

# BLAZE

“Nobody Does It Better”. I doubt this is what you had in mind, Carly. Drinking in the middle of the afternoon and having conversations with not there musicians. Still, it seems to be what nobody can do better than me. Inhale the aroma, swirl and watch the tannins cling to the glass to make me confident I chose a good bottle. That might be all I’m confident about anymore, my ability to choose good wine.

Jaxson was cleaning the gutters, this had been an endless endeavor the past two weeks: sprucing up the house for the girls to come home. Nobody does that better, and I knew there was some motherly enticements I should be busying myself with in preparation for their arrival, but nothing had struck my fancy except to make sure to stock up on more wine. I felt something I might be good at rise, even a smile teased my face as the thought entertained more than it should have. I envisioned pushing the ladder out from under him and seeing the fear smack his face. I’d really enjoy that, I’d really enjoy any extreme emotion to smack his face. I’d enjoy watching him plummet to the ground. I’d enjoy watching him in pain. I’d enjoy watching blood swirl from him and turn dark red as it coalesced with oxygen. I’d be fascinated watching the color of the blood until it darkened to match the color of my wine. I wouldn’t get to watch him die. I’m sure I couldn’t be that lucky.

I turned from our bedroom window before I went out there and accomplished my fantasy. I walked into the bathroom, my wine glass accompanied me, of course. I pulled open the drawer, reached into the tampon box – that one was better than a locked safe – pulled it out. Smiled at it. Hit the ON button, watched it ramp in speed, clicked it to the 10<sup>th</sup> speed, as fast as it would go. I pulled down my shorts enough, pulled down my shirt so I exposed my breasts for my enjoyment, inserted and watched myself in the mirror. The rise and fall of my breasts, the slosh about of my wine in my glass in my hand that was raised in the air while my other one was ...

Hmmmmmm. Giving me the best part of this endless day.

# JAXSON

I smiled as I walked up the ladder, as I passed our bedroom window and saw her standing there like she was watching me, appreciating me taking care of our home. As I reached for leaves, I couldn't help but think of when we'd moved in. When Tatum was three years old. I had loved our first house, but with our three stair steps (as we'd called them, as was all you could call them when you'd had three kids in three years) we had truly outgrown that house, and every day I could see the frustration on Blaze's face more and more as she listened to them argue and wrestle and constantly scream about having to all share one bedroom. I could endure them screaming, but I'd never been capable of enduring any negative emotions on Blaze's face. So, I got her a new home. Carried her over the threshold as three girls smiled.

Nostalgia waned and brought smiles to my face, brought me down from the ladder hoping to go in and see a smile on Blaze's face. In our bedroom I stopped my tracks. I heard a fast vibration, her moaning and screaming. I stood paralyzed.

A part of me wanted to go in there and yank that vibrating pleasuring device from her and throw her on the bathroom floor and take her, fuck her so hard she didn't need that fucking vibrator. Another part of me recognized, something no man ever wants to admit – I'd never heard those sounds for me. I had heard pleasant enough for me, of course, but not that, not what she was making for herself. I didn't know how to compete with it. Maybe if I had, I could have stopped the storm of the lost that was coming for us.

But I only enter competitions I know I can win.

I snuck out careful to be quiet. Went to the garage, jerked off thinking of a time when we were sixteen, when I fingered her on a ferris wheel and the way she screamed at the top. She had been so free and wild. Excited to climax then ride the climax as we descended. I licked my finger. She smiled that we shared a secret. Blaze, that wildness, that face, that she gave me her smile – I came so hard.

I woke, took a second before there was another one to realize a flash of lightning had woken me as her sister flashed bright enough to light up the entire room. There she was on the balcony off our bedroom, doors open. Blaze loved storms. I got out of bed and when I got out there, she was masturbating, hand in her shorts as she watched the storm. I pulled my boxers down, her shorts down, went to go in her ass. "I'll fucking kill you." Tilted her forward a little so I could enter the door that wouldn't get me killed. She was wet, but it didn't last once I entered. Then she removed her hand. "Just fucking cum, will you?" I literally deflated inside of my wife. My head sank into her back. Moments of silence and a little heartbreak. Finally, she spoke, "I could have enjoyed you more if I had finished myself first."

