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# ENEMY DOWN

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NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR



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Enemy Down  
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“Hot, right?”

I glance to my left, to lane number four as fellow track star—and my very best friend—Kaitlyn Collins catches up to me. I lift my face to the sky to take in the late afternoon sun. It might be early fall, but it’s always hot in Southern California this time of year. I swipe beads of moisture from my forehead and concentrate on my breathing and my pace. Our big meet is next week, and I need to take first in my category or...well, I can’t think of the consequences.

“The sun is going down. It should cool off soon enough,” I say, but before I get a chance to turn my focus back to my own lane, I catch her mischievous grin, and the wagging of her eyebrows.

“You know that’s not what I’m talking about.”

“Then what are you talking about?” I ask, instantly regretting the words spilling from my mouth. Stupid. Stupid. Stupid.

Honestly, I'd have to be a total idiot not to know she's talking about the football team, and their...oh, how does she describe them in their tight pants? Sexy, hot football butts. If you ask me, they all look like overstuffed sausages ready to burst wide open. I never did have a taste for sausages, except those flat breakfast sandwiches ones from my favorite fast-food restaurant.

"You don't want to tap dat ass?" she teases. I take a deep, fueling breath and focus straight ahead, putting an end to this conversation. I am not discussing butts with her, or any kind of sausage. But will she let it alone? Hell no. This is Kaitlyn we're talking about. She might want to work her way through the entire football team—bed every Falcon—but she can leave me out of it. I have more important things to think about than tapping any man's ass. Wait, is that even a thing?

"What about Christian?"

"What about him?" I grumble.

Her grin widens and yeah, I get it. She caught me staring at the quarterback as he called out the last play. I'd give just about anything to run track somewhere else, but no, Kingston had to efficiently build the track around the football field, forcing me to stare at cocky Christian Moore like it's my damn job. When it comes right down to it, I don't *have* to stare. I don't even want to stare. I hate that guy with the power of a thousand burning suns, and honestly, that might not even be enough sun to accurately describe the extent of my loathing.

*Then why the hell were you staring, Maize?*

Isn't that the question of the century. But there is one thing I know. It has nothing to do with his butt in those pants. Almost nothing, or maybe everything.

“Christian is looking even harder this year, don’t you think?” She lifts her arm and flexes her impressive bicep.

I put on my best bored expression. “I wouldn’t know.”

I pick up my pace, hoping to leave my bestie behind, but she’s not having any of that. I might be the school’s top middle-distance runner, but she’s the top long-distance girl, and there isn’t a hurdle she can’t jump. My stupid gaze slides to Christian again.

Speaking of jumping.

*Come on, Maize!*

Kaitlyn kicks out those long athletic legs of hers and catches up easily. Not that I really thought I could lose her. We’re both attending Kingston College on sport scholarships. Most students here are on their parents’ dime, but we’re star athletes from the wrong side of the tracks. We met at Sweetwater High, an uber rich high school in So Cal. We both had to take three different busses to get there each morning, since it was outside our school districts. That’s where I met Christian too. God, just thinking about him makes me want to hurl. The guy singlehandedly ruined my life in senior year.

I cast Kaitlyn a glance, and as if being pulled by some greater force, my gaze once again slides to Christian, only to find his eyes locked on me—like he could feel me staring, feel me thinking about him. Holy shit. I tear my gaze away fast and suck in air.

“We still on for the mall later?” I ask, trying not to sound winded. I could run for hours without losing my breath, but apparently, all it takes is one direct look from Christian to steal the air from my lungs.

*Get it together, girl.*

Her pace slows, as she finishes her run. “Yeah, but I can’t be long. I have a group project meeting later.”

I toss my words over my shoulders. “Okay, I have one lap left. After I shower, I’ll meet you out front.”

She nods and wanders off the track as I keep running. I pick up the pace, wanting to feel the burn in my legs—and expel images of Christian from my brain. My lungs expand, and I enjoy the rush of endorphins racing through my body. Nothing, and I mean nothing—sex included—feels as good as running. Not that I’ve had a lot of sex. I’m practically a virgin. A few years back, my buddy Ryan—the boy next door back home—and I, decided we didn’t want to be virgins when we went off to college. So, we did the logical thing and had sex. It was awkward and fumbling, and it was over before it ever began. I’m not even sure I climaxed. Pretty sure I didn’t. I can barely get myself off with my own hand. Usually, I have to switch to battery operated, which I hate to do in an old house with nothing but seaweed between the walls. I have four roommates, and I’d die of embarrassment if they ever heard.

