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## Chapter 1

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"Get your little butt into the office," said Chase. His voice was low and controlled, his muscular arms by his side.

Charity locked eyes with Ashli, who grimaced sympathetically. The rest of the team had their heads down as if something remarkable was happening on the gym floor.

Charity felt like jelly inside, but she attempted to retain her dignity in front of the others. She flipped her straight, blonde hair in Chase's direction and said, "Fine."

Then she flounced into the cheer office and leaned against the desk. She folded her arms and tried to look tough.

"Break up into groups and work on the tumbling runs," she heard Chase tell the rest of the team. She watched through the window as he strode into the office. He pinned her with a stare she had seen many times before.

"You want to explain that?" Chase asked calmly.

She did not want to explain that, but she knew she had to say something.

"I was just making a suggestion." She began her own defense. "I thought that we should go right into the dance instead of

breaking to the side." She hoped her voice sounded innocent of wrongdoing. "I just wanted to help."

Her husband turned and closed the door, and she heard it clicking into place. The top half of the heavy door was glass, and Charity could see that several of her teammates were straining their necks to catch a glimpse of what was going on. If Chase turned around, she was sure they would jump back into practice. No one wanted to be caught on Chase's bad side.

Chase was known as a tough coach. He had a reputation for being strict, but few of the team members knew just how strict he could be with his own wife.

Chase folded his arms and stood with his feet shoulder length apart. Charity knew that stance. It was his way of claiming his territory and holding it.

"Young lady, you know very well that the way you spoke to me was disrespectful and demanding," he said. "You did not just make a suggestion. You announced to the team that you thought my decision was... what was the word you used?"

She felt her cheeks burn. As soon as that word had popped out of her mouth, she'd known she'd regret it. She shrugged her shoulders, pretending like she couldn't remember.

Chase raised his eyebrows. "What was the word, Charity?"

"Um..." Charity tried to look confused.

"Do I need to go out and ask the rest of the team? I bet they will remember."

Charity shook her head and spoke softly. "Idiotic. I said your decision was idiotic."

Chase nodded. "Yes, you did."

He let her stand in silence for several seconds. It seemed much longer to Charity.

Finally, he addressed her again, "Who is the coach of this team, Charity?"

"You are," she answered.

"And who makes the decisions?"

"You do."

"That's right," he said. "And I will not tolerate disrespect from anyone on this team, but especially not from you. Am I making myself clear?"

She nodded. "Yes, sir."

"Good," he said. "Practice is over in ten minutes. You can spend the rest of the time running laps around the gym. Then when everyone else is gone, I'm going to set your bottom on fire."

"Come on, Chase," she pleaded, breaking out of her composed demeanor. "I'm sorry. I won't talk to you that way anymore."

Chase actually smiled. "If you didn't talk that way, I'd think someone else had gotten into your head. Go on; run those laps. If they're too slow, I'll spank you in front of the whole team."

Chase had delivered a humiliating smack or two in front of the team before, but Charity didn't think he would give her an all-out spanking with everyone watching. Then again, she wasn't sure enough that she was willing to take the chance.

She sighed, but she jogged out of the office and onto the gym floor. The eyes of her teammates followed her. She knew that Chase was making her run laps as an example of what happens when someone disrespects the coach, even if that someone happens to be the coach's wife.

As Charity sprinted past, she heard one of the male team members mumble to another, "I guess Coach isn't getting any tonight."

This made Charity smile. On the contrary, Chase's authoritative attitude never failed to turn her on, even when his discipline had her in tears. It was a huge part of what made their marriage work. Her husband kept her in line, and that made her body quiver with desire.

She looked at Chase. He was walking purposefully over the gym floor, watching the tumbling runs. He offered advice, praise,

and criticism as needed. Charity had no doubt that everything Chase said was spot on.

Chase had a broad-shouldered, compact body that consisted of nothing but muscle. He had been a champion gymnast throughout his college years and had gone on to become one of the best coaches the cheer world had ever seen. He had taken Charity's college team to a national title before they had gotten married and decided to start a gym of their own.

Charity's husband believed in discipline in all aspects of life and especially in coaching. His no-nonsense approach was admired and appreciated by the athletes who were there to work hard and be their best. Chase had always maintained that cheer-leading usually involved far too much drama and that wallowing in the drama was a quick way to bring a team down. He allowed none of that on his teams, and he was willing to show a talented athlete the door if she was causing too much trouble.

Of course, Charity knew that what Chase really believed was that allowing corporal punishment in college level and adult sports would be an excellent idea, but even Chase had to play by the rules when it came to athletes other than his wife.

The team she was on now was an exhibition team for the gym. It consisted mainly of young adults who had been cheerleaders in college and wanted to continue in the sport. Many had been on Chase's college teams. They didn't usually have competitions due to the lack of other adult teams to challenge, but they were good enough that they were paid to appear at various events. They were known for high quality tumbling and precision in dance, and they inspired lots of young students to come into the cheer gym.

Charity slowed her run to a jog as she continued her laps around the gym. Chase was preparing to end the practice session. As she passed the area near the front door, she spotted movement out of the corner of her eye. It was unusual that

someone would come into the gym at this time of night. She wondered if one of her teammates had needed a ride home.

