feel of him under me, the way his hands know just how to hold me and make me feel safe...

We’re swaying, and I feel light.

The song ends, blending into a faster one, but neither of us lets go. Bodies gyrate and twirl nearby, bumping into us. We don’t waver an inch. He shields me, his muscular frame our protection as he wards off random people who veer too close. Nothing could get between us. His hips brush against me, friction sweet and sharp between my legs.

The bass from the speakers booms underneath my skin, as if it’s in tune with the rush of blood that’s coming from my heart. My fingers dig into his shoulders. I can get lost in this for a little—

“Mmmm,” he says, and his thigh moves and slips between my legs. I close my eyes and clutch his nape. “Take your mask off and tell me your name, little freshman,” he murmurs.

My head rises and our eyes lock.

“This is a masquerade—no.”

His tongue darts out and he licks that bottom lip, painstakingly slow. “Chicken.”

“Am not.” I take a breath, knowing I shouldn’t be doing this, but I say it anyway. “Everything else is yours.”

He pauses, his head down and close to mine. “Everything?” Wariness crosses his face, a ghost of pain flashing before disappearing.

I nod.

He slips his hand around to my ponytail and pulls until my hair spills out and flows down my back. His hand slips underneath and palms my scalp. He kisses the sensitive area below my ear, his tongue stroking the surface. “Is this mine?”

“Yes,” I gasp.

He sucks on my skin, and I hold his head, pressing him closer. His thigh slips between my legs again, seesawing back and forth.

We’re not dancing anymore, and maybe we haven’t been for a while, but it’s dark and no one is noticing. A couple next to us kisses, their hands roaming over each other. A quick glance tells me everyone is either lost in their partner, the music, or the free alcohol.

“This?” His hand massages my ass then moves up my body, his palm

following my curves. He presses me against his cock through his jeans.

“Yes,” I mumble, my senses are overloaded with his touch.

“This?” He brushes his thumb against my vest where my piercing is.

“Yes,” I hiss.

He leans down to place a kiss on my neck, his lips taking and taking, sucking, getting harder, probably leaving a mark. I lean into it, writhing, clenching around his leg.

My lips part, a tidal wave of sensation pooling, drenching my panties. Music and people surround us, and I can’t tell where I am anymore.

“I’m gonna make you forget you ever had a name,” he says, staring down at me.

“Try.”

He puts his hand between our bodies, cups me through my leggings, and then presses down with his heel on the top of my cleft.

My lashes flutter, and I can’t breathe, pulsing against him. My leg hitches around his thigh, rubbing like a cat.

More, more, my eyes say before I lean my head on his chest, wanting to hide, afraid he’ll see the power he has.

“Look at me.”

I raise my gaze.

His eyes are brilliant, bright and gleaming as he takes me in, molten with need. His expression is searching, as if he’s waiting for something, needing something from me.

“Is this mine?” His hand strokes down, rubbing my mound, but not enough—not nearly enough.

“Yes,” I moan.

“Thank fuck.” He slips his hand inside my leggings and past my panties, a lone finger inside me, dipping and exploring the folds, the already wet skin. My head falls back.

His cock strains out, bulging against his jeans as he applies that tortuous pressure with his palm, rotating against me then sliding back inside my panties, two fingers this time, taking the cream and massaging me. He circles me, playing, teasing. He tightens his arm around my waist when I feel like I might fall.

He never lets me look away, and I can’t anyway, caught up in the way he’s losing himself too. Sharp need etches his face, his jawline drawn with desire and lust and need.

Does he still think about us...

“All the fucking time.” I think he says, but it’s loud and I didn’t speak.
Did I?

One song glides right into another as his fingers slide in and out.

My chest rises up and down. My hands tug on his nape, pulling up close until I can see the flecks of white in his ice-blue eyes.

Smoldering eyes land on my mouth, his breath warm and smelling of beer as he puts his forehead against mine. “Come while I’m watching you, baby.”

His tongue licks at my lips, just barely a touch as I go over the edge, my heart and body crashing into tingles and vibrations that shake my body. I close my eyes and pulse around his fingers, stars detonating behind my lids.

God. This, him, *him*. How I’ve missed his touch, craved it.

“Just like that,” he says, not letting up, and I move, riding him, getting every bit of that nirvana, every single ounce of that gaze on me.

He...he stares at me like I’m a girl he wants to worship.

Another song comes on as I come back to myself, woozy and warm and still turned on.

His breathing is labored, and my hand reaches out to palm him through his jeans, wanting him to receive what I did—

He eases us apart and holds me a few feet away as we stare at each other.

My hand cups his cheek, and I’m past reason when I nod my head toward the corner under the stairs, to the lower exit that will get us out of here.

He shakes his head, his lips parted as he pushes up on his mask until it sits on the top of his forehead, tangling with the longer hair there. Bright and glassy-eyed, he looks at me.

I’m frozen in place when he touches my mask and pushes it up off my face.

“Hey,” he says softly.

I can’t speak. He’s beautiful, so much that I ache.

“Didn’t fool you, did I?” I say.

“Knew the moment you walked in. Always do.” He touches my cheek and lets his hand fall. He sticks his hands in his jeans and looks away from me. “Was starting to think you...forgot what we had, Charm. It was always hot with us—was all I thought about for a long time.”

Was.

He pinches the bridge of his nose. “You’re a dangerous girl.”

Then why did he even ask me to dance?

I shake my head at him, anger at myself rising up. Why did I put myself through this with him?

I can't win.

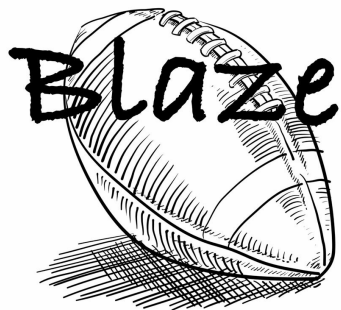
He always wins.

He has me in the palm of his hand.

Because I still need him. I still want him. I still l—

Penelope is next to me, crooking her arm around my shoulders. Her eyes flare when she sees my mask is off. Her eyes dart from me to Blaze, and something on my face must tell her everything she needs to know. “Found you! Let's get out of here, 'kay? Margo's been found out and they already tossed her. They're searching the party, and I have a feeling we're next.”

I let her spin me around and lead me away from him.



She walks away, and I let her. My heart thuds as I watch her go up the staircase and out to the party upstairs. I picture her at the front door of the Theta house, looking over her shoulder to see if I followed.

I won't though.

I could.

I could...

But my head spins as I imagine going up to her and spilling my guts—and then what?

No one has ever cared about me before, so why would she?

I can still smell her on me, and my cock is rock hard. In the middle of the crowd, I take a deep breath, willing my body to stay under control as I give myself a pep talk.

Snap out of this. You don't want her. You fucking don't. You don't need her.

You is all you have.

Shouldering through the crowd on the dance floor, I make my way up the

stairs. I never should have started talking to her, but as soon as she walked in with Margo and Penelope, I knew I wouldn't be able to resist pretending we didn't know each other.

And her in my arms? It was three months ago all over again.

Her under my hands...her sweet body against mine...everything I want to forget.

Dani is waiting for me at the landing, leaning against the wall. Wearing a short black dress and shiny black boots, her legs are long and tan from the sunbed. Her blonde hair is messy and everywhere. Her mask has a little tear on the side, and she pushed it up, using it as a headband. I wonder if she was part of the inquisition that kicked Margo out.

She watches me with a smile and puts a hand on my chest. Long red nails trace the pattern on my sweater. I let her for a few seconds, waiting, wondering if maybe my dick will twitch. I close my eyes when she brushes her lips on my cheek.

"Blazey, I haven't seen you in forever. You've been avoiding my texts."

"I know. Been busy."

"We're all busy, I get it, but now I'm here and you are too."

Her lips are on my neck, kissing me, and I ease her back, holding her there. She smells like alcohol and flowery perfume.

"No."

Her mouth turns down, a brittle look in her eyes. "What is up with you?"

I guess she's finally reached her limit. I've been wondering how long it would take.

Instead of answering her, I take her hand and lead her off into one of their formal rooms, a big library. It's empty and we sit on a leather couch.

She crosses her legs, scoots in close, and gives me a smile. "This is what I'm talking about...me and you alone. It's about freaking time." She puts her hands on my shoulders and tilts her face up.

I study her, taking in the perfect face. We've never even kissed on the lips, and that is just stupid. I should have been all up in that. I should have been fucking her anytime I wanted. I should have taken her and Candi up on their offer last week.

I clasp my hands. "Dani, we've been hanging out as friends for a while now."

She nods and plays with my hair. "I know. You've been a big tease."

No, I haven't. I never got too flirty with her or pretended that I wanted

her to be anything other than a friend—yet we weren't friends. Sure, I've let her hang on me, but I never encouraged it or took it where she wanted to go. That was all her. I also made sure she and I were never alone. We always had Dillon or other girls with us. I ease away. "I never led you on. You and me... it isn't going to happen."

She shakes her head, a confused look in her eyes as she stares at me. "Why not? You're hot. I'm hot. We look good together." She squints. "Are you gay? Because that would explain a lot. It's cool—we can work with that. I'd do anything for you."

My eyebrows hit the ceiling, and I huff out a laugh. "Not gay, but there's nothing wrong with that."

She frowns. "Then it's the draft. You're keeping yourself wired for the Combine. I get it. Keeps you focused. Once you get drafted, we can screw like rabbits. I like waiting—builds anticipation."

I exhale. Obviously she doesn't know I wasn't invited. "No."

A hard, steely look grows on her face. "Then it's that girl, the one with pink in her hair," she mutters.

I stand up and pace at those words, ready to get out of this room, but I have to finish this. "You're a beautiful girl, Dani. Some guy is going to be lucky to have you." Actually, I'm not so sure about that. She's got a hungry look about her, a girl searching for money and fame. I've always known it, and it just made things easier.

Her mouth opens. "But...but all my sisters think we're hooking up."

Because she took every opportunity to give that impression. I think back to all the IG posts she made about us, slanted to look as if we were together. I didn't complain. I figured it...it would keep Charisma away from me.

"I just don't understand why you don't want me." Big tears spill out and roll down her face.

Dammit. I sit back down next to her, feeling unsure. I never know how to deal with emotion. I'm not detached from it, just clueless. Growing up, I learned to keep my feelings at a distance from people as much as I could, knowing that whatever I felt, it wouldn't be returned. I clasp my hands as we sit there in silence.

"Dani...I'm really sorry."

She wipes her face, straightens, and looks at me, the dark makeup around her eyes a mess. "I can't believe this is all over some nerd girl Chi-O—who crashed our party with her friends."

“Leave Charisma out of this. Don’t even go there.” My tone is clipped.

A few tense moments pass until finally she takes a big breath and stands. Her fists clench as she glares at me. “You know what...she doesn’t want you or you’d be with her.”

She *does* want me. I think.

But I don’t need anyone.

I stand up from the couch. This convo is done. “Don’t text me anymore, Dani.”

“You’ll miss me, Blaze, you will. You liked having me around, and I don’t give up that easy,” she says slyly, but I don’t reply.

Without looking at her, I walk out and head to the kitchen. Dillon is there splayed out like a rock star at the bar, a girl on either side. Pushing Charisma and Dani out of my head, I listen to him retelling that big play he was in.

“You better stop lying to those girls,” I say with a grin as I approach. “We all know who the star of that game was—me.”

He hoots and slaps me on the back. “Just the man I was talking about. Ladies, I’d like you to meet Blaze Townsend.” He waggles his eyes toward the two girls. “These lovelies are from the Furry Kitty Kat down the road, townies stopping in for a little college action.”

He elbows me as one of them giggles and rushes over to me. She’s got long brown hair and a shit ton of makeup on.

“I’m Lola,” she says, batting those lashes up at me.

“Nice.”

Her hand rubs my shoulder. “Wanna go downstairs and dance?”

Uh, no.

“Nice to meet you. Excuse me, I need a drink.” I subtly set her aside and take a few steps away to grab a glass of water from Theo. I rake my eyes over him, remembering the appreciative looks he gave Charisma. He hands me my water.

I gaze at him over the rim of my glass. “Hey, remember that girl from your graphic design class tonight? The one who talked you into drinks earlier? She had two girls with her.”

His face gets tight. “Yeah. Nice tits. Played me right into her hands.”

My nose flares as my temper rises. *Easy, Blaze.*

“If you recognize her in class, don’t give her any shit about it.”

He blinks and looks surprised. “She your girl?”

Is she my girl? No. We’re just...friends who can’t stop torturing each

other.

“She’s a nice girl, and I don’t want you giving her a hard time—got it?” I lean in a little over the bar so the dude can read the intensity on my face, catch the glint in my eye.

He holds his hands up. “Right on, man. You got it. She’s kinda scary anyway. I wasn’t planning on it.”

I turn back and face Dillon and company. How soon can I tell him I’m ready to go? I eyeball the door and consider walking home. It’s not that far. *Damn*. He’s going to suggest I start seeing a shrink if I don’t pick up a girl and act normal soon.

Ryker appears at my side, eyes on me. “Hey, asshole. Haven’t see you in a while.”

Yeah. We’ve been missing each other at the gym.

I exhale and nod, glad at least that our little spat seems to have blown over.

I lift my water. “Sorry for before with Cedrick. I should have texted you and apologized. I wasn’t thinking and—”

He shakes his head. “No need. I shouldn’t have sprung him on you like that without a heads-up. We could have had a plan. My fault. Next time we’ll be ready for him.”

I nod at his optimism. “Next time.” Odds are, no scout is going to pop back into the field house, but I’m happy for *him*. He deserves being the number one pick. “I’m proud of you, man. You’re gonna take over the world.”

“Whatever.” He grins sheepishly and looks around the room, taking in the crowd. “Have you seen Penelope? She said they were coming here but she’s not answering her texts. Thought I’d surprise her.”

“Margo got tossed.” I tap my leg. “Pretty sure Penelope and Charisma left.”

“Ah.” His gaze goes to Dillon and the girls hanging on him. He’s got his head buried in one girl’s chest, and the other one is playing with his shaved head. Ryker looks back at me. “You gonna get a piece of that or let him hog it all? He’s an animal.”

I shake my head. I’ve already had the girl I wanted tonight.

I just wish she’d let down her guard; I wish I’d let mine down.

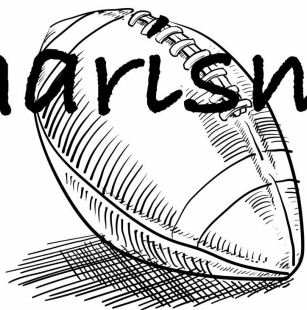
I wish we...

Yeah, but wishes are really just fairy tales with happy endings.

Guys like me, we don't get those.

15

Charisma



Charisma



The following Monday after my morning classes, I'm late for lunch, as usual. My head is down and I'm rushing to the student center when my phone rings. *Ma*. It's close to noon, and I picture her as she sits at our worn kitchen table. She's probably just wrapped up a Pilates class, and I bet she's showered and wearing something classy, slacks and a soft-looking blouse with flowers on it. A pretty lady, she'll have her brown hair up in a neat and tidy style, little diamond earrings in, and her makeup will be on point. She tries hard, I think, to keep Pop's attention. Pregnant at seventeen, she and my dad had to get married, and part of me wonders if that's part of why he—

Nope. Don't want to think about him cheating.

"Hi, Ma."

She sighs. "How is my little girl down in the bottom of our country? Are you staying safe?"

I smile. "I'm fine, and it's not really the bottom part of the country. I'm just a couple of hours from Memphis, Ma."

"Be a good girl. Remember those Southern boys are trying to trap you.

Don't fall for a hillbilly."

I roll my eyes. "I don't see any hillbillies, just college students. Besides, hillbillies live in the mountains, Ma. This is the Delta and it's flat as a pancake."

"You want to be a virgin on your wedding night, Charm. Keep those legs closed. God loves purity."

I groan. "Ma, stop. God loves bad people too."

She doesn't even hear me. This is her weekly call, and she's just going down a list. "Are they starving you? When you come home, I'll cook you a nice ziti. Your dad and Paulie are so busy with the business. Everyone needs a plumber. This city is falling apart without them. Can you imagine if all the toilets stopped working? What a mess."

I sigh internally.

"Are you going to Mass?" she continues. "I hear good things from Father Lewis about the priest in Magnolia. He spent some time in Brazil helping the poor. You need to listen to him. You need to remember you're a good Catholic girl."

I laugh. "I haven't been to Mass. Is there anything you needed, or did you just call to harass me about eating and church?"

"I just wanted to hear your sweet voice. Come home soon. You have the frequent flyer points in your account."

And we have hit the guilt trifecta: food, church, and coming home.

"Spring break, Ma, soon. Listen, people are waiting for me. Give my love to Pop and the boys. I love you!"

Breanne, our Chi-O treasurer, is already sitting down as I get to the pizza place inside the student center. I don't know her well, but she's different and I can get behind that. She waves at me, and my eyes widen when I take in her paint-splattered overalls. She isn't wearing anything under them and they gape a little on the side, revealing a high percentage of side boob.

"Hey, you," she says with her slow flower-child drawl. She always appears high, but it's just her personality. She pats a seat next to her. "I saved you a place that catches the light coming through the window. You can use the sun's rays to warm up and fill you with the rich energy you need to get centered."

Maybe she really does think she's a flower. "Do I need to be centered? Is my aura off?"

She cocks her head and studies me. "Your aura is diluted. Love

troubles?”

Yes. I frown. “No.”

She shrugs. “Well, you’ve been so down lately. I don’t like it.”

Neither do I. “I’m fine.”

Margo appears, her usually sleek blonde hair in disarray, a harried expression on her face. She looks a lot like she did the night Penelope and I found her in her dorm room after being kicked out of the Theta house. We showed up to make sure she was okay, and good thing since she was throwing pillows against the wall and vowing to break back in. Apparently there was hair-pulling and obscenities shouted when they escorted her out of their house and off the premises.

I hide the grin that wants to fill my face just thinking about it.

She throws herself into a chair and slams her book bag onto the table. “God, this semester is kicking my butt. Thank goodness for Connor. If it wasn’t for him...ugh.” Her face goes from annoyed to serene as she tells us about their last date together.

Penelope arrives next, her hair up in a messy bun. A pencil sits behind her ear, and Ryker is beside her, his arm across her shoulders. He gives her a kiss and heads off in the other direction toward the burger place across from us.

She sits down, a bemused expression on her face.

“Love is wonderful, huh?” I say.

A slow grin takes over her face, slow and soft. “Yeah.”

The sound of laughter comes from the eatery across the way, and my eyes are drawn there.

I find Blaze, Dillon, and Ryker sitting at a table together. Speaking of trifectas, they could be movie stars out for lunch with all the hotness they’re throwing off.

I study Blaze while he isn’t looking. We avoided each other in class today...mostly. Hard to do when his body is right next to mine.

I tried to look at his bell responses several times, but he kept his paper hidden from me.

I didn’t mention the party. Neither did he.

We get our pizza and dig in, but my gaze keeps slipping over to their side of the room.

Their table has been overrun with jersey chasers, and some random has her hand on Blaze’s chest while laughing at something he’s saying. Most of them avoid Ryker. They know he’s with Penelope, and he doesn’t put up with

it.

I wonder if Blaze would be like that if he had a girlfriend. Ah, but football is always first. Explains why he's never had a real one. Oh, I know—I've asked Ryker.

My gaze goes back to him, tracing his profile, that sexy smile.

A dull thudding starts behind my eyes, and I wince and furrow my brow. I relax my face to relieve the tension, but the pressure doesn't subside. *Dammit.* I don't have time for a migraine right now. I've got too much to do. Homework, checking in with some design firms—

My phone pings with a text.

Hey. I see you.

Blaze. My heart rattles around in my chest. *Just leave me alone,* I want to shout.

But, I can't resist responding.

I see you too. And the harem. The words smack of bitterness, and I immediately regret sending them.

It's like background noise. What's your favorite color?

Okaayyy. I'll bite.

Black. It's slimming.

STFU. You don't need "slimming".

What's your fav color?

Red. Color of passion. I'm a passionate guy.

Oh, don't I know it.

Since we're friends now, may I ask a personal question? he writes.

My mouth flattens. Friends who dance and have sexy times? Plus, we aren't even acknowledging what happened.

Yet...

Isn't that my usual? I don't want to dig too deep because it might hurt.

I exhale and type. **Aren't you missing out on time with your friends?**

I glance up and see his head is bent over his phone, an intent expression on his face. He really isn't paying attention to anyone around him.

No. Question: what's your favorite sexual position? I mean, as a FRIEND, I would like to know. Just for clarity's sake, he sends.

WTH. My heart skips a beat, and my face feels hot. I dart my eyes around the group I'm with, but no one seems to notice I've been sucked into a sexting convo.

You aren't responding. Did I go too far? Can't FRIENDS talk about

this stuff?

My hands clench my phone. **I don't know.**

I'll go first. Mine is lying side by side, looking in her eyes while I fuck her real slow. Her leg is hitched around my hip and my hands are on her ass, doing all the work. She's saying my name. And when I kiss her ON HER MOUTH, she comes, her pussy squeezing my dick until I can't resist and come with her.

I nearly hurl the phone across the room. Oh, he went there. He went *there*. He's talking about me and my rules. I stare down at his words, my skin tingling as I squirm in my seat. Damn him and his dirty mind.

Now you go.

I can't think. My head is filled with images of us and I want *him*—

Panic sets in as I stare down at his text. My legs cross and uncross.

Charisma. Your turn.

My head looks up, and he's staring at me. I drop his gaze and focus back on my phone. **I'm not a game for you to play, Blaze.**

I know. I'm not playing. I want to know. Tell me, do you like public places for sex? Like a masquerade party? I think you do.

My chest rises, and I want to pay him back, want to make him burn just as much as I am right now. I think about what to type, my teeth pulling at my lip.

Masquerades are meh. I've had better.

I look up at him to get his reaction, and he's staring at me. I smirk and arch a brow. He seems to take a deep breath and then starts typing again.

Charm. You're being mean.

Fine, fine. He wants me to tell him, and I want him to get as hot and bothered as I am right now. I hunker down and type.

My favorite position is me in his lap on a couch or a chair. He pulls my panties to the side and fucks me under my skirt. We might get caught if someone comes in the room.

Are you facing him or is he behind you? Is the TV on or is music playing? What time of day is it?

Seriously? You writing an article for Penthouse or what?

TELL ME.

Fine. **"With or Without You" by U2 is playing. I'm facing him. He fucks me slow but rough, his hands digging into my hips as we stare at each other.**

Excellent song. Slow but rough? That doesn't make any sense.

This is my favorite and you asked so STFU.

Have you done it lately? he asks.

I've never had sex *exactly* like that, but I can't tell him. Maybe he thinks I get around more than I do. Sure, I hook up when I want, but it's not willy-nilly, one-night stands. It's a careful plan, and I'm always in control. That way no one gets hurt.

No, but I will soon.

With who?

The pain in my head sharpens, and I rub my forehead.

You okay? he sends.

Headache. A cold sweat breaks out over me, and I can barely get the words typed out.

The phone slips from my hand, and I lean my head back on the seat. Penelope and Margo's voices penetrate my fog as the pain kicks in more, asking if I'm okay, and I nod and close my eyes. Sometimes if I can get really still, it will pass and—

“Charm, what's wrong?”

It's him.

Damn, he got here fast.

Penelope is standing over me too. *Ah, shit.* I hate the attention. “I'm cool. Just a headache.”

“Where are your meds?” Penelope asks, already grabbing my backpack and riffling through it.

“My rescue medicine is in the bathroom at home. I forgot to put it in my bag this semester. I just need to get to my car and go get it...” I swallow as another twinge hits, and it hurts to even hold my head up.

“You're not driving anywhere,” Blaze states, his voice firm.

“I can run you home.” It's Penelope, and she's already sitting next to me. “I don't have a class for another couple of hours.”

“I'll take her home.” Blaze again. I wave him off.

My eyes peek open and the pain sharpens. I wince. “No, you don't have to do that. I'm fine.”

“No, you're not. Come on.” Without waiting for a reply, he grabs my backpack and puts a hand out.

I take it and he pulls me up.

“Are you sure? Don't you have a class?”

He doesn't reply, just wraps his arm around my shoulders, leading me away from the pizza place. We take the stairs down to the exit, my body pressed against his. He handles me as if I'm small and delicate, stopping periodically to stare down at me and ask if I'm still good.

We leave the student center, and the sun makes me flinch. My stomach lurches as the pizza I just ate decides to roll around. If I puke in front of him, I'm going to die.

I stumble down one of the steps, and his hand is the only thing that keeps me from falling.

"Baby, you're a mess," he mutters as he pulls me to a stop and sweeps me up in his arms. My head rolls to his chest, my nose pressing against his shirt. God, he smells so good...fresh and crisp, like summer and woods and...

"You're so gallant...a real Southern gentleman with broad shoulders and a slow drawl. Ma warned me about guys like you," I mumble, my voice close to a whisper.

"Smart lady. Somehow I don't think you listen to her."

"Nope." I peek out, and he's staring down at me.

I see where he's headed, the reserved parking lot close to the student center. "Good thing your truck is close."

"Special athlete parking," he says back.

"Lucky duck."

He opens the passenger side of his truck for me. "Hang on," he says softly as he runs his hands over my body, getting me settled and buckling me up.

"Don't cop a feel there, football player." I close my eyes and lean back against the leather.

I'm aware of him chuckling as he gets in and cranks the truck. "Sick and still feisty."



CHARISMA



CHARISMA

My eyes crack open. I come to slowly, blinking as I realize I'm in my bed under the covers and a fan I keep on my nightstand blows softly in my face. It's winter, but I love the noise, plus Penelope keeps the thermostat a bit high for this New York girl.

Based on the sunset in the window, it must be late afternoon. I've missed my classes.

I rub my temples. Thank God the pain is gone. I recall Blaze carrying me inside our house and taking charge. He set me on the couch and, with my instructions, found my meds in the bathroom, got me a glass of water, and watched me take them. He grabbed my eye mask from the freezer, cranked up my diffuser, and sat in the chair across from me while I drifted off on the couch. He must have carried me to my bedroom after I fell asleep.

I hear a soft snore behind me on the bed and turn my head to see him there, lying on his side facing me. His arm is thrown over my waist, and I blink, wondering how I missed it. I study him, taking in his handsome face, soft with sleep, his full lips slightly parted as he breathes deeply. A little scar,

a half-moon shape, sits over his right eyebrow, cutting through the hair there. I turn more until I'm facing him then trace it lightly with the tip of my finger, not wanting to wake him.

The hair doesn't grow where the scar is and it fascinates me. I picture him as a kid, getting dirty and playing hard.