I pulled out, pulled up my boxers and sat in one of the two chairs on the balcony. She pulled up her shorts but stayed close to the rail but did me the courtesy of turning around to look at me while we talked. I didn't have any answers. I didn't even know what the questions were. So, I waited. Watched her hair in the breeze. I didn't know what about her face was making me relive it. Where I thought it began, but now looking at her face, where it must have ended for her.

*I'm pregnant. I'd never been so happy. I jumped excitedly. Hugged her so tightly. Pulled back and thought she gave me a shy smile.*

Blaze isn't shy. That had been an uncertain smile, and I hadn't realized.

"We can't undo twenty years."

"I'm not looking to. I just ..." she ran her hand through her hair blowing wildly around that beautiful face. "I want something, one thing, that is completely mine. I haven't had myself since I was fifteen, when I started belonging to you. At eighteen I started belonging to you and Teddy, then you, Teddy, and Tally, then you, Teddy, Tally, and Tatum. When do I belong to me?"

"You're not looking forward to them coming home?"

"How do I answer that without watching your face go to that place, like I shattered everything you ever won in life?"

“Here’s your moment. Let’s pretend I didn’t knock you up, what would you have done at eighteen?”

She didn’t even hesitate. “Got as far away as possible.”

“You’d have done that to Paps?”

Her face. The sentiment his name smacked on her. He was that spot in her. Tears misted her eyes. “No. I probably never could have left Paps. Or you then.”

I existed for a moment. I was a part of her world, the parts she’d never leave. My heart couldn’t even stop smiling. Falling for her like she was fifteen all over again. My leash she had metaphorically tied me to then must have been showing. She gave me a smile. “You know I love you, Jaxson, but lately, I need something from myself.”

“So, if I want to keep living in this house then don’t insert myself when you’re going to town on yourself?”

She laughed. “No. You can always live in this house. I’ll leave if it comes to that.”

What do you say to that? Except. “Can I watch?” *Can I find some way to keep you?*

“I could let you, Jaxson, but it would still be a performance for you, instead of fucking myself for the pure enjoyment of myself.”

“I wish I could relate, Blaze, but even when I fuck myself, I’m enjoying you.”

“I know, and that makes you a fucking great husband and me a fucking bitch of a wife. I know that too.”

I rose, pulled her into my arms, kissed her forehead, “Always my wife, regardless of if you’re a bitch or not.” Placed my hands on her face. Made her look at me, “I’ll let you fuck yourself.” She laughed. Gave me that smile I’d do anything for. I closed the balcony doors as I went back in our bedroom. Lightning gave me hints of her silhouette. She didn’t look like she was masturbating again. Looked like both hands were on the railing, watching the storm thrash, feeling one with it – not me.

# BLAZE

I pulled into the fire station. Everyone greeted me. Finally got to make it to my intended destination: The Captain's Office. My arms went around him. Old Spice and Hard work were the aromas that met me, that I inhaled more enthusiastically than the aroma of wine. His hand left the desk for a moment and touched my arm. My head sank in close to him.

"Hey, Paps." And the world made sense briefly.

"My Blaze." And I think his world made sense briefly too. He let me stay for a minute, hanging on him and looking at his desk. Well, not really looking at his desk, looking at one picture on there. Him, my mama, and my daddy all in uniform.

He patted my arm. I knew to move. Sank into the other chair as he swirled his around. Those eyes, and immediately he said, "You look lost."

"Should I have done this?"

"What do you remember about your mama?"

"That she always came into my room, no matter how late, to make sure I knew she made it home safely. Until the night she didn't."

"And your daddy?"

"Nothing. Pictures of him. Stories Mama told me. You told me. This entire firehouse has told me. But my actual memories of him, those don't exist."

"Answer your own damn question about should you have done this."

