

Burn

Prologue

May 1997

Lancaster, Ohio

“I love feeling you against me, baby. You’re so soft. I can’t get enough of your satiny skin.”

My eyes drifted closed as I heard his words of praise and felt his fingers touching me beneath my panties. “Blake, please,” I begged shamelessly, “I need you inside of me this time.”

Blake went still, then I felt his fingers beneath my chin, urging me to open my eyes and look at him. When our gazes locked, he asked, “Are you sure this is what you want, Ally?”

“Yes. I know I love you. I don’t want to wait anymore.”

“I can make you feel good. We don’t have to go all the way for you to come, baby.”

“I know. It’s wonderful what you do. When you...kiss me down there, I like it a lot. But I want to feel you deep. I want our bodies connected.”

Blake leaned back and closed his eyes. I was afraid I’d said too much, that he was disgusted with me, but when he opened them again, it was with new purpose. He unlocked his door and said, “Get out of the car. Your first time isn’t going to be in this old clunker.”

I wanted to laugh and cry at the same time. I was so nervous my entire body shook with it. I pulled the handle and left the beat-up black Charger behind. Blake was in front of the car, waiting for me. When I drew near, he grabbed my hand and led me to a more secluded spot in the woods. We walked so long I was about to lose my nerve, but he stopped suddenly, and I realized he’d taken me to a clearing. Clovers littered the ground and the full moon shone through the trees. It was romantic and beautiful, and I adored Blake for being so sweet with me this first time. He turned around and kissed me. His touch was electric. It’d been that way since the first time he’d stroked a hand down my cheek and asked me to the spring formal. I’d been head over heels ever since.

“I want you so bad, Ally. You’re special. Never forget that, okay?”

I didn’t know why he felt the need to say that. I knew what we had was different. Blake had dated other girls, but he’d never treated them the way he treated me. We were in love. That was the difference. I knew in my heart we were meant to be together.

“Take off your blouse. I want to see you.”

I did as he asked. Blake could have anything he wanted from me. As far as I was concerned, my body belonged to him. With shaking fingers, I unbuttoned the pink silk and let it drift to the

ground. He stepped forward and unclasped my bra with a quickness that surprised me. I didn't want to think about how he'd gotten to be so good at unhooking a girl's bra.

As he bared my chest, the night air rushed over my skin, and I instinctively covered myself with my palms. I watched in heated interest as he licked his lips and murmured, "You're so pretty, baby. Don't hide from me. Never from me."

Nervous, but willing to give Blake everything, I slowly dropped my hands to my sides. His head came down. He clasped my left nipple between his lips and sucked hard. I arched forward, feeling that zing of pleasure between my thighs. Moisture pooled there, and I was shocked at my own reaction. He licked and flicked my nipple, while his other hand came up to cup and squeeze my other breast. I grabbed his head and held him against me. After several long minutes of suckling and fondling, he released my flesh with a pop and stepped back. He stared at my wet nipples, and I could have sworn he growled. I couldn't be sure, though. My own desire seemed to be buzzing in my ears.

"Skim out of those jeans, baby girl. I want to see you in the moonlight."

I was beyond speech. In that moment, I couldn't have uttered a single protest to save my life. As I slipped the button free and dragged the zipper down on my designer jeans, Blake began to do the same. My one salvation in all this was knowing he would be naked, too. I'd get to look at him. I'd get to do more than fondle him through the opening of his fly. I pushed my pants and panties down my legs and soon I was standing nude for the first time in front of Blake Steele. His gaze roamed over me in an impassioned journey of discovery. It was as if he wanted to imprint my body on his memory forever. It was odd, but he looked almost sad.

His erection was bigger than I'd imagined it'd be. I wondered how it'd ever fit. My feet moved of their own accord. Soon I was pressed flesh to flesh against my sexy boyfriend. His hands came up, cupping my bottom in his big palms, pulling me against him. He rubbed his heavy erection against my slick folds. I moaned at the contact. He chuckled and slowly drew me down to the soft ground.

Clovers and grass tickled my skin. The cool night air had my nipples pebbling hard. Blake covered me with his body and pressed against my entrance. He didn't move, just stayed on top of me, staring down into my eyes. Finally he spoke.