"Fishing accident," he says, startling me as his eyes open.

"Oh?" My voice is soft.

"We had a pond behind our house, and I used to take a pole and try my luck there. I went to throw the line out, it got tangled in some brush, and when I jerked on it, the hook popped me in the eyebrow." He smiles. "Blood everywhere. You would have passed out. I ran back to the house, rod and all. Nobody was home and I ended up in the bathroom, where I pulled it out by myself. Scared the shit out of me."

"No stitches?"

"No. I'm tough."

"You should have gotten stitches. If I was your mom—"

"Nah, don't start with that now. Besides, chicks dig scars." He makes a mean scowl and the eyebrow drops low. I laugh...until his finger lifts and touches my eyebrow, tracing it. "Now, you, on the other hand...I've never seen such elegant brows."

"It takes a lot of plucking and waxing to get this sexy look."

"It's working."

We stare at each other, and I'm acutely aware that there's barely any space between us. At least we're dressed.

"Thank you for bringing me home."

"You're welcome."

"Did you miss class?"

"I'll take care of it. How often do you get migraines?"

"It used to be a lot, but I have daily meds that keep it to a few times a year. Back to you—you sure you missing class is okay?"

"Stop worrying about me. I'm studying every night." He gives me a brief smile and stares up at the ceiling.

"Are you gonna fuck or what, bitches?" squawks Vampire Bill from his cage.

Blaze leans up on his elbow and eyes the parrot. "You're one rude motherfucker." There's no heat in his words, and the bird eyes him warily.

"Rude motherfucker!" he repeats back.

Blaze bursts out laughing.

I slap him on the arm. “Thanks. Now he’ll be saying that all day. I meant to put him out in the den this morning. He likes to sit by the front door and watch cars. He’s freakishly smart. Sometimes I think he’s plotting, waiting for an opportunity to fly away. Poor thing has a misshapen wing. He can fly about five feet and then he’s out.”

“I’ll move him. I should get up anyway, now that you’re awake.” He sits up and inches down to the end of my bed.

My eyes follow him, part of me wishing he hadn’t gotten up.

Dangerous, Charisma.

He walks over to the bird, reaches into the cage, and rubs him on the head.

I ease up until I’m propped against the pillows. “He likes you. He’s not that crazy about guys.”

“Score for me.” He flashes his smile at the bird, and I swear the damn thing weaves on his little feet.

“Are you some kind of hypnotist?”

He pauses and looks back at me. “If I were, I’d hypnotize you.”

“Yeah? What would you make me do?”

Blue eyes lower, drifting over my face.

“Kiss me. Friends can do that, right?”

Oh. I feel lightheaded as I adjust my pillows. “Not normally, no.”

He clears his throat and tears his gaze off me. He picks up my acoustic guitar in the corner of the room and holds it up. “You play?”

I blush. “Not well. I got it in my head last year to take lessons, but as it turns out, I suck. Probably not the right instrument for me. I like upbeat, harder sounds.”

“Like?”

“Joan Jett, Poison, Bon Jovi, Metallica. I’m old school.”

“I’ve got a song for you. Not hard rock, but the words won’t get out of my head lately.” He cradles the guitar, sitting on the end of my bed and strumming out a soft tune with long fingers. He plays the bridge with ease, his head nodding as the soft timbre of his voice shifts into song. The pitch is perfect, the husky quality skilled as the sound reverberates in my small room.

His voice picks up and sings the chorus, about a guy who keeps seeing the girl he broke up with. He sees her everywhere—in *her Maxima*—and he thought he’d get over her, but he...doesn’t. His small town is closing in on

him. He needs to get away.

He sings the last note, and I suck in a breath and try, *try* to push down my feelings for him.

“Have you had lessons?”

He pats the guitar. “I just pick it up fast. It’s the same with a piano. I may not get the tune right away, but I usually do pretty quick.”

“Blaze...that’s amazing.”

He blushes. “Yeah? When I went to church with my aunt and uncle, I would play when no one was around.”

“What song was that?”

“Sam Hunt, ‘Break Up in a Small Town’.”

“Don’t know who that is, but you’re better than he’ll ever be.”

He laughs and looks down.

“Play something else.” *Please*. I want to wipe that song out of my head, because it felt like...us.

“You like Peter Gabriel?”

“Doesn’t everyone?”

“Here’s ‘In Your Eyes’.” He hangs his head, his fingers on the strings again, the soft way he strokes them making me sigh. He raises his head and sings the words, the sculpted lines of his face drawn with intensity as he works the guitar with perfect precision. The beat picks up, and he stands and plays, his hips swaying just a little with the beat of the tune.

He ends the song, and there’s a heavy silence. All I can do is stare at him. My chest feels incredibly tight.

“That’s the song John Cusack plays on his boombox to get the girl in *Say Anything*,” I say.

His eyes flicker. “Is it?”

I close my eyes. It *is*, and he knows it. “It’s your favorite movie.”

“Ah, guess you got me there.” He looks down and stares at the guitar.

I want to hold him. And I shouldn’t.

“I never knew you played and sang. I guess you do that for girls all the time.” Emotion rises in my throat and I battle it down, but it seems as if I can’t. “Your voice, it...it makes me want to cry.”

“Don’t do that. I can’t take it when you cry.” He sets the guitar down and comes back to me. His fingers brush at my cheeks, and I realize there *are* tears on my face. “I’ve never sang a song for a girl. Not like this. Never.”

Oh. I push his hands away and wipe my face, feeling color rising on my

cheeks. I mutter, “It’s those meds. They make me loopy.”

“Just the meds? Maybe it’s something else.” His eyes are on my face, reading me, and whatever he sees there is enough for him to get on his knees in front of me. His hand goes around my nape and palms my scalp underneath my hair.

“Is it okay to do this? As a friend?” he asks softly.

Breathing faster, I lean into his hand. “Yes. Thank you for the song, for taking care of me.”

Before I can focus too hard on the repercussions, I trace his lips, outlining the fullness. There’s a slight indentation in the center of his bottom lip, and I press my finger there.

He closes his eyes. “Charm?”

I freeze, feeling self-conscious. *What am I doing?*

He’s here being kind, and I’m...out of control.

“Do you want me to stop?” I say.

“No.” His tongue darts out, licks my finger, and then he bites it, sucking it into his mouth. I can’t breathe, watching his mouth pull on me, until it feels like my body is hardwired to his tongue, everything sparking alive, nipples, my core, all of it connected to his sinewy wetness. He sucks me, his lashes fluttering against his cheeks.

He lets my finger go slowly, with a soft pop.

He moves back to staring at me, his pupils large, dark, and focused on me.

My body tightens. I know that look. I recognize that heat and desire. I feel it too, every time he’s close to me. Goose bumps sprinkle over my skin, a buzz in my bloodstream...

He stands and paces around the room, his hand in a fist as he puts it to his mouth.

“Come back,” I whisper.

He stops and looks at me.

“If I come back...I don’t think I can resist touching you.”

“Okay.”

He inhales sharply, walks over to me, and gets back on his knees. “I want your mouth, but you don’t like kissing.”

I love kissing, but if I do that with him right now, I’m lost, and he’s already ripped me apart once, so goddamn hard. I can’t go there again—

As if he senses my reticence, he lets out a deep breath, looks away, and

stares at the fan, watching it twirl.

“Blaze...” I don’t know what I’m going to say.

He nods, almost as if to himself, and turns back to me. I press a kiss to his palm and press it to my face. I can’t *not*—even though it’s going to haunt me later.

“What are you thinking?” I ask.

He watches me, and when he speaks, his voice is low. “I’m thinking if I can’t have a kiss, I want my dick between those full lips, your mouth and tongue on me. We never did that. We never did...” His voice stops as he takes a deep breath. He cups his hand over his jeans, and his pants tighten, jutting out against the fabric. “Would you like it? Would you get on your knees for me?”

“I’ve never done that with anyone.” I’ve had opportunities to, and guys have begged, but that level of trust and intimacy always intimidated me. It was a way to keep myself separate and apart.

“I’m not just anyone, am I?” His words are quiet, yet the very edges of them tremble.

“No.” I pull on his hair, threading my fingers through the soft strands as he bends his head closer. His hand pops the button on his jeans and unzips them just a little. His pants are barely past his hips, but his large mushroom-shaped cockhead is visible as his hand wraps around it and strokes.

“Blaze...” I sigh as he runs his fingers over the thick head in circles, white liquid slipping out of the slit at the top.

He watches himself then looks at me. “I can’t stop. Lying there with you for all those hours, knowing you were next to me...”

I watch his hands pump, sliding over the brown skin of his cock, more thick white liquid beading. He rubs the wetness down the part of his length I can’t see, the slick sound of his strokes loud in the quiet room. “I’m thinking about you, your hot mouth sucking me like a lollipop. I want that. I want you taking every inch of me down your throat.” His head goes back with another loud groan, and the top of him is red now, bigger and thicker as his hand works it. With a mumbled curse, he shoves his jeans down the rest of the way and I see all of him, from root to tip. He’s huge, thick, and veiny. Hard as a steel pipe.

“Are you with me, Charm? Are you turned on?”

I tear my gaze off his length. My hands clench. I nod.

“Take your shirt off,” he tells me, and I comply, pulling it over my head

and letting it fall on the bed. I skate my fingers over the edge of my black lace demi bra, glad I have it on. I think about how I must look, chest heaving, hair everywhere, my skin flushed. My breasts feel heavy and tingly, begging for sensation. The air from the fan breezes across my nipples, erect and aching, and I arch my back. I push the wire of my bra down until it's underneath me, lifting me up. The fabric brushes over the piercing in my right breast, and I hiss.

“Christ! Your body...” he says. “That nipple ring—*fuck.*”

Our eyes meet and I falter. I'm going too far. I'm skirting the edges of the rabbit hole that he is, this inescapable desire, and it's going to hurt me later—

He must read my face. “Don't think, Charisma. Look at how much I want you.”

He squeezes the head of his cock, doing a twisting motion that makes me gasp.

My nipples respond to him like there's an electric current between us, and I play with them, pinching and rolling them between my fingers in time with his strokes, my legs scissoring at the fire that's building there.

His hands are fast and he shudders with each upward stroke, his broad shoulders quivering, his waist arching.

“Blaze...” I'm breathless.

“Say my name, Charm. Say it.”

“Blaze, Blaze, Blaze—”

He lets out a grunt and liquid spurts from his cock, spilling out over his jeans and running over his hands.

He reaches over to the nightstand, grabs a tissue from the box there, and wipes himself off, sweeping up the mess with hands that tremble. Then he's in my face and pushing a strand of hair back. “You didn't get off.” Blue eyes glitter down at me.

“Was enjoying the show.”

“I want to make you come.”

“You did, at the party. We're even.”

But...

Thick need has taken up residence inside my body, the warm honey of desire licking at every molecule inside. My fingers touch my silver nipple ring and, combined with him staring at me, it's almost enough to get me—

“I'll barely touch you. Just close your eyes.”

There's a hint of authority in his tone and everything inside me wants to

resist, but he has power over me, something no one else has ever had.

I let my lashes lower.

“Don’t move.”

I nod.

What’s he going to do?

The air from the fan drifts across us as the moment stretches into several seconds. I can feel the heat of his gaze on me, and I know he’s staring, his eyes heavy and low.

His tongue licks at my ear, biting my lobe softly, and I start, having expected him to go for my breasts. I strain toward him as he works his mouth down my neck, licking my skin. His nose trails down my nape and skates to my collarbone.

I squirm, my hips arching off the bed, estimating where I think his hips are, but there’s nothing. Finally his hands cup both my breasts, and I cry out.

My head falls back. “Oh, oh...”

“Touch yourself. Here,” he says as his hand briefly touches the crotch of my leggings and then is gone.

My hand plays with the waistband before slipping underneath to the hem of my black lace panties.

“More.” His lips suck my skin while his hand teases my piercing, tugging and brushing over the sensitive skin until I’m falling, falling.

I push aside my curls until I find my slick, wet folds. Groaning, I go deeper, finding the wetness in the center.

“Are you soaked?”

“Yes.”

“All for me.”

“Yes.”

He pushes my legs farther apart. I think about him staring again, and it’s embarrassing how my hips arch, still finding nothing. He must be standing and bending over me.

“Push your panties down.”

I fumble around until my leggings and panties are at my ankles. I kick them off.

He makes a sound in the back of his throat as his hands part my legs. “I want my tongue there. I want you sitting on my face. We never did that either, did we? It was just straight-up fucking for us...doggy style in the library...then my dorm, up against the wall.”

No, I don't like that distant tone is his voice—not now.

“Blaze—”

“Faster. Two fingers.”

I do as he says, opening myself up and giving up my control as I touch that little spot close to my opening that makes me crazy. My lips part and I breathe faster. My fingers feel so good, and my legs twitch. When I go to push them together, to get privacy in this, he stops me with his hands, holding them apart.

“Let me watch. Give up that control, baby.”

He kisses my neck and then sucks. “Do you hear that sound you're making? Do you hear how you can't breathe? And the sound of your pussy... I like thinking about you getting off when you think about me. How many times did you touch yourself when we weren't together?”

“Too many to count.”

The sound of fabric shifting and a zipper going down reaches me, and he lets out a strangled noise. “I'm going to jack off again, Charm. You good with that?”

“Why wouldn't I be,” I mumble. I can't even think straight.

“I dream about this. Two o'clock in the morning and I wake up with a hard-on for you. All it takes is three strokes and I'm coming all over myself,” he groans, and I picture him stroking himself, biting those full lips.

My legs are jelly, the tips of my fingers playing, doing everything he says as I hear his breathing quickening, him sliding his hand over himself.

God, the closed eyes thing is really hot.

A lone finger presses down at the top of my mound, pulling on the curls there, and I gasp and jerk, wiggling to get him closer. My hips rise off the bed, fighting against the pressure of his hand keeping me down, yet wanting it as I touch the bundle of nerves at the top of my sex.

“You're so beautiful,” he says, and that voice, the gold and gray of him, the two sides of light and dark send me over the edge. My core squeezes and pulses against my hand, a million stars lighting up behind my closed eyes. Hot sparks detonate, and I call out and fall down into a sensation so sharp it makes me whimper.

Aftershocks roll through my body, and I grasp the blanket underneath me, my hips still writhing.

My eyes open.

He's leaning over the bed, face flushed, eyes full of lust, his jeans at his

feet.

I find myself on my knees in front of him. He lets out a deep groan of satisfaction when I take his length in my mouth. He tastes like salt and heat, and *him*.

I want it all.

My eyes look up and he's watching me, dark gaze smoldering.

"Just like that," he grunts, cupping my head and guiding me, threading his hands through my hair.

My tongue and lips suck him while his grip grows firmer, pushing my head into his body until the tip of him is in the back of my throat. His breathing gets loud as his cock thickens and hardens more.

"You should move. I'm about to go," he groans, staring down at me.

"This is my first BJ. Don't tell me what to do," I say around him, kissing the tip.

He laughs but stops when I twirl my tongue around his head.

"Charm..." he mumbles when I take him inside my mouth and hum. I'm not sure how to do it right, but I use everything I have. My hands cup his tight ass, my nails digging into those firm muscles as I suck, rolling my tongue down his hard length. "*Charm!*" His hips arch and he growls when he comes, his fingers in my hair as he pushes himself in deep. I take everything he gives me.

Silence fills up the room as we breathe heavily and ease away from each other slowly. I reach the bed and pull myself up. I keep my face averted, processing.

He...I...that was...hot.

Why haven't I ever done that?

Because I never wanted to before, but with him...

When I turn around, he's zipping up his jeans, his shoulders hunched as he seems to gather himself.

He never even took his shirt off, I realize, and here I am in nothing but a bra *under* my breasts.

Reaching over to the nightstand, I grab a tissue and wipe my mouth. Fixing my bra, my fingers feel useless, still in some kind of afterglow as I straighten up and stand. I snatch my underwear and slide them on then grab a blanket from the bed and drape it around me.

He's just watching, and I chew on my lips.

What's next?

Weirdness, that's what.

"Thank you for seeing me home," I say. "I appreciate it."

Stupid, stupid, stupid.

I feel a slow blush rising on my cheeks. "That was lame," I say.

He's got those heavy eyes on me, assessing me, thinking.

Shit, what is he thinking?

I clear my throat. "Are you leaving?" It's what I did to him. I pulled myself together those times we were together, said goodbye, and left. He didn't seem to care. He told me *bye* and *see you later*. I clearly remember, because I *wanted* him to say more, especially that last night we were together. I suspect my heart was right there on my face.

He stalks over to me and lifts my face up. "I should go."

"You should. It's very late, practically dinner time."

"I don't want to," he murmurs, playing with a piece of my hair.

"Then stay."

"What will we do?"

If I was a good girl, I'd say hang out and watch TV, maybe eat, but—

"What will we do?" he repeats, his eyes on me.

"Whatever you want," I whisper.

He licks his lips. "The next time I come, I want it to be inside you, Charm. I want to be deep in your pussy. Tell me to go, say the words, because I can't leave until you do. I can't." His eyes are dark, his chest still, as if he's barely in control. "I don't want to hurt you."

Air whooshes out of me.

I want his heart, yet he doesn't want me like that.

Still, we both want to lose ourselves in *this*, whatever it is. It's the language we both know.

For this moment, it's enough. I know I'll regret it later, but rational thought left me the moment he sang "In Your Eyes" to me.

"Stay."



CHARISMA



CHARISMA

“You sure?” he asks quietly. We study each other, reserve on his face, almost fear.

I nod my head.

His voice is gruff. “I’m going to go sit on the couch. You’re going to put on a skirt and find me. You feel me?”

I know exactly what he’s referring to—our sexting convo—and it makes my chest rise in anticipation.

His gaze burns. “Wear some of your big heels.”

He turns and stalks out of my bedroom, and I stand there for a moment. This isn’t like before when we had sex, where I felt a semblance of control. No, this is him being alpha, his ideas, and it doesn’t freak me out like it should. In fact, I run to my dresser and yank out fresh lacy underwear and a black mini skirt that’s too short for public wear. I adjust my bra again, pushing the girls up, grab some four-inch red heels, and shove my feet in them.

I walk into the den, and he’s sprawled back on the couch, fully dressed.

He's hooked my phone up to a speaker and "With or Without You" blares, the lyrics reminding me of the pain of wanting him.

A quick glance tells me the window blinds are open with a clear view of the house across the street plus the parking spot where his truck is.

His muscled legs are apart, blue eyes running over me, lingering on the shoes before coming back to my face. "Hey."

Just that one husky word and I'm wet, juices already pooling.

"How can you be hard again?" I flick my eyes over the tent in his jeans.

"I'm twenty-one and horny as fuck." He rubs his crotch and squeezes. "Been missing you."

I let out a shaky breath. *God, what are we doing?*

"Get in my lap."

He takes my hand and pulls me closer.

I suck in a breath and situate myself as I straddle him, my hands going in his hair. Wavy and dark, it's soft and silky under my touch, and I tug, playing with the highlighted parts, scraping my nails over his scalp.

He closes his eyes and grabs the sides of my legs, moving slowly up my thighs, going under the skirt. He grips my hips, his fingers digging into my skin. He looks down at the tops of my thighs, the hint of lace peeking out from my skirt. "I can see why you like this. Grind on me, baby."

"As long as you know that when you say *baby*, you really mean Charisma Rossi, badass nerd girl."

His hand clutches my hip, squeezing. "Wasn't thinking about anybody but you, city girl."

Sliding up and down against his jeans, I start nice and slow, my forehead pressed to him, my hands moving to his shoulders, kneading the muscles there, relearning the planes of him. We always moved so fast before.

The sound of a car makes us pause, the motor loud in the quiet room. We look at each other, releasing twin sighs of relief when it passes by.

He shifts up to give me more friction, and I gasp at the sensation from the rough fabric of his jeans, the button at the top pressing against my wet panties. I rotate my hips, sinking into him, massaging my clit against his pants. I moan.

His fingers dig into my ass. He's going to leave bruises, and I don't care.

I kiss his neck, breathing him in. My tongue and teeth bite at him, and he clutches me to his body, his hands moving to caress the bare skin on my back. I suck hard, memorizing the taste of him, carving it into my memory.

“Baby, baby, you got me crazy...” He’s moved his hands, cupping my breasts through my bra, paying extra attention to my piercing.

“You like that ring?” I say in his ear.

His eyes hold mine. “You know I do. Does it feel good when I touch it?”

“Yes.” I swivel my hips against his jeans, grinding. “You should get one. Just the softest touch and it sends tingles straight to my pussy.”

His lips part. “Charm...you’re killing me.”

“Then I’m doing it right,” I whisper.

He leans over to the side and fumbles to reach his back pocket, pulls out a condom and rips it open with his teeth, eyes on me.

I unzip his pants and push them as far as they’ll go, about mid-thigh, until his cock juts up. No underwear, of course. He rolls the condom on and looks at me.

He cups my face, sliding his hands into my hair. His face is flushed, his eyes hot.

He reaches down between us and moves my panties to the side with a sweep of his hand. He holds himself and gets positioned under me, but my underwear snaps back in place.

I let out a small laugh.

He laughs with me. “Damn. This isn’t going the way I wanted.”

“Fantasies work better in our heads,” I say at the same time.

He flashes that devastating smile. “Oh, this is going to work. Take those bastards off.”

I ease up from him, taking my time as I uncurl my legs from the couch. I stand up and bend over with my ass in front of him, hook my fingers in the panties, and push them down, slowly, taking my time, letting them breeze past my thighs and calves and shoes until they’re off, a scrap of lace.

I’ve lost my GD mind.

But I don’t care.

I turn around and his face is red, his chest rising rapidly. “Can you do that again? Maybe shake that ass and slap it?”

He’s teasing, and I smile and twirl them in my hands until he reaches up and snatches them, tucking my underwear in his pocket. “Mine now.”

I gasp when he picks me up and moves me back onto his lap, groaning as he rubs his length up my nub, sliding over the slickness until I’m gasping and trying to get him inside me.

“Blaze...don’t torture me.”

“Never.” He stares at me, breathing deep when he takes my hips and adjusts me, going inside just an inch or two then sliding out slowly.

“Blaze...” I arch for more.

“Wanted this for so long,” he says, sliding back in, though not nearly enough for what I want.

His lashes flutter as he pumps all the way in. Our fit is tight and we stop, both of us motionless, savoring the feel of us.

We stare at each other when he starts to move. He strokes in and out, hands on my hips, driving me, guiding me.

I clutch his hair and move with him, getting deeper, faster.

His gaze is on my lips then my eyes. He stares down at where we’re joined. “You’re the best fuck I’ve ever had. Am I yours?”

My hands clutch his shoulders. “Yes,” I groan.

He moans and throws his head back against the couch when I swivel my hips.

A car pulls up outside and parks at the curb because the driveway spot is taken. *Penelope*. I watch from the window as she gets out of her car. Her classes are over. She stops to talk to Mrs. Keller, the older lady next door who just had knee surgery. They laugh at something, their voices under the window. I can’t make out what they’re saying, but she’s going to walk in—

“Not stopping, babe,” he says, his hands clenching my hips.

“We have to,” I call out, but I can’t let him go. He feels so good, and I’m close.

He lets out a curse and stands, still holding me as he carries me back to my bedroom, kicking the door shut with his foot. I’m not sure how he did that with his jeans halfway down, but, well, he is an athlete. We fall back on the edge of my bed and land with him on top of me between my legs. He tries to shove his jeans down, but they get tangled on his shoes and he finally has to sit up and toe them off while I giggle.

“Damn, this is turning into comedy hour,” he murmurs when he turns back to me.

“I like it.” We always laughed together.

He smiles, runs his hands down my body, and pushes up my bunched skirt. He bends down and licks the skin on my inner thigh. I arch up, needing him back inside me. “Hurry...”

“I got you. I know what you want.” He moves back up to me, spreads my legs apart more, and slides in to the hilt, going deep at this angle.

I tighten my legs around his hips, whimpering as my heels dig into him. He starts an agonizingly slow pace, his strokes sure and disciplined, coming all the way out and then back in.

“Harder,” I whisper.

“Patience, baby,” he growls down at me.

My lips press against his neck and when I suck that skin, he grunts, picking up his maddening pace just a little, his hips twisting as he grinds down inside me.

I hear Penelope opening the front door, calling my name, and I block it out, watching him move above me.

I tug at the hem of his T-shirt, and he pauses and helps me, whipping it off and tossing it on the floor. He undoes my bra and throws it over his shoulder, a little curve on his lips as he stares down at me.

“You like this?” I say, cupping my breasts and brushing my finger over a nipple.

His throat bobs. “You. I like *you*.”

My hands clasp his shoulders, caressing the skin I’ve missed so much. He shudders when he clutches me against him, my breasts against his chest.

His words are broken up in pieces when he speaks, each phrase in sync with his thrusts as he picks back up. “Charm...we never did it like this...on a bed...me, looking down at you. How good is this,” he groans.

“So good,” I pant out.

He scoots us up and moves to his knees, adjusting so he holds my hips up at the tops of his thighs. I can’t really move, and he does all the work, so... intent on me. Holding my gaze, his finger rubs my clit as he slides in and out, back to that slow pace, savoring me.

“You’re driving me crazy,” I say, my lips parted, arching up for more.

“In my dreams, we do this. We do this all the time—me fucking you slow until you’re begging to come.”

“I’m begging now.” I lean up on my elbows, wanting him closer, wanting his skin against mine.

He slides back in, unhurried and deep, a small smile on his lips. “That’s not begging. Those are just pretty words. I like actions. Show me you want to come.”

Show him? Oh, I can. I reach up, grab a handful of his hair, and pull his face to mine. I lick his lips, just a tiny sweep, and give him a nip there before pulling away and staring into his dark eyes. I push his hand off my core and

touch myself.

“Charm,” he growls, his hands moving my legs up until they’re over his shoulders and he’s looming over me, and when he pumps inside me this time, it’s ferocious and hard and out of control.

He feels bigger, thicker as he pushes into me, and my hands fall to my sides as fire licks at me. Need rising. Escalating, higher and higher.

Sweat drips off his face, and he’s muttering nonsensical stuff I can’t make out, his gaze needy...and emotional as he stares down at me.

He’s everything. He’s everything I never knew I wanted. He’s perfection wrapped in a dark, deep lake, and I ache to swim in those waters, to discover his secrets and let him delve into mine.

My body quakes for release, my mind holding this picture of him in my head. I don’t want to forget his beautiful face—wanting *me*.

I don’t want to forget a thing.

I say his name when I come with a groan, my back lifting off the bed, my head twisting as I vibrate around him.

He puts his face in my neck and goes with me, his shoulders stiffening under my hands then quivering. He continues to pump in and out until we both slow down, our breaths loud in the quiet room.

