

Broken | 30: Game Mode

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The school band blasts the Greendale fight song. Gemma and Tayla are belting the lyrics with wild energy, their voices half-singing, half-shouting.

I mumble along, even though I don't know any of the words.

"Wow, you're really giving it your all," Gemma teases, nudging me with a grin.

"Ten out of ten lip syncing," Tayla adds, laughing.

I roll my eyes.

I glance at Dad, and I've never seen him like this—eyes locked on the field, jaw tight, shoulders tense.

He throws an arm around me, pulling me close without even realizing he's squeezing so hard.

"Dad, you're about to break my ribs!"

Dad winces, loosening his grip and giving me an apologetic smile. "Sorry, kiddo. Just got a little too hyped," he says, his eyes still glued to the field.

Then the whistle blows, and the other team sends the ball flying across the field to kick off the game.

Anxiety fills my whole body as I watch the game.

Well, as I watch Mason.

My eyes never once stray away from him.

The game is brutal from the very first snap. Mason gets hit—hard—multiple times, knocked to the ground again and again.

I wince with every blow, clutching the edge of my seat tighter each time.

"That's called a sack," Dad murmurs beside me, his voice worried.

Mason looks like he's about to be sacked again.

I gasp, my heart leaping into my throat—but at the very last second, he spins away.

The crowd roars as he hurdles another guy and takes off running.

With one final burst of speed, Mason dives into the end zone, ball clutched tight.

The whole stadium explodes in cheers, but I swear, for a second, he's only looking at me.

Tayla and Gemma throw their arms around me and we do a bouncing group hug.

Dad lets out a low whistle. "Damn, he's good."

At this moment, he definitely loves Mason more than me.

The other team scores right after Greendale's touchdown and then everything seems to stop working.

Greendale's plays are getting shut down every play.

But Mason doesn't panic, even when they're down by two scores.

He helps his teammates off the turf and slaps helmets.

When he's not on the field, he paces the sideline rallying his guys.

He's a real leader.

Dad keeps stealing glances at the row of scouts behind us, watching them just as closely as he watches the game.

The only time I can actually relax is during timeouts.

That's when my eyes wander from the field to the sidelines, where Brittany is absolutely owning it with the cheer squad.

She leads this insane dance routine that looks like it came straight out of a music video.

I swear, the only one on earth with more confidence than Brittany is *Beyonce* herself.

Then, during another break, two of the guys throw her into the air and she does a double flip like it's nothing.

The whole crowd cheers.

She's amazing.

As I watch her land perfectly, beaming and full of energy, I realize something—I don't miss it.

Not the pressure, not the drama, not even the spotlight.

I feel good about my decision not to keep cheering.

I love it for her.

I love watching it.

But I'm glad I'm not down there with her.

At halftime, Greendale is down by ten points and I don't know how they'll possibly pull this off.

When Mason disappears back into the locker room, I collapse onto the bench and gasp for air, like I've been holding my breath the whole time.

Watching football is exhausting.

"He's playing so good." Tayla smiles widely.

"He's pretty great," I say, feeling overly proud of Mason.

"I'm mad at Ryder though." Sky pouts slightly.

"He did drop that guy pretty hard." Gemma nods with an amused smile.

"He did?" I ask, looking at her.

"You really haven't stopped looking at Mason at all, have you?" She laughs, throwing her head back, making my cheeks heat up.

“Don’t be mean. She’s just in loooovvve,” Gemma teases, making me blush even more.

“Shut up,” I weakly mumble.

“It’s okay, I have a hard time looking away from Ryder too,” Sky whispers before sending me a wink.

“I’ve just got to take this, sorry,” Dad interrupts, holding up his ringing cell phone.

“How’s he been?” Tayla asks once he’s out of earshot.

“Better. He’s always home by five-thirty p.m.,” I reply, watching Dad walk up the stairs. “I bet you miss your freedom,” Sky jokes, making me laugh and agree.

I do love having Dad home, but at the same time I do miss the freedom I had. I miss the time when Mason and I wouldn’t be worried that he’d come home early and find us in a compromising position.

Just after the whistle blows and the second half has started, Dad slips back next to me. “Everything okay?” I ask, glancing at him before quickly looking back at the field.

“Absolutely perfect.”

“I’m going to go pee.” I announce. “Anyone need to go?” I ask, looking at Tayla, Gemma, and Skye.

“Me!” Skye exclaims, jumping to her feet and linking our arms together. “It feels sooo good to actually be able to cheer on Ryder.” She smiles as we make our way through the crowd.

“So good!” I agree. It must’ve been hard for her to hide their relationship for... “Wait, how long have you two been together?” I question, realizing I actually don’t know anything about their relationship.

“Sophomore year,” she says very casually, making me literally gasp and stop in my tracks. “What!” How the hell did they keep it a secret for so long? Mason and I didn’t even last a semester!

“We’re sneakier than you,” she says with a wink as we enter the area under the bleachers.

It’s really crowded under the bleachers. People are everywhere, laughing, talking, and waiting in line for snacks. The smell of nachos is strong, and it actually smells pretty good, but I’m too nervous to eat anything.

After the bathroom, I wait outside for Skye to finish. I’m daydreaming, thinking about the game, when someone bumps into me really hard. I trip and almost fall into a table, but I catch myself at the last second by grabbing a wall.

I look up to see who bumped me: Leah. She stands with one hand on her hip and twirls her shiny, perfect hair like she’s in charge of everything. She’s got on her Ridgewood cheer uniform even though they’re not even playing.

“Oh look, it’s the gross traitor.” Leah smirks evilly as she looks me up and down.

“Just leave me alone, Leah,” I say, my voice shaking. I turn to walk away, hoping she’ll let it go—but she doesn’t. She grabs my arm, fingers digging in.

“Where do you think you’re going?” she sneers. “You look disgusting in that puke green jersey, by the way. Like, actually embarrassing.”

People nearby notice what’s going on. A crowd forms and some kids already have their phones out, ready to record. They want a fight and Leah really wants to give it to them.

I try to pull away, but she steps closer, her smile sharp and cruel. “And Mason? Please. He’s a loser just like the rest of his pathetic family. No future. No chance. He’s going nowhere, and so are you.”

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