"You're my sweet angel, Ally. Your blonde hair looks like a halo framing your face." He paused a moment, just staring, then said, "What we're about to do... It's different, Ally. I've been with girls, you know that, but with you, it's just different, that's all."

"I'm scared, Blake."

He stroked my face and smiled. "I know, but I'll make it real good for you, baby. I'll make it memorable for both of us."

As he started to kiss his way down my body, I clenched my legs together in confusion. “I thought you were going to...be inside me this time.”

He grinned. “I am, baby, but I need to get you all soft and wet first. It makes it easier.”

“Oh,” I mumbled. I was so naïve, and Blake was so sure of himself. Thankfully he didn’t seem to mind. Before I could even blink, Blake had started back on his sensual path. Once he reached my tight curls, he coaxed my legs open, and then his mouth was on me there. His tongue was hot and insistent as he flicked my tiny bud. He licked up and down, tasting me as he’d never done before. It was as if he wanted to touch every inch of my private flesh. It wasn’t long before I felt that familiar pooling of desire in my stomach. My body arched upward, and I was suddenly drowning in heat.

Blake didn’t give me time to calm down. He moved over me and slipped his heavy erection inside an inch. My tender flesh stretched to accommodate the fullness of his invasion. I tried to push him away. It was too much, but he started kissing me, gently enticing me back to that place I was a second ago. My body started a slow climb. My hips twitched back and forth, all at once edgy, wanting something, but unsure how to get it.

His lips moved to my chin then my neck. He sucked the skin right over my pulse, and I knew I’d carry his mark on me the next day. I was so proud to be his girl. I wanted his mark to stay on me forever. He drew back and looked down at the reddened skin.

“Remember, this is special. We’re special together, Ally.”

Then he plunged deep and tore through my thin barrier. I cried out in surprise and pain, but his fingers found their way over my little button and he was very quickly taking me on a journey into womanhood.

Blake’s hard shaft moved in and out, slow at first, then his thrusts grew more frantic. My own passion mounted.

It was like when he’d first licked me there, only better. It was euphoric. I arched into him, rubbing my clit against his talented fingers. He plunged one last time, and we both flew over the edge.

Several seconds went by as we lay there, Blake breathing hard against my nape, my body deliciously sore. The moonlight bathed us in its magnificent glow.

“I love you, Blake,” I whispered into his hair.

He stiffened and lifted himself off me. The look in his eyes wasn’t what I’d expected. I thought he’d be happy. He’d smile and say something romantic. He didn’t. He just stared at me for a long minute, then said, “Come on, I don’t want you to break your curfew.”

Present day

Lancaster, Ohio

As I hit the save button on my latest, *Grave Dealings*, and started to leave my chair, the little bell dinged, letting me know I had mail.

“Unless it’s Janet, I’m not answering.”

Janet was my agent. She thought my stories were marvelous, and she thought I was a scatterbrain. She was right on both counts. I loved Janet to bits. But the email wasn’t from Janet. The name in the “From” column sent a blast of cold air down my spine. How can it be? Too shocked to click the email open, I just sat there, staring, transfixed by what must be my imagination.

Blake Steele. There had to be more than one of those in the world. I’d always thought the name sounded more like a hero in a book than a real man. Too unreal to be believable. As it turned out, he definitely wasn’t hero material. Just another guy stealing a girl’s innocence, then moving on.

“Click the little icon and open the damn thing,” I told myself. Then, with a sort of sick glee, another thought occurred. “It’s probably a virus. Wouldn’t that just be appropriate as hell?”

As the seconds ticked by, the room grew so quiet I could hear the purr of my cat Shelby across the room. Normally, I didn’t notice such things because I’m too engrossed in my writing. But I wasn’t writing. I was staring. Curiosity forced me to place my hand over the mouse and click. The email sprang open and I sucked in a breath as I realized it wasn’t a virus. It was also not some other Blake Steele, but the Blake Steele. The one who tore my heart to shreds and left me a whimpering mess. I began to read. Hey, I was an author. Curiosity ruled me.

Hi, Ally,

If you really are reading this then I’m shocked. I figured you’d toss it in your trash bin, maybe even pin my address to your block sender list. But, since you didn’t, I guess I’d better get to the point, huh?