He rises up on his elbows and stares at my lips. “Charm.”

“Blaze.”

“How soon can you go again?” He grins.

I burst out laughing. “You are insane.”

“I am—for this.” He moves his head down close to me, his nose brushing against mine, his mouth inches away. I freeze, unease sliding over me. I can’t give him that. I can’t. It’s the final piece of me.

He sighs and rolls away from me.

Silence ticks by as we stare up at the ceiling.

He lifts his hands and scrubs the lines of his face.

A long breath comes from him, and I try to take his hand. He pulls it away from me, not far, but enough that I know he doesn’t want that.

I think a full minute goes by. I turn my head to look at him. “Do you regret...what just happened?”

He frowns. “No. I just had the best sex ever.”

Oh.

I chew on my lip. “But you don’t look happy.”

He focuses back on me just as his cell pings from his jeans.

“That’s your phone,” I say.

He exhales, sits up, and reaches for his pants on the floor where they ended up, fumbling for it. He reaches into his pocket, grabs the cell, and reads the message.

“Someone important?” I ask, sitting up, fighting annoyance, wondering if it’s one of the many girls who hang on him.

“Yeah.” He takes the condom off and throws it in the trash. Pulling his jeans up, he tucks his phone back in his pocket, grabs his shirt, and puts it back on. His shoulders are tense as he walks around the room, seeming lost in thought. He stops at the door, and I feel faint.

I stand up and straighten my skirt then put my bra back on. One of my heels came off, and I jerk the other one off, pushing it out of the way as I stand. “So...you’re...leaving?”

He stares at me, his expression torn. “I have to work out. I promised Coach and that was him. I can’t miss it.”

“So it wasn’t a *fan*?”

His eyes flare. “Honestly, I think you want me to say yes. It would make things easier for you.”

I toss my hair back. “Don’t turn this around. You’re the one standing at my door after sex.”

His voice is quiet. “Charm, you—you won’t even let me *kiss you*. Why do you care?”

My heart trembles inside me. “Then go!” I say, annoyance ratcheting up to anger.

He frowns. “Look, I know we’re not right. I know I’m not good at talking about this stuff. I’ve never had to—”

His phone pings again and he glances at it.

“Just answer it,” I grind out.

He looks back at me, frustration on his face. His fists clench. “This isn’t over. We’ll talk. I’ll text you later.”

“Don’t,” I say bitterly. “We both know what this was. Just like old times, huh?”

“No, it wasn’t, goddammit. We are not doing that again.”

“Then what is *this*?” My eyes search his.

He exhales slowly, his face shuttering. He swallows as he lifts his fist to his mouth. “I...don’t know.”

I remind myself that he gave me the choice to tell him to go—and I

didn't.

I don't want to hurt you.

Yeah. I see exactly where this is going.

I walk over to him. "Let me make it easy for you. Get out."

He taps his leg, staring at me.

"Charm—"

"Now." Before I cry. *Again.*

He takes a long look at my face, heaves out a sigh, and walks away, shutting the door softly, and all the tension I've been holding in releases. I whimper and fall back on my bed, hands covering my face.

Penelope knocks on my door, but I don't answer it. I hear her shuffling away.

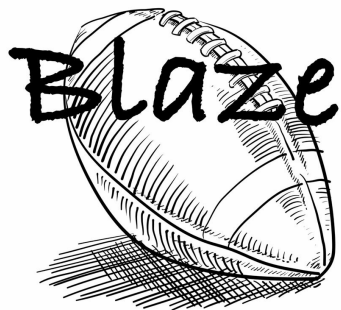
I roll over and beat my pillow.

He owned my heart three months ago, and he knows it. *He knows it.*

I think back to that heart-revealing note. I was fooling myself with that *blew away in the wind* shit. I taped that fucker to his door, and at the time, I didn't care who might walk by and see it, right out there for everyone. He got it and read it and if he felt the same way, if he were as gone for me as I am him, he would have told me by now.

He doesn't want us.

If he did, he would have stayed.



I walk out of Charisma's and stalk to my truck. I sit there with my vehicle idling, waiting to see if maybe she'll come after me. She won't though. I saw that stubborn look on her face. She's in there fortifying her fortress, adding more cement, pushing me out of her head.

After five minutes, I back up and pull away, building up my own walls.

What are we doing?

I can't go back to the way we were three months ago, messing around and never talking.

And now? I'm hot and cold with her, and I know it.

I also know I can't go back to needing her but still being afraid to commit to something when I don't even know *what* it is.

It's not fair to her.

Today, I just couldn't resist her, and when she needed me to take her home, I practically jumped at the chance, jonesing for just a few minutes alone with her.

I have feelings for her, scary fucking feelings that keep me awake at

night.

Like wanting to burn shit down to make her happy.

Like being willing to walk across scorching hot coals just to hold her in my arms.

I just need to...forget her.

Forget those big eyes.

Forget how she makes me laugh.

Move on.

My head goes back to my parents, and tightness builds in my stomach. They stumbled in and out of our trailer, high and glassy-eyed, needing their next fix. I had basic needs taken care of—mostly—but I never felt loved. Not once did they ever say it. Neither of them *looked* at me, their eyes going right over the restless, frustrated kid I was. *Stop wriggling. Shut the fuck up. Watch TV.*

They left me at a gas station. They left. People leave. Charisma will too. One day.

I drive down the highway to the gym, barely knowing where I'm going, operating on autopilot.

Dammit.

I've got to focus on what really matters, on my dreams and how bad I want it.

But.

I want—

Her.

I'm not sure how much longer I can keep going on like this. I tried to remove her from my head last fall, and here I am again. She deserves better than this. She doesn't need a coward. My hands clench around the steering wheel as I pull into the field house and park.



* * *

Dillon has one foot on the bench press seat and points at the bar loaded down with weights. “You game for some more weight?”

I grin. We've been working out for an hour and I'm sweating, but bring it on.

“My personal best is 290 pounds,” I say.

“Not bad for a slow wide receiver,” he says. “You can do better.”

I laugh. “You trying to kill me?”

He studies me. “Just trying to keep you busy. You seem distracted. Wanna try more?”

I do the quick math on the bar on the bench; it’s around 315 pounds.

I lie down below the bar and put my hands on it. “Let me show you how Mississippi boys lift.” With a grimace, I blow out a breath and push up, and he helps me lower the bar to my chest.

“Ready?”

I give him a nod and he releases it, his face serious as shit. Adrenaline ratchets me up, and I clench my fingers around the metal.

I breathe out, the muscles in my arms and chest tightening as gravity threatens. The bar starts to rise, and I get almost to the top then stop, quivering. My arms scream, and I feel like my chest is going to split in half.

“Come on, man, do it,” he says.

“I am!”

He balls up his fists and gets in my face. “You will never play in the NFL, boy. You’re just a small-town kid in a big-city world. You don’t belong in pro football. You’re too slow.”

My eyes flash.

He gives me a hard look, green eyes shining. “You’ll die alone, Blaze. Worst thing is, Charisma is moving on, but you don’t want her anyway. Maybe I’ll start tapping that.” He mimics a motion of doing her from behind, slapping an imaginary ass. “Oh, yeah, just like that. So good, so good...”

“Dillon!” I call out and shove at the bar until it’s at the top. My gaze lands on him. “You sonofabitch, I’m going to beat the shit out of you. Don’t you ever say—”

He laughs, holding his chest. “Ah, don’t get pissy. I’m pumping you up, man, and I got you.”

My teeth grit, anger hot. I take several deep breaths. He’s just messing around, I know he is, and that’s the only reason I decide to let it slide.

“Asshole,” I mutter. “Someday some girl is going to twist you up, and I hope I’m there to see it.”

He slaps his chest. “This heart is cold as ice, man. I thought yours was, but...” He grins.

I immediately drop the bar back to my chest again and force it up a second time. He cheers and a few of the other guys come over to watch.

After the third rep, Dillon helps me move the bar back to the rack, and my arms go limp. I just bench-pressed twenty-five more pounds than my maximum. *Damn.*

The guys slap me on the back, and Dillon puffs up and looks around at them. “See? Good wasn’t enough for Blaze here. That’s why he is going to the NFL come draft time, and we’re still here practicing for next season. You commit and focus like Blaze and maybe you’ll get somewhere one day.”

Dude. That might not happen, my eyes tell him, but he’s on a roll, and I know he’s positioning himself as captain next year.

“Blaze Townsend!” calls Coach Sanders from the door. His eyes land on me. “In my office, now!”

Shit. He’s the one who texted me, but when I came in earlier, he told me to work out first and then he’d get back to me.

Dillon looks at me. “Archer again?”

I shake my head. I’ve been avoiding any run-ins with him. “Don’t know.”

“Sounds ominous. You better go.”

I stand up and shake out my muscles, thinking about hitting the hot tub later.

Coach is talking to someone on speakerphone as I come in. He looks up at me and points toward a seat. “Here he is now,” he says to the phone.

I frown and try to figure out what’s going on.

“Sir?” I ask as I settle in.

Coach points down at the phone as a voice comes through.

“Mr. Watson here. I’m on the board for the Combine.”

My heart stutters, and I lean in. “Yes, sir. Blaze Townsend. Nice to meet you.”

He chuckles. “I like that Southern drawl, son. We’ve got a lot of good guys from your neck of the woods.”

I swallow, my hands tightening in my seat. “Sir, I can talk all day if you let me.”

Another laugh. “Well, Coach Sanders here has been telling me about how fast you are.”

“Best ever,” I say.

“I’d like to formally extend an invitation for you to come to the Combine and let us get a look at you, see you run. I can’t promise a higher rating in the draft, but Coach seems to believe in you, and well, I like an underdog. What do you say?”

“*Fuck yeah*—I mean, yes, sir! I’ll be there!” I’m standing now, leaning over the desk. My chest feels like it’s going to burst.

I hear him slap his hands together on the other end of the call, clearly excited. “Outstanding, Blaze! I have some papers my assistant will send over for you to fill out. We’re running late on this, so get them back to me in the next two days.”

“Sounds good, Harold.” Coach Sanders takes over, probably because I’m wide-eyed and jumping up and down, fists in the air. “Send the papers to me, and I’ll make sure he gets them.”

After a few back slaps and *thank yous* to Coach, I leave his office and grab my phone. I want to tell someone.

I realize I’ve already brought up Charisma’s name. Good news and she’s the one I want to tell.

Even though things aren’t right between us, I text her anyway.

Who else would I tell?

Charm. I’m in the Combine. Can you talk?

She doesn’t reply, and I pace around the hall. *Shit, shit, shit.*

Can I call you? I’ll come back.

Still no reply, and I’m about to call her when Dillon comes around the corner. “Well? What happened?”

I grin and hold my hands out. “You’re looking at a Combine invitee, man, every fast motherfucking inch of him.”

“Hell yeah!” He gives me a quick man hug. “Now, how about some fun?”

I nod and look back at my phone. Nothing. She’s shutting me out. I can’t blame her.

I take a breath. *Fine, fine.*

“Let’s grab showers and get to Caddy’s. Ready?”

I look at Dillon, seeing the excitement on his face.

I lock thoughts of her away, step by step, carefully folding them up in my head.

In a few months, we’ll be going in different directions. She’ll graduate and leave, and I may be in the NFL.

And that...

That makes my heart shift inside my chest. To think of her miles away...

I take a breath, pushing her further from my mind.

Football. It’s all I have.

“Yeah. Caddy’s. Let’s go.”



Our next class with Dr. Cartwright rolls around the next day, and even though I'm riding high on my good news, I'm anxious about Charisma.

Dillon's talking a mile a minute about the drinking we did last night. It wasn't much on my end, but he was lit, a girl on either side of him back in the dorm after we left Cadillac's. I came out at one point to grab some Gatorade and saw three naked bodies on the couch. I laughed and kept on going. I just hope he's using condoms.

"You're not listening to my play-by-play," he grunts as we take the stairs. "You slipped off to bed and missed all the good stuff. Pussy."

"Oh, I saw your white ass. Ever consider waxing?"

I throw him a look, laugh, and pick up my pace.

He nods. "Yeah, she's going to be in there and you can't wait to see her." There's a glint in his eyes that gives me pause.

"What?"

"Dude—how long are you going to wait? If you want her that bad, tell her. Go steady, or whatever people call it."

I look away.

He shakes his head. “You two are driving me bonkers in there. I’m tired of sitting next to you always eye-fucking her. *Do something.* I’m tired of you moping around.”

“Fuck off.”

He laughs.

We enter, and she’s already in her seat, head bent down.

I tune out the girl who comes up to me, brushing past her to get to the front row.

I get hot all over as I approach. Her long silky hair is straight today and hangs in a curtain around the sides of her face, the pink back and mingled with her darker strands. She’s got red eyeglasses on, something she doesn’t do often, and I wonder if she’s tired.

My eyes move down, pulled by her sheer white shirt, the hint of a red lace bra underneath it.

My shoulders straighten. City girl brought her A game, and if her intention is to make me squirm...

I plop down in my seat, my hands getting out my notebook for class.

I clear my throat. “Hey.”

“Hey. Congrats on the Combine.” She gives me a hesitant smile. “I’m happy for you.”

“Thanks. Big deal. I’m stoked. You never texted me back.”

She waves that off. “You’re gonna make it, Blaze. I always knew it.” She looks back at her desk. “I’ll be cheering you on when draft time comes. I’ll watch on TV.”

“Thank you,” I say. Her words tug at me, loosening the tight feeling in my chest.

We’re quiet again, the awkwardness building.

“Lovely day for the end of January,” I say after a few minutes, just wanting to talk to her and not really knowing what to say. “Welcome to the South where the weather is mercurial, right?”

She nods.

“Did you know it’s snowing in Memphis? I’d give anything to see snow. Maybe that’s why I love Christmas movies so much. Have you seen *Elf*?” Shit, I know I’m rambling, but I can’t stop.

She flicks her eyes at me, her gaze withdrawn, and I want that distance gone.

I tap my pen. “Back to *Elf*: Buddy is this over-the-top adult-sized elf who wants to find his dad, but his dad is too wrapped up in his job—until Buddy shows him the real meaning of family. Kickass movie. Gives me warm fuzzies. And Zooey Deschanel as the love interest? Hot. You look like her, by the way, all that long hair and the way you laugh. You snort a lot. It’s cute. I’m sure you know.”

She sighs.

Come on, give my shit back to me, Charm.

I rack my brain. “I want a pet now that I’ve met Vampire Bill. I’m thinking a soft furry cat. Kittens are a pain in the ass when they’re tiny, though, like little babies. I want babies someday, but not now. Maybe a dog? A big German Shepherd, one who’ll follow me around and sleep at the foot of my bed. We never had any real pets growing up except for mice in the barn. Maybe I can babysit Vampire Bill when you guys are out of town, you know, to get some practice in.”

I tap my pen on my desk harder, faster. *Do something*, Dillon said.

But I don’t know how. I’m not fucking emotionally equipped to do this.

“Speaking of barns...sometimes I think about that toga party. You know, the one I mentioned before?” I arch my brows at her. It’s pointless since she isn’t looking. “You won’t admit it was you, but it was. That night, damn, we kissed and made out for hours. Your tongue in my mouth, mine in yours...”

Thank God, Cartwright hasn’t come out yet.

“I can only imagine how you must have felt when my spin of the bottle landed on *you*. Did you even think twice? Of course you knew who I was. Everyone did. I was the baller from Alma. Future star wide receiver. I remember looking across at you, and you had this *come hither* look on your face. *I can handle you, hotshot*, it said.”

I chuckle, but there’s no mirth there. This is like talking to a wall.

“You were...trashed. You had your hair braided in those plaits and a skirt on...*damn*.” My hands clench at the memory. “If you’d had your rules then—I don’t really know if you did since you didn’t follow them that night—you might never have kissed me up in that loft. But you did. Wholeheartedly. With your soul, you worshiped my mouth. You couldn’t get enough.” I pause, going for gold. “I looked for you around campus later—never told you that. Didn’t know your name, and all I had to go on was a dark-haired girl with a pouty mouth. I saw you once or twice as school went on, but you... you didn’t seem to recognize me.” I make a clicking noise with my tongue,

tsking. “You ran away to those quiet guys...and I let you. Guess I keep doing that.”

Her lashes flutter against her cheeks, her lips parting.

In for a penny...

“I knew *damn well* who you were from the get-go last fall, the girl who kissed me like I was air she had to breathe. Did you come from all that dry-humping in the loft? I did. I was too shy then to ask if you did. Sorry about that. Do you still think about that night? Because, babe, it was *you*.”

Her chest swells as she turns to me, the golden glints in her eyes flashing. Lightning in a bottle. I want that. Jesus, I want to hold it in my hands, tame it, and write it on my heart.

She opens her mouth to speak and—

DING! Dr. Cartwright has entered the lecture hall.

It was you that night and I’ve never forgotten it, I write furiously, my hand flying across the page. I show her.

I glance over to see what she’s written. She isn’t trying to hide it.

Fine. It was me. What do you want from me?

What do I want? WHAT DO I WANT? I close my eyes. I want her. So damn bad.

And I can’t stop it.

Cartwright starts his lesson, but I don’t care; I’m wired, my legs jittery and bouncing, and I know I’m probably going to write some shit I’ll regret, but I do it anyway.

I can’t stop thinking about you. I’m sorry I left yesterday.

She looks up at the board again, her eyes wide.

She bends down and writes.

It doesn’t matter. You know what I did when you walked into class? I counted the girls who called out your name when you came in the door. FIVE. Go toy with them.

I sit back and stew. *Fine, fine.* I bend over my paper and lay it out.

Don’t want them. I think months of celibacy might have been a big fucking clue. Last night meant something and I want to see what it is, but if you don’t want me, just tell me. Tell me right now. Write it out nice and neat in that smart-girl handwriting you have, and I’ll tape it to my mirror so I can see it every day when I get up.

My hands tremble as I show her the words, my chest tight. This is me, putting myself out there, the best I can. I don’t know *how* to go any further.

She looks at Dr. Cartwright.

I pick up my pen again and think about us in her bed, the way she felt like home...the way I *know* I was looking at her, everything there in my eyes. Doesn't she know...

I'm just a guy who doesn't know how to do this. I want you. I wanted you freshman year. I wanted you last fall. I want you now, Charm. Let's see what this is.

I feel lightheaded. I'm insane, and I'm saying too much, I'm showing my cards and she's—

She gathers her book and backpack.

“What are you doing?” I mutter as she stands up.

“Leaving. I have somewhere else to be today.”

Where?

Dr. Cartwright has stopped lecturing, and several people turn to look at us.

She gives me a final look, dips her head, and leaves the room.

“Charm!” I call out, but she's already shutting the door.

Everyone looks at me, and Dr. Cartwright arches his brow with a *what the fuck did you do* look on his face.

I sit there stunned for five seconds then jump up and follow her, leaving my stuff behind.

I see her headed down the steps of the building and take off.

“Wait!”

She doesn't, but I catch up to her. I grab her arm and pull her to a stop. I study her face, taking in the pucker between her brows. “What's going on? Did I go too far?”

She looks up at me. “Everything isn't about you, Blaze.”

“I know. Tell me what's going on.”

“After you left, I had a voice mail for an interview in Nashville for an internship. I need a job, even if it isn't the one I want. I'm driving up today, and they're going to take me to dinner tonight. I came to class to...” She bites her lip. “I came to see you. I don't know why, but there it is. I'm staying the night and driving back early tomorrow. Missing classes, but mine are easy enough.”

“Oh. I'm glad you got an interview.” I think about going with her, but the awards dinner is tonight, and I have papers I still haven't signed for the Combine. I go for it anyway. “Let me come. I can hang out in the hotel while

you go to dinner. We can talk—”

Her face is tight. “No. I need space from...this.”

Space? After everything I just wrote?

I feel winded. “I see.”

“Good.” She turns to walk away, and I grab her elbow.

“Charm, we need to figure us out. I want to,” I say, digging in, getting braver by the minute, even though it’s making me queasy, my stomach jumping.

She takes her glasses off and rubs her eyes. “Can it wait until I get back? I need to go now.”

“Sure,” I say coolly, my pride rearing up.

I chased her out of class and I get “space”.

“When?” I ask.

She looks at me and her voice is toneless, blank. “Whenever. And it’s just talking.”

My hands tap my legs. “Fine. My dorm. Eight o’clock. Three days from now. Is that enough time for you?”

“Yes.”

She turns and walks away, her shoulders hunched. Part of me is tempted to follow her, to just say fuck it and demand she take me with her, but responsibilities pull at me—and fear.

I turn and walk back to class.



CHARISMA



CHARISMA

The sound of music meets my ears when I reach the door of The Purple Iris, a downtown bar near campus. The place has a stage for bands, a nice menu, and the clientele is a mix of townies and students. I sigh, not really wanting to go in.

It's been a long two days. First, I had the interview in Nashville, and it went well. Then, I came home today and ran around trying to catch up on the classes I missed with my migraine and going out of town.

Laughter drifts through the air as people walk out the door.

I don't come here much, mostly because it has a rep as a date place—but that's my purpose tonight: a blind date, one I set up two weeks ago. I wanted to cancel, and perhaps I should have, but I hate to disappoint Dr. A. Plus, I don't know where Blaze and I stand. He walked out on me, and I can't let it go. Penelope let it slip that he and Dillon were covered in jersey girls at Cadillac's after he got his Combine invite, and that is fine. We aren't together. He wants to talk tomorrow, but I know it will just be more of the same with him. One step forward and two steps back.

My fingers toy with my tight black sweater—no mohair tonight—adjusting the neckline. On my legs are dark gray skinny jeans and three-inch ankle boots with fringe. My hair is straight and sleek, pulled back with two jeweled bobby pins on either side.

The place is dimly lit and purple smoke swirls around the muted ceiling lights, giving the place a romantic vibe. I'm turned off already.

A tall guy leans against the paneled wall in a small foyer, straightening when I walk in.

"Charisma?" he asks, a broad grin on his clean-shaven face as he takes me in.

I nod.

Okay, okay. Not bad. With a headful of wavy sandy hair and hazel eyes, he's handsome—better than any of the other dates Dr. Alfonsi has set me up with.

Verdict is still out on this one, but as far as looks go, he's handsome in a boy-next-door kind of way.

He takes my small hand in his. "I'm Mike. Great to meet you. Dr. A talks about you all the time. You look nice."

He keeps his eyes above my chest. Point one for Mike.

I mumble a thank you and return the compliment. He's wearing slacks and a nice sports coat, and I do a double take. I'm used to laidback guys, but I get the feeling Med School Mike is all business. He's also got broad shoulders that taper to a trim waist and a New York accent. Ma would faint, wake up, plan our wedding, and then start on the baby shower.

This place is not fancy enough for a hostess, so we seat ourselves at a dark booth that's back from the stage by a couple of rows. We're surrounded by booths on either side, and near the front are several larger tables for groups. There's a small area for dancing, but right now, there's no band and...I look around. Dang, the place is rather empty. I wince but try not to feel bad about asking him to meet with the early-bird crowd. I want to get this over and done, checked off the list.

The booth is a deep red and circular. He slides in next to me, his leg a respectable distance away, yet the heat of him is close. It feels weird.

He smiles at me, his eyes direct, and perhaps...nice?

"So, Boston? I hear you lost the internship you had."

Dr. Alfonsi is quite the talker, apparently.

"Something will come up. If it doesn't, I'll be moving in with my

parents.” I manage a smile, wanting to be upbeat and normal, but my stomach hurts.

I wonder where Blaze is. Probably somewhere with “fans” all over him.

“Charisma...you listening?” He laughs.

I come back, realizing he was talking. What was he saying? Oh, yeah, our post-graduation plans. “Sorry. What about you? What’s next?”

“NYU for med school.”

“Nice. Congrats.”

He flashes a sheepish smile at me, the dimples in his cheeks popping. “Thanks. Looking forward to living in New York again.”

Yep. I can never tell Ma about Mike. She’ll be stalking his socials, inviting his parents to dinner...

A waitress in a black dress comes over. I recognize her from one of my classes. “Drinks for y’all—”

“A shot of tequila for me, please,” I say before she can finish, blushing at Mike’s grin.

“Ready to party, I see,” he says.

“No, just a long week. Really fucking long.”

His eyebrow arches as he searches my face, and his lips tilt up in a slightly crooked smile. “It’s going to be like that, huh? Good.”

I blink, not sure what he means.

He looks at the waitress. “Bring us two shots each, please. Patron Silver—and keep them coming.”

I laugh, feeling more at ease. “Someone else having a rough semester?”

He lowers his face until it’s close to mine, and I smell his cologne, the scent of sandalwood. “My ex dumped me last semester, and I have a class with her. Sucks big time.”

I burst out laughing. “STFU!” I lean into him and give his hand a quick squeeze. “Mike, I’ll be honest, I was worried you might be hard to connect with. No offense, it’s just Dr. A’s guys are never my type—but, dude, we’ve got this date down. My ‘sorta ex’ is also in one of my classes.”

He shakes his head. “I can’t get away from mine. She’s driving me nuts in that class.”

“Same.”

“What the hell are we going to do?”

“Drink,” I say when the waitress sets our glasses down.

He lifts the first one up. “Fuck love.”

I lift mine, murmuring an agreement, and we toss them back.

Three shots plus a glass of wine later, I feel awesome, better than I have in two days. The place is getting busier, the booths filling up. And Mike? He's nice. He's fun. He has a nice laugh and hazel eyes with green glints that are pretty.

"You ever get lonely?" he says with a lingering look.

"What do you mean?"

He toys with his shot glass. "Nothing. I mean, we're both far from home, and it's tough. This semester is the longest of my life. I just want to get away from here..."

"From her?"

He gives me that cute grin. "Yeah. I haven't been with anyone since her—shit, I shouldn't be telling you this. You're my date." He grimaces and looks down at the table.

"It's the liquor. And look, I'm not lining you up as my next boyfriend—even though Ma would love it—so say what you want. Tell me about her."

His eyes lift. "Damn. You're cool."

I laugh.

"And fucking gorgeous."

Oh.

Well, then.

I did manage to avoid carbs this week. There was that one cupcake, but no one's perfect.

I stare at the table. "Thanks."

He clears his throat. "Do you want to order something to eat? Soak up this alcohol?"

"Sure."

We devour our burgers, and after they're gone, there's another glass of wine on the table. My body is loose and relaxed as the restaurant gets louder, co-eds and townies taking up seats until the place is packed. Mike's arm is thrown across the back of the booth, his hand barely touching my shoulder. He loves model planes and likes to play chess—score. He's currently taking tennis lessons, and I laugh when he tells me how terrible he is at sports. I tell him about my pathetic attempts at yoga. He chuckles.

