




A L A N G R A T Z

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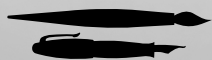


CODE OF HONOR

Where do his loyalties
really lie?

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CHAPTER ONE

A FEW DAYS AGO

“LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, I GIVE YOU EAST PHOENIX High School’s homecoming king and queen: Kamran Smith and Julia Gary!”

The crowd clapped and cheered, and Julia and I descended the steps to the dance floor. Julia clung to my arm like she was never going to let me go, and I grinned at her.

I spied my best friend, Adam Collier, in the crowd. He gave me a deep, flourishing bow like some duke at court, and I laughed. Even though Adam and I had joked around about the homecoming dance, I had to admit that being crowned king—especially alongside Julia—felt pretty amazing.

When Julia and I got to the middle of the dance floor for our spotlight dance, the DJ played that old Green Day song “Time of Your Life.” I put my arms around Julia’s waist and she leaned into me, laying her head on my chest.

“I am, you know,” I told Julia, tucking a lock of blond hair behind her ear. “Having the time of my life. With you.” I didn’t even care if it sounded cheesy. I meant every word.

Julia stood on her toes to kiss me, which made my head tingle, like always. I loved Julia. There. I said it. I maybe hadn’t said it *out loud* to her yet, but she had to know it. Julia was smart, funny, and *way* cute. We’d been dating for two months, and I didn’t know what we were going to do when I left Arizona for West Point next year. But this was definitely not the night to think about that.

The DJ slid into a bouncing hip-hop song, and kids streamed onto the dance floor, hopping and waving their arms. Adam and some of my other football teammates and their dates surrounded us, shouting their congratulations.

“Double congrats,” Adam said, punching my arm. He glanced around at our teammates. “Did y’all know there was a college scout at the game tonight? From the University of Colorado. Pac-12! That’s big time. And Kamran put on a *show* for him!”

I shrugged and blushed. I hadn’t told anybody else about the scout, not even Julia, because I didn’t want to make a big deal out of it. I was committed to going to West Point and playing for Army anyway. But it had still made me play harder, knowing the scout was there in the stands. I’d had the best game of my high school career, scoring three touchdowns.

“I wouldn’t have run for all those yards without the offensive line stepping up,” I said. “That last touchdown was me just following Antonio into the end zone.”

Adam scoffed. “Dude, you’re too modest. This guy’s going to the Super Bowl one day,” he told everybody.

“Yeah, um, I don’t think so.”

“No, I mean it,” Adam said. He pulled out his phone and brought up a photo. Fanned out on a table were four oversize silver tickets, each with a picture of the Vince Lombardi Trophy and SUPER BOWL XLIX written across the top. “We’re going to the Super Bowl, amigo!”

If anything could make me stop dancing with Julia, it was that. I took the phone from Adam and stared at the screen. I couldn’t believe what I was seeing. “*He got them?*”

This year’s Super Bowl was going to be in Arizona, right across town in Glendale. Adam’s dad was a big shot at a Phoenix

bank, and he'd put in for some of the tickets the company got for being corporate sponsors. But Adam and I had never thought Mr. Collier would actually get them.

Adam beamed. "Yep. One for my dad, one for my mom, one for me, and one for *you*."

I shook my head, still staring at the tickets. Beside me, Julia squeezed my arm. She knew how much I wanted this. But then I saw the price on one of the tickets and my eyeballs almost popped out of my head. Each ticket was \$700. I was looking at \$2,800 worth of football tickets—way more if you considered what you could get for scalping them once the Super Bowl teams were settled.

I handed the phone back, feeling sick to my stomach. "I can't," I told Adam. It just about killed me to say it. But my dad was an assistant professor at Arizona State, and my mom worked at a horse ranch out in Apache Junction. There was no way I could afford a ticket to the Super Bowl.

"It's taken care of, bro," Adam said. "Compliments of the family Collier." Adam was an only child. I'd been like a brother to him most of my life, but still . . .

"No, I can't, really," I said again.

"Will you get this idiot out of here before he says no to a free ticket to the Super Bowl again?" Adam asked Julia.

"Gladly," she said. She pulled me over to the snack table, ladling punch into cups for each of us. We sipped our drinks, my mind still spinning from Adam's offer.

"You should totally go," Julia told me, a smile in her voice. "Don't feel guilty about it."

I chuckled, grateful that she knew me so well. I put my arm around her and leaned down to kiss her again.

“Wooo! Yeah! Kissy-kissy!” an obnoxious voice yelled over the music. I turned around, thinking somebody was making fun of us. But it was a gang of senior boys giving an underclassman and his date a hard time. The kid who’d shouted was a senior named Jeremy Vacca. We’d had a few classes together over the years. He was the kind of guy who wore backward baseball caps and pants that sagged three inches below the waistline of his underwear. I’d always thought he was kind of a jerk, but he’d never bothered me, so I never paid much attention to him.

“Oh God,” Julia said, nodding toward the underclassmen. “Seamus Laurie and Anne Henry.”

“Who, the little guys? You know them?”

The girl, Anne, was petite and red-haired, wearing a modest white dress with a big pink bow on the back. Seamus was short and gangly, with a huge ball of curly brown hair that circled his head like a space helmet. He was exactly the type of guy who attracted bullies, and he hadn’t helped matters by overdressing for the homecoming dance. He wore a powder-blue tuxedo with a white ruffly shirt.

“They’re in the fall play with me,” Julia said. “They’re super sweet.”

Jeremy flicked a finger at Seamus’s ruffled shirt. “Nice tuxedo, dorkwad! You two look like you’re going to a dork wedding. You don’t have to marry her, you know.” Jeremy shoved Seamus aside. “Can I cut in?” He grabbed Anne around the waist, laughing in her face.

Anne scowled and tried to twist away from Jeremy, but Seamus only stared helplessly at the ground. God, had I ever been that small?

I couldn't watch any more. I pulled away from Julia and pushed in between Jeremy and Anne. "All right, Vacca, you've had your fun," I said. "Why don't you leave them alone?"

Jeremy took a step back, looking at me like I was something his dog had barfed up on the carpet.

"And why don't you mind your own business . . ." he said. "*Towel head.*"

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