"I could have never done that to my girls. Never knowing if I was coming home."

"You made the right choice."

"Was I a good mother, Paps?"

"Were and still are."

I smiled then asked, “Did you ever resent me, Paps? You had already raised your children, then Mama died, and you had to raise me too.”

“Resent you? You gave me a reason to come home every night, and I loved you dearly for it. But I’ve always seen men and women are different. So, get to it. What’s got My Blaze as lost as a ball in high weeds?”

“I don’t have an answer. I was hoping to find the answer here.”

“Girls will be home tomorrow, huh?”

“Yes. Tatum off to college this year, I thought it would be hard, all three girls gone, but I’ve enjoyed it mostly. Now all three of them will be home for the entire summer. The past two summers I was glad when Teddy returned from college then last summer when Teddy and Tally returned from college, but maybe I was glad for Tatum, for her to have her sisters home. Now, I don’t know, having all three of them home for the entire summer seems overwhelming.”

“The opposite of empty nest syndrome.” I laughed at him. “Hold off your mid-life crisis until after you see them tomorrow. There’s something about seeing your babies that makes you realize how much you really did miss them.” I smiled at his ease about life, about how right he probably was, all this was worrying for nothing.

I rose, kissed his cheek. “Thank you, Paps. I got big ole love in my heart for you.”

“You’ve been melting my heart with that line since you could talk.” I got to the door. “Blaze.” I turned back around. “One year I had too much vacation sitting in my account, so they forced me to take a week off. Scheduled days off, your grandmother had always delighted in, made us a picnic, knew what to do with me, but that week, she got downright frustrated with me intruding on her time alone until the last few days I told her I was going hunting. I didn’t. I went and sat in the woods and waited until dinner time to go back home because I loved her enough to give her herself. Needing time for yourself, you got that one naturally. You’ve never had it until now. It’s natural to be afraid of them coming home and disturbing what you’ve finally given to yourself, but they’re grown now. You’ll find the balance, Darling.”

I walked back over to him, let his arms gather me, let his scent transcend me, to one moment of my life there was me and him and balance and the world made sense.

After leaving Paps' balance, I indulged another guilty pleasure. Rode out to the field behind Paps' house. Laid in the grass, and let my mind see it. See my day with her:

*Six years old. We'd gone to Nana's for lunch. Mama had gushed about that roast and her favorite, the banana pudding. Then she hitched me on her back and tore out of the house to the field. Even with me on her back she expertly navigated the tires laid out as an obstacle course. Then propelled up a wall with a rope until we were in her favorite place: a treehouse Paps had made her when she was little. It was red, no pink for my mama, and she'd made sure to tell Paps that when he was building it. I ran my finger on her muscular arms. "Why are your arms so muscular?"*

*"I have to be able to save people, sometimes pull them out of burning houses. I like to always be in shape should someone need me."*

*"Was Daddy in shape?"*

*The smile on her face, I had sent her somewhere else, possibly a new favorite place since she met him. I let her stay there a minute without having my question answered, until she said, "Yes, your daddy was very very in shape. He was a real man. Amazing fire fighter, and a hero, always putting others above himself." She touched my nose, "And my god did he love you. You were Our Blaze we made together, that's how much we loved each other, enough to create our own amazing Blaze."*

*I couldn't help the smile that came across my face. "Do you miss him?"*

*Tears stung her eyes. "Every day."*

I looked at the rope to propel me up, decided on the slats built into the tree. *I'm no hero like my mama.* Got in the treehouse and pulled my own red out of my bag. I had poured it into a coffee tumbler. I pulled the top off and raised the coffee tumbler and spoke aloud to the air, "To Mama and Daddy and the ever-roaring Blaze they made." I drank.

I let a tear escape for the *Every day* I had missed them. For the blazes that took them both from me, and for knowing, despite leaving me, they died doing what they loved.

Here I was doing nothing that I loved. I don't even know what I do love.

Wine. That was clear. I really loved wine. Masturbating. The occasional cigarette. Storms. I really loved to watch storms. I could have killed him for interrupting.