I watch him, taking in the square chin and dimples. He's handsome with a dash of nerd boy. Old Charisma would be on her way to his place by now. She'd be in control, and when it was over, she'd drive back home and maybe

call him again if she was interested.

My mind wanders, thinking about Blaze, and I sneak a look at my phone to see if he's texted me. He hasn't. I haven't texted him either.

"You're thinking about him?" Mike stares at me.

I grimace. "Yeah."

His hand brushes over my shoulder and makes little circles there.

"We can get out of here and forget them, put them out of our minds." There's a questioning look in his gaze. "If you want?"

I suck in a breath. "Ah, uh, I...I don't think..." I bite my lip.

Mike is perfect—but his eyes aren't ice blue, and his touch doesn't make my skin go up in flames.

"Hey, it's all good. I just thought...well, you know what I thought." He lets out a small laugh. "We seem to have a lot in common, and I let my head go there." He shrugs.

I laugh. "No, don't apologize. It's not you—"

My eyes land on a group that just entered the booth area, a couple.

Heaviness hits my chest and I suck in a breath.

It's him with a pretty girl. He's got on jeans and a blue button-up shirt, and the sleeves are rolled up, his roped forearms taut and muscular. He looks hot, his hair styled back and gelled off his face as if he's taken care with it.

She's tall and slender with shoulder-length reddish brown hair that brushes against her pale shoulders in a yellow dress. She's got her hand on his arm, and she's laughing up at something he's saying. She slides into a booth near us, just one aisle over, a bit closer to the stage.

He smiles down at her and then his eyes move up and find me.

His freezes and runs his gaze from me to Mike, his face expressionless. He takes in the table, lingering on the shot glasses, then on my date. His lips go flat.

His date takes his arm and pulls him down to the seat.

He keeps his gaze on me for a long time. I glare back.

"Shit, Charisma, who is that?" It's Mike speaking, and I tear my eyes off of Blaze and look at him.

I clear my throat. "Blaze Townsend."

His eyes flare. "*That's* your ex, isn't it? The most popular guy on campus?"

"Not technically an ex, and there are others more popular." Not really.

"He's seething. Something really serious happened between you and him,

am I right?” He leans in closer. “You want to get out of here?”

I think about it. It would be the prudent thing, but when do I ever make the right decision? “No. Maybe I...need to see this.”

“You sure? I don’t like the way he’s looking at me.”

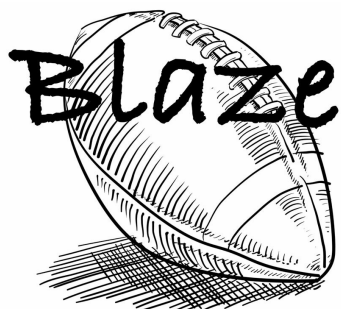
“Trust me, he doesn’t care—or if he does, he’s never said so.”

He said *I want you*.

Mike thinks, his gaze bouncing from me to Blaze. “Some guys aren’t much for pretty words, but their eyes tell the story. His are...scary.”

Maybe.

The waitress shows up with our refills, and once it’s in my glass, I suck it down.



The Purple Iris is packed when we walk in and make our way to a booth.

“I love this place! Great idea,” she says, looking up at me with deep blue eyes.

Not my idea. “Yeah,” I say as we take in the open seats.

She squeezes my arm. “I heard the band tonight is great.”

“Yeah.”

She nods and bats her lashes. She’s Dillon’s cousin, and he’s been begging me to be nice to her and give her a chance. “*You’re grade A prime beef and you’re moping around the dorm. It’s fucking embarrassing. You’re in the Combine. If you don’t have her, ride a new pony!*” He might have used the phrase *pussy-whipped*.

I’ve been ignoring his nagging, but today after classes and my workout, his cousin showed up at the dorm and Dillon begged me to double up with him and his girl—and why the hell not?

She asked for space, I remind myself.

I opened myself up in class, and Charisma acted like it wasn’t a big deal,

almost like I was a nuisance, and trust me, I've felt like that plenty of times in my life growing up. I don't want to go there again.

Doesn't she know I don't say those kinds of things to any girl?

Still, I don't want to be here. I shouldn't have come.

I spot a booth and we move through the crowd. Voices call my name and people wave. A couple of players invite us to sit at their big table in the front, but I tell them we're hanging with Dillon and his girl when they show up.

My stomach jumps when I see Charisma at a booth. The girl next to me is talking nonstop, but I'm not hearing a word she's saying.

She's...she's with someone. My hands clench and press against my legs as I take them in, the glasses on their table, the way he's leaning in over her, his arm around her shoulder.

Yeah, it's like that then. *Space*.

Yet, here I am with someone.

What right do I have?

But those are logical thoughts, and right now, logic is way out of reach, stupidity inching in. I want to go over there and pull her out of that booth. My hands curl—

“...which side of the booth do you want?”

I look down at the redhead and blink. *What's her name? Melody... Melanie?* I shake my head then nod when I realize that's the wrong response.

“Uh, wherever, yeah, great.” Only when I slide in, my view is of her.

My hand goes in my pocket and I touch the note there.

The one I can't bring myself to ask her about.

My date leans into me, and I look down at her. How the hell am I supposed to get through this date when I don't even remember her name?

We order a round of drinks as the band picks up, a ragtag but talented group of students from Waylon who mostly do old rock cover songs.

M is on her second beer when Dillon and his girl, a brunette, join us. I don't know her name either, but I'm glad for the distraction.

“How's it going?” he asks me when the girls pull out their phones to take selfies.

“What's her name? Your cousin?”

He rolls his eyes. “Fuck you, man. That's my family and you don't even know her name?” He studies my face, and whatever he sees makes him frown. “Dude, it's Mary—easiest name in the world.”

“Does it end with an ‘I’, like M-E-R-R-I? Because I'm starting to see a

trend lately.”

He smirks. “Nah. Just regular Mary.”

I nod.

His eyes skate over the room, linger for a moment in one spot, then come back to me. “Now I know the problem. Your ex is here.”

“Not my ex.”

“Okay, your former hookup who’s also in our class, also known as the ‘hot piece who turned me down sophomore year’.”

“Fuck you.”

He takes a sip of his beer. “See. That explains the mood.”

“I’m fine,” I snap.

He studies me. “Tonight, you’re not gonna think about her or anything. You’re gonna drink some beer and have fun. You feel me?”

The band takes a quick break, and Dillon gets up to go talk to them. They look at me a few times until I finally raise my beer and toast them.

Dillon waves for me to join, and I finish up the beer and head that way—anything to move around and get her out of my line of sight.

“You wanna sing tonight?” Dillon asks. “The band is asking.”

“Nope, not feeling it.” I have a few times over the years, mostly when I’ve had too much to drink and someone prods me until I give in and do it.

Mary has joined us. “Oh, please, Blaze! Dillon is always talking about how great you are.”

I shrug. “I’m not that good. I just know how to carry a tune.”

Dillon shakes his head. “Liar.”

The band guy speaks. “You know any eighties songs?”

My eyes go over to Charisma. “A few.”

“What instrument do you prefer? I’ve got a little bit of everything. Piano, guitar, drums...” he asks.

She’s not watching me, instead looking at her date, their heads bent low. I watch him touch her hand—

“I can play them all, but I’d rather just sing. What song you want? I know the words to a shit ton.” Thanks, ADHD.

We run through some options, talking over Skid Row, Guns N’ Roses, and Poison, but nothing strikes me.

Then it hits me, and I suggest a song that’s been burning inside me for three damn days. Images of her play out in my head, that short skirt, her heels.

“Can you sing it like he can?” Carson, the lead singer, asks with excitement. He’s a tall, skinny guy wearing a Metallica shirt.

I bark out a laugh. “I’m rusty, and it might sound shitty, but...”

He grins. “Doesn’t matter. It’s the whole package they’ll see.”

Whatever. I just want to sing *those* words to her, get them off my chest.

Dillon rolls his eyes. “Dude, your voice is butter. You’ll nail it.”

I look back at Charisma, and part of me—okay, all of me—wants her to be watching me, wants her to want me so bad she can’t stop looking.

Mary hands me another beer, and I take a long sip.

Fuck it.

I don’t need her.

All I need is this...the crowd going nuts when I take that stage. They care. They don’t need space.

“All right. Let’s do this.”

Dillon dances a little jig, and Mary claps her hands then throws her arms around my neck for a hug.

The band wraps up their break and takes the stage. I follow them.



CHARISMA



CHARISMA

“Y our not-ex is on stage.”

I start at his statement, having been deep in thought, and turn to watch as Blaze walks across the wooden floor then hangs a little ways back from the lead singer. Cheers and applause go up, and several people call out his name from the football table near the front.

One of the guys from the band grabs the mic. “All right, guys, we’ve got a special treat for you tonight. He needs no introduction, but please welcome Blaze Townsend, one of the football players who just brought us home a national championship!”

More whoops and applause.

“Sing it, Blaze,” comes from the girl he’s with.

I swallow down another sip of wine. I’m not sure I can sit through this. I’ve heard him sing; it made me cry.

He stalks up to the mic, raises his hand, and waves Miss America style. The crowd goes nuts.

“Ah, thanks y’all. That was a fine welcome. You’re a good group.”

“We love you!” shouts a girl at a table up front.

Mike arches a brow at me. “Last chance to get out of here.”

But I don’t respond, my body linked to the man on stage. I study his face, taking in how easy he is on stage. Somewhere, he’s going to be big, and I wish he could see what I see when I look at him: beautiful man, talented in so many ways...and a coward when it comes to us.

Blaze looks out over the crowd. “This song’s a classic, and I hope I do it justice. I’d like to dedicate this song to...” He clears his throat, then continues. “Doesn’t matter. If I suck, just focus on the guys in the back, especially bass and drums, because they’re great.”

“You won’t suck!” declares his date.

He tosses a look back at the guys and the one on bass guitar kicks in, the sound and tune immediately recognizable. The drummer keeps the intense beat.

I shiver when Blaze sings the first line to “With or Without You”. His gruff voice fits and grabs me, not letting go. It’s low and yearning, giving me goose bumps. He closes his eyes and cups the mic when the guitar sneaks in a quick solo. His head beats with the tune and then he comes back, his voice tearing up my heart, ripping it apart.

That song is mine, and he’s taking it.

Does he feel that way about me? Like the lyrics? Does he feel as if he’s waiting on me? Does he think he can’t live with or without me? Maybe. I’m too exhausted from us to dwell on it, and I suck in a deep cleansing breath, trying to separate myself from the words of the chorus, but my eyes are damp.

He ends the song and looks back at the crowd. He sweeps his gaze across the space and his eyes land on me, linger for a long moment, then move on. “Now don’t ask me to sing another one, because I don’t want to steal the band’s thunder tonight. Thanks, guys.”

The applause is deafening.

He walks off stage, and Dillon gives him a chest bump.

His date throws her arms around him and kisses him on the cheek.

I want to rip her hair out.

“Man knows how to make an exit—and sing, and play football. Color me impressed. Is there anything he can’t do?”

“No,” I mumble.

Mike gives me a long glance and frowns. “We can go, Charisma.” He

pauses. “Or, if you want to talk to him, I can go and you can stay? I’m cool.”

“Mike...you’re the nicest guy I’ve met in a long time, but I’m fine.” I push out a smile.

I watch Blaze grab another beer from a passing waitress and chug it down. He doesn’t even look in my direction.

“I just need to go to the restroom. Give me a few,” I tell him then grab my purse and get up.

There’s a long line for the ladies’, but I wait, keeping my face averted every time a tall man walks past to get to the men’s. Finally, it’s my turn, and I walk in and shut the door. You’d think they’d have more restrooms, and clearly they need to modernize.

I stand at the sink and stare at my face. I look blindsided. I’ve had several drinks, but I feel sober as a priest. I end up turning the cold water on and splashing it in my face. Fuck makeup. I’m done with this night. Mike is right—I need to get out of here. If he gets up there and sings another song, I’ll lose it.

I leave and let the next girl in then make my way through the hallway.

And there he is.

His back is leaned against the wall, arms are crossed.

He’s not in line; he’s waiting on me.

Electric blue eyes pin me and don’t let go.

I straighten my shoulders and walk his way, stop in front of him.

I’m acutely aware that there are people all around us, but I tune them out and focus on him.

His face is made of stone, and except for that hand-tapping, you’d think he was perfectly relaxed.

I’m under his skin; otherwise why push me away so hard?

But I need more than him just *wanting* me; I need him to be in this as deep as I am. I need him to feel as empty as I do when he’s not around, to ache and want to spend every moment with me.

I *love* him. Those feelings started freshman year when we kissed, and no matter how much I try to ignore how I felt, it only escalated when we spent time together last fall.

Love hurts; I know it does. Love is opening yourself up like a book, letting someone see your secrets with every paragraph and page exposed, knowing that the person you’re showing it to can walk away at any minute. And maybe he will.

Love only works if you try, if you take a chance.

What if...what if I don't care if all he can say is *I want you*?

I let that idea linger, settle, and take hold.

My chest hitches as we stare at each other. I think about those songs he sang to me in my room, the song he sang tonight.

If he's been waiting for something from me, here I am.

What else do I have to lose?

His date pops up next to him, her hand curled around that bicep like it's hers. She's young, maybe a freshman, and so dang pretty. She's exactly right for him, her height just a few inches shorter than his in her heels, her frame slender and perfect. My stomach twists. I can see her and him; it works in my head...so much better than we do.

But, I shove those insecurities down.

F her.

She doesn't know the man I know. He's never sang "Break Up in a Small Town" to *her*.

Whoever she is, I reach out and peel her fingers off him, and I guess she's too surprised to stop me. She gapes at me, and I smile tightly. *Hey, little freshman, my eyes say, you don't know me, but right now you're holding something I want. Back the fuck off.*

I take two steps until I'm against him. My hands slide up around his chest to his shoulders, my palms pressed tight, so tight against his hard chest. His eyes don't even widen as he watches me, never dropping my gaze.

"Excuse me?" says the girl. "You have your hands on my date!"

"He's not yours," I say, looking at him.

She huffs.

"Give us a minute," Blaze tells her, his voice low, eyes on me.

I think back to Cadillac's and Dani plastered to his side.

He never fucking looked at Dani when I was there.

He's not looking at this girl either.

It was *me* every time.

We don't speak. We don't have to. My hands find the base of his skull and I pull on the hair there, soft and then harder, until his mouth opens slightly. Standing on my tiptoes, I press my lips to his, our mouths touching, so soft. Tears prick at my eyes when he doesn't give me one inch, not with his tongue or with a move to pull me close. I'm accosting him in front of the bathroom line like a crazed fan and—

I don't care. God...*this*.

He smells and feels like everything that's precious, just like I knew he would. The sun, the moon, the sky. I sigh and say his name, tilting my head to fit his mouth full-on. My teeth nip at his bottom lip. My nipples bead and my breasts press into him, the feel of him under me like a hot brand on my skin. It's not even his skin, just a stupid shirt, but it...it licks at me.

I kiss him hard, my hands now cupping his cheeks, giving him all the emotion I kept bottled up for three months.

I feel when he capitulates, when his lips move with mine, when his arms embrace me and hang on. He takes control, his tongue inside my mouth, exploring me, taking, and I surrender to it. *Take me, take me*, my lips say. *Love me and only me*.

Don't ever stray. Don't ever look at anyone but me.

I know it's too much to ask, but I bask in his touch like a flower who needs the rain after a long drought. He's the first to pull away with slow movements of his mouth, and I tilt my head up and reach up for more, wanting to taste him again, one little kiss to keep for myself, but he's back against the wall, his eyes low as I ease away from him and let my arms fall to my sides.

He watches me, his face boarded up.

I stand there for way too long. I feel bare and open, people whispering nearby. I'm also aware of his date a few feet away. She hasn't gone far. Smart girl.

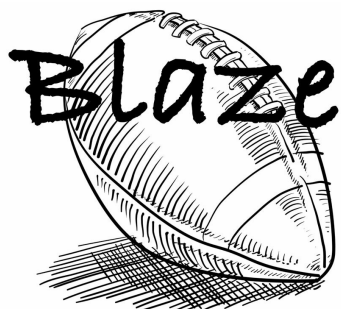
Seconds tick by. One, two, three, four, five.

My chest expands. "Best kiss I've ever had."

He closes his eyes.

And me?

I walk away, my hand on my mouth, feeling the tingles.



I drive Mary back to her dorm and we get out to walk into her building. It's late, but she's still chattering about my singing and what a good time she had, even though some other girl kissed me.

My hands tighten as I open the lobby doors and escort her inside.

"Blaze, I can't thank you enough for such a great time." She pulls me past the girl at the front desk and leads me over to the stairwell. "You in the mood for a nightcap? I have some Fireball up in my room."

She tilts her head up at me as she pulls her hair off her shoulders, swishing it around shapely shoulders.

"Ah, I'm pretty beat. I have classes tomorrow."

"So do I, silly."

I rub my neck and study her. She's a sweet girl and—

I give her a smile, even though it's difficult. My stomach is in knots, has been all evening.

"Hey, don't worry about my cousin. Dillon knows I do whatever I want. He gave me a box of condoms the day I arrived on campus." She laces her

hand with mine, and I stare down at our intertwined fingers.

I never held hands with Charisma. I let my fingers brush hers but never went for it.

I should have. *I should have.*

What the fuck is wrong with me?

“Blaze? Are you listening?”

“Sorry. Random thought. Happens all the time.”

She studies me, and her shoulders slump as a knowing glint grows in her eyes. “It was that girl, wasn’t it? Dillon said her name was Charisma.”

I shrug.

“She’s the one you broke up with last fall, right?”

I nod. “I guess. We weren’t a couple.” I pushed her away before it got to that.

She huffs out a laugh. “I didn’t think so. She doesn’t look like your type, to be honest. I mean, I thought she’d be...different.”

“How?” I frown.

“You know more...sorority girl, beautiful, or at least Southern. Her accent is super weird.”

“She is in a sorority—Chi-O—and she is beautiful.”

“I’m rushing Theta next fall. I can’t wait.”

I’m not listening. “She *is* my type. She’s fucking amazing. She makes me laugh my ass off. She’s believed in me since day one, okay? Never a doubt in her mind about what I can do with a football—”

I inhale sharply, reining myself in.

She frowns. “Look, I’m just repeating what everyone knows you said to her at that party last year. You dumped her in a big way, so I just assumed she’s still trying to get with you.” She shrugs. “She’s got some nerve kissing you, right?”

“She’s got nerves of steel,” I say tightly. My head is all over the place. “And who knows what I said at that party?” I want to kick them in the nuts. I want to kick myself. I was so angry that night, all of my shit bubbling up, knowing I had to let her go.

“Dillon was there. He may have mentioned it. It was a huge party,” she reminds me.

A long exhalation comes out, and I look away from her questioning eyes. Charisma...she thinks she’s not right for me. She thinks...fuck...*my words to her*. But we had this conversation, she and I; we worked it out, and I

explained to her what I really meant, yet inside, maybe it never stuck with her. She still thinks she's not up to my standards, which is such a fucking joke because she's all—

“Blaze? Do you want my number? I can put it in your phone. You can call me when you're less tired. I'll answer.” Her hand is on my chest, playing with one of my buttons.

I remove her hand slowly. “No. Take care and I'll see you around.”

I hear her huff of exasperation as I walk away.

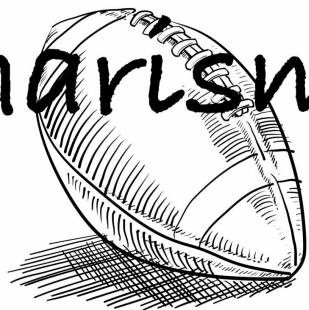
It's almost midnight by the time I get back to my dorm. Dillon isn't home yet, and I'm glad to be alone. I fall into my bed and stare at the ceiling fan, my head a mess, my thoughts darting from football to Charisma.

With a heavy sigh, I reach over and grab my phone.

It was the best kiss I ever had too. Tomorrow. My dorm.

I clutch my phone and wait for her reply.

Charisma



Charisma



“Morning, VB. You’re awfully quiet.”

He looks in my direction then turns back to stare out the window. A few soft feathers lie at the bottom of his cage. Odd. I get out of bed, open the cage, and reach in to pet him on his head.

“Cat got your tongue? Although if it did, it’d probably have the rest of you too.” He gives me a slow blink and I frown. “Too insensitive? Even for you? Sorry, buddy. I had a shitty night.”

Leaning down, I rub his head, and his beak opens as if he might say something, but he doesn’t.

“Nothing sassy for me?”

He nudges me to pet him again, and I see white stuff in his eyes. *Hmmm.*

“Want a cracker?” I make a kissy face at him.

Usually any mention of a cracker and he’s hysterical, but he just bumps my hand to keep petting him.

I frown. “Where’s my smartass bird?”

He blinks at me.

“Vampire Bill? Don’t you have an opinion on my ass today? Is it fat? Skinny?” I turn and shake it at him.

Nothing but silence.

Good Lord. He’s broken.

Chewing on my lips, I head down to the kitchen and grab some lettuce and a banana. Back at the cage, I tear up the lettuce into small strips and lay them in his food bowl. He glances at the food then turns his head to the window. I break up the banana and offer some but get the same result. “Little buddy, you’re scaring me.”

I hear Penelope in the hall and dash out to catch her before she hits the restroom. From the looks of her wild hair, she just woke up. “Hey, come look at Bill. He isn’t sharing his morning opinions or eating his breakfast. There’s something wrong!”

She comes in my room and runs through some of the same things I’ve already tried, pets him, talks to him, tries to hand-feed him the banana, but nothing seems to cheer him up.

“Does Bill want to go to the vet?” she asks, and he throws his head back indignantly—he’s nearly human—and moves his feet in a shuffle.

“How long has he been like this?” she asks.

“I got in late, so maybe since last night. He was fine yesterday...I think.”

“How was your big date?” she asks as she studies the bird, still trying to get him to eat.

“Okay.” I don’t feel like going into details about Blaze being there.

Her gaze flashes at me. “Potential?”

“Friends only. I came home and he went home. Nice guy though. Ma would pee herself.”

She grimaces. “You okay?”

I nod and glance down at my phone, at the text Blaze sent me last night. I haven’t responded.

“Charm? Headache?”

I start, realizing I’m frowning and rubbing my temple. I shake my head and push out a smile. “No, no. What should we do about Vampire Bill?”

She thinks. “The vet is only open until lunch today. I have a morning meeting with a possible agent, but I’ll cancel.” She rubs my arm. “Hey, don’t stress. He’s my bird. I should have noticed if something was up with him yesterday.”

“You’ve had your writer agent meeting planned forever. Don’t do that.

I'll take him."

Her eyes light up. "I appreciate it. I'll pay you back. The stinker loves you."

I wave her off. "You go get ready. I'll take care of him."

Half an hour later, I've thrown on some old clothes, called the vet, and packed his "baby bag" with crackers, a banana, a soft blanket, and trinkets to keep him calm. *Geeze*. I'm like a mom—parrot style—as I open the door to Lady Maxima and try to finagle it inside.

It's a chore to get his cage in the back seat and buckled up with the seat belt, but I manage.

"Crazy bitch, can't drive," he says as I crank the car.

"Now you want to talk. Keep your opinions about my driving to yourself, filthy bird." I smile at him in the rearview mirror. "I guess all that moving around perked you up, huh?"

Fuel level is low.

"I know, I know, but I don't have time for gas." *Come on, girl*. I pat the dashboard.

Fuel level is low.

"Shut up, bitch," screeches Bill.

"I know she's annoying," I tell him as I pull out of the driveway and take off for downtown.

Fuel level is low.

"I want cheese on it," says the bird as he shuffles back and forth on the perch in his cage. Feathers fall as he flaps his wings.

I laugh. "On what? And don't we all?"

He just glares at me.

We pull in, and once I'm out of the car, I unbuckle his cage and look for a place to put it so I can grab his baby bag and my purse.

I set him down on the pavement next to the car. Once I have the bags, I turn around and pick up the cage. It's lighter than normal.

My eyes pop when I see he's gone.

I spin around in a quick circle, searching the ground, calling his name.

My mouth is dry, anxiety level skyrocketing as I keep turning in circles. "Vampire Bill, please...where are you?"

I start widening my search grid of the parking lot, trying to peer under each car, checking behind tires and anywhere else I can think of.

Music blares from a truck that whips in and parks in an empty spot next

to Lady Maxima. I'm on my knees but dash up and run toward my car, heart pounding. *Lord, please don't let a vehicle crush my bird.*

My breath whooshes out when Blaze steps out. "What are you doing here?"

He tucks his hands into his pockets. "Was driving past and saw your car. Turned around and came back."

Oh.

My mind goes back to last night, and then I shake myself.

I let out a little wail. "Will you help me look for Vampire Bill?"

"You lost him?" He looks horrified. "Here? How?"

"It's a long story." I quickly run through what happened this morning. "The latch must have come undone in the car. I don't know..." A cold wind blows my hair and I realize it's a mess; I have zilch makeup on and my outfit consists of joggers and a baggy Waylon sweatshirt. *Perfect.*

"He can't fly. He's around here somewhere," he says.

"But what if something gets him before I find him?"

"Charisma." He stalks toward me and takes my hands. I realize I've been wringing them. "Hey, calm down. Where have you looked already?"

But...

What...

I look down at our clasped fingers, the way his thumb is rubbing the top of my hand.

He kisses my forehead. "Come on, tell me where to start."

"Under cars, maybe the landscaping, I guess. He's hopping around with cats and hawks and mountain lions just waiting to pounce. What if something gets him?" My hands squeeze his.

His lips twitch. "I think we're safe on the mountain lion front."

"Either way, we have a situation! And we're at the vet, and he hates it, and he's probably super mad at me."

"We'll find him. Don't worry." He lets my hands go and starts looking around my car. "I have a cracker, Vampire Bill," he calls out. "Wanna come get it?"

I take a second to consider him on his hands and knees searching for VB and then refocus, jogging to the landscaping near the front of my car.

"Maybe this was a setup," Blaze says as he steps into the flowerbed to help me. "Maybe he's hopping back to Chile or Argentina or wherever he's from."

I give him a small smile. “The question is, does he have some sexy female parrot waiting for him in a getaway vehicle?”

Blaze looks under a Subaru. “Maybe a drone picked him up.”

I snort. “Amazon does have those package-dropping ones.”

Blaze cups his hands to his mouth. “Jeff Bezos, if you’re here, just come out and no one will get hurt.” He looks over at me and grins. “Just trying to make you laugh.”

I smile...then a big truck zooms past on the highway just fifty yards away. Horror hits. What if he wanders out to the road? All I can see is smashed bird, and I’m headed that way when I hear Blaze shouting.

I flip around.

“Found him!” he yells from a small pine tree to the left, about five feet from my car.