*Dear Mom, thanks for that strict Catholic upbringing and all the teachers who body shamed us.* At Sweetwater, our uniforms were constantly assessed. I was told numerous times my skirt was too high. Um hello. Tall girl. Long legs. Capri pants on other girls are like shorts on me.

I’m about to slow my pace, but the next thing I know, something big and hard hits me in the side of the head, and I lose all sense of balance. The direct hit, combined with my speed, sends me flying forward, and the sound of bones popping, and skin ripping as I hit the ground hard, reverberates around me, over the ringing in my ears.



My jaw skids shut with an audible click as my face hits the track, and I skid. It takes forever for my body to stop moving and the world to stop spinning. When everything slows, I lay on the ground face down, too afraid to breathe...to move.

What the hell just happened?

“Are you okay?” I try to move, to check my limbs, but whoever is hovering over me puts his hands on my back to hold me down. “Don’t move.”

Move? I almost laugh, because I’m not sure I can move and that seriously freaks me out. I turn my head to the side, and that’s when Christian puts his face down, right there, inches from mine.

“Maize, I’m so sorry.”

What is he talking about?

“My football,” he begins obviously reading the question in my eyes. “I don’t know. I threw it, and Kyle missed it, and then you were right there, perfectly aligned for it to hit. You weren’t there a second before. You must have picked up your pace.”

“Oh, it’s my fault, is it?” I manage to get out.

His brow furrows, and he shakes his head. “No, that’s not what I mean.”

Voices echo in my brain as everyone comes running, and embarrassment floods me. I need to get up, to move, to run all the way to Canada, never to be heard from again. I move my hand, and once again Christian presses down, to stop me.

“Can you stop doing that?” I whimper. “I’m fine. I don’t feel anything.”

His face twists. “Yeah, that’s because of the adrenaline rush. Give it a second.”

I swallow. Why do I get the feeling he knows something I don’t? “Christian—”

“You’re going to be okay,” he says, but the strain in his voice tells another story.

A burst of panic floods my body, and I slide my hand and touch my forehead to find an egg-sized lump. It’s possible I have a concussion. The world spins and my stomach lurches from the movement. Great, now I’m going to vomit in front of everyone. This ground might as well open up and swallow me whole.

“Here,” he says, and slides his jersey under my head to cushion it from the ground. I sink into the soft material, heavy with the scent of soap and...Christian. Okay, I definitely have a concussion, because no way on the face of this earth would I be reveling in the stupid aroma of his shirt.

Damn him!

A siren sounds and I try to shake my head no. All I need to do is get up, throw a little dirt on my wounds, and I’ll be okay. I give a very unladylike snort. That’s what my Mom used to say to me when I was little and hurt myself. Throw a little dirt on it. Mom and me, we were a team. Just the two of us against the world. We did things on our own terms, and asked for nothing. We worked for everything, or we went without.

“Maize, please,” Christian implores, his voice, heavy with worry, stills me. He drops to the ground, and lays on his side, his eyes locked on mine. Blue. My God, he has the most gorgeous blue eyes in the universe. I couldn’t see them that

night we were locked in the closet, playing seven minutes in heaven. I wanted so badly to fit in with the ‘popular’ girls at Sweetwater. When Chelsea Haverstock invited me to her party, I was thrilled. Of course, I had no idea it would ruin my reputation and leave me friendless, except for Kaitlyn. She had no desire to be a popular girl. She knew mean when she saw it. Now I see it everywhere.

“I think your ankle is broken,” he says his voice low, like it will somehow soften the blow.

“No, it’s not.” I suck in a fast breath, determined to get up, but his big hand continues to push me down again and why the hell do I like that so much? What is wrong with me? I hate his face. I hate his touch, and I most definitely hate the way he’s pinning me down, and making me wonder what it would be like if he were on top of me.

“The paramedics are almost here. Let’s wait and see what they say.”

“I’m not waiting for anything.” No, I’m getting up, finishing my run, and meeting Kaitlyn for a fast trip to the mall for new laces. If I wait, they might tell me what I refuse to admit. If I refuse to admit it, then I won’t be off the team, my scholarship won’t be stripped from me, and I won’t have to move back home, having made nothing of myself. I have big dreams, for God’s sake. I want to be a lawyer, I want to right all the wrongs and help people.