I’m coming home. My business in New York is doing well and I’m coming back to Columbus to open a new branch. I didn’t know where you lived, so I called your mom in Florida (Dad gave me their number). Don’t be mad at her for giving me your email. I begged and pleaded. :) At any rate, I’m coming home for good. I’ll be staying at Mom and Dad’s until I find an apartment. I had hoped we could schedule a time to meet. Maybe catch up on old times. Is it too callous of me to ask? Probably. Fuck. Anyway, if you want to reach me, my cell number is attached to my signature. Call me anytime, day or night.

Blake

Btw, I’ve missed you.

Much to my dismay, I could feel my eyes start to water. “Ten years later and he misses me? No freaking way!”

Now, all these years later, I knew why he’d looked so troubled. Because he knew something I didn’t. He knew he was taking my virginity and running. He’d known there would be no second time. No sweet words or promises of everlasting love. He’d known. I hadn’t.

I stared at Blake’s cell number for an eternity. Then, I dialed. Two rings and his deep voice came over the line. I was so shocked to hear him after so many years all I could do was sit there. He’d struck me speechless countless times. Why should this time be any different?

“If no one’s there, I’m hanging up,” he said, obviously getting frustrated at my silence.

“Blake,” I forced myself to utter.

“Ally? Ally, is that you?”

Oh, God. I hadn’t known how hard it would be to hear that voice. It all came rushing back like a bad dream. All the good times, the bad times, that horrible day when he’d walked out of my life. In a rush of clipped images, my relationship with him flooded my body and mind.

By force of will, I pulled myself together and answered, “Yes, it’s me.”

“Damn. I didn’t think you’d call. I didn’t really let myself believe you would even read my email.”

He sounded like he actually cared. I wouldn’t let myself be sucked in this time, though. “I’m glad your business is taking off. It sounds like you got everything you wanted when you left Lancaster. How’d New York treat you?” Keep it friendly, civil. Don’t open the past. Don’t let him know how much it still hurts.

“I didn’t get everything I wanted, but I did okay. New York was a pretty big shock after living in a small town my whole life.”

“But you managed. I’m not surprised. What do you plan to do?”

“Get an apartment first,” he said, sounding stressed. “I’d thought to hang for awhile, but my parents are already driving me up the wall. I’m too used to being an adult, and they still see me as their little boy.”

“So you’re back already?”

“Yep. I got in last night.”

His parents' place was only a thirty-minute drive. It was tempting to jump in the car and do a drive-by. Just to see if he really was there. To see what he looked like after ten years. Had the years been kind to him? I secretly hoped he'd gone bald and sported a potbelly.

"You've been home all of one night and already you're getting antsy?" I hoped I didn't sound bitter, but I couldn't help feeling angry.

"Like I said, I'm used to being on my own."

"Yeah, I can understand that."

"So, I was thinking we could hook up, talk about old times?"

"I don't know, Blake."

"You never got married."

It was so far out of left field, I wasn't sure if he was asking or if he already knew. "No, I never married. You?" Well, I needed to know, didn't I? Did he have ten kids somewhere and a half dozen ex-wives or what?

"Nope, I'm single. You dating anyone special?"

"No. I've just been concentrating on my career, which leaves little time for a personal life."

"Same here. But I've been rethinking a lot of things lately. Somehow it all seems so lame."

"What do you mean?"

"Life is so short, Ally. We spend all our time trying to make money and earn some sort of social status. We should be enjoying the time we have."

Wow. He had grown up. Miracles never ceased. "Didn't find your happily ever after in New York?" I had to know if his big city plan had worked out. I needed to know if it had been worth leaving me behind. I felt I deserved that much at least.

"I found some things rewarding. Others disappointing."

He was keeping it vague. Fine, I could be vague, too. "I'd better go; it's been nice talking to you again, Blake."

"I want to see you, Ally."

"Oh?" No way was I giving him an inch. He deserved to squirm.

"Yeah. I was hoping you and I could go out to dinner or something."

“I see.”

“Do you?”

“I think I do, yes.” I paused, weighing my words carefully. “But I’m not into taking a trip down memory lane.”

“Not even dinner?”

He was pushing. Attempting to have his own way. Well, not this time. “My schedule is pretty busy. Thanks for the invite, but I’m going to pass.”