When she looked more closely, she saw a young woman she didn't recognize standing at the door. The girl was studying the gym and seemed to be looking for someone.

Charity walked over to her, a little bit out of breath. "Hi. I'm Charity. Can I help you?"

Upon closer inspection, Charity could see that the girl was nothing more than a pretty teenager. She had long brown hair that hung down her back in a shiny ponytail, and her eyes were a striking blue.

"Are you looking for information on the teen program?" Charity guessed.

The girl shook her head. "Um, no. I'm looking for Chase?"

Charity was surprised. "Chase is my husband," she said, a little bit defensively. "He's finishing up a practice session. I'm co-owner of the gym. Is there anything I can do for you?"

The girl looked confused. She blinked at Charity. "I didn't know Chase was married. He said I should come here to see if I wanted to join the adult team."

Charity cocked her head. Official try-outs weren't until next year, and Chase had never mentioned this kid to her. "The adult team?" she repeated. "How old are you?"

"I'm nineteen," said the girl.

Charity raised her eyebrow. "Are you trying out for Chase's college team?"

"I'm not in school right now," she replied. "Chase said I should join the adult team."

Charity forced herself not to huff. There was no way Chase had told this kid she could be on the adult team without at least consulting Charity. Was there?

She forced a smile. "Let's talk to Chase about scheduling you a try-out," she said pleasantly. "What was your name?"

"Tawni," said the girl, still blinking her large eyes. Then she looked straight past Charity, and her face lit up. "Chase!"

Chase jogged up from behind Charity with what his wife thought was a big, stupid grin on his face. "Tawni, you made it."

"Oh, you know Tawni?" Charity asked, her voice dripping with forced sweetness.

"Of course, I know Tawni," Chase said brightly, oblivious to Charity's annoyed reaction. "She's going to join the team."

Charity felt a burning sensation in her chest. "Doesn't she need a try-out first?"

"Formalities," said Chase breezily, grinning at the young woman. "Tawni, there's a dressing area over there. Why don't you get ready?"

"Now?" Charity stared at Chase. Why was he being so accommodating to this kid who had just walked in off the street?

"Now is good," said Chase. Tawni scurried off to the dressing area. The adult team members were leaving practice. They all said goodbye to Charity as they went out the door, and Ashli squeezed her shoulder.

Charity said goodbye, wishing she could stop Ashli to tell her about this girl who had walked in out of nowhere. She would text Ashli later if Chase didn't ground her from the phone.

Soon, Tawni came back, bouncing toward them with all the energy of a playful puppy. Charity scowled.

Tawni looked cute in a shiny, purple leotard. She followed Chase onto the gym floor, Charity bringing up the rear.

Charity folded herself into one of the chairs on the sidelines usually kept for mothers of younger students. She thought about asking Tawni sarcastically if she'd be bringing a parent to practice.

Tawni was on the floor stretching, her flexible body arranging itself into shapes Charity had never thought possible. Chase watched with approval and offered a few suggestions.

## Charity Cheers

"Now give us a simple cheer routine," said Chase when Tawni had finished warming up.

The girl nodded her head and placed herself in the center of the gym floor. She began a cheer Charity had heard and performed herself many times before.

Charity had to admit that Tawni's voice was great. She was loud and clear, and her movements were crisp. Her arms popped solidly through the air, even as she changed position quickly. She ended the routine with a huge straddle jump, sending herself into the sky like she was on a trampoline.

Chase grinned at Charity. It was obvious that he thought Tawni was a super-star.

"Now give us some tumbling," he instructed.

Charity prepared to be critical. She was easily the top tumbler on the team and the star flyer as well. She often held clinics for the other flyers, teaching them to keep their bodies tight and straight in the air when other cheerleaders launched them upward.

Tawni ran back to the corner of the gym floor, not even slightly winded by the cheer routine. She settled herself for a moment and then ran hard, hurdling herself into a perfect roundoff with two back handsprings into a double. She landed with her feet solidly on the floor.

Chase clapped. "Excellent!"

Charity stared as Tawni performed two more incredible tumbling runs. Where had Chase found this kid? Was she a freaking Olympic athlete? One thing Charity knew for sure was that she was a showoff.

Chase beckoned Tawni to the chair where Charity sat so the three of them could talk.

"That was terrific," he told her, beaming.

"Very good," said Charity, keeping her face neutral. "We'll be in touch."

Chase ignored this. "We practice on Tuesdays and Thursdays

from seven to nine or ten. Sometimes we have an additional practice on weekends, depending on whether or not we have a performance. Will that work for you?"

"I'll talk to my boss about changing my work schedule," Tawni said. "I should be able to make it most of the time."

Most of the time? Charity looked at Chase. She was waiting for his standard lecture on commitment to a team.

Instead, he said, "That's great. I'll call you tomorrow."

"Thanks!" Tawni chirped.

"I guess you already have her number," Charity mumbled.

Chase walked Tawni to the dressing area and then returned to Charity. His stern gaze was back, and she knew that he was ready to go back to their previous conversation. "Okay, Char. Let's go into the office and talk."

Charity wasn't yet ready to talk about what had happened at practice. She stood up and looked him in the eye. "I'll talk first," she said. Then she walked swiftly toward the office.