

Charlie

A crash. Books fall to the speckled linoleum floor. They skid a few feet, whirling in circles, and stop near feet. My feet. I don't recognize the black sandals, or the red toenails, but they move when I tell them to, so they must be mine. *Right?*

A bell rings. Shrii.

I jump, my heart racing. My eyes move left to right as I scope out my environment, trying not to give myself away.

What kind of bell was that? Where am I?

Kids with backpacks walk briskly into the room, talking and laughing. *A school bell.* They slide into desks, their voices competing in volume. I see movement at my feet and jerk in surprise. Someone is bent over, gathering up books on the floor; a red-faced girl with glasses. Before she stands up, she looks at me with something like fear and then scurries off. People are laughing. When I look around I think they're laughing at me, but it's the girl with glasses they're looking at.

"Charlie!" someone calls. "Didn't you see that?" And then, "Charlie...what's your problem...hello...?"

My heart is beating fast, so fast.

Where is this? Why can't I remember? "Charlie!" someone hisses. I look around. *Who is Charlie? Which one is Charlie?*

There are so many kids; blond hair, ratty hair, brown hair, glasses, no glasses...

A man walks in carrying a briefcase. He sets it on the desk.

The teacher. I am in a classroom, and that is the teacher. High school or college? I wonder.

I stand up suddenly. I'm in the wrong place. Everyone is sitting, but I'm standing...walking.

"Where are you going, Miss Wynwood?" The teacher is looking at me over the rim of his glasses as he riffles through a pile of papers. He slaps them down hard on the desk and I jump. I must be Miss Wynwood.

"She has cramps!" someone calls out. People snicker. I feel a chill creep up my back and crawl across the tops of my arms. They're laughing at me, except I don't know who these people are.

I hear a girl's voice say, "Shut up, Michael."

"I don't know," I say, hearing my voice for the first time. It's too high. I clear my throat and try again. "I don't know. I'm not supposed to be here."

There is more laughing. I glance around at the posters on the wall, the faces of presidents animated with dates beneath them. *History class? High school.*

The man—the teacher—tilts his head to the side like I've said the dumbest thing. "And where else are you supposed to be on test day?"

"I... I don't know."

“Sit down,” he says. I don’t know where I’d go if I left. I turn around to go back. The girl with the glasses glances up at me as I pass her. She looks away almost as quickly.

As soon as I’m sitting, the teacher starts handing out

papers. He walks between desks, his voice a flat drone as he tells us what percentage of our final grade the test will be. When he reaches my desk he pauses, a deep crease between his eyebrows. “I don’t know what you’re trying to pull.” He presses the tip of a fat pointer finger on my desk.

“Whatever it is, I’m sick of it. One more stunt and I’m sending you to the principal’s office.” He slaps the test down in front of me and moves down the line.

I don’t nod, I don’t do anything. I’m trying to decide what to do. Announce to the whole room that I have no idea who and where I am—or pull him aside and tell him quietly. He said no more stunts. My eyes move to the paper in front of me. People are already bent over their tests, pencils scratching.

Fourth Period

History

Mr. Dulcott

There is a space for a name. I’m supposed to write my name, but I don’t know what my name is. *Miss Wynwood*, he called me.

Why don’t I recognize my own name? Or *where* I am?

Or *what* I am?

Every head is bent over their papers except mine. So I sit and stare, straight ahead. Mr. Dulcott glares at me from his desk. The longer I sit, the redder his face becomes.

Time passes and yet my world has stopped. Eventually, Mr. Dulcott stands up, his mouth open to say something to me when the bell rings. “Put your papers on my desk on the way out,” he says, his eyes still on my face. Everyone is filing out of the door. I stand up and follow them because I don’t know what else to do. I keep my eyes on the floor, but I can feel his rage. I don’t understand why he’s so angry with me. I am in a hallway now, lined on either side by blue lockers.

“Charlie!” someone calls. “Charlie, wait up!” A second later, an arm loops through mine. I expect it to be the girl with the glasses; I don’t know why. It’s not. But, I know now that I am Charlie. *Charlie Wynwood*. “You forgot your bag,” she says, handing over a white backpack. I take it from her, wondering if there’s a wallet with a driver’s license inside. She keeps her arm looped through mine as we walk. She’s shorter than me, with long, dark hair and dewy brown eyes that take up half her face. She is startling and beautiful.

“Why were you acting so weird in there?” she asks. “You knocked the shrimp’s books on the floor and then spaced out.”

I can smell her perfume; it’s familiar and too sweet, like a million flowers competing for attention. I think of the girl with the glasses, the look on her face as she bent to scoop up her books. If I did that, why don’t I remember?