“I never thought to check in the trees! He must have flown up. I bet it took all he had!” I trot over and Blaze holds out his arm, which Bill promptly hops onto.

He nuzzles his head against Blaze’s hand.

“He’s shivering,” Blaze says. Using his arm as a perch for the bird, he tucks him under his varsity jacket.

“Thank you. God, thank you so much. Give him to me.” I reach out.

Blaze is looking at me. “I’ll carry him in with you.”

“You don’t have to. I’m sure you have class. I promise I’ll be extra careful.” Remorse hits me. “I never should have taken my eyes off him. It won’t happen again.”

“I know you’re careful. *I know*. I just want to help. Let me, Charm.” He looks down at the parrot, who’s poked his head out. “Plus, he likes me.”

He’s never even had a pet.

We stare at each other for a few seconds until the wind picks back up, and then I nod and we head inside.

I get him signed in and we sit down in the waiting room.

“No cats in here—thank God. He hates them,” I say.

“Nice diaper bag,” Blaze says dryly as he looks at the big purse thing I plop at my feet.

“It’s Pen’s. We use it when he travels.” I swallow down sudden nervousness. Here we are, side by side, close, and I can’t think of what to say

—
“Vampire Bill,” calls out a young female receptionist, and I wave at her.

She takes Blaze in, smiles, and blushes. Her eyes glaze over. “Hey...are you Blaze Townsend?”

He nods.

“I’m a huge fan,” she titters.

“Now, at the freaking vet’s office too?” I say under my breath.

He nods at her, rather coolly, and looks down at VB, who currently has his head back out of the jacket and is eyeballing everything. “Can we get this little guy a room?”

She straightens, getting a load of his indifference at her starry eyes. “Sure. Right, come this way, please. Dr. Sally will see you now.”

We get settled and Blaze carefully places him on the silver exam table.

“You two are so cute with your bird,” says the doctor as she comes in, eyes sweeping the room. An older lady with gray hair and glasses, she’s wearing a white coat and a big smile. “Have y’all been dating long? Waylon sweethearts I bet.”

Blaze’s breath hitches, and his voice is soft when he speaks. “She kissed me.”

I start at his declaration and glance at him. He’s staring at me, emotion swirling in his gaze.

“Okay, that’s...nice,” Dr. Sally murmurs as she watches us warily.

I shake my head. “Seriously? Here?”

He gives me a sobering look, his face serious. “You don’t kiss a guy for no good reason, Charm. It meant something. We aren’t over.”

My mouth opens, then I quickly shut it. “You had a date with you.”

“So did you. Bet you didn’t kiss him.” He pauses, his eyes intense. “You’re mine, Charm.”

My heart flutters. *What?*

The doctor clears her throat. “Um, okay, this is all interesting, but can we get to the bird?”

When she turns around to wash her hands, he leans down and whispers, “Never even bought you a sandwich, but people think we’re together.”

“OMG,” I whisper.

He laughs, and my lips twitch.

“So tell me about the sick parrot,” she says as she walks to Vampire Bill.

“Cold as shit!” he complains loudly as hops around on the table.

“Ah, I remember you.” She looks down at his file. “Little rescue fellow, right?”

I nod and explain his symptoms while Blaze stands next to me. He takes my hand, lacing our fingers together, and I pause before continuing on. She shines a light in his eyes and takes a small sample of the discharge. After a few more routine checks, she closes her penlight. “He’s got a pretty severe eye infection. Luckily, I have drops. I’ll leave them up front for you to get when you check out. Otherwise, he’s a healthy, happy bird.”

“You’re sure?” I ask. “He’s barely been his usual talky self.”

She nods. “The stress of an eye issue is enough to change his normal behavior, just like when a human has a cold.”

I watch as Blaze picks him up and tucks him back under his jacket.

“Is it okay for him to carry the bird like that?” I ask her as we walk out.

She smiles. “Sure. The warmth of his chest is probably extremely comforting.”

Indeed.

We get the drops and walk out. At the car, Blaze helps me get Bill back in his cage and buckled up. Neither one of us is talking, and I’m all nerves.

You’re mine.

He pauses for a second as he stands back up to open my door for me.

“Charisma, about last night—”

I put my hand to his mouth. “Later. I’ll see you tonight,” I say.

He pauses, his eyes searching my face. “Tonight then.”



CHARISMA



CHARISMA

I stare at my reflection in the rearview mirror after I turn off Lady Maxima. I'm pale. With a groan, I open my purse and apply blush to my cheeks then swipe on more lipstick. What else? I grab a bottle of peppermint mist and spritz my hair.

Stepping out of the car, I smooth down my black dress. Short with a plunging neckline, it hugs me like a second skin and screams *see you at the club*. My hair is in beach waves, flowing down the back of the open dress, and there's a slit on the side that goes up to my bare upper thighs. Basically, I'm freezing my ass off.

I inhale.

I got this.

My nerves are pulled taut as I take the steps that lead up to his third-story dorm room.

I see a group of football players on the open-air landing ahead eyeballing me, and I pick up my pace in the three-inch heels.

A football player I don't know, probably one of the underclassmen, lets

out a whistle when I reach the top. “Hey, you looking for me? ’Cause I’m available.”

“Zip it,” I say. I don’t have time for testosterone-induced bullshit. My mission is Blaze. We’re going to talk. We’re going to...

I don’t know.

He walks up to me, a big smile on his face. “Aw, don’t be like that. Where you been all my life? My room is right down the hall—”

One of the other guys elbows him in the ribs and whispers something in his ear. I hear my name.

The flirty one’s eyes flare and he holds up his hands. “Ah, sorry, Miss Charisma. Didn’t know who you were or I never would have said that.”

Miss Charisma? WTH. He’s only a few years younger than me.

“No worries. Carry on.” I walk past him and head to Blaze’s door. There’s no sound from the other side, and I let out a sigh of relief. Part of me was worried they’d be having a party, and I’m not up for that.

Mustering up my courage, I knock and wait.

The door flies open and I blink.

Looking magnificent in a rumpled and mussed way, Blaze leans against the doorjamb. He holds a bowl of popcorn and pops a few kernels in his mouth as he takes me in, eyebrow arched.

“You’re late.”

“Ma called me. My brother Mattie is dating a Protestant and she’s spying on him, reading his text messages. I had to hear all about it. The usual.”

“She sounds really into her kids.”

“You have no idea.”

“Yeah.” A ghost of a smile crosses his face, and I bite my lip, realizing he probably never had a pain-in-the-ass mom constantly checking up on him.

I take in his soft T-shirt with a hole in the shoulder, faded jeans, and bare feet.

I want the ground to open up and swallow me. “Obviously, I overdressed.”

He invites me inside. “Nah, you’re fine.”

I take in the small area with a couch, two chairs, and a huge TV on the media center. I’ve been here before but only got a cursory look around. It appears to be clean for a guy’s place, and I think he straightened it up before I arrived.

“Dillon is out, and Ryker’s with Penelope.” He tosses a look at me over

his shoulder. “It’s just you and me.”

“Okay.” I take a seat on the couch, and he sits in the chair across from me.

“You want some popcorn?” He tilts his head toward the bowl in his lap.

I shake my head.

This is weird. I way overdressed, and he’s...distant?

My shoulders tense, and I roll my neck.

“How’s Vampire Bill?”

“Great. Pen and I had to hold him down to give him the drops, but he’s fine.”

“Good.”

A few seconds tick by.

He jumps up. “Want to listen to some music?” He doesn’t even wait for me to reply before he’s connecting his phone to the speakers. Music blares in the room.

He turns around and goes into the kitchen, calling back at me. “I’ve got soda, beer, and vodka—what’s your poison?”

He lingers there, waiting for me to reply. His finger taps his leg, and his other hand is fisted, pressed tight against his lips.

He’s freaking nervous.

I am too.

I cross my legs and clasp my hands in my lap. “A shot of vodka would be...great.” I need the courage.

“Cool. I’ll just have water. Combine’s coming up and I want to stay tight.” He gives me a quick nod, pivots, and makes his way to the fridge.

And now I’m the only one drinking! KMN. *Kill me now.*

He stays in the kitchen forever, but I won’t look to see what he’s up to.

Oh, lord, stop. Relax.

Finally he’s back. Instead of putting the glass in my hands, he sets it on the coffee table in front of me. I toss it back faster than I should have and cough a little.

“You good?” He’s back in his seat, his forearms tight as he rests them on the sides of the chair.

I nod and clear my throat. “Some of your guys met me on the landing.”

“They give you any trouble?”

“Nothing I can’t handle. They knew who I was.”

He looks away. “Yeah. That’s on me. I told everyone to stay clear of my

room. I told them I had a date.”

Oh.

Oh.

He watches me. “I have a movie if you wanna watch? Or a show?” He looks around uncertainly.

“Okay.”

He stands again. “We can’t watch out here though. Dillon will be home soon and there’s no telling who’ll be with him. I have a TV in my room. It’s small, but it gets the job done. We’ll have to sit on my bed.”

“Sure.”

He walks over and reaches out to help me up from the couch. His hand engulfs mine and I think back to how he held Bill. So careful.

He doesn’t let go as we walk down the hall and enter his room.

It’s the usual dorm setup and I take it in again, from the navy and orange comforter to the trophies scattered around, some on the floor, some on his dresser where the TV is. His room is messy, but it fits him.

“What’s wrong?” he asks as he faces me.

“I... Do you have a shirt and maybe a pair of shorts I can put on? Me in this dress will not work on your bed. It’s going to ride up and I’ll be squirming—”

He lets go of my hand and is at his dresser, holding up shirts for me. “This one?” It’s a soft pale blue with a tiger on it. “It’s one of my practice shirts from Alma. It’s old but pretty much the softest and smallest thing I own.”

“Perfect.” I take it from him along with a pair of gray shorts and dart into his bathroom to change.

I ease the door shut and move fast, finding a hook and slipping my dress on it. I kick off my shoes and set them in the corner.

Once that’s done, I make sure I still look presentable. My eyes take in the motivational notes taped there, lingering on *You is all you have*. I think about him vowing to be good for his aunt and uncle but still feeling left out in the end.

I come out and he’s already propped up against the headboard, pillows behind him. He pats the area next to him. “Or I can bring a chair in here for you?”

A chair? Is he for real?

“No, the bed is great.”

“I like my shirt on you.”

I touch the hem, which reaches my lower hips. “It’s big.”

“You look good.” The words are gruff.

I swallow. “What movie are you pulling up?”

He’s got the remote in his hand and looks down as if he’d forgotten.

“How about some old episodes of HBO’s *Rome*? You a fan?”

I laugh as I ease up on the bed until I’m sitting next to him. “I haven’t seen it, actually, but I heard it was great.”

An hour later, we’re in deep, and some of the tension has eased. There’s another bowl of popcorn between us, and we’re tearing it up as we stare at the TV. The room is dark since he got up earlier and turned the lights off, and the only illumination comes from the glow of the screen.

“I can’t believe how they stabbed Caesar—ugh—and Mark Antony is a useless politician. Well, except for that speech on the steps of the capitol. He’s a lucky sonofabitch. Does he screw everyone in this show?” I say as he sweet-talks a girl in a tavern on screen.

“Hmmm, he gets what’s coming to him later in Egypt—”

“Don’t spoil it.” I throw a piece of popcorn at Blaze.

He catches it in his mouth.

“It’s Cleopatra, right? She’s the end of him. She uses an asp?”

“Not telling you, but bad girls are usually the end of men.”

I snort. “There are two other whole seasons! I’ll never catch up.”

“You will. You’ll catch up. I’m catching up, Charm.”

There’s an earnest quality to his voice, and I glance at him.

Did he mean something else when he said that?

Later, I’m closer to him, my leg pressed against his, and his hand...it sits right next to mine, his pinkie softly touching my skin. It’s not even a caress, just an acknowledgement that he’s aware of me, and I shiver.

“You cold?” His head leans down.

“No. Yes. Maybe.” My stomach flutters. “I’m all over the place.”

“Yeah, I know. You’re fidgeting worse than I do. I wonder why?” His hand tilts my chin up and he stares down at me.

“What?” I say, feeling strung out. We’ve been sitting here for three hours and I’m anxious. What are we going to talk about?

“I’ve been wondering...am I the *only* guy you’ve kissed at Waylon?”

“Was it that bad?”

“Am I the only one?” His forehead furrows, and I see how important this

is to him.

“Yes, fine, you know all my secrets. Kissed you freshman year and that was it.”

“Practically a kissing virgin.” His gaze dips to my lips. “And who was Sport Coat Guy last night?” His voice is softer now, his hand sliding around the nape of my neck.

“Who was she?” I ask.

“Not the person I want. But you already know that, don’t you?”

I nod. I do know that. He barely looked at her. And he sang my song.

“Who was he?” he asks again.

I lick my lips. “My advisor’s been trying to find me a nice Italian guy—”

“Did he find the right one?” His hand clenches in my hair, not hard, but enough for me to know that my answer matters.

“No. I can’t...” My voice breaks. “Blaze, you know it’s you.”

He’s turned toward me, our faces close.

My hand touches his shoulder tentatively then slides down to rest on his chest, over his heart.

“Your heart is beating fast.” My hand draws circles on the center of him, that vital part keeping his blood pumping. “What is this thing between us?”

Moving his arm, he presses his hand against mine. He leans down closer, our foreheads together. “*This* is me. This is my heart flying every time I see you. This is why I tried to let you go last fall...” He stops, his eyes closing for a moment then opening. “This is why I want your kisses all the time.”

He moves away, reaches into his pocket, and pulls out a bag, opening it slowly and pulling out the small piece of paper inside.

“What’s that?”

“Your note. I keep it in my pocket sometimes. Had it with me that night at Cadillac’s. Had it with me at the library and the masquerade party. Had it last night.”

I inhale. “Blaze...”

“Let me finish.” He unwraps it slowly, and tears prick my eyes when I see how careful he is. “*I love you*, you wrote.” There’s awe in his voice.

I look at the hastily scrawled handwriting. I can’t breathe. I recall getting in my car when I clearly shouldn’t have been driving, parking at his dorm, trying to figure out what to do. I’d already cried my eyes out at the party. I was done with anger. I just wanted him to know what he’d fucking given up when he ended us, so I opened myself up on a gum wrapper.

He glances at me, searching my face. “I found it on my door after we broke up. Didn’t believe it, of course. Nobody’s ever said that to me. Not one person. Not even my aunt and uncle.”

My heart clutches at the thought of that. I touch his face. “Blaze—”

“Let me finish.” He takes a breath. “I just figured you were trashed and saying things you didn’t mean. I mean, we were just having sex—even though it felt like *more*, you know? Couldn’t throw it away, never in a million years. *You* wrote it. *You* said it...and I wanted to believe it.”

There’s a long pause.

“Did you mean it?” He’s staring at me, his breath seeming to halt.

I close my eyes as the word falls from my lips. “Yes.”

He doesn’t speak for a long time, and I open my lids to see him still looking at me, his expression full of wonder.

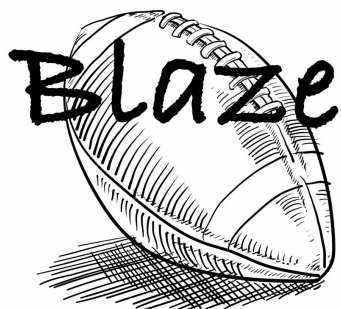
“I do,” I whisper.

He swallows. “I’m sorry I said those shitty words to you at your party, and I’m sorry everyone knew. It wasn’t what I really meant. I screwed it up, but we’re here. We can do this thing again. I don’t know how good relationships work, and I’m not good at talking except when it’s to run my mouth. I never know what to say...” He touches my chest, tracing the lines of my heart. “Everyone in my life ends up leaving me at some point. You won’t, will you?”

Never let him go. “I won’t.”

His lips land on mine, soft, and I sigh and curl my hands around his neck.

I’m taking this chance. I knew it the moment I walked out of that bathroom at The Purple Iris. I also know I’m flying close to the sun, brushing at the flame he is, but is life worth living if I give up on the most precious thing I’ve ever held in my hands?



I blink in the darkness, checking the time on the clock on my nightstand: five in the morning. Charisma is lying next to me. The last time she was here in the fall, we had sex and she left.

Not this time.

We fell asleep after talking and catching up. She told me about going to Nashville and more about her family. Will she let me meet them? Will they like me? Will her mom? Shit. Am I ready to commit to whatever this is?

She turns over to face me, still asleep, her face relaxed, lips parted. I brush a knuckle over them. She's never kissed another guy here, and I know what that means to her.

She meant it when she wrote *I love you*. I let those words reverberate in my chest.

She snuggles in closer to me, a sigh coming from her. Last night already feels far away, a fleeting moment, tenuous and fragile, so I kiss her, savoring the feel of her lips against mine.

"Morning," I say with a smile when her eyes blink open.

“It’s the ass crack of dawn. Why are you awake?” she murmurs.

“My brain is up. I can’t sleep once it’s running.” I push hair out of her face. “It might help if you took your clothes off.”

“Me taking my clothes off will help you sleep?”

“It might. Wanna find out?”

“Well, I must do my part to ensure that Blaze Townsend gets his beauty rest.”

“Smart girl.” I reach for the hem of her shirt, tugging it up, and she moves around with me, sliding her arms through. I toss it on the floor. She’s wearing a purple bra, lacy and low, accentuating her creamy pale skin.

“Charm,” I groan, my fingers teasing the outline of her cleavage. “You wreck me.”

“I know.” She has this bemused expression as she pulls my shirt off and throws it over her shoulder.

I wrap my arms around her and hold her against me, her skin on mine. “This...this...your skin against mine...”

She kisses her way up to my neck until she’s finally on my cheek, my chin. My body tightens, anxious for her lips on my mouth, and I let out a growl when her tongue touches mine then plays, dipping in and then coming back out. I lie back and let her make love to my mouth, kissing the corners, tilting her head and exploring, flicking her tongue against mine.

I take control of us, my mouth straining up and opening, taking her in deep, sucking on her tongue and swirling. I can’t get deep enough. I can’t crawl inside her like I want to, but I think my kiss tells her how long I’ve waited.

“Fire in my hands,” I whisper, breathing out.

“The things you say...”

I reach down and slide my fingers inside her shorts, my fingers grazing over her tiny, lacy underwear. “How many of these kinds of panties do you have?”

“So many. All colors. A few thongs.”

“I want to see them all. Fashion show later at your place?”

She’s laughing as she pushes my jeans to my feet and throws them to the floor. My cock juts up, pointing straight at her, and I laugh. “He knows what he wants.”

“So do I.” She runs her hands from the tops of my bare shoulders to my thighs, where she tangles her hands in the leg hair there. Those big brown

eyes lift to mine as she strokes my cock, rubbing her fingers over the head.

Lust licks at me, but I tamp it down. I want to savor her, enjoy her.

“No need to rush,” I say, and I lean up and pull her back to where I want her, flush against me.

I suck her nipple through the lace while my hands unhook the back clasp. Her nipples are rosy and erect, her breasts straining as I massage them, licking and blowing on her skin.

My fingers dip into her panties. “You slay me, hot and wet...” I rub circles on her clit. I slowly slide her underwear down until they’re gone.

I just stare down at her, taking all of her perfection in.

She watches me. “I like how you look at me.”

“Get used to it. You aren’t getting away from me this time. You aren’t walking out that door unless I’m with you.”

She laughs and says, “Okay.”

I move down her body, my hands clenching around her inner thighs, kneading the soft skin there, my nose drifting up her knee. I lick at a freckle and she gasps. My thumbs spread her apart, and when she tries to close her legs, I tsk. “Let me see you. We never did this, Charm, and I can’t stop thinking about you on your bed that day. I wanted to put my mouth on you and taste you. I wanted to play with this...” I run my tongue over her folds, delving inside her softness. My tongue rotates on her, and her body arches up off the bed. “You’re beautiful.”

She spreads her legs and clutches the sheets as I own her with my tongue, taking and lapping, her little gasps making me hotter. Her body is wet, dripping down her leg, her nub hard as I take it in my mouth and flick it. “Do you like this?”

“Is it not obvious?” She exhales heavily.

“This?” My thumb presses against the star opening below her opening, that forbidden part.

“Yes, damn you.” She huffs out a laugh. “Though if you pull out a butt plug, I’m out of here.”

I laugh against her skin and kiss her inner leg. “No plugs. No one’s done this with you?”

“No.”

Satisfaction runs through me and I smile.

She raises her head and glares at me. “Don’t stop now.”

“Never.” I laugh and write my name on her with my tongue. *Blaze.*

She writhes under me. Her legs move restlessly on the bed and her skin turns a rosy color.

“Blaze...”

“Promise you won’t get tired of me, Charm. Promise me you’ll stay.” I say the words against her skin, not able to look at her, terrified of my own vulnerability. My tongue flicks at her as I slide my fingers inside. “Say it, baby.”

Her hands clutch my head as she bows up closer to me. “I promise, I promise...”

She stiffens and arches up, spasming under my mouth.

I crawl back up to her and stare down. My eyes hold hers. “You’re mine. Right?”

I hate that anxiousness in my voice, the need to hear her say it, and she seems to know, her eyes soft as she returns my look. “I’m yours.”

Emotion swells inside me. My hands shake as I move over to the side of the bed and grab a condom from the nightstand. I tear it open with my teeth, my body wiggling to get back to her.

“Face me, baby.”

She does, her body pliant and loose.

“Put your leg on my hip, Charm,” I say. “Side by side. I want that. Soft and slow.”

She hitches her leg over me until we line up, her brown eyes on mine, and I groan at the feel of her tits against my chest.

And then we’re kissing again, and a sense of completeness fills me.

She feels so right. This feels right.

Is this what love is?

Is that what’s driven me to near madness every time she’s gotten close to me?

I want her.

I want her.

I want *her*.

For as long as I can hang on to her.

My hand palms the back of her head, and I kiss her mouth with a ferocity I didn’t realize I was holding back, a banked feeling I’ve let build up for months, a reaction to her finally being in my arms.

I rise up and stare down at her. Words, heavy fucking words, teeter on the tip of my tongue...but I can’t say them. So, I kiss her again, loving her with

my mouth, showing her who I am, how deep inside her I want to be.

Later, after we're both exhausted from doing everything I've had in my head for months, we find ourselves on the floor and staring up at my ceiling fan.

We're holding hands, and I turn to look at her. "Wanna sandwich?"

She rolls on top of me, hair in her eyes. She pretends to think. "It's breakfast, but I'm starving. Whatcha got?"

"Turkey and Swiss in the fridge. There's some bread in the cupboard."

"Got mayo?"

I roll my eyes. "Yes, Dillon has mayo. Bastard."

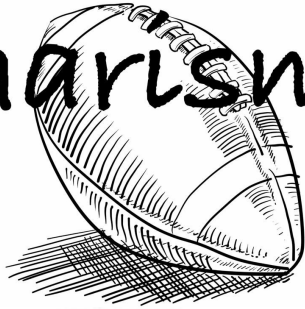
"Now you're talking."

"I'll even make it and bring it to you—even though it's going to really gross me out."

She laughs and I kiss her.

Nothing is going to ruin this with her. *Nothing.*

Charisma



Charisma



“Joey P stopped by to see your brother and asked if you’d be home in March. You know, he never married that Protestant girl he was seeing. Knew it wouldn’t last. Maybe he can come for dinner when you get here. I’ll talk to his mom and work it out,” says Ma.

My eyes widen as I clutch the phone to my ear. I’m on my way to class, thought I’d check in, and this is what I got—the Italian setup.

I let out a sigh. “If you call his mom, I’m not coming home.”

Her voice tsks. “But, Charm, you’re going to be a lonely old maid.”

I choke back a laugh.

She continues, “I know once you get here and Joey’s here, things will just happen—”

I stop on the path to Dr. Cartwright’s class. Might as well tell her. Should have by now. She’s going to either love Blaze or hate him on sight. “I have a boyfriend, Ma. It’s kind of new, but it’s a real thing. We’ve been dating for a few weeks.”

Perfect days of us together, me at his place, him at mine, barely a night

apart. We can't get enough of each other, both of us eager to make up for so much lost time. I'm falling deeper into his dark waters, drifting and wading, listening to him describe how he grew up—without real love. He's opening up to me, moment by moment, and I hang on to the seconds, my heart hoping he will give me everything.

Her voice rises. "Why haven't you told me? What's this boy's name? Is he from Mississippi?"

I chuckle. "His name is Blaze, and you never give me a chance to talk."

"That's not a real name!"

"Neither is Charisma."

"What's his family name?"

"Townsend. He's one of the football players. Remember when we sat around and watched the Waylon game? He made some big plays."

I hear rustling and water running. She's probably washing morning dishes. "You went down to that awful place, and now you're going to be stuck down there. When will I see the grandkids?"

I bend over and stifle my groan. I love her, but...

"No grandkids anytime soon. Seriously, Ma, ease up."

There's a long silence.

"You've never had a boyfriend," she says quietly.

"I know." I chew on my lip, debating telling her why I've kept my heart protected for so long, but I can't. I never told her about Trevor because I knew my brothers would likely kill him, and I only broached the topic of Pop's cheating once when I was seventeen. It killed me to hear her angry words, telling me to mind my own business, saying I didn't get what real love is.

She clears her throat. "You just come home and we'll see if it lasts. No one gets you like people up here."

Blaze *does* get me. He looks at me as if he never wants to take his eyes off me. I move and he moves in turn, making me the center of his world.

He hasn't told you how he feels, a small voice reminds me.

"Are you having sex? Please, Charm, just use protection. Don't get the VD that goes around those colleges. Is he going to Nashville with you this summer?"

OMG.

I called her last week and told her they offered me an entry-level paid position with the option to hire me full-time in a year. It's not Boston, but I

can get behind a city like Nashville.

I clench the phone. “I’m not talking to you about sex, and I don’t know where he’ll be this summer. Depends on the draft. How’s Pop and the boys?” I ask, changing the topic.

She fills me in on the usual, and there’s more rustling and then whispering as she talks to Mattie. He must not have left yet for his law school classes at NYU.

I hear him ask for the phone.

“Hey, sis! Joey P is the man!”

“Mattie. She told you,” I murmur.

He chuckles. “Oh, yeah, she did. She’s fuming about some guy you’re seeing. What’s wrong with Joey? He got his teeth fixed and everything.”

FML. I roll my eyes. My family is insane.

“I mean, one tooth is still jacked, but he’s cool,” he adds. I hear the creak of the back door, and I imagine he’s going out to the screened-in porch to get some space from Ma.

“This has nothing to do with Joey P or his teeth. She’s freaked out because I said *boyfriend* and she hasn’t met him.”

He laughs again. “So who’s this guy banging my little sister?”