Can I really not have one damn moment to myself lately? A night to enjoy a storm, myself. Let the storm rage vividly in me until I came violently with it. Until I was one with it, it's all I can be one with now, the storm of the lost, raging and blazing.

I finished my wine. I laid down in her treehouse, hoping she would come save me. I woke up there. Still alive. Still alone in my mama's treehouse. Still Blaze.

Looked at my phone. Recognized it had been a three-hour nap, so peaceful, three hours to sleep - pass out from wine, regardless, three hours I slept in her place.

Thankfully my phone had been on silent. 6 texts from Jaxson. Two calls from Tally. I responded to Jaxson's text that I was fine and had fallen asleep at the treehouse, and that, yes, I can pick up his saw from Hal at the repair shop. I took several deep breaths, called Tally back. "Geez, Mom, I've called you a million times."

"I see twice on my phone. What do you want?"

"Nice to talk to you too, Mom."

"If you want a pleasant conversation, then answer the phone pleasantly!"

Her silence was how stunned she was that I yelled at her. Then, "Umm, you're right. Hi, Mom. How are you? Thank you for calling me back."

And my silence was stunned as well. It's really that easy to get them to treat me like a human being? To yell at them? Her reaction made mine too sugary sweet. "I'm fine, Baby. I fell asleep at my mama's treehouse, and it was nice feeling like I was with her for a little while."

"I know the feeling. I can't wait to be with you tomorrow."



My mother's heart did dance a little. "I want to revel in that gushiness, but history tells me you're about to have a big ask."

Tally giggled. "Well, you know seeing my mama is always sweeter with some orange-glazed cinnamon rolls."

"They may be store bought, Honey. Tatum beat you to the sweets' request."

"The Baby. She always gets everything."

A giggle released from me. "Yep. We love her a lot more."

"Oh, don't I know," Tally said with the cutest laugh reflecting sibling rivalry and love. She loved her little sister. "At least I know I was so perfect you decided to try for one more, then she was so crazy, you said absolutely no more."

I laughed. "If that's what you need to tell yourself, Baby."

Then she was quiet, a different quiet, the Tally quiet. *I need to ask for something.*

"I ..., um ..., I ..., can I bring someone home with me?"

How do I answer this? What do I ask? If I say, *a young man?*, then I've given no other options, if there are other options for her, I closed that acceptance door.

"A romantic someone?"

"Yes. Just a couple of days. Please, Mom."

"Of course, Baby." She thanked me. Hung up. No name. No gender. No details.

My daughter is getting to be someone I want to be: Someone with no details.

# TEDDY

“Nobody Does It Better.” *Mom loves this song.* That made my seeking through stations come to a halt and remember a moment when I was eight catching a glimpse of the real Blaze when she thought she was alone, when she was singing this song and dancing in her room only wearing a bra and panties, occasionally tossing around clothes as it looked like she was trying to decide on an outfit and Carly was completely helping out with that decision, and with her, a wine glass. I’d been so mesmerized by her sensuality and even more by her ability to dance and never spill one drop of wine. I’d recently tried it. In my dorm room. My boy shorts panties didn’t give me the same thrill as looking at my mother. Then the abrupt stop of my whimsical dance as I caught a glance at my tiny titties in the mirror.

“Shane titties,” Marly had commented as she reached in and helped herself to those.

“What are Shane titties?” I inquired then pulled her hand from my shirt and looked at the other lesbians drinking in our dorm.

“From *The L Word*. She’s so hot, tiny titties but with this complete sexual prowess and power,” Lana said raising her eyebrow-ringed eyebrow at me. “Shane titties!” Lana repeated, like saying it could give mine prowess and power. I had smiled in front of them. Tried to convince myself I could have any kind of sexual prowess and power, but dancing for myself in my boy shorts panties and no bra because I’d never really needed one, all I saw was I’m not sexy like my mother. Still hearing her song, I felt in some way I belonged to her. Was her daughter. Smiled. Picked up speed a little to get to her.