His fingers splay on my back, teasing all my nerve endings until pleasure mingles with pain. I’m familiar with the sensations from running, and I have to admit, my body craves that rush. The next thing I know, I’m being checked out by two men, and nearly blinded by a flashlight. Everyone is moving,

fussing about, and my head starts to pound so hard, nausea grips my stomach. If they would all just leave me alone, I'll be fine. The two paramedics move me, and shift me to a gurney. I briefly close my eyes, wishing I was an ostrich and could shove my head in the sand. I might be an athlete, but I don't love being the center of attention, and right now, every member of Kingston's football team is staring at me—so are their girlfriends, and all the cheerleaders.

It takes great effort to go up onto my elbows, to check out my body, and a sound that seems to scare everyone around me crawls out of my throat when I glance at my foot, which is twisted in an unnatural way.

"No..." I whisper. "No, no, no."

"Maize," Christian says, and I turn to him as tears burn behind my eyes. "It's going to be okay." He puts his hand on my shoulder.

I swallow against the pain in my throat. Christian is a rich kid, born with a silver spoon in his mouth. He has no idea that his wayward football just put an end to my scholarship. How the hell am I going to pay for next term's tuition?

"You have no idea what you're talking about," I shoot back, and he withdraws his big hand from my shoulder, worry and guilt all over his face. "You ruined high school for me, and..." a humorless laugh crawls out of my throat. "And now, not only have you ruined my senior year of college, but you might have ruined my future too." He rears back like I just slapped him. His mouth opens and closes, like my words have shocked him, but he knows what he did that day in the closet, what he's done now. I hold my skinned palm up to stop him. "Just go." He inches back, and I square my shoulders to pull myself

together. No way, no how am I going down like this. I'm a fighter. A survivor. A girl who can stand on her own two feet—well, at the moment, on one good foot. As long as I can stand, I'll do whatever it takes—anything—to stay in college.

Well, just about anything...

I pick my helmet up from the ground, and the coach comes over to me. He dips his head, and assesses me like he does after I've taken a hard hit on the field.

"You okay?" he asks.

"Not really," I respond as Maize's words beat against my gut. She blames me for ruining high school for her? Honestly, that's news to me. After our seven minutes in heaven, when she pulled my pants down to my ankles, and opened the doors so all the girls could get pictures, I never spoke to her again. Yeah, I get it, the mean girls were hazing the skinny new guy. I never paid Maize much attention after that, and even though she left me standing in my boxer shorts, the rumors about her being an easy lay never seemed to ring true. Then again, she did take my pants to my ankles. But how was that *me*, ruining school for her?

But the past is the past and what's happening now is far more serious than a stupid hazing prank. I might not like her as a person after that stunt—that doesn't mean I don't admire a

beautiful girl when I see one—but I'd never forgive myself if she lost her spot on the track team because of my football.

Coach's voice pulls me back. "Why don't you go to the hospital, check on her."

I nod, tap my helmet against my leg and glance around. My best friend Linc, and his girlfriend Steph, slowly walk toward me.

"Okay, guys back on the field," Coach Meyers orders. He waves his hand and the guys all start back, and I nod as they check in with me.

"Fuck," I say to Linc. "Her ankle is shit."

He tears off his helmet and runs his fingers through his mess of dark hair. "That was Maize, right? From high school?"

"Yeah. That was Maize." I shake my head and stare at Linc, like he can somehow make this all better, even though I know he can't. He's a good guy, and back in high school took me under his wing, on and off the football field. We've been best friends ever since. I was sixteen when we moved to So Cal, and a skinny kid at that. It wasn't until eleventh grade that I filled out, and tried out for the football team. During my sophomore year, the girls might have teased me, splashed a picture of me with my pants at my ankles all over social media, but my status quickly changed when I excelled on the football field. Then I was moving in different circles, Maize's stunt long behind me, and the pictures from the closet became almost legendary, something to be admired instead of ridiculed. How fucked up is that?

I wasn't a fan of all the attention. I'm not one to flaunt or showboat around and as far as Maize goes, after the incident, she mostly kept to herself or hung out with Kaitlyn. I found

out later she was a scholarship student. Maybe she had to focus on her running and classwork and didn't have time for parties. That doesn't change the fact that she was one of the mean girls—girls who never had anything to do with me until I was a baller. Of course, Chelsea Haverstock was a mean girl too and that didn't stop me from sleeping with her in my senior year of high school.