“Shut up. You’re going to love him—wide receiver for the team, funny, nice, and just...” I pause, caught up in thoughts of him. I sigh.

“You in love, sis?”

“Not telling you shit. You’ll just repeat it.”

He laughs. “You got that right. She knows how to beat it out of me. Don’t worry, I can’t wait to meet him. Great team. I’m going to look him up online, get some questions ready for when he gets his ass up here to meet us.”

Yeah...

I want to do that—I do—but I’m nervous. Blaze doesn’t talk about the future for us, plus the Combine is right before spring break and he’ll be out of town. We should discuss it soon, but not now.

I get off the phone with Mattie and walk into class.

Dr. Cartwright is already lecturing, and I hurry over.

Blaze is grinning at me as I slide in next to him, and my heart skips a beat when he rests his hand on my desk. His pinkie brushes mine. “Bout time you got here. Was about to get worried.”

DING!

What are we doing tonight? I write and show it to Blaze.

Your place? I can cook this time.

You can cook? Nice.

Lasagna?

Really? That's awesome. Is this because my last name is Rossi? What do you put in yours?

I just take it out of the box and put it in the oven. Presto.

I put my head down to hide my grin. Ma is going to die.

He's still writing.

First you tie me to the bed and have your way with me. Haven't checked that off the list yet. Then we eat. Then TV. Or do you want to go somewhere?

My shoulders shake. I picture him in my room, tied to my bedpost with scarves, then I'm picturing me in a black dominatrix suit with tall, black, high-heeled boots, and it kind of works. I'm about to write that down and tell him when—

"Mr. Townsend, can you tell us your last entry please? There seems to be a lull today with the spring weather, and I always enjoy your comments."

I glance over at Blaze, my eyes wide.

He throws me a look then gapes at Dr. Cartwright. "Uh, well, sir, it's rather private, this one. I don't mind if you read it for your study since that's anonymous, but..."

"I see." The professor arches his eyebrow and looks from Blaze to me. The man has to know we're writing notes to each other half the time. We're on the front freaking row.

Dillon glances at us, probably sees my wide eyes, and clears his throat. "Uh, I have a good one."

"Indeed, Mr. McQueen? Please do share."

"I wrote **I'm hot.**" He grins. "I don't mean the temperature in the room," he adds. "It's just me. I'm sexy like that." He raises his hands for support. "Am I right?"

Whistles come from throughout the class.

"How insightful," Dr. Cartwright murmurs, a smile on his face. "Thank you." He comes back to Blaze. "I'd still love to hear yours. You looked so... absorbed in thought when you wrote it."

The man is messing with us.

Blaze taps his pen on his desk, gives me a look, and takes a breath.

"I said, **Tie me to the bed.**"

He kept as close to the truth as he could, and it feels like every single student turns to stare at him. I tuck my head in.

Dr. Cartwright's eyes gleam. "How surprising that a strapping football player might enjoy a little rope play and being a submissive. Fascinating. Good for you for admitting your proclivities, Mr. Townsend."

"Yes, sir. Proclivities are on my mind constantly."

Good Lord. He's too much.

Too far, rein it in, my gaze tells him.

He gives me a grin.



* * *

Later that night, we're lying on the couch at the house as we watch *Downton Abbey*, my pick. He's lying behind me, one arm around me, a hand playing with my hair. Penelope and Ryker are at the library studying. The credits roll on the show and I turn to face him. There's a little pucker on his forehead, and I smooth it with my hand.

"What are you thinking about?"

"Nothing."

"Liar." I touch his cheek, reading him. "Those NFL scouts and agents will be pissing in their fancy suits when they see you run at the Combine."

"Yeah?" He gets a hesitant look on his face.

"Of course."

He stares down at me, thinking. "No matter what happens, I want you to know that I'm in this thing we have."

In this thing.

I ease away and clean up our dishes from dinner on the coffee table. We ended up ordering a pizza since his workout went long.

He sits up, reaches out, and grabs my free hand, lacing our fingers together. "Hey, you okay?"

"I'm good. Just want to clean this up before Penelope gets back."

I move to pull away, but he won't let me go, standing and tugging me to him. His eyes are worried as he gives me a kiss, soft and slow. "Hey, I know we aren't just about me and my stuff." He pushes hair out of my face. "I'm happy about Nashville, happy for you."

"Yeah."

“Are you excited about it?”

I nod. “Of course. It’s a cool town.”

I haven’t wanted to bring it up much. When I told him last week, he listened intently, his face unreadable. We even celebrated by going to Cadillac’s with Ryker, Penelope, Dillon, Margo, and Connor. It was a fun, laidback night, but I caught him staring at me when I was talking to the girls about driving up in a few weeks to find an apartment. His eyes were filled with disquiet, his expression drawn.

Is he worried about a long-distance relationship? Maybe. I am.

I keep picturing him in another town...away from me...with “fans”.

He watches me now, his eyes bright. His chest rises. “Charm?”

“Yeah.” My hand holding the paper plates shakes a little. The air feels charged, as if he...

He sticks his hand in his pocket, and I wonder if he’s touching that note. “I know things are up in the air, but we’ll make a plan after I’m drafted. I don’t know where I’ll be, or if I’ll even get selected.”

“You will.”

He looks at the floor then back at me. “I’ve never had someone like you.” His throat bobs and his eyes search mine. “You know...you know how I feel about you, right? You’re the last thing I think about when I go to sleep, the first thing I want when I wake up.”

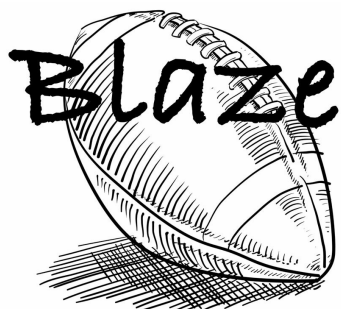
I set down the plates, slide into his embrace, and put my arms around his neck. “It’s going to work out, all of it.”

He kisses me, and it’s hard and sweeping, part need and part frustration, both of us anxious, wondering what the coming weeks will hold. I get lost there, in his mouth, like I always do. I don’t know how I ever waited so long to have this intimacy with him, to share it with the man I love. His tongue sucks on mine, making me moan, and he gives me more, his hands already in my hair and pulling out my ponytail and palming my scalp, getting me as close to him as he can.

“Charm, baby...” he says, staring down at me, those blue eyes dark with heat. “I brought rope. You got any high-heeled boots?”

I grin. “Already picked out and ready.”

He laughs and leads me to my bedroom.



“We both know who’s gonna look good today for that scout,” Archer says, squaring his shoulders, nose to nose with me. “Me.”

We’re standing in the middle of the field while Cedrick Clemmons, the New York Giants scout, watches from the sidelines. I feel the weight of his scrutiny, his assessing gaze on us. Gone is the affable fellow I met in the gym a few weeks ago, and in his place is a hard-nosed businessman looking for talent.

It’s a fucking gift.

An NFL scout has asked to see you and Archer run drills before the Combine.

That’s what Coach Sanders told us yesterday—and here he is today, watching.

Ryker gives me a thumbs-up from the sideline as he talks with the coaches and a few other players who are hoping they get the chance to hop in. He’s not going to throw to us—doesn’t want to risk an injury—so Coach Sanders is standing in.

I reach out my hand to give Archer a quick fist bump before we start. He pounds down on my outstretched hand like a boxer before a fight.

“Going to destroy you,” he says under his breath.

I grin, but it’s tight, controlled. “Try. I’m faster.”

“Hike!” yells Coach.

I fire off the line, getting my arms under Archer’s ribs right away, and he stumbles back, giving me a crucial second to twist away and run. He recovers and sprints after me, but I stop on a dime and spin around right as Coach throws the ball. Archer flies past me, and I catch the pass twelve yards downfield.

Blaze one, Archer zero.

I flip the ball back to our coach as we both walk back to the line and set up for the next drill. As I pass Archer, I bump him with my shoulder. *Beat you*, my eyes say.

He sends a grin to Cedrick but then looks back at me. “Pussy move.”

“Ah, you want a pity play now?” I say. “I just saw a wannabe defensive back who doesn’t like contact. Cedrick saw that too. He just wrote down the word *soft* next to your name.”

Archer rolls his shoulders. “If that’s the way you wanna play it, let’s dance.”

“Hike!” Coach holds the ball and waits for us to run.

My body darts forward, and I swing in Archer’s direction, acting like I’m going to jam him again, but I do a fake and fly past him at full speed.

He runs to catch me, but I’m faster, my feet eating up the yards. Twenty yards down field, I look for the ball, which is already in the air. In a split second, I realize I’ve beaten Archer on the route, but Coach has underthrown. I dash back, get behind Archer just in time, and leap. I snatch the ball down, and we both fall to the ground. *Yes!*

Blaze two, Archer zero.

I walk back toward the line and hear Archer breathing, snorting like a bull. “You trying to show off for your girl? What’s the deal with that one? She leading you around on a leash?”

I glance up into the stadium. Charisma and Dillon sit low in the stands. I didn’t see her come in, although I knew she wanted to come. I agreed when she asked, though grudgingly. Part of me wants her here, but the other part is terrified I’ll fuck it up and disappoint her.

“Hike!” yells Coach, yanking me back to the present.

I'm one second late getting off the line, and as I get up to full speed, Archer is right on my hip. I stop and turn for the ball. Coach throws a shitty pass and I twist to grab it, but Archer shoves me in my back. The ball falls to the field.

Blaze two, Archer one.

My fists clench. *Focus!*

Keep your eyes off her and on him. Right.

"Bitch move, Archer," I tell him as we line up.

He stares at me, eyes hard. "Your girl reminds me of that stripper at the Furry Kitty Kat, you know the one, big tits and a juicy ass. When she's done with you, I'm going to fuck that real good." He leans in until I feel his breath through the cage of my helmet. "What's her name? Charm? She remind you of the trash you come from?"

I flick my eyes up. She's got her hands clasped tight in front of her, eyes on me.

"You ready, Blaze?" asks Coach, and I realize I'm distracted.

"Yes, sir," I bite out as Archer glares at me across the line.

"Hike!"

I blow past him as Coach overthrows the ball, and I put every ounce of effort into driving my body forward.

I dive and reach out to get my fingertips on it just as Archer's feet tangle with mine. His cleat jams on my ankle hard and the ball ends up just out of my grasp, hitting the ground.

Archer stands first and towers above me, smiling. He reaches out his hand to help me up, but at the last second, he jerks it away. "I'm the superstar here, farm boy. Not you."

He runs back to the line.

Pain skyrockets from my foot up my leg as I stand. I shake it off. *I'm cool. I'm cool.* I glance at Cedrick as he scribbles notes on his clipboard. The last thing he wants to see is a prima donna wide receiver complaining about a little pain.

I walk back for the next drill, fighting the urge to limp.

Coach watches me, a furrow on his brow. "You good? Looks like he accidentally came down on your ankle."

Accidentally my ass.

"I'm fine. What's the next route?" I ask through gritted teeth.

"You sure?"

“What’s the next route?”

“Deep post,” he replies, gaze wary.

I line up.

Archer leans in and whispers, “You’re hurt, farm boy.”

I realize he’s right after a few more drills, and my gut churns with frustration. I’m nowhere near full speed, and my ankle throbs with each step, adrenaline the only thing keeping me going. I’ve had injuries before, small ones I recovered from, but this...this is...*shit*.

I come back to the line.

Coach levels his eyes on me, his gaze going to my ankle. “Blaze, get your ass off the field and send in another wide receiver for Archer.”

My shoulders tense. “I’m fine. Let’s run another play.”

He grimaces. “He’s kicking your ass. Doesn’t look good.”

I crack my neck and tighten my jaw.

“Don’t ruin your ankle for a scout, son. Get off the field,” he says, his tone more insistent.

I’m not leaving this spot until I beat Archer.

“Sir—”

“I’m sorry. I know this is big. Get that goddamn ankle looked at.” He crosses his arms, taking no arguments.

I let out a groan. “Please, Coach. Just let me try.”

“No.” He points to the sidelines.

“Where you going, pussy? We’re just getting warmed up,” Archer calls as I stalk off the field. He laughs, but I ignore him and fight not to limp with each step. I can’t even look at Cedrick.

A trainer kneels at my feet in the locker room, checking out my swollen right foot. He helps me walk to the training room and I sit on the table while he applies ice packs. He tells me to alternate with hot and cold then dashes off to check with the doctor on getting the X-ray.

“Blaze? You okay?” Charm says as she comes in the door, her eyes too big.

She shouldn’t be back here, but Dillon’s next to her.

“I’m fine,” I mutter, tearing my eyes off her and looking at my propped-up foot.

She leans in and kisses me. “You looked good out there.”

“Yeah, right.”

“You did.” Her gaze goes back to my ankle.

I take her hand and thread our fingers together. Being with her these past few weeks has meant everything to me, and that frown on her face is bugging me. “I’ll shake it off and be fine tomorrow. Don’t worry, ’kay?”

“He’s bounced back from worse hits than that,” says Dillon.

I glance at him and give him a head twitch toward the door. I don’t want her to see me like this.

Dillon touches her arm. “He’s just waiting. Wanna walk with me to Dr. Cartwright’s class? Might up your street cred to be seen with me.”

She frowns. “I’m not going to class until I know what’s going on.”

I exhale. *Please, get her out*, my eyes tell Dillon. He just lifts his hands.

“I need you to take notes,” I say. “Besides, I might be here for hours.”

“I’m staying.”

“No, you’re not.”

“I am.”

My jaw tightens and I snap. “I need to do this alone.”

“Why?” she asks, hands on her hips.

Because I always have. I’ve never had parents or my aunt and uncle rushing to me when I was injured on the field. It was just me. Besides, I can’t have her seeing me weak and scared. What if I fall apart? Because...I might.

My teeth grind in pain. “Just go, okay?”

She lets out a sigh, brown eyes are back on me. “Fine. Will you text me when you know what’s going on?”

Fear slides over me at what kind of news I might get. “Yeah.”

I watch them leave, and nervousness ratchets up, riding me hard. I want to call her back, but I don’t. Out in the hall, I hear Archer and some of the other players walking into the locker room down the hall. “Farm boy is probably crying.” I hear him say.

My fists clench.

Ryker comes in the room and takes me in. His lips flatten. “That was a dirty fucking play by Archer, man.”

Yeah, it was. I nod. “Cedrick...did he say anything?”

“Don’t worry about him. Everyone saw the way you went down and kept pushing through. I think he knew what was really up.”

But...did he?

I drop his gaze and stare at a point over his shoulder. “Thank you for trying to help me. I don’t know if you had anything to do with Cedrick coming back, but I figure you did, and I appreciate it.”

“He came on his own, bro. You’re a natural—he’ll see it.”

I clear my throat. “You should get going. Charisma mentioned you’re getting fitted for a suit for the draft today.”

He’s quiet for a few moments. “Yeah, it’s kickass, serious dark gray on the outside with a paisley lining in school colors. Sharp. Penelope helped me pick it out.”

I try to laugh but wince when a bolt of pain ricochets across my foot. “Go get it.”

“Trying to get rid of me?”

“Just...go.”

“I’m not leaving, so shut the fuck up.”

I meet his eyes and see the careful, apprehensive expression he’s wearing.

“We’ve known each other for four years, man. You’ve been my go-to on the field and my roommate. That shit runs deep. We’re family,” he says.

I close my eyes, my throat tightening as I fight back emotion. *Family*. I like that, I do, but right now I’m barely keeping shit together. I want to stand up and beat on the wall. I want to slam my fist into something hard over and over.

“Dude...just go. *Please*.”

He gives me a long look. “No. That suit can wait. You can’t. Whatever happens, I’m here.”

I may not have a real family, but he’s here and it means something. And Charm?

Why did I push her away? Why am I still holding part of me back—

I forget that as Jack Calloway, the head trainer and our team doctor, comes in and examines me.

I glare down at the foot. It’s gotten bigger, looking ugly and turning purple.

“What kind of pain level are you at?” His manner is brusque, keeping his face set.

“Fine, none. Just a twinge, really.”

He frowns. “Blaze, look at it. His cleats tore you up. What’s your pain level? I need to know so I can prescribe something if needed.”

I swallow and look away from him. If I tell him the truth, that it’s making me want to pass out, he’ll write me a script for heavy drugs, and that’s not good. It means I’m close to being unable to run for several days.

“Aleve will knock it out, sir. Swear.”

He thinks about that and gives me a level look. “Okay, if you say so. Let’s get you X-rayed.”

One of the trainers comes in and helps me into a wheelchair, and my fists stay clenched in my lap. *This is...bullshit.*

Later, I’m back in the room, and minutes tick by in the quiet space. I’m constantly changing out packs, switching from ice to heat and back again.

Archer walks by the room and stands at the doorway. There’s no remorse on his face, not an ounce.

“Even with a hurt foot, I’m faster than you, asshole,” I say, teeth grinding. “Your day is coming.”

“Move on, Archer,” Ryker says, marching over to the door and glaring at him, his fists curled.

Archer looks like he wants to trash-talk, but in the end, he just curls his lip and keeps on walking.

Ryker walks back over to me and takes a seat next to the exam table. “You got this, man. You got this.”

But I think I hear uncertainty in his voice and it crawls over me.

I dart my eyes around at the room. *God.* The wait kills me, my body jacked and itching to get up and move around. I count the tiles on the ceiling, on the floor, mind spinning. I close my eyes and think about the Combine, about going and sitting on the sidelines while all the other wide receivers from other teams show what they’ve got.

If I don’t have football...

Would Charm want me? Would she leave?

How miserable would I be to live with?

Stop, just stop!

Maybe it’s not that bad. Maybe it’s just a strain and you need to rest. Maybe it’s just a blip in the big picture. Think of all the shit your body has been through, the bruises, torn ligaments, sore muscles...yeah, it’s like that, it is, it is, it is, it is—

Jack Calloway walks in holding an ankle brace. Coach Sanders and Head Coach Alvarez are with him, faces grim.

I feel the blood draining from my face. “I don’t need a goddamn boot!”

His mouth flattens to a straight line. “I’m telling you the good news first. You don’t need surgery to repair anything. I don’t see any compound damage.”

“But?”

“You have a hairline fracture in the high-ankle region. Nothing career-ending, but you need to get keep weight off of it for a few weeks, at least two at *minimum*. Frankly, that’s pushing it. You’ll need the boot on to walk. You can take it off when you’re resting—”

My chest heaves as I cut him off. “That’s crazy. The Combine is in a week! I need to be at full speed.” I look down at my ankle. “Look, let me show you.” I move to stand, tentative as I place my right foot on the floor. Shards of sensation rocket over the muscles, and I grit my teeth. Sweat drips down my back. “Fresh as a daisy, sir.”

A long exhalation leaves his chest. “Sit your ass down. Take the next four days and really rest, no class at all. Coaches will take care of your absence with your professors. No driving and no walking except to get up from the bed and eat and piss, you feel me? Get one of those girls you got to help you. You can go back to class on day five. Normally, for a regular person, I’d okay it sooner, but that ankle is your moneymaker. The more you rest, the better it will be later, plus it might improve your healing process. I’ll give you some meds for the pain at first—”

I’m barely listening. All I can think about is that it will be two weeks before I can run.

“I don’t want meds. Let’s get another doc in here, get another X-ray.” I scrub my face then look up at him. “Please.”

Ryker stands next to me. “Blaze, these guys are the best. This isn’t career-ending.”

Jack’s gaze is filled with sympathy. A grimace crosses his face. “Listen to Ryker. It’s just a couple of weeks. Don’t let it get in your head. Accept it, refocus your goals, and move on.”

Coach Sanders puts his hand on my shoulder, and I shake it off.

Move on? *MOVE ON?*

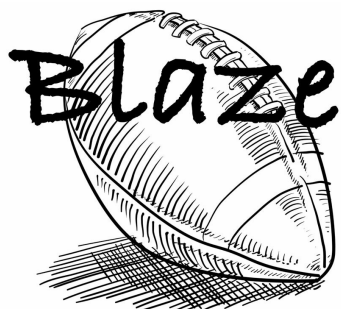
He wants me to *refocus*?

On what?

On giving up the only thing that keeps me going?

No.

I throw the water bottle I’m holding across the room, and it smashes against the wall and spills onto the floor.



“Thanks,” I say as Charisma brings me a glass of iced tea. I’m on day three of sitting propped up on pillows on my bed. Sometimes I sit out in the den to mix it up, but honest to God, I’m going crazy in this dorm room. Yesterday it was sunny, and I sat out on the landing and talked to everyone who passed by.

One more day until I can resume classes, and for once, I can’t wait to sit through a lecture.

Charisma’s been here the majority of her free time, keeping me company and bringing me notes from Cartwright’s class, even though a TA is getting all my stuff together and delivering it to me. A tutor showed up the first day and went over my missed classes. He comes each day for a couple of hours in the evening and then heads out. Thank God. At least I might still graduate.

She holds out my pain meds. “Here, take these. It’s Aleve.”

I’m off the heavy drugs, only having used them on day one. Feeling stubborn, I set the Aleve on the nightstand and look at the TV, but I’m not paying attention. I feel antsy as hell. Shit is piling up in my room, and

surprisingly, it bothers me. Books, papers, and my laptop are scattered on the bed.

She turns my ceiling fan on and busies herself with picking up my dirty clothes off the floor, taking them into my bathroom, and putting them in the hamper. She closes the blinds, darkening the room. Her eyes find mine and her face is blank, and I'm thankful for that at least, glad she isn't giving me pity or bringing up the Combine. No one wants to talk about it, not Dillon or Ryker. They don't know what to say, I guess, and they can feel my nerves, itching to lash out.

"You want me to grab some protein bars for later?" she asks.

"No."

My eyes go over her short green and navy plaid skirt and the fitted white shirt she's wearing. She looks hot, and I swallow down feelings of helplessness. "You've got fencing today? Be sure Chess Boy keeps his sword to himself. I should have taken that class."

A laugh comes from her, and I smile. She's been so goddamn careful around me.

"I'll remind him what a badass you are. Maybe he'll be scared," she teases.

"He better be."

She laughs and picks up notes that scattered from the fan.

I tear my eyes off her and stare down at the breakfast she brought me from the student center. "Don't worry about bringing more food. Dillon said he'd bring me dinner later." She lingers next to my bed, and I reach out and grab her hand. "You really need to get to class. Cartwright will be ringing that bell soon."

While I go nuts. Alone.

She leans down and kisses me long and slow, until I'm arching up off the bed to reach more of her mouth.

"I can stay if you want...I'll do all the work and be careful of your ankle," she whispers.

"You could." I cup her face. "But you've already missed classes just to hang out with me."

"Meh. I catch up quick."

My finger brushes over her shirt, lingering on where I know her piercing is. I want my tongue there.

Her eyes widen and she pulls back. "Shit—we have a quiz today. I totally

forgot. I gotta go.”

Deep disappointment hits. “Of course you do, Charm. Get out of here before you miss it. I’m used to doing this solo. I got it, babe.”

She stands and gives me a searching look, her expression cautious. “Blaze?”

I adjust my ankle. “Yeah?”

“I love you.” Her voice is incredibly soft, and I...I can’t breathe.

The room spins a little, and I grasp the blankets to anchor myself.

She’s never said it out loud.

I inhale a deep gasp of air, and it shouldn’t be such a big deal that a girl has said she loves me, but it is. People use pretty words for their emotions, but I never have. In the grand scheme of things, they don’t matter. I prefer actions, but she...she needs more, and I know it. My heart pounds as fear inches in, of putting my feelings out there, of being completely vulnerable. Prickles of awareness hit me mid-chest, my gut pushing me, urging me to...

I swallow. “Charm, I...” My eyes dart around the room. “I...think you shouldn’t miss that quiz.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I see her give me a nod. “Right. Of course.”

I feel her staring at me, but I keep my gaze off her.

“If you need anything, just shoot me a text.” Her voice is quiet.

I nod.

She walks to the door and stops, waiting several seconds. “I’ve got a big project to work on so I won’t be coming over later.”

“Sure.” In my peripheral vision, I watch her slip out the door. Inside I’m screaming for her to come back and let me try again, but that familiar hesitation won’t release me. I waver when it really counts, but even knowing it, I can’t...

I hear the door shut out in the den. She’s gone, and I let out a breath.

Later, I’ll beat down this fear, I fucking will, and I’ll tell her how I feel.

I swear. I swear.

Once I get myself straight with this ankle.

Dillon waltzes in a few hours later, fresh from a shower and dressed to go out. He brought me a pizza earlier and I could barely eat it. My head is...jacked.

“Hey, man, Happy Birthday,” I say, pushing away the homework in my lap. He’s twenty-one today and full of fire, and I don’t want to rain on his parade. “You gonna party your ass off?” I push out a grin. “Wish I could go

with you.”

He flashes a smile, then gives me a serious look. “Charm not here tonight? I can stay and hang—”

“Get your ass out that door. At least ten girls are waiting on you to show your face at Caddy’s.”

He rubs his head, which is normally shaved but has quickly grown into a clipped style over the past few weeks. “True that. They’ve all been texting to see who’s the lucky lady tonight.” He laughs, lingering at my door. “I’ll keep your door shut in case some of us come back, okay?”

I nod and gesture to my books and meds on the nightstand. “Trust me, I’m good. Don’t worry about me.”

He leaves the dorm and I pick up my laptop to work on my notes, but my eyes get heavy and I push them away. Later, I focus on the TV, watching Mark Antony for a while, until the room darkens and my eyes are closing. At least oblivion pushes away football and Charisma.



* * *

I slowly come to in my bed. It’s late; I can tell by the total darkness in the room and the TV that’s turned itself off. I’m lying on my back, and I figure I must have moved around in my sleep to get comfortable. One glance at the clock tells me it’s midnight.

A warm body is pressed against mine, a small hand curled around my waist, fingers idly drawing small circles on my bare chest.

“Charm, baby.” I turn to face her, my hands reaching out in the dark to touch her, needing my anchor.

She sighs and scoots in closer to me, her hands slipping under my shorts and stroking my cock. I groan, arching up off the bed. It’s been three days since I had her, since I was between those legs. We could have had sex, but I hadn’t been in the right headspace, and maybe part of me had needed some distance, to think about the Combine and how screwed up it was.

But now...after what she said...I need her. I don’t know what love is, but I can show her how I feel.

I reach for her breast. It’s warm and small and—

I stiffen.

“Blazey...”

“Dani! What the fuck? How did you get in here?” I scramble up on the bed and reach over to turn on the lamp.

What did I almost...*what did I do?*

She blinks at the light and sits up, the covers slipping down to show bare breasts. Her skin reeks of alcohol.

I look away from her. “Seriously? You’re insane! Who let you in?”