“I—”

"It's lunch, why are you walking that way?" She pulls me down a different corridor, past more students. They all look at me...little glances. I wonder if they know me, and why I don't know me. I don't know why I don't tell her, tell Mr. Dulcott, grab someone random and tell them that I don't know who or where I am. By the time I'm seriously entertaining the idea, we're through a set of double doors in the cafeteria. Noise and color; bodies that all have a unique smell, bright fluorescent lights that make everything look ugly. *Oh, God.* I clutch at my shirt.

The girl on my arm is babbling. Andrew this, Marcy that. She likes Andrew and hates Marcy. I don't know who either of them is. She corrals me to the food line. We get salad and Diet Cokes. Then we are sliding our trays on a table. There are already people sitting there: four boys, two girls. I realize we are completing a group with even numbers. All the girls are matched with a guy. Everyone looks up at me expectantly, like I'm supposed to say something, do something. The only place left to sit is next to a guy with dark hair. I sit slowly, both hands flat on the table. His eyes dart toward me and then he bends over his tray of food. I can see the finest beads of sweat on his forehead, just below his hairline.

"You two are so awkward sometimes," says a new girl, blonde, across from me. She's looking from me to the guy I'm sitting next to. He looks up from his macaroni and I realize he's just moving things around on his plate. He hasn't taken a bite, despite how busy he looks. He looks at me and I look at him, then we both look back at the blonde girl.

"Did something happen that we should know about?" she asks. "No," we say in unison.

He's my boyfriend. I know by the way they're treating us. He suddenly smiles at me with his brilliantly white teeth and reaches to put an arm around my shoulders.

"We're all good," he says, squeezing my arm. I automatically stiffen, but when I see the six sets of eyes on my face, I lean in and play along. It's frightening not knowing who you are—even more frightening thinking you'll get it wrong. I'm scared now, really scared. It's gone too far. If I say something now I'll look...crazy. His affection seems to make everyone relax. Everyone except...him. They go back to talking, but all the words blend together: football, a party, more football. The guy sitting next to me laughs and joins in with their conversation, his arm never straying from my shoulders. They call him Silas. They call me Charlie. The dark-haired girl with the big eyes is Annika. I forget everyone else's names in the noise.

Lunch is finally over and we all get up. I walk next to Silas, or rather he walks next to me. I have no idea where I'm going. Annika flanks my free side, winding her arms through mine and chatting about cheerleading practice. She's making me feel claustrophobic. When we reach an annex in the hallway, I lean over and speak to her so only she can hear. "Can you walk me to my next class?" Her face becomes serious. She breaks away to say something to her boyfriend, and then our arms are looped again.

I turn to Silas. "Annika is going to walk me to my next class."

"Okay," he says. He looks relieved. "I'll see you...later." He heads off in the opposite direction.

Annika turns to me as soon as he's out of sight. "Where's he going?"

I shrug. "To class."

She shakes her head like she's confused. "I don't get you guys. One day you're all over each other, the next you're acting like you can't stand to be in the same room. You really need to make a decision about him, Charlie."

She stops outside a doorway.

“This is me...” I say, to see if she’ll protest. She doesn’t. “Call me later,” she says. “I want to know about last night.”

I nod. When she disappears into the sea of faces, I step into the classroom. I don’t know where to sit, so I wander to the back row and slide into a seat by the window. I’m early, so I open my backpack. There’s a wallet wedged between a couple of notebooks and a makeup bag. I pull it out and flip it open to reveal a driver’s license with a picture of a beaming, dark-haired girl. Me.

Charlize Margaret Wynwood

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I’m seventeen. My birthday is March twenty-first. I live in Louisiana. I study the picture in the top left corner and I don’t recognize the face. It’s my face, but I’ve never seen it. I’m...pretty. I only have twenty-eight dollars.

The seats are filling up. The one beside me stays empty, almost like everyone is too afraid to sit there. I’m in Spanish class. The teacher is pretty and young; her name is Mrs. Cardona. She doesn’t look at me like she hates me, like so many other people are looking at me. We start with tenses.

I have no past. I have no past.

Five minutes into class the door opens. Silas walks in, his eyes downcast. I think he’s here to tell me something, or to bring me something. I brace myself, ready to pretend, but Mrs. Cardona comments jokingly about his lateness. He takes the only available seat next to me and stares straight ahead. I stare at him. I don’t stop staring at him until finally, he turns his head to look at me. A line of sweat rolls down the side of his face.

His eyes are wide. Wide...*just like mine.*