"She looks different," Linc says.

He's right. She does look different. She was a cute sixteen-year-old, now she's a tall, gorgeous college senior who excels in track. Impressive really, and now I might have taken it all away from her. Just because I don't like her doesn't mean I want bad things for her.

"Fuck," I say again. I'm responsible for the accident and I need to at least see what I can do to help. "Listen, I'm going to go to the hospital."

"I'll come with you," Linc says.

Steph slides her arm around Linc. "Me too."

"Hey, what's going on?" I glance up to see Kaitlyn coming toward me. Her ponytail bounces as she picks up her pace. "I was out front when I heard the ambulance. Who's hurt?" She glances around the track, and her face pales as worry moves into her eyes. "Wait, shit. Where's Maize?"

I jerk my thumb over my shoulder, to the street. "She, uh..."

"Oh my God, is Maize hurt?" she asks, her voice rising, bordering on hysteria as her gaze goes from me to Linc, to Steph, back to me again.

"It's her ankle. I think it might be broken."

"Holy shit." She starts toward the street.



“Where are you going?” I call out.

“To the hospital. Where do you think I’m going?”

“I’m going too. Come on. I’ll drive you.”

She keeps walking, and I guess if Maize hates me, her best friend does too. “It’s too far to walk. Come on, Kaitlyn, I’ll drive.”

She slows and spins, her jaw tight. I don’t miss the way Steph has her head lowered, like she’s looking down her nose at Kaitlyn, because she’s not dressed in the latest, most fashionable yoga clothes from that ridiculously overpriced store.

She yells out, “Fine.”

“Meet me in the lot,” I say and hand my keys to Steph. She takes them and doesn’t even acknowledge Kaitlyn as she stalks off, not bothering to wait or make conversation. She could at least show concern for Kaitlyn’s best friend.

I nod to Linc and we head to the locker rooms to change. A few minutes later, I’m behind the wheel of my Jeep, Kaitlyn beside me and Linc and Steph in the back as I maneuver through the campus and hit the street. Ten minutes later, I’m at the hospital and squeeze my Jeep between two cars. Linc pulls up his parking app to pay, as Kaitlyn and I both hurry inside.

Kaitlyn scans the waiting room. “They must have taken her in already.”

“I’ll go find out.” I walk up to the nurse’s station, and a pretty little blonde behind the counter offers me a big smile.

“Hi there.” She smiles, and Kaitlyn snorts behind me.

“Seriously,” she murmurs.

Ignoring her, because I am not flirting like she thinks, I ask about Maize and find out that she's been rushed to surgery. I thank the nurse and plop down into a chair next to Kaitlyn.

She turns to me, her face tight. "What the hell happened anyway?"

My stomach twists as I toss my car keys to Linc. "No sense in you both hanging out here. I'll give you a call when I know more and you can come get us then."

Linc catches the keys and nods, and I bend forward to brace my elbows on my knees.

"Are you going to answer me?" Before I can get a word out she continues. "It obviously has something to do with you, considering you're sitting here."

"It was an accident."

She snorts. "Oh, just like you pulling down your pants. Was that an accident too, Christian?" What the fuck is she talking about? I don't get the chance to ask before she blurts out, "Okay, tell me everything. Exactly what happened."

I let her earlier comment go, and exhale. "Kyle missed the ball, and it hit her. She went flying and landed hard." I steal a quick glance at Kaitlyn to find her shaking her head, and I can almost hear the wheels spinning.

"Fuck," she murmurs. "This is bad, so bad."

"Yeah, my sentiments exactly." I glance at Kaitlyn's ponytail, the glow on her cheeks, like she'd just been running herself. "What does this mean for her? You know, for track." I have no idea if she's a scholarship student here or not, but I can only assume she is, based on the fact that she told me I've

probably ruined her future. I didn't want to come right out and ask, and make her feel, less, somehow.

Instead of answering, Kaitlyn pushes from the chair, and shoves her hands into her pockets, but her non-answer says it all. Shit. Kaitlyn paces for a few seconds and heads to the coffee machine. Coins plink as she drops them into the slot, followed by gurgling sounds. She surprises me by coming back with two paper cups.

"Thanks."