Well, pause that mission for a bit. First, I have to pick up her baby. Pulled in at her freshman dorm. Freshmen weren’t allowed to have cars on campus, so someone had to take her home. She, and all her stuff, were waiting outside the building. I couldn’t believe Daddy hadn’t come up here to get her stuff, but when I asked, he reminded me of the to-die-for SUV he had bought for me, and suddenly I filtered into submission picking up little sister.

Tatum didn’t need to know that I wasn’t coming from my dorm. That it had taken me thirty minutes to get here because I had fallen asleep at Lana’s and woke up very uncertain had I

really wanted to be there. Had I wanted her to touch me? Taste me? Did I like it? Was I a lesbian? Or hell, did I want one place to belong? They'd been so welcoming to me lately.

After he ... (*Broke me*) They felt ... safe. No pregnancies to worry about.

LUG – lesbian until graduation. Could be me.

Tatum kissed me. “Thanks, Ted. I know tagalong sister isn't your thing.”

I stared at her, the only one who looked like Mom. Not something she could help. Yet something I had always hated her for. I kissed her back. “I'm sorry if I made you feel that way, Tatum.”

She stared at me for a long time. “It's just a ride. I didn't expect a Dear Diary moment,” she finally said with a sly smile.

I laughed at her. “God, you're so much like Mom.”

“Poor me.” And we both laughed and started filling my SUV with her things. Things that would go in a different dorm in August, but until then, needed a home. Tatum piled into the passenger's seat. Immediately turned the station as James Taylor was now playing, “What the fuck with you and boring ass music?”

“Something else was on when I got here. And, you know, it is my vehicle.”

“Whatever,” as she kept scanning stations, quickly landed on Campus Voice.

“No.”

“You know they make some good points.”

“You missed the sixties, the time for good points. Everything has already been protested by now, Tatum. You can work and own property and everything.”

“Right, so I guess that means women are equal now.”

“Equal enough for me to hear music instead of ranting while I drive.”

“Pull over. I'll drive.”

“No thanks. I’d like to get home alive.”

She laughed. “I haven’t had a wreck in over a year.”

“You haven’t had a car in over a year either. Coincidence. I don’t think so.”

Tatum giggled again. That giggle that infinitely made her seem five years old. Perpetually our little sister, as bratty as she was, something I loved to the end of me. Like she could feel that, she reached over and turned off the radio. No fighting. “Did you talk to Tally? She’s bringing someone home.”

“I haven’t talked to Tally since Christmas.”

“Teddy?”

“Don’t.”

“She didn’t mean it.”

“She meant it.”

“We were all drunk. Hanging out at night at the treehouse.”

“That prompted Tally to say that I ruined Mom’s life. That if she hadn’t gotten pregnant with me that Mom would’ve been a firefighter like her parents, Uncle Donovan, and Paps.”

“Okay, the 2<sup>nd</sup> part is probably true. She might have been a firefighter, but you didn’t ruin her life. Mom has never said anything like that. And after you, she kept on having babies. Well, until she got the perfect one.”

I couldn’t help but laugh at her bragging about her birth order. I reached under her chin, “Yep, we finally got the perfect one.”

Tatum smiled, then grew sullen. “That night was so perfect for me. The first-time you guys ever let me sneak out with you, drink with you. Then you two haven’t talk to each other.”

“Just because it was the first one you were in attendance for, doesn’t mean it was the first one with a fight. Tally and I have always fought.”

“Why?”

I took a deep breath. “I don’t know if I have an answer. We’ve always hated each other. The first time I remember hating her, I was five. She went into my new room and destroyed it. Maybe in her mind I abandoned her because I got my own room. Still, she hurt me so badly that she intentionally destroyed my room. Fighting is all Tally and I have ever done since then.”

“At least you had that together. All I felt as a Cameron sister was left out.”

“She told you, not me, that she was bringing someone home, so guess you’re not left out anymore.” Thinking of Tally, I slowed my speed of getting home.