She laughs. “Came back to party with Dillon and snuck in here to check on you. You looked so sad, all injured, and I wanted to make you feel better.”

I hobble to standing. “I wasn’t sad. I was asleep! Get your clothes on and get out.”

“Don’t be like that. I’ve waited forever for this. Come on,” she murmurs, her voice slurring.

I hop forward to the wall and turn on the overhead light. My heart has slowed down a notch, but I’m anxious to get her ass gone. “You don’t just waltz in here and act like it’s okay to get in my bed. If I’d done that to a girl, it would be serious shit. I’m not into you and I never was. I don’t want anything you have to offer.”

I brush my gaze over her and see her face has reddened. “You’re a giant dick. I hope that Chi-O dumps your ass.” She eases out of the bed on the other side, nonchalant about the fact that she’s stark naked.

Fuck me. I shudder and rub my face, dread pooling as I think about explaining this to Charisma.



CHARISMA



CHARISMA

I slam my laptop closed and rub my forehead.

“Get me some cheese,” screeches Vampire Bill from his perch.

I send him a look. *Dream on, buddy*, my eyes tell him.

He seems to get it and glares back. “Get your skinny ass down the road,” he retorts.

Standing up, I stretch, going over my presentation for tomorrow’s design class. It’s good, and I’m stoked I got it down.

I throw him a glance. “Maybe I will.”

He moves his head back and forth as I consider popping in on Blaze. Checking the clock, I see it’s eleven-thirty, probably too late to stop by unannounced. I think back to today. He looked so lost in that bed, worried and frazzled, and when I told him I loved him...

He didn’t say it back.

He wouldn’t even look at me.

I laid myself out there, and he just pretended I never said those words.

Yet, part of me knows it’s there...right?

Am I being stupid?

Am I one of those girls who hang on forever, loving a guy who can't really *commit*?

"I'm going to see him. I need answers," I tell the bird as I walk to my dresser and grab a pair of white lace underwear then head to the bathroom and take a shower. After putting on yoga pants and a tank top, I snatch a Wildcats jacket out of my closet and shove my arms inside.

Once I get to his dorm, I'm less sure about seeing him.

He's been so distant. I know he's worried. I am too.

I knock, but no one answers. Figures. He's probably asleep, and Dillon is out celebrating.

The door is unlocked and I ease it open, blinking to acclimate my eyes in the dim light. Low music throbs softly from a speaker as I step into the den. Dillon is laid out on the floor, a girl on either side of him. They're partially clothed, and I avert my eyes and head down the hall to Blaze's bedroom

The door is open, just a little, the light on, telling me he's up. He hobbles past the opening, talking to someone, and I pause, listening.

There's a girl's voice, but it's too low to make anything out.

Apprehension, snakelike, crawls over me, starting at my scalp, tingling as it inches over my face, my chest. My feet are moving closer, the air in my lungs scant as I use my fingers to ease the door open and take a step inside.

He hasn't seen me yet, his focus across the room, but Dani has.

A sly smile curves over her features as she zips up a skirt and wiggles until it's smoothed down.

He freezes at the smile on her face then turns and sees me.

"Charisma! Jesus! This isn't what it looks like, I swear!" He hobbles over the two steps it takes to get to me, limping on the ankle. "I woke up and she was in my bed. I told her to get the hell out."

"I see." I look away from him to her, and she's still wearing a smile as she picks up her bra and puts it on, followed by a low-cut cropped sweater. She bends over, grabs a pair of ankle boots, and slips them on her feet. Straightening up, she considers me briefly and weaves on her feet—trashed, I assume, yet she's able to give me a withering, assessing look, taking in my wet hair before drifting down to the rest of me. "He's got a big cock, little Chi-O. Perfect in my hands, and so hard. Ask him about *that*. Good luck taming him." She flutters her lashes and tosses a strand of hair over her shoulders. She sashays past me to the door, and then she's gone, every

willowy, beautiful inch of her.

“Charm, for fuck’s sake, don’t believe a goddamn word she says. I thought it was you—”

“Stop.” I raise my hand and he clams up. Inside, I’m falling apart, but I make my face inscrutable, schooling myself, part of me wanting to chase after Dani and pluck her eyeballs out.

But I won’t.

She’s not worth it.

He gives up on waiting for me, shaking his head and moving closer. “Charm, don’t let your head go to weird places...” He inhales a breath. “Please, believe me!”

He watches me, his fist to his mouth, as I tilt my head up. His bare, muscular chest heaves under my scrutiny. My gaze traces the lines of his lips, and I think about the way he kisses me, as if he can’t get enough, as if I’m the very center of his world.

Yet...

He didn’t come after me last fall. In fact, he went so far as to stick Dani to his side to keep me away.

He needed distance then.

And he does now too, still keeping his heart hidden.

“Your face isn’t right. Charm, stop, just stop thinking that shit! I’m telling you the truth—I woke up and she was there and for half a second, I thought she was you. She’s not the kind of girl I want! I never fucked her last fall and I haven’t tonight—”

“I believe you. I do,” I say, surprised by the calm in my voice. “I know how girls like her operate. I can see her sneaking in here and crawling into bed with you. You aren’t a liar.”

He bows his head over me, hands reaching out and cupping my face. “Thank God. Thank God. I thought you were going to freak out.”

Oh, I am freaking out.

I pull away from him, my forehead furrowing, the adrenaline finally reaching a point where my head pounds with it.

I lick my lips, an empty feeling inside me getting bigger, growing until it’s a looming awful monster, until it’s all I have, a black hole in my chest, pushing him out and bringing those insecurities from my past back in, curling around me.

“You’re upset. What are you thinking?” His words are soft.

What am I thinking?

I think about that aching darkness you get when you lose something you love.

I know there are things you can't control. I can't control him. I can't control what city he ends up in after the draft. I can't control women who lust and fawn over him. Those are battles I can't fight because they only tear *me* down.

Who wants to live like that?

At the end of the day, all we really have is trust and faith in the people we choose to love, and I don't have that. *I don't*—no matter what I've been telling myself these past few weeks. My faith was thin to begin with, and now...it just brings everything back into focus, sharp with edges that hurt.

I feel wetness on my cheeks, and I'm startled by it, quickly wiping the tears away.

He makes a strangled noise and comes toward me, but I take a step back until I'm hanging on to the doorknob, my hand gripping it.

"Don't touch me right now, okay?"

He closes his eyes. "Charm...baby. Don't leave me. You *promised* you wouldn't—"

"Blaze, please, stop talking."

He huffs out a big breath, his lips thinning.

I'm not sure how long I stand there, just thinking, but neither of us move. I put a hand to my chest, willing my heart to be okay, to slow down, but it doesn't. It hurts, actually twinges, and I stop an awkward laugh. So it's true—your heart really does break.

I take in a deep breath. "Dani...you didn't sleep with her, and I want to be clear: I believe you. She came in here and you didn't know."

He nods. "I had no clue."

"But someday, somewhere, there'll be another girl—maybe on the road, maybe in whatever city you end up in. You'll have a girl hanging on you, and she'll be perfect, and you'll forget about me, Blaze. Otherwise, why haven't you told me—" I stop.

I am *not* begging him to tell me he loves me. *Hell no.*

He leans against the wall to keep his balance. Red colors his cheeks. "You can't punish me for some future girl I don't even want!" He blows out a breath, his voice lowering. "Charm, come on. I'm not your pop."

I shake my head. "You keep everything inside you locked up so tight,

Blaze. I thought I was okay with this *thing*, as you call it, but I can't do it anymore."

He just stares at me.

He doesn't speak.

He could.

He could.

But he chooses not to.

He swallows and looks away.

Just like earlier today.

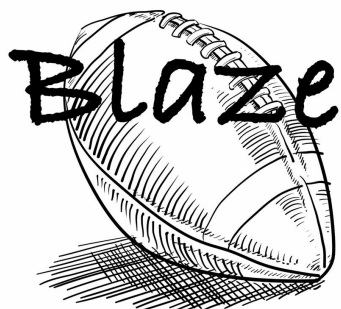
I sigh. "Just leave me alone, okay? Don't talk to me. Don't...do anything."

And I leave, marching out his door and past the people on the floor. I shut the front door quietly behind me, and it's not until I reach my car and crawl inside that the tears really come. I bang my fists on my steering wheel and weep.

I can't be the girl who's always waiting for the guy to figure out what she means to him, all the while knowing he's out there surrounded by other girls.

I just can't.

I'd rather hurt like this until he's out of my mind and out of my heart.



“Next,” calls out the Combine official who’s working at the height station. He tells us all to remove our shoes, socks, and anything that might enhance our height. I remove everything, even the boot. I set it all on a bench and limp back, testing it gingerly. I’m seven days out from my injury, a far cry from the fourteen days the doctor told me I needed to wait before doing any running.

“Keep moving!” yells a trainer, and I throw him a wave and make my way across the Indianapolis Colts’ stadium floor with several other players, most long shots like me. The number eighty-two is pinned to my chest, the background a bright yellow tag that says, *INJURED*.

I’m better than all these guys and I know it. I heave out a breath when it’s my turn to be measured. My hands tap at my leg. I’m frazzled, and it doesn’t help that my ankle feels off without the boot on it. I’ve been the best patient I could be, following all the instructions to the letter.

My eyes quickly survey the stands, looking for Charisma. She isn’t here, of course, and my chest tightens to the point that I clutch it.

She left me—even though she knew I wasn't with Dani. Anger and grief mingle together and brush at me, a familiar emotion I've been struggling with since she walked out.

How can she let us go so easily?

Don't think about her. Focus on today.

"Do you need someone to help you walk up to the machine?" It's one of the trainers. He watched me remove the boot earlier.

"I can still walk," I tell him, my words clipped.

"Bad luck about the ankle. Heard about it in the break room," the trainer says.

"Doesn't even hurt," I tell him. It still twinges, though, and I know it's healing.

I step up to be measured. "Number eighty-two. Six foot, three and five-eighths inches," the trainer calls out to someone who types it in to be displayed on a large board, the measurements appearing next to my name.

I look over and watch a group of NFL scouts scribble notes on their pads.

Blaze Townsend: tall, well built, but can't run.

Whatever.

I shuffle to the next station with the rest of the group. Frustration swirls inside me as we make our way to the forty-yard dash, the granddaddy of all measurements for wide receivers. Every molecule inside me wants to run, wants to show them that I know I'm the best. You can be short, fat, unable to jump over a mushroom, and have seven fingers on one hand, but if you can run a fast forty, the scouts will notice.

"You running?" asks Terrance, a wide receiver from Alabama who I've gotten to know over the last two days of the Combine. He's putting his shoes back on. I realize I left mine back at the bench, my thoughts scattered. Won't need them anyway.

"Injured," I tell him. "Just gonna sit in the waiting area now and watch."

He frowns, probably looking at my face. "Man, that sucks. All I care about is getting on that board and seeing how fast I am."

I compose my face slowly, working it into the semblance of a good-luck smile. "Break a leg, Alabama."

He walks up to the track and I take a seat, my rage rushing fast and furious when I see that Archer has already run and is listed as the eighth fastest overall.

Terrance does the dash then walks back up to the bench to take a breath.

“Shit, 4.47. I ran better on campus last week.” He shakes his head and sits down.

The rest of the group finishes in unimpressive fashion, and I beat back the emotions jammed in my throat. I could have beat all of them.

“Time for us to move on,” says the trainer.

“I still haven’t run, sir.” The words are out before I can think.

He gives me a squinty-eyed look. “Thought you were skipping this station.” His eyes flick over my injured leg and then down to my ankle. The boot is still on the bench near the height station, but I refuse to look at it.

What if...what if I ignored the injury?

I weigh the options in my head in two seconds flat.

If I don’t do this now, the NFL is never going to happen.

I’ve been pushing myself for four years, and I’m going to let one injury slow me down?

FTS. *Fuck that shit.*

“I wanna run.”

He frowns. “You don’t have any shoes. You left them back at the last station.”

I look over at Terrance. “What size do you wear?”

“Fourteens.” He takes a hard look at my face, gives me a lopsided grin. After a beat, he takes them off and offers them up.

“Close enough. Thanks, man.”

I squeeze my feet into Terrance’s shoes and lace them up. They’re tight but fine. I do some stretches, rubbing my calves and ankles.

“Show us what you got, Townsend!” yells one of the other guys in our group. The yelling gets other people’s attention, and I feel a few eyes looking at us. I shake it off, running in place in quick steps, getting my heart rate up. I see Archer craning his neck toward me from a huddle of defensive players, and I toss my hand up and give him a wave. I’ll show him.

The trainer leads me to the line. “Get set there and start whenever you’re ready. Your time will be measured by laser from the moment you start until you cross the line at the end of the track. Got it? No second chances.” His eyebrow cocks as his eyes brush over my foot. “Don’t hurt yourself, son.”

I stretch more, getting the jitters out and warming up my muscles. I bounce on the turf in the weird shoes. *Shit, this is insane.*

With my feet flat on the ground and sweaty hands planted in front of me, I get set.

This is it, my one shot. “Lose Yourself” by Eminem goes through my head.

Prove you're better.

Be worthy.

Because I am. *I am.* I'm not the *piece of shit* my parents said I was.

Charisma slips back into my head. I think about how she's always believed in my talent, even when I didn't believe in *us*. That first night in Cadillac's, she didn't walk out the door until she told me she was *happy* for me.

She's scared, just like me, but she loves *me*—a poor trailer park kid from Mississippi.

“Run when you're ready, Townsend,” the trainer calls out from a few feet away.

Everything in the stadium zooms in until it's just me, heart pounding, and I use it, focusing on the yards in front of me.

Adrenaline courses through my body.

One shot, one shot.

I take off.

Everything's a blur as I put one foot in front of the other and streak down the short forty-yard course. I hear yelling but don't care if they're cheering me on or hoping for me to fail. This is my moment. If it goes to hell, I'll pay the consequences.

I cross the line, jog to a stop, and turn to see the time as it's posted on the board.

4.34 seconds. Fast—so goddamn fast.

Pride ripples through me. *Shit.* My ankle throbs, but I know it's good. It's going to be fine.

I tilt my head up and close my eyes.

Charisma, Charisma, Charisma. Where are you, baby? I need you so much.

I'm not listening to the guys cheering and slapping me on the back. I'm not even looking at the scouts on the sidelines.

I picture her in my head, those lips, those eyes I drown in, and I feel lighter than I have in....years.

I've been saying football is the one thing I can't live without, but it's a lie.

She is. It's her.

She's been there the entire time, even when she had her rules, and I've got to be what she needs—because existing without her is not an option. And love? It's just a word. It's a pretty word that scrambles my head and makes me scared. Hell, maybe it makes lots of people afraid. Terrified of getting hurt, of being left behind, of giving a part of yourself to someone while knowing they have the power to change your whole world.

But she's worth fighting for.

Wherever she is, I kiss my fingers and send them up into the crowd. For her.

My name jumps onto the board as the third-fastest wide receiver of the day and the fifth-fastest overall. I stare up at the lights of the stadium, emotion tight in my chest.

I'm going to find her.

And this time I know what to say. I'm not going to be afraid. Maybe she's given up on me, but I'm not letting her go.



CHARISMA



CHARISMA

“Goodness, you’re up early for spring break,” Ma murmurs as I make my way into the kitchen wearing old joggers and a baggy Waylon shirt. “It’s six AM, dear. I thought you’d sleep in after that late flight.”

“Couldn’t sleep,” I mumble as I walk over to the coffee table and pour a cup. *Fuck carbs*, I think as I throw in a heavy dose of cream and stir.

“You look pale.”

I nod. I flew out of Jackson late Friday night and arrived last night around eleven. My body nearly collapsed when I walked in the door and Pop, Ma, and Mattie all ran over to throw their arms around me. They acted like I was a celebrity who’s been in hiding for months. Ma fawned over me, running her hands over my face and hair, Pop picked me up and swung me around, and then Mattie got his turn. Through the laughter and their questions, I fought back tears. I’ve missed them so much more than I realized.

I take a seat at our small table in the breakfast nook and stare down at the worn scratches and dents on the table. One is from when Mattie threw a butter knife at me over who got the last piece of pie, another from a plate Ma

dropped and shattered on the wood when I told her I was accepting the full-ride to Waylon. There's even a Sharpie mark I made when I was a kid, drawing a picture for Pop to hang in his office a few blocks over. It's still up on the wall there, stick figures of me, Mattie, Paulie, and my parents.

She sits down across from me and clears her throat. She's freshly showered and dressed in her usual slacks and nice blouse, hair coiffed, makeup on. Pop's probably already gone. Running a small business never stops—even on the weekend. Plus, he's putting Mattie through law school. That isn't cheap.

“I'm worried about you. Is it...is it that boy in Mississippi? I thought you might bring him home so I could check his teeth or at least get a detailed history of his background.”

“He lost his parents when he was ten. They were drug addicts. He grew up with family who never paid him any attention. No one ever told him they loved him—” I stop and duck my head with my elbows on the table. I don't want to go there and think about him, not now. It's too fresh. It was hard enough to go into our psych class, knowing he was there when I took my new seat in the back. I'd gone to Dr. Cartwright beforehand and told him he had to move me, and after taking in my face, he did so on the spot, no questions. Maybe he knew. I'm sure he's watched us all semester and knew there was a relationship there.

As soon as class was over, I left from the upper exit, leaving Blaze on the lower level. It wasn't hard. Plus, he was wearing the boot, and he couldn't exactly chase after me. I ignored all the texts he sent me and deleted every voice mail he left. I spent three nights at the library, in a far corner away from anyone, not coming home until late. I figured he'd show up at my house, and he did once he was cleared to drive, according to Penelope.

“Oh. Well, why didn't he come with you?”

I reach out and take a slice of homemade coffee cake she's set out for me.

She sets her cup on a saucer. “Fine. You don't want to talk about him. Good, good. You've come to your senses. I'm planning a dinner tonight. Paulie and his wife are coming with their kids. He's dying to see you. It'll be all of us together. Joey P has confirmed too. Took the liberty of setting it up, so don't be mad. Such a good boy. Runs his dad's construction company since he passed—”

I stand and walk away, moving through the small den, taking in the tasteful yet worn furnishings in our small house. It's a warm home, filled

with pictures of me, Mattie, Paulie, his wife, and their kids. It's a good place, but I can't with Ma right now.

I step out onto the screened-in porch to see the sun rising up. Sitting on the flowered patio couch, I tug my legs under me and sip my coffee.

Ma follows me out. "Dear, don't be upset about Joey—"

I can't get away from her. Maybe, just maybe, I don't want to this time. "I know Pop cheated on you. Why did you stay with him?"

The words are out and hang between us.

She inhales a breath, shuffles forward, and plops down in a matching chair across from me.

There's a long silence, and when I look up, she's staring at the floor. Her face is pale.

"You have no right to ask me personal questions about my marriage."

"But you get to tell me every move to make? You get to arrange a dinner with some guy I've never even had the slightest attraction—"

"You're my daughter," she says quietly. "I only want you to be happy, and you're clearly not. Haven't we given you everything you've ever wanted, Charm?"

"I want to know why you stayed with him," I say. Regardless of her meddling, we've needed *this* conversation—or at least I do.

She gets a faraway look on her face and sighs. "Your dad and I, we love each other. He made some mistakes early on, but we go on. He knows it was wrong, and we had some rocky times that I tried to hide from you, but we love each other. Love is give and take, Charm. I forgave him, and he hasn't done that in a long time."

Interesting. "How do you know?"

She runs her finger over the rim of her glass. "I just do. You think I never thought about leaving him when I found out? I did, but in the end, he begged me to stay. He loves me, loves what we've built. He's my whole world, and he treats me like I'm the best thing he's ever had. And I am! Look at this wonderful family we made for you." Her tone is low but exasperated, and I pause.

We do have a wonderful family. I can't deny that.

"Is this why things didn't work out with you and that hillbilly? Did he cheat on you?"

"Ma, stop calling him that, and no, he didn't...yet." I set my coffee cup on the end table and look at her.

Her eyes widen, and realization dawns in her gaze. “Charm...you think... you think just because your dad...” Her voice trails off.

“He’s a lot like Pop—handsome, charismatic, everybody wants him. I don’t understand why he’d want someone like me forever.”

Emotions flit over her face: regret, remorse, and then fear. She stands up and comes over to sit next to me. “Don’t do that. Don’t be afraid to love. Please. You’ll never be happy if you don’t give people a chance. Me and your dad aren’t perfect, I know, but that is us, just us, not you. Please don’t...” Her voice breaks, and for the first time since I drove away for freshman year at Waylon, I see tears in my mom’s eyes. They spill over, and I suck in a breath.

“You deserve happiness, deserve it so much, and I know I get a little out of hand and push you, but I never ever want you to look at me and Pop and think all relationships are bad. Use what you know about us—the good times, the times we laugh—use it and listen to that voice inside you, the one that knows you’re a smart girl with so much to offer, more than me at seventeen and pregnant. Don’t let my mistakes ruin your future, Charm, please.” More tears slide down her face and my insides crumble. She’s strong, the backbone of our family, and I’m making her cry.

“Ma,” I whisper. “You didn’t make a mistake...you got Paulie and me and Mattie...” But my voice cracks and I can’t finish.

“I’m not strong like you, Charm. I’m not. I never went to college. I got married and had a baby before I was eighteen, and I don’t regret any of it, not for a second, even the bad times with your dad. We were so young, don’t you see? He was only nineteen with a wife and a baby and a business. We grew up together while we were married and that’s hard and sometimes people make mistakes. But don’t you doubt for a minute that we don’t love each other. But you...you’ve got the whole world in the palm of your hand. You’re going to have everything, and you’re going to love someone someday, and he’ll be the right one because you’ve got fire in you I don’t. He’ll see it, he will, I swear. You got the best of us, baby girl.” Her arms engulf me and she squeezes me tight, her shoulders moving as she tries not to cry and fails.

She feels good in my arms, holding me with such care, and I think it’s how good moms do it. I don’t even realize I’m crying too, and we weep together, women who love deep and hard and strong. We never give up, we don’t.

But I did.

“I’m sorry, Ma. I don’t know what’s really between you and Pop. I haven’t walked in your shoes, but if there’s one thing I do know, it’s that I couldn’t have asked for a better home to grow up in. You and Pop did a good job. You’ve given me so much more than some kids get.”

“Just promise me you’ll live your life with an open heart, okay?” she says. “Don’t lose faith in love, please. Your journey will be different from mine.”

I close my eyes and nod. “I want to. I want to trust, and I was close, but he...he never said—” I stop, thinking, finally seeing the truth.

He doesn’t have to tell me he loves me. Because my soul knows he does. It’s in his eyes. Always has been.

“What’s all the blubbering about out here?”

We unfurl our bodies and look up. Mattie stands at the back door, one foot in, one out. Tall and skinny in pj pants and a headful of dark ruffled hair, he’s still got a sleepy look on his face.

He scratches his unshaven jaw. “Ah, I get it—you two got your period, didn’t you? Damn, I guess this means I’m going to the market for cupcakes and tampons.”

I laugh and wipe my face. “Morning. In case I didn’t tell you last night, I’ve missed you. How are you enjoying living at home at twenty-five?” I grin. I bet he’s in hell.

“Miss you too, sis. Your accent is fucked by the way. I can’t even tell where you’re from anymore.”

“No cussing, Mattie. God’s listening,” Ma admonishes, but there’s no heat there.

He grimaces. “Fine. Scoot over on that couch and let me sit down. Enjoy my good looks and charming personality. You two look like you need it.”

We both move over, and Ma pats the seat between us. “Sit down. I want to hear about this girl you’ve been texting with.”

He groans. “Ma, don’t read my texts. You might see some shit you don’t want to.”

She waves him off. “Pfft. Is she one of those snobby girls from downtown? What’s her family name?”

Mattie and I look at each other and burst out laughing.



Later that night, the house is full of people talking and laughing, my older brother and his wife and kids, along with Joey P. I felt too bad to ask Ma to call him and cancel at the last minute, and he sits across from me, a handsome man with short sandy hair and smiling eyes. Mattie keeps kneeling me under the table and grinning every time Joey asks me a question. I return the favor and stomp on his feet with my heels. He winces, and then we start all over again.

We're in our dining room, and Ma has pulled out all the stops for me: a roast with potatoes and carrots, gravy, and sourdough rolls—all my favorites.

Mattie stands up. "Anybody else want more bread?"

"Me," Paulie says.

Mattie comes back into the dining room.

"Where's the bread?" I ask.

He has this bemused look on his face as he looks around the room. "Uh, never made it to the kitchen." He clears his throat and gives me a long look. "There's a guy at the door. Name's Blaze. Wants to see Charisma."

OMG.

"You didn't invite him in? What's wrong with you? I raised you better," Ma huffs. She throws her napkin down and starts to stand—

"No, I'll get it." I stand up and walk down the hall to the foyer.

My heart pounds as I stand at the front door and take him in.

He hasn't seen me yet.

He leans against one of the columns, hands in his pockets, head down. His boot is on, but it looks easier on him, as if he's used to it. There are shadows under his eyes, and I figure they match mine.

"Thought you'd still be at the Combine," I say as I step out onto the porch.

His head rises, blue eyes glittering as he takes me in, drifting over my hair and red lipstick. I take the perusal, glad I'm in skinny jeans, a fitted black shirt, and heels.

He can't seem to find his voice. After a long moment, he finally does. "Charm, you're so beautiful. I feel like I haven't seen you in forever." He rakes a hand through his hair and shakes himself. "Uh, the Combine ended earlier today."

"Shouldn't you be on your way back to Waylon?"

"All I wanted was to see you."

I keep a few feet between us as I move in closer. "How did you get my

address?”

“Penelope gave it up. Had to beg for it.”

I run my eyes over the boot. “How was Indianapolis?”

He looks away from me, taking in the shrubbery in the front, the ones Ma planted years ago. She takes special care with them and it shows.

“You’re the only one I wanted to tell, Charm. I ran and kicked ass. I took this stupid boot off and just took a chance.”

Paulie and Mattie appear at the door and step outside. “Just checking in,” Mattie says as he comes out and stands next to me.

Blaze straightens his stance and runs his eyes over them, trying to get a read on them, I assume.

I point them out in turn. “Blaze, meet my brothers. This one’s Paul. He married the nice girl down the street, had two babies, and helps Pop. He’s the favorite, but don’t tell Ma we know.”

Paulie grins, the expression an exact replica of our father’s. “Smartass.”

I nod my head at Mattie. “This one’s Matthew. He loves to give me a hard time about everything. He still lives at home and hates it,” I add with a smirk.

“Looked you up online, Townsend,” Mattie says. “Not bad. You look good, though if you don’t play baseball, you’re shit out of luck. We’re Yankees fans.”