She doesn't respond. Instead, she sits down and loudly sips, like she's purposely trying to annoy me, but I'm already upset with myself as it is. I toss up a silent prayer, and tell myself that it's nothing serious and that after minor surgery she'll be back on her feet in no time. My gut however, doesn't quite believe it.

"Should we call her parents or something?" I ask.

"No."

I shift on the hard plastic chair, as more people enter and fill the seats. "Don't you think they should know?"

"No." Kaitlyn pulls her phone out and starts texting.

"Her parents should know. I mean she might want a family member here for when she gets out of surgery, and their insurance—"

"No."

I let loose a frustrated sigh and tug on my hair. "Can you say something other than no?"

"Yes."

"So you can, you just won't to me."

She gives me a humorless grin. I shake my head and I flick the plastic lid on the coffee as I push to my feet. My phone pings, and I pull it from my pocket. I read a message from Tamara, telling me there's a fun new band at the pub this weekend. That will get me out of Wolf House for the night, and I always try to be out of the frat house when the monthly 'ceremony' takes place. I shake my head. Jesus Christ. It's fucking crazy. My father is a goddamn Supreme Court judge, and what's taking place in the basement of Wolf House is fucking corrupt. Sure, it's a secret society, and we've all taken a vow of silence, but I don't want anything to do with it. Just like I didn't want anything to do with the hazing when I arrived. I am not going to 'bag' any virgins, for Christ's sake. I'd like to think I'm above that kind of disgusting misogyny. Women are not sex objects, put on this earth for my pleasure.

While I believe that, and respect women, it doesn't mean I want or am ready for a committed relationship. If my parents' marriage was anything to go by—she trapped him by getting pregnant with me—I'd steer clear of women altogether. But hey, I'm a red-blooded male. So, while I'm all about the sex, women know I have nothing more to offer.

I stop pacing. Maybe...this weekend, the 'ceremony' that takes place in our basement might just be the way to make up for taking Maize to the ground. Then again...I'm not sure it's something she'd ever do.

I spend the next little bit checking social media, and pacing. I head outside for a breath of fresh air, and the cute nurse eventually follows me out. She puts her hand on me and turns me her way.

"You don't remember me, do you?"

I narrow my eyes. Shit, did I sleep with her at some frat party and forget? “Sorry, no.”

“I’m Fiona Witherspoon.” She gives a little laugh. “I was a senior at Sweetwater when you moved to town.” She nibbles her bottom lip in that flirty way women do. “I was there at Chelsea’s party the night you sort of lost your pants.”

“Yeah, great night.”

She chuckles and nudges me playfully. “It was just a prank, put the new kids in the closet, and have some fun.”

“It really wasn’t fun.” I narrow my eyes and inch back. “Was it fun for you?”

She waves her hand. “Actually yeah, it was a good laugh.” I just stare at her and she shifts a bit uncomfortable under my scrutiny. Bullying is anything but funny. “It was harmless.”

“I’m not sure I would agree with you.”

“Come on. You got over it, big time, and Maize was a big nerd at our school on scholarship.” She blows out a breathy sigh. “Did she really think she could be one of us?” A tsking sound is followed by a hard eye roll, and everything inside me tightens.

“One of us?”

“You know.” She puts her hand on my chest. “One of us.” Her voice is flirty, playful as she touches me. “People like you and me.”

I shake my head as the pieces fall into place. “Oh, one of the popular kids, you mean?”

“Yeah, you know. Cool and popular and not on a sports scholarship. She should have stayed on her side of town.”

“Okay, let me get this straight. You guys were out to prank *both* of us?”

“Yeah, but then...” Her gaze moves down my body, and her fingers follow, stopping when they reach my pants. “This happened, and then you fit in quite nicely, didn’t you? No hard feelings?”

One of her hands goes to her hair, and in a flirty gesture she curls a strand around her finger. I jerk back, away from her touch. “If you’ll excuse me, I need to get back inside to check on my friend.”

“But—”

I don’t want to hear what she says. I go through the doors as they open, my stomach tight at what I just heard. I honestly had no idea the prank was on Maize, too. Did they tell her to pull my pants down? Then make fun of her for doing it? She did stop hanging with those girls, because they turned her reputation to shit. She never seemed like she was an easy lay, as the guys used to say. In the hallway one day, I heard someone call out ‘corn on the cob’ when she passed, and I’d have to be an idiot not to get it—although I’m beginning to believe a lot of things went over my head in high school. But her name is Maize, which in French is loosely related to corn, and a guy’s dick obviously represents the cob.