“You know my number if you change your mind.” The bite in his tone told me he wasn’t happy I’d turned him down. I wasn’t very happy, either, but I couldn’t let him in. Not again.

After ten minutes of mundane conversation, we said our goodbyes. He wanted more out of me; I could hear it in his voice. But I wasn’t inclined to indulge him.

...

I pulled my Lexus into the grocery store parking lot and found a spot. The only available space was at the back. Figured. Not that it mattered. I needed the extra exercise. Being a writer, sitting for hours a day, usually meant a little extra to love, especially in the rear. I turned off the engine and checked my hair and makeup one last time, then left the car.

Ever since the phone call with Blake, he’d been in my head. Invading my dreams. Slipping in under the cracks when I least expected it. Two days after that call and I could still feel his deep voice in my ear. It was crazy after all these years, carrying a torch for a guy who threw me away without so much as batting an eye. Dumb. I’d already given myself a stern lecture—several of them. It wasn’t doing any good.

As the doors slid open, a draft of cold air hit me, cooling my overheated skin in an instant. The dog days of August were in full swing. The overbearing heat made me glad I’d worn shorts and a tank. I grabbed a cart and forced my mind on my mental list of foodstuffs. It was Thursday and tomorrow Heather was flying in for a visit. Since she lived in Florida, most of our visiting was done through email and phone calls. As wild as Heather was, her trip to Lancaster was bound to wake up the sleepy little town. Hard telling what she’d get into. Already I was getting jazzed. It was a rare treat for me to play hostess, and I was aching to cook up something fun in the kitchen.

As I imagined the dishes I planned to prepare, I wasn’t watching where I was walking and smacked my cart into a wall. When I looked up, my mouth fell open. Not a wall.

“Ally?”

I tried to swallow, tried to speak, but there seemed to be a rather large rock wedged into my throat. Finally I managed a squeaky, “Blake?”

“Yeah.”

We both just stood there, staring. It seemed neither of us knew what to say. My heart sped to a wild gallop. Every feeling I ever had for him came back like a monsoon. A floodgate tore open and the emotions poured through. And, oh wow, he’d definitely aged well. Blake was gorgeous as a teenager, but as an adult, he was delicious.

My body liquefied as I took in his long, muscled legs and massive shoulders. His six-foot-plus frame filled out the charcoal-gray suit like nobody’s business, too. I noticed his hair hadn’t changed much. It was still the same dark shade of espresso and tossed about as if he’d just stepped off a motorcycle. Knowing Blake, he probably had. Damn it. Pornographic thoughts slid around in my brain. I felt like a total perv.

A wave of self-consciousness came over me as I imagined what he’d think of the way I’d aged. Would he like what he saw? I watched him blink his sexy blue eyes several times, then look me over. Slowly. When his gaze rested once more on my face, I spoke.

“Hi.”

“Hi.”

His voice sounded hoarse, like a man turned on. I crushed that thought and stepped forward, took him into my arms. “It’s good to see you again.”

Blake’s arms came around my waist as he hugged me tight. Really tight. Almost as if he didn’t want to let go. I didn’t want to think of that right now, so I pulled away.

“Parents got you grocery shopping already?”

He rolled his eyes. “Mom’s been cooking up a storm. I’m going to get fat if I don’t find an apartment soon.”

“You have a ways to go before you have to worry about that.” He looked so damn edible I wanted to scoop him up and purchase him for dinner tomorrow night!

He laughed. “Thanks, but between the errands and the dinners, I’m starting to feel like I’m back in high school again. I’m waiting for Mom to give me a curfew.”

The mention of high school was what did it. I didn’t want to think about the last time we’d been together. “Well, good seeing you again. I better get moving.” I grabbed the handle on the cart and started to move around him. He placed his hand on my forearm. My gaze darted to his.

“You sure you don’t want to have dinner with me?”

God, this was too cruel. Seeing him. Wanting him. Walking away from him. No woman was that strong. But I surprised myself when I said, "I'm sure. Take care of yourself, Blake."

Then, before I could rethink my decision, I moved off, leaving him standing there. My legs felt like rubber. My stomach ached. Being the one to walk away wasn't as satisfying as I'd thought. In fact, it sucked.

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