Blaze huffs out a laugh. “I’m actually pretty good at baseball. Could have gotten a scholarship for it if I’d wanted to.”

“Of course you could have,” I murmur as they shake hands, my brothers and the man I love so much I’m finding it hard to breathe.

“What’s going on out here?” It’s Ma.

She walks out and frowns, her eyes running over Blaze, taking in the carefully pressed blue button-up shirt he’s got rolled up to his elbows, the long legs and the boot.

He nods his head at her. “Nice to meet you, Mrs. Rossi.”

She stills at his voice, and I wonder if she hears that darkness inside the gold, the deep tone that resonates and wraps around your heart.

She murmurs a *nice to meet you* and just stares at us. I don’t know what she sees, maybe that I feel faint or that Blaze looks just as bad, his skin pale in the soft light from the porch.

Pop comes out next. A handsome man with laughing brown eyes like mine, he is surprisingly somber. He doesn’t look at anyone but Blaze.

“Heard you were the boyfriend. About time you got here. Frank Rossi.” He takes Blaze’s hand, and if the wince on Blaze’s face is anything to go by, he squeezes pretty hard.

“Yes, sir. Finished the Combine and took the first flight out from Indianapolis to get here. Glad to meet you. I apologize if I interrupted dinner.” His face is carefully shuttered, but those eyes, they’re bright and emotional and—

Joey P is next, sticking his head out the door with a questioning look on his face. “Who’s this?”

Ma never takes her eyes off Blaze. “Joey, be a dear and get the tiramisu out of the fridge then help Susan get the dessert plates out?” Her tone brooks no argument, and he hops to it, shrugging and going back in the house.

They make small talk with Blaze, asking questions about his flight, but all I can do is stare. Inside I’m flailing around like a chicken with its head cut off. He’s here—*why?*

He looks at them when they speak, but he always comes back to me, that hesitant, searching look on his face.

Pop gives me a look as if to ask what’s going on, but I’m not sure what he wants me to say. He huffs out a laugh and focuses back on Blaze. “Looks like Charm’s lost the ability to speak. Would you like to come in?”

Ma steps forward. “No, not yet, dear. Maybe they need some time alone out here. We’re good people, but we can be a lot to take in.” She gives Blaze a small pat on the arm. “And you’re not a hillbilly. Sorry I said that to Charm.” She corrals everyone back inside.

There’s a small smile on Blaze’s face and he softly says, “I like her.”

“You’ll regret it later. She’ll be planning your life for you, arranging dates, pushing you to go to Mass, and guilt-tripping you into calling her every day.”

“Ah, well, I never had that, so maybe I wouldn’t mind so much.”

My eyes close briefly, and I open them to see he’s moved closer. We’re almost chest to chest. Just one little step and I could put my arms around his neck, reach up, and kiss him. “Why are you here, Blaze? You didn’t come all this way just to tell me about the Combine, although I am happy for you.”

“I’m never going to let you out of my sight again, Charm.”

“Oh.”

A long sigh comes from him. His eyes burn, that emotion still brewing. He tilts my chin up and gives me a long look, his mind spinning, debating

what to say judging by the conflict in his gaze. “There’s something I need to say. Emotional words are hard for me. Never got them growing up, and I learned to not think about them. Then I found football and did what I do best. Actions, applause—that’s what got me jacked up. Then you came along, a girl determined to keep me at arm’s length, when for the first time in my life, I wanted something besides football. I wanted to tell you that, but I shoved you away. Because no matter how many times I let myself think someone cares, there’s always this voice in the back of my head telling me I don’t get to have those things because people have always deserted me in some way. I’m not good at expressing myself. I know it, and I fight with it. That day in your room when I sang those songs to you, Charm...that’s *me*, telling you how I feel. When I can’t stop looking at you when you’re underneath me, that’s me telling you you’re *the one*. When I wrote those notes to you in class, that’s me saying more to you than I have ever said to anyone. It’s me when I see you on a date and I’m on a date and all I want to do is sing your song. I’m scared I won’t be worth your love. I’m scared of those big words because they mean *so much* to me. What if you leave me? What if I’m so fucked up that one day, you finally see it and walk away?”

He inhales a breath. “*I love you*. I do. I have for a long time—maybe since the moment you walked into my bedroom with that coat on and made me insane for you. I’m sorry I’ve been scared. I’m sorry I hesitate on the important things. It’s just...me.”

I close my eyes as tears slip down my face. He murmurs soothing words and wipes them away, and when I open look up again, there’s wetness on his cheeks.

His forehead rests against mine. “Can you see me, Charm? Can you see the man I really am underneath all this? Can you look at me and *see* that I can’t go on without you?”

I do. I see his love for me, right there, shining in his eyes.

I nod, and he holds my face with those big, careful hands. “I’m never going to betray you. My feelings for you...are beyond anything else. I’m not that man. I want a happy ending, Charm. That’s who I am. I’m the guy in *Say Anything* who begs the girl to take a chance. I’m here. I’m right here, and I don’t care about anything but you, even football, because if I don’t have you, I’m going to dig a hole so deep I’ll never crawl out of it.” He pauses, a pleading look in his gaze. “Will you ever be able to trust me?”

I got knocked on my ass when I walked into his dorm room and saw

Dani, but I won't again. I refuse to let my insecurities ruin what we have.

"Yes, please, yes. I want to do this with you. I do. I love you so much, and I let those thoughts get in my head and mess with me." A long breath slips through my lips. "But just hearing you say everything out loud, it means something. It makes me feel like flying..." I shake my head, overcome with emotion.

"You're mine for as long as you want me, Charm." He kisses me, soft and slow, and I melt into his arms.

We're still holding each other when Mattie pops his head out the door. "Ma says you two have to come in now so the neighbors don't talk. She wants to get to know Blaze. She's demanding a game of Monopoly. Sorry, sis."

I laugh. "We'll be up all night." I look at Blaze. "These games get pretty heated, underhanded deals and such."

"Sounds fun," he says, easing away from me and taking my hand, lacing our fingers together. "Any pointers on how to do this?" he whispers in my ear as we walk into the den and every eye in the place turns toward us.

"Nope. Sorry. It's every man for himself here." I grin.

Pop and Ma are setting up the game. She looks at my face and dips her head to hide a little smile. Pop is still wary, his gaze taking in our clasped hands, but he smiles. Joey P is noticeably absent, and I figure Ma slipped him out the back.

"So the guest gets first pick on their playing piece. Blaze, which one?" Ma says.

"Don't pick the battleship. She wants it," I say in his ear.

"The battleship, Mrs. Rossi. It's the strongest piece."

Amazement flashes in her face and she claps her hands, giving him an approving look. "I like you already!" She pats the seat next to her. "Here, come sit by me. We can talk while we play. I want to hear about this Combine thing. Such a strange world, football is. You may have to explain a lot to me. I have to warn you, I ask a lot of questions."

"My pleasure." Blaze gives them all that megawatt smile and they all freaking *blink* then slowly recover.

Paulie and Mattie have their mouths open, and I start laughing. I'm not sure if I'm laughing because they got a tingle when he smiled or at the fact that he's taken Ma's favorite Monopoly piece.

Blaze takes the seat, his face growing serious, ready. I see a hint of

excitement there too, the eager anticipation of a boy who never belonged.

She puts her hand on his shoulder. “Now...how do you feel about converting to Catholicism?”

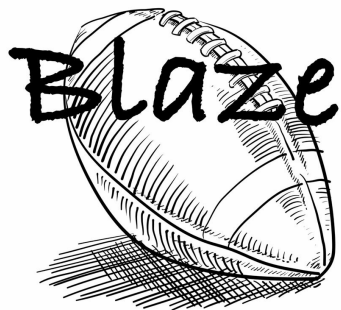
I put my hand to my mouth.

This is who they are, my eyes tell him. Are you ready?

He looks right at me. *Love*. So much wonderful love there. I see it so clear and plain and open.

He smiles at me. *I'll take them. I'll take you. Forever*, his eyes tell me back.

Epilogue



“Nice sunset,” Mattie says as we stand on the beach. “Hawaii, man—beautiful freaking place. I could get used to this. I say we come back for Christmas. Blaze loves Christmas, and he’ll pay for it since he’s got big money now. Hey, remember last year when I got him that Buddy the Elf shirt? I thought the dude was gonna cry.”

“Standing right here,” I murmur. “And there was something in my eye.”

“Gorgeous place,” Paulie agrees. “Christmas with the Rossis—never a dull moment, right, Blaze?”

“Those matching sweaters Ma made us all wear—now that, *that* was cool,” I toss in. “But I think the picture ornaments of us on the tree are my favorite, especially that one of you, Mattie, naked as a jaybird.”

Mattie groans. “I was five, okay! Five. Now you’re just trying to piss me off. I hate those pictures.”

I laugh.

“The snorkeling we did yesterday was perfection. I’d come back just for that,” Ryker says, jostling to get in next to me.

“Why isn’t anyone talking about how good I look in this suit?” Dillon chimes in, finding his place in line.

I just shake my head at him. *Cocky bastard.*

Decked out in a cream tailored suit, I dip my head and take in the way the sand feels beneath me. Seagulls call from over our heads. Palm trees wave around us.

I’m far, far from my roots in Mississippi.

I’m here, waiting for her, my heart bursting.

The guys keep murmuring softly next to me, but I tune them out. They think I’m nervous, and maybe a regular guy would be, but I’ve got nothing but clarity inside me. I’ve waited for this day since the moment I stepped onto Charisma’s front porch.

I think back to the five years that have passed. I got an agent after Combine and was drafted high in the second round, a great pick to the New York Jets. Best team I could have gone to with good teammates, plus it kept me close to Charisma and her family. Ryker went to the Giants like he wanted. Maybe one day we’ll end up together on a team, but at least we’re in the same city. Archer ended up being drafted in the third round, but trouble followed him, team infighting and fines for altercations. Last I heard, he was arrested for hitting someone outside a nightclub in Miami. His team immediately placed him on suspension. Karma eventually gets those who deserve it.

When I asked Charisma to let go of the Nashville internship and move with me, she did. It hadn’t been her dream job anyway, and after a year of waiting, she snagged a position in Manhattan and has been there since. She’s so smart. Bright and beautiful, like a flame.

I was tempted half a dozen times over the years to ask her to marry me, but I waited, always watching her, looking to see when *she* was ready. It wasn’t about fear or not having faith, but about us figuring each other out, learning how to live together. We happened fast, but sometimes love is like that. It slams into you and you might stumble a few times, trying to figure it out, but if it’s real, you’ll make it. You’ll last.

Ma leans over and whispers, “It’s about time. You two living in sin was nearly the death of me. Any plans for babies soon? Charm’s not getting any younger.”

I huff out a laugh at the teasing light in her eyes. The entire family is up here with me, not exactly the traditional thing, and it’s not in a church, but it

fits me and Charm.

Her family is mine. Dinners, crazy games, full of laughter and shit—stuff I never had.

And I'm marrying all of them today.

The music starts and we pull our gaze from the ocean to the arch of colorful flowers on the beach.

My breath whooshes out.

How on earth did a girl like that fall in love with a boy like me?

Charisma stands waiting, her arm looped through her dad's.

Her hair is down and wavy like I like it, her dress strapless and fitted with deep slits up the sides. Huge red heels adorn her feet. I grin. Gonna take those off real slow later.

She waltzes toward me, a confident swagger in those hips. Ah, yeah, she knows I'm hers. Not once in five years has she wavered in her trust. She is mine. I'm hers. Till the day I die.

I don't think I take a breath until she's next to me. Pop gives me a nod and steps aside to stand next to Ma.

My aunt and uncle and the girls sit in the front on folding wooden chairs along with some of the guys from the Jets, coaches, Penelope, and several other friends. I glance at the people who raised me. They don't know what to make of me, I think, this boy turned man who's moved on and far away. We visit once or twice a year, but things don't change with them, and that's cool. They already have their family.

And I have Charm and hers.

She puts her hands in mine, and we stare at each other. Everything else fades away. It always does. I lean in and whisper, "Ma wants grandkids. You in?"

She laughs under her breath, and I join in. I never want to stop laughing with her.

"I want at least five or six," she murmurs.

"We'll start tonight."

The minister finishes up the vows we wrote, speaking of commitment and forever and love, but I've tuned them out. I've whispered them to her for many nights when we lay in bed and held each other. She knows my heart. Her name is written there.

I slide the silver band onto her finger, the one that matches her huge diamond. On the inside it reads, *Fire in my hands*.

She slides mine on, the inscription, *I see you, always*. Such simple words, nothing flowery, but she chose them. I'm worth something to her. I'm *it* for her.

Our kiss is long and lingering, and when I pull back, she looks up at me, eyes shining.

"I love you, Charm," I say softly.

Because once you know a girl sees you for the man you are, once you know she's never leaving, she wants you forever, and she'll take a chance on you, it's easy to let the words out.

"I know," she says, smiling. "I love you too."

The minister pronounces us man and wife and presents us to the small audience.

Her hand is in mine, fingers laced tight.

I stare down at her. I figure amazement is on my face, because I'm feeling it, the luckiest man in the whole world, living a real-life fairy tale.

"You and me, babe—you ready?"

"Always," she says.

I pick her up and swing her around.



* * *

Dear Reader,

Thank you for reading *I Hate You*. I hope you enjoyed Blaze and Charisma's story as much as I loved writing it. If you want more passion and angst, take a peek at the short excerpt from Zack and Sugar's book [Boyfriend Bargain](#) or just head straight to the Amazon store to get the entire full-length standalone novel. It is currently FREE in Kindle Unlimited!

Honest, heartfelt reviews are like gold to authors, and I read each and every one. If you have a few moments, please consider leaving a review for *I Hate You*.

Ilsa Madden-Mills

P.S. Please join my FB readers group, Unicorn Girls, to get the latest scoop as well as talk about books, wine, and Netflix:

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/ilsasunicorngirls/>

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Excerpt - Boyfriend Bargain



Boyfriend Bargain
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Zach

When I showed up for tonight's game, I didn't know it would try to kill me.

I picture the headlines now: *D-1 hockey player dies during biggest rivalry event of the year.*

Whatever. I push those thoughts down and skate onto the rink, ignoring my out-of-control heartbeat. The thing is, *I can't die*. Sure, I scored two goals in the first two periods even after some heavy body checks, but that's not enough if I want to break the tie.

I need a hat trick.

I need to be the hero.

But the more I think about the fact that my chest is thumping faster than it should, the worse it gets.

Slow down, I tell my heart. *Please.*

It doesn't, and I inhale slowly through my nose then out through my mouth. Deep breaths usually chill me out when performance anxiety hits, but the arena spins, and I resist the urge to skate back to the bench and put my head between my legs.

Shake it off, Z.

It's just nerves in front of the home crowd. *Use it as energy.*

But this...this feels different. Like a train about to derail.

My jaw tightens as I clench my fists, physically willing myself to push one skate in front of the other.

Dressed in our black and gold, the team and I move to the center of the rink and up to the faceoff. Briefly, my thoughts go to the people in the stands. Watching. Depending on me to be the hockey star.

He has it all, people say. Number one pick in the NHL. Hobey Baker Award winner.

"Z? You good?" It's Eric, my winger and best friend. Without even looking, I know the redheaded behemoth is assessing me—probably with a scowl on his bearded face.

He'll think I've lost my mind.

He'll think I can't keep my shit together when it really counts.

I'm supposed to be strong.

I'm the captain.

I *am* this team.

"Z?" His voice is more insistent. "You ready for this?"

My chest squeezes and my arms tingle. *Am I dying?*

Don't look at him. Dude sees everything.

I give him a nod.

Reece, my younger brother and another version of myself—so much so that it's eerie—skates up on the other side. He slaps me on the back with his gloved hand and points his stick toward the Minnesota-Duluth players. "Ready to kick some bulldog ass?"

"Yeah." One of the opposing defensemen catches my eye and makes a lewd gesture with his hands. It's just a regular season game, but the rivalry between our universities goes back forty years. They also kicked our asses last year during the Frozen Four. Cold determination builds, battling with my racing heart as I grit my teeth. If you want to end up a champion, you have to climb the biggest mountains one step at a time, and right now this team is Mt. Everest.

I have to score.

A clammy feeling washes over me.

Shit.

Get. Yourself. Together.

Somewhere off in the distance, a lone female fan yells, “Go, Z!” and chills race down my spine. It’s not *her*, but something about the voice is familiar enough that it sends me back in time to a place when I thought the world was golden.

She’s dead, and I know it, yet...

Panic claws at my body as the cold air around me grows hot and thick. My throat tightens and it’s all I can do to not rip off my helmet. My brain wants to climb out of my head and push the tension away. My stick wobbles as I juggle it, trying to keep it from clattering on the ice.

Wake up, Z. Your heart is going to pop out of your chest.

Coach Swearingen yells something, and I swivel my head to look at him, watching his lips move in slow motion. The lights of the arena blind me, and it feels like a monumental effort, but I somehow manage to put my hand up to shield the glare.

I’m swaying and I think I taste ashes in my mouth. God, this helmet is choking me. My limbs are chunks of lead, and I stop, panting as I hunch over on the ice until I manage to stand again. I’m vaguely aware of the stares of the officials, the calls from my teammates, the wave of silence slowly drifting over the arena.

Reece and Eric call my name.

Someone touches my arm—I think it’s an official—but I brush their hand off.

“Z! Z! Z!”

It’s that girl in the stands again.

I can’t do this in front of everyone.

Zack Morgan is *not* weak.

I’m a goddamn superstar.

Even though I don’t deserve it.

That’s when I bolt, pulling away.

By the time I make it past the other players on the bench—I can’t look at them for fear of them seeing what a total fucking disaster I am—I already have my helmet and gloves off. Chest heaving and gulping in air that isn’t there, I dash down the carpeted, darkened hallway, my heart a runaway train.

Just go.

But I don't know where.

I don't know what I'm doing.

I just know I need to make this insanity stop.

You brought this on yourself, a voice says in my head. You should have worked out harder. You should have run that extra mile. You should have done that new age meditating shit. You should have scored three goals instead of two in the first period and then this pressure wouldn't be here.

This isn't normal.

I exhale rapidly, trying to breathe properly, but God help me, I can't...

Dashing for the locker room, my legs pump to get me there. I fling open the door and dart inside, my body shaking as I jerk off my jersey, followed by my pads.

Standing in just my pants, my eyes are wild as I sweep the place, taking in the giant lion painted on the wall with the *Never Give Up* slogan underneath. Dashing to my wooden locker, I reach in and yank out the small silver medallion that's hanging from a hook.

I don't wear it during games, but maybe I should. Just as a reminder.

"Nothing gold can stay," I manage to whisper aloud, the words the title and last line of a poem by Robert Frost. Cradling the necklace in my palm, my thumb rubs the silver circle, feeling the etching of the letters.

From a distance, I hear pounding footsteps—medics and trainers, always ready.

My chest beats and beats and beats, gaining speed, gaining momentum, and darkness creeps into my vision as I slip the chain around my neck.

My knees buckle and I collapse on the floor.

I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I whisper to the girl I killed.

Two weeks later

Sugar

Listen, I don't normally hide behind a dusty old support column in the basement of the Kappa house, but when I do, I'm a true ninja. In fact, I've been holding up this piece of wood for a full ten minutes, sipping on disgusting spiked punch as I periodically stick my head out and survey the dimly lit room. It's my first frat party—pretty sad for a senior—and I'm as nervous as a long-tailed cat in a room full of drunk, gyrating co-eds.

Surprisingly, not one person has noticed my furtive glances from my hidey-hole except for the leering frat guy in the corner. Worst of all, he's wearing a too-tight black shirt over his beer gut that reads *Blink If You Want Me*, and unfortunately, sometimes I accidentally *do* look in his direction and we make eye contact. Obviously I blink. I mean, it's not like I can just *not* blink.

He sends me a rather dainty finger wave and motions for me to come over. For the hundredth time.

"Jesus," I say under my breath. *Never in a million years* my eyes glare.

Besides, it's the hockey player I'm here for—the one who hasn't arrived at this party to celebrate the big win over Western Michigan this weekend.

Cursing under my breath, I check my watch for the second time, as if something might have changed in the last few minutes. Do these party people ever sleep or study? How do they deal with hangovers the next day? Ten PM already on a Sunday night and I should be back in my room, curled up on my bed devouring Ding Dongs and Doritos while I go over notes for tomorrow's classes.

My shoulders press into the column as a swarm of giggling girls in high heels stagger past me. One of them bangs her elbow into my side but barely gives me a second glance. Rubbing the sore spot, I call out in my sweetest Southern accent, which comes out when I'm pissed. "Don't worry about me, y'all. I'm fiiiiine!"

They never even turn around. Ugh. I sigh. All I want to do is leave this party, put on my sweats and camisole, and veg out, maybe turn on some HBO after my studying is over. It takes a lot of work to attend one of the most prestigious—and most expensive—colleges in the Midwest. Welcome to Hawthorne University.

I blow at a piece of white-blond hair that's come out of my headband. Maybe he isn't going to show.

Then it happens.

An electric current crackles in the air and the partygoers stop talking, looking around expectantly, almost as if they know something big is coming.

It's *him*. Has to be.

No one else has this kind of stupid effect on people.

Standing on my tiptoes, I watch as Zack Morgan, AKA Z, AKA the Heartbreaker, AKA Douchebag (that one's my own contribution to the list) strides through the ground-level basement door, dipping his head so he

doesn't bang it on the frame.

Heartbreaker. *Pfft*. In other words, he's a womanizer.

That's a moot point, though. I'm not here to discuss societal stereotypes of future pro athletes. I'm here to bargain.

Two other players—one blond and one a redhead—flank him on each side like chess pieces protecting their king. I squint. I think those guys are his...wingers?

The DJ turns down the music to announce the hockey team has arrived, and a buzz goes through the crowd as partiers clap and cheer.

The players move, the sea of people parting enough that I see the entirety of him in his full-blown glory and a tingle of *something* zips up my spine.

Finer than frog hair is what my southern mama would have said about him, and there's no doubt it's true. He's hot as hell and it slams into you when you look at him, like a great wind in a hurricane.

Without being too obvious, I study him from the bottom of his black motorcycle boots up to the tight jeans that cling to his thighs, all the way to the fitted, super-sleek dark grey leather jacket encasing his well-built upper body. On anyone else, that jacket would come off as pretentious—like a wannabe biker—but he looks like he just stepped off a movie screen.

He's a big-ass Viking.

I examine the six-foot, six-inch frame of the NHL's number one draft pick. Apparently, he's so slick on the ice that the Nashville Predators drafted him this past June, willing to wait a year for him to finish his senior year at HU.

It's definitely not just his toned, athletic grace in the arena that captures people's attention. It's that face. Chiseled and firm and strong, his jaw is spectacular. And his long, wavy, dirty blond hair? Good Lord, I've heard jokes about "hockey hair" and how hot it is—and now I see why. My fingers itch to touch it.

His nose is rather long, fitting for his height, but there's a slight imperfection, a small dent, which I imagine came from a hockey injury. It's impossible to see his eye color in this dim lighting, but I already know from his online HU bio that they're grey.

As if he senses me staring, he flicks his eyes in my direction and I stiffen, part of me terrified he'll find me, the other part hoping he does. It was the same last week when I showed up for ladies' night at the Tippy Moose to spy on him. (It was right there in his bio that he frequented the popular bar, so I

wouldn't call it stalking.)

That night I sat in a back booth, sipping on a shot of smooth tequila, trying to conjure up the backbone to go up to him and introduce myself. I mean, I have to start somewhere, but I'm not a flirty person. I have balls, don't get me wrong, but when it comes to him, nerves abound.

You have to make a move, Sugar.

With a deep exhalation, I take a step toward him just as a group of sorority girls call out his name and run up to say hi, rapt expressions on their faces as if he's the big present on Christmas morning.

Come on...

My hands twist as people circle around him, guys too, clapping him on the back and clamoring to get his attention. I don't blame them, I guess, if sucking up to athletes is your thing.

Doubt creeps in, and I frown, worrying I can't compete with this kind of attention. I'm not bubbly or even a hockey fan.

He moves around the crowd and stalks into the center of the room, his gaze searching the perimeter, and even though I've eased back behind the column, I read the concentration in his gaze.

The rumor is, at certain parties he chooses a new girl to be his for the next month. See? Douchebag. Miss December has apparently been dumped, and he's ready for another one if the throng of females scrambling to get to him is anything to go by. As I watch, one girl crawls between the legs of her friends then jumps up in front of him and throws her arms around his neck. She lets out a squeal, and I roll my eyes. All I need is some popcorn and this is a show.

After a few hugs, he manages to move away from them and takes up residence near the dance floor. His two friends stand next to him as he scans the crowd, arms loose at his sides, his gaze moving from one face to the next as if searching for something special, much like I do when picking out a good donut.

His attention lands on the column, and his eyes rove until they capture mine. I freeze. *Crap.* My body hums, and I nearly drop my cup as a jolt of adrenaline lights up my veins.

Well.

Maybe this won't be as hard as I thought.

Maybe I *can* get his attention.

But then he frowns.

Wait—why is he frowning?

Am I that awful? Well, yes. I glance down at my black leggings and puffy black North Face jacket. I'm a blob in shapeless clothes, and I guess I could have actually put on party attire before I came, but this extravaganza happened right after my work shift and I didn't have time.

"I can't do this," I mutter under my breath.

He's the king of the ice, and I'm just...no one. I come from nothing. I have nothing, literally. Okay, I have fifty-three dollars in my checking account, but that's barely enough to hold me over until my next paycheck. Thank goodness for scholarships and loans. But man, those loans are big, just waiting for me when I graduate. I twist a strand of hair around my index finger, making it into a tight spiral before letting it go.

I have to be realistic.

This crazy, harebrained idea will never work.

Plus, I don't have time for over-the-top, testosterone-driven superstar athletes.

Until now, that is.

I have to make time.

Because Zack Morgan is the key to me getting into the law school of my dreams. He just has to agree to be my fake boyfriend.

END EXCERPT



* * *

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About the Author

Wall Street Journal, *New York Times*, and *USA Today* bestselling author Ilsa Madden-Mills writes about strong heroines and sexy alpha males that sometimes you just want to slap. A former high school English teacher and elementary librarian, she adores all things *Pride and Prejudice*; Mr. Darcy is her ultimate hero. She loves unicorns, frothy coffee beverages, vampire books, and any book featuring sword-wielding females.

*Please join her FB readers group, Unicorn Girls, to get the latest scoop as well as talk about books, wine, and Netflix:

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/ilsasunicorngirls/>

You can also find Ilsa at these places:

Website:

<http://www.ilsamaddenmills.com>

News Letter:

<http://www.ilsamaddenmills.com/contact>

Book + Main:

<https://bookandmainbites.com/ilsamaddenmills>