Those rumors must have evolved from that incident. Something the mean girls started to put her in her place, show her she didn’t belong. Did she think I was in on it? Holy fuck, she must have, but had I known what was really going on, that she’d been set up too, I would have beat the crap out of everyone responsible—although most of them were the mean girls.

I drop down into the uncomfortable chair and Kaitlyn stares at me like I might have something on my face. Other than regret and worry, I'm pretty sure I'm clean. I swipe at my nose anyway.

"Christian?"

I stiffen, and brace myself because she looks like she has something very important on her mind. I lower my voice to match hers. "Yeah?"

"What goes on in the basement of Wolf House?"

I slowly open one eye, and then the other, and when my bedroom walls come into view, and reality comes racing back, I groan and roll over, the stupid boot on my foot a heavy reminder that I might never run again. It's been five days since they did the ankle surgery, and for five days I've been lying here trying to figure out how to pay for it, along with my next term's tuition. I run my tongue over my front tooth. It's been a bit wiggly since I fell. Maybe the tooth fairy would give me a large sum if I tucked it under my pillow. I mean, an adult front tooth must be worth something, right?

God, what am I even saying? I must still be concussed, because I'm clearly not thinking straight. The tooth fairy only collects kids' teeth. Sheesh. I laugh, almost manically at that last thought. My phone pings, and I sober as I reach for it. I put on my best happy voice when I see it's my mom calling. Then I wonder why she's calling at ten in the morning on a Saturday. I slide my finger across the phone, digging deep for my chirpy voice.

"Hey Mom, what's up?"



“What do you mean what’s up? Can’t a mother check in on her daughter?”

Okay, it’s true. I haven’t called or texted and that’s not like me. It’s just, well, I worried that if I heard her voice I’d burst into tears, and have to confess that I’m going to lose my scholarship. Mom is a nurse’s assistant and can’t afford to help me, even though I know she’d go without heat and food to try. But still, I’m an adult, and I need to find my own way out of this mess.

“Sorry. Just crazy busy with the upcoming meet,” I say, and cringe as the lie spills from my lips. I hate to lie to my mother but under the circumstances, I have no choice.

“I thought that was today,” she says, as dishes clang in the background and her tea kettle sings.

“Oh, yeah, no. I made a mistake. It’s next week.” I’m glad I don’t have pants on, because yeah, they’d be on fire.

“That’s not like you. Making a mistake on your meets.”

“Fourth year, applying for grad schools.” I have the grades to get into Harvard Law, I just won’t have the funds if I can’t get a scholarship, and with this broken ankle... “I have a lot on my mind.” Time to change the subject. “How are you?”

“I’m good. Maybe I can drive up tomorrow, we can grab lunch—”

“No,” I bark out quickly, too quickly judging by the way she just fell silent. “I’m sorry, Mom. I’m just crazy busy. I’ll see you at Thanksgiving, okay?” Hopefully in two months, my ankle will be better, and I can get back to running. If not... Nope, not going to go there.

“I have a study group, so I have to go.” Pretty much the first thing I said that was true.

“Okay, love. You have a great day. I’m looking forward to seeing you for Thanksgiving.” A pause and then, “Will you be bringing anyone with you?”

I shake my head and silently laugh. “No. You know I don’t have time for guys right now.” I don’t have the time, patience, or trust needed for a boyfriend. I’ve seen the way the guys here go from one bed to the next. My own father cheated on Mom right after I was born, then he screwed off, never to be heard from again. So no, I’m not about to put my heart in any man’s hands only for him to crush it. “All my focus goes into my work.”

She makes a tsking sound. “All work and no play—”

“Is what’s going to get me into Harvard,” I say, cutting her off. Mom knows my plans, and I get that she wants me to enjoy college and come out well-rounded. She wants better for me than she had, and I don’t want to disappoint her, but I will not be bringing any guy home. I’ll be bringing good grades home instead.

She laughs, and it mingles with the sound of her spoon in her teacup. I smile, missing my tea and honey moments at home.

“Okay, love. If you change your mind.”

I end the call, push from the bed, and about to head to the hall bathroom when a knock comes on my bedroom door.

“Maize, you up?”

“Yeah, come in.”

The door pushes open and in walks Kaitlyn. I instantly notice the tightness in her shoulders.

“What’s wrong?” I steal a glance at the clock. “Shouldn’t you be at the meet?”

