



WE'RE ALL
LIARS

A.J. LOGAN

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SAINT JULIET ACADEMY BOOK 4

A.J. LOGAN

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This story contains sensitive topics that some may find triggering and is intended for mature readers. Please check [author website](#) for a list of content warnings.

~A.J. Logan

CADE

I see her. My mom. I'm looking right at her. But my eyes and brain aren't communicating. Even as she slowly approaches, I can't move. I can't speak. I can't truly comprehend that she's here. I can't do anything but stare as she gives me an uneasy half-smile. "Hi, Cade."

The sound of her voice jars me out of my daze. Every emotion I've felt over the last few years amplifies tenfold as it soars through my body.

"Hi, Cade.' That's what you want to say?" My voice gets louder with every word. And I'm vaguely aware that Morgan has stopped her ridiculous speech on the stage. Not that it'd matter because all eyes are on my mother and me.

"There's nothing I can say to make up for—" I cannot stand to listen to a pitiful explanation. Her voice goes weak, breaking like she's about to cry. Like she's the one who's hurting. Like she's the child whose mother abandoned them.

"No, there's not anything you can say. So shut the fuck up and go back into whatever hole you crawled out of." I shift my gaze to the smiling vixen still standing on the stage. "Or whatever pit that bitch pulled you from."

I don't know how any of this came about, why or how my mother is standing in front of me. But I'd bet my life on it all being Morgan's doing. And this time, she went too far. It's too much. All of it. My mother being here. My father wagering on my game. My brother asking me to bail the piece of shit out of a bind. Me being too fucking weak to refuse.

Neil looks about how I feel, like he's seen a ghost, as he makes his way to stand beside me, his hand is on my bicep, tugging me away from Mom as he says, "Let's go get some air."

But all it does is remind me of how deep the shit is around here. How the kindest person I know murdered someone, then I helped cover it up and gave Coach King the ammunition to blackmail me into doing whatever he wants.

I don't need some air. I need to get the fuck out of here. Now. Before I do something I regret. Because the only thing I can latch onto is anger. At everyone. And someone is about to end up on the receiving end.

Jerking my arm out of Neil's grip, I haul ass towards the nearest exit. The French doors can't open fast enough to let me out of the suffocating room. As I step out onto the patio, I hear my mom's pleas behind me. "Cade, please wait."

Why the fuck won't she back off? Halting, I turn to face her. She stops about two feet away, so I close the distance. "I'm shocked you even remember my fucking name because you sure as fuck had a problem remembering everything else—my phone number, where we lived, when you were supposed to pick me up after practice so we could go buy new cleats."

Her face turns away, her eyes looking down with shame. Good. The only other thing I need her to feel is pain.

Morgan decides to take this moment to show her face and steps in front of me, blocking my view of my mother. "Don't talk to her like, Cade."

This bitch is truly crazy. They all are. Leaning down, I move so that my cheek touches Morgan's. "If you know what's good for you, you'll get the fuck away from me and take that bitch with you."

"I'm not going to let you talk to Kelly like that. She's been through a lot. At least hear her out *after* you chill the hell out."

The sound of Mom's name on Morgan's lips, the fact that Morgan is defending her, all of it infuriates me. "I don't give a fuck about what she's been through," I shout, my finger pointing at the woman cowering behind Morgan. Still hiding. Still not owning up to her destruction. "No. I take that back. I hope she's been through hell."

"It was hell. But I deserve it." Mom hardly speaks loud enough for me to hear.

I go to respond, but Morgan cuts me off. "Just leave her alone, Cade."

"Don't, Morgan. Don't put on a fucking show or pretend that you give a fuck about anyone but yourself," I scream in her face.

Her lips stretch into a smile as she says, "I gave enough fucks to keep in touch with her all these years."

I'd question what I just heard, if she's lying, but this is the one time I

know Morgan King is telling the truth. Because it was another way to hurt me, make me pay for hurting her, leaving her, like the coward hunched behind her left me.

Reaching up, I grip Morgan's chin in my fingers, slightly tilting her head back as her eyes stay locked with mine. "I was right. As much as I hate her and my father, I still hate *you* more."

MORGAN

Perfect. Absolutely fucking perfect. I knew Cade would be out of sorts when he spotted his mother for the first time. But his reaction was even better. Because his anger is directed towards me more than anyone else.

“Morgan, I’m so sorry,” Kelly utters from behind me.

When I turn to face her, I feel nothing for her. Not even pity. I kept in touch with her more out of spite than anything else. “Eh. Nothing new.”

“Maybe my being here isn’t such a great idea.” She looks in the direction where Cade sulked off to.

“I’m sure he’ll come around. It’s a lot. Seeing the woman who abandoned him.”

She flinches at the statement, and she should. That’s what she did, so there’s no point in sugarcoating it. “But if you want to run away again. I wouldn’t blame you.” Whether she stays or goes works to my benefit. Merely having Kelly show her face was enough for him to hate me even more. Damage is done even if she bails again, which could cause more destruction on its own.

I don’t stay and bother with the little reunion she’s tried to have with me a few times. Yeah. I kept in contact. But we’re not going to be bonding any more than I have with my own mother. If anything, the two of them should get together and discuss their dismal parenting decisions.

Just before I’m about to enter the banquet room again, I hear Neil behind me. “Morgan, wait.”

Rotating to face him, I wait for him to speak. He just stands and stares at me until I ask, “What?”

“I don’t understand why you would do that to Cade. I know you care

about him.”

A laugh escapes as I step to the chump who’s trying to switch up the game. Won’t work. He can’t play savior and surely can’t stop me or make me feel an ounce of remorse for any of this shit. “I did it to hurt him. He knew what he was getting into from the start. I never pretended to be anything other than who I am, unlike him. So, fuck off. Or you’ll be my next venture.”

He keeps an uneasy watch on me as he takes a step back. “You do care about him. That’s why it hurts so bad to think he betrayed you. But he didn’t. He has a lot of shit he’s dealing with that you don’t know about. We all do.”

I’m not sure if it’s the fact that the kid has some balls to say that to me or the fact that he gets a pass for offing Lenny. But either way, I detour from my usual and decide not to teach him a lesson and I just simply stay silent as Neil walks away.

Nerd boy really is