“I just finished warming up. Headed back in a second. I wanted to talk to you.”

I shift on the bed, to make room for her. “What’s up?” I ask, my stomach tight. She’s going to deliver bad news. I just know it.

“I was talking to Coach today. She uh...she’s going to replace you. Janice is going to take your spot.”

I grip the sheets and squeeze. Of course, she’s going to replace me. I never thought for a moment she wouldn’t, but it stings nonetheless. “Janice will do great.”

She glances at my boot. “I’m worried about your tuition.”

“Me too.”

“There’s a way...” Her voice falls off and my gaze jerks to hers, and from the way her eyes are wide, her head dipped a little, I’m not sure I want to hear what it is she’s about to say.

“What?”

She picks at an imaginary piece of lint on my bed. “Remember those whispers we used to hear, you know about the secret society some of the athletes and scholars belong to, you know the Wolf Pack, at Wolf House?”

“First that’s a stupid name and second it can’t be true, Kaitlyn. Men can’t buy and own women, it’s the twenty-first century, and illegal.” She slides her hand behind her back, and produces a card. I eye it carefully. “What’s that.”

“It’s an invitation.” She pushes it toward me. “It’s for you, and only you. You have to turn it in tonight.”

I take the card from her, and all it says is a time and a place, and that time is nine tonight. “What am I looking at?”

“In the basement of Wolf House. It’s an auction of sorts. You’ll belong to the highest bidder.”

Forgetting all about my foot, I jump up, hardly able to believe what I’m hearing. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“I wish I was, but...”

My heart crashes in my chest as my brain races to catch up. The Wolf Pack at Wolf House is real? “Where did you get this?”

She hesitates for a brief second. “I can’t tell you.”

“Kaitlyn,” I warn.

She stands and puts her hands on my arms. “Just trust me on this.” She takes the card and holds it up. “This...right here...is your ticket to Harvard, Maize. You might never run again, but as long as you can stay at Kingston and keep your grades up, you’ll get that scholarship to Harvard. This will help you afford it.”

I glare at her, unable to wrap my brain around this. “How long have you known about this?”

“A little bit now, why?”

“Why are you just telling me now?” I practically shriek.

She exhales and makes a groaning sound. “I was hoping you’d miraculously recover, and two, I wanted to wait until the last minute so you couldn’t overthink it.”

“Overthink it? I’m not going to overthink it. In fact, I’m not going to spend one more second thinking about it.” Kaitlyn frowns. “Look, I can’t...” My words fall off as I actually take a

second to think—okay maybe overthink—all this, and what selling myself could mean for my future. The fact of the matter is, I'm a fighter, a survivor who will do whatever it takes to succeed. But would I sell myself, become some rich asshole's plaything? That's insane, right?

She blinks dark lashes over hopeful blue eyes. "It's a means to an end, that's all it is."

"I...I..." I sink back onto the bed. "What would I have to do?"

She shrugs. "I don't know. You just show up, and well, the guys bid, and you become their...I guess like maybe their servant or something. It can't be that bad. Maybe you just cook and do their homework or something..."

"Or something, something like sleep with them."

She glances down and frowns. "I don't know if that's true. But if it was so bad, why would girls agree to do it? I don't know much, but I know this happens once a month, on the last Saturday of the month, and these cards are not given out lightly, they're given out to—"

"Girls who are desperate!"

A door slams down the hall, and I jump. We live in a very rundown old house with three other girls, someone is always coming and going, and the place is always creaking—pipes always breaking—so I don't know why I'm on edge, or maybe I do. Am I really considering this?

I take the card from her and toss it onto my bed. "I need coffee," I say, and hobble to the door. "And you need to get to the meet. One of us needs to keep her scholarship."

"I'm going. I'm going. And I put a whole pot of coffee on for you. I figured you'd need it after..." She glances at the card I tossed to my bed.

"Maybe what I need is a stiff drink."

She gives a humorless laugh and walks into the hall with me. "You know, maybe Christian will bid on you. He does feel responsible. He actually seemed really nice at the hospital, once I started talking to him."

"He's not nice, and he *is* responsible, and he's the last guy on the face of this earth that I'd want to be serving." My stupid mind takes that moment to roam. If Christian bid on me, he'd likely make me clean his toilet, or something equally disgusting...like sleep with him.

My heart jumps into my throat as images of me in his bed, his big body next to mine, his callused hands holding me down, while he does dirty things to me. "Oh my God," I whisper.

"What?" Kaitlyn asks as we head downstairs.

I shake my head. "I can't do this. I can't sleep with some guy for payment. I'm not a prostitute."

"Christi...uh, I mean, the person I talked to, the one who gave me the card—"

I roll my eyes. "Christian, obviously." When did she start thinking I was an idiot, and when don't we tell each other everything? I guess whatever depraved activities take place in that basement really are shrouded in secrecy, because it's not like my best friend to keep anything from me. Maybe once you know about it, you're a part of it, and down the road, this ridiculous secret society offers protection or favors or something. Or maybe it's off with the head if you snitch. Okay, time to cut back on watching thrillers.

"I never said that." She puckers her lips. "Anyway, that person who gave me the card said the cards are actually coveted, and you'd never have to do anything you don't want to do, and come to think of it, you don't have to worry about Christian bidding on you. A little birdy told me he doesn't participate."

My God, what is with the heavy disappointment sitting in my gut.

I am all kinds of messed up, that's for sure.

*You hate him, Maize. HATE HIM!*

"His father is a Supreme Court judge, I sure as hell hope he doesn't participate," I shoot back, hating that I know more about him than I should. It was just curiosity that sent me to his social media a time or two. He doesn't post much. He mostly comes up in photos he's tagged in. "Not that I care about him or anything." I catch the smirk on Kaitlyn's face. "What? I hate him. You know what he did to me."

"To be honest, taking his pants to his knees and getting you expelled from the mean girls' club..." She pauses to do air quotes around the word mean girls. "Was the best thing that ever happened. I don't know why you ever wanted to be a part of that clique."

I frown, a heavy sensation building right around the vicinity of my heart. "I was trying to fit in and what he did was wrong, no matter how you look at it. Making fun of me because I wasn't rich enough... it's just cruel, and they can all go screw themselves. I'd rather be alone than hang out with people who could do that."

"Then I guess you were lucky I came along."

"You've always had my back."

We reach the kitchen, and she puts her hand on my shoulder to turn me to face her. “I do now, too. I wouldn’t have suggested this if I thought there was any other way. No one talks about what goes on, but I’m thinking if it was bad, everyone would hear about it. Look, I’ll go with you. If we don’t like what we see, we leave, simple as that. But we do have to go, to return the card if nothing else. It’s part of the agreement, and I agreed on your behalf.”

“How kind of you, and I don’t think there is going to be anything simple about it.”

“You’re not going to do it then?”

I give her a resounding, “No.” With that, I hobble to the coffee maker and pour a big mug full. Kaitlyn hands me the milk from the fridge. “Who would bid on me anyway?” I wave my hand down my body. “I’m tall, with barely there curves, and if they want me to run errands, broken ankle, remember? I look like...like...”

“You’re sexy as fuck, Maize. You just don’t know it. You’re tall, thin, have a great rack despite your low body fat, and I’d kill to have full lips like yours. Plus, your name is Maize Malone. If that doesn’t scream sex kitten, I don’t know what does.”

Sex kitten?

I stand there for a second and stare at Kaitlyn, waiting for her to break out into a fit of laughter but instead she just raises her brow, daring me to challenge her views on me.

“Who are you and what have you done with my best friend?”

She checks her watch. “I never said any of those things to you before, because you never needed to hear them. Now you do. Okay, I gotta go. I’ll be back by eight. Text me to let me



know if you've changed your mind about going through with it."

"Not going to happen."

She gives me a big hug and I take a mouthful of coffee. I swallow it, and lean against the kitchen counter. My gaze goes to the hallway, my mind on the card sitting on my bed. My stupid brain takes that moment to wander again, back to the night Christian and I were in that closet. He was thinner then, but I was crushing on him hard.

My body tingles as I recall the way he put his hands on my hips. His skin was hot as his fingers bit into my flesh, and if I try really hard, I can almost still feel the imprint. We were both breathing a little heavy and when he shifted closer, his tall body crowding mine, I wet my lips, prepared them for him, but the stupid jerk took his hands off my body, pulled his pants down and threw open the door, making me look like a fool. I took off after the mean girls laughed and made fun of me, and don't even get me started on the rumors about me afterward. Christian came out on top after that, and I almost quit and went back to my own district, but I'm not a quitter. I fight for what I want and need and would do just about anything to achieve my goals.

*Will you do this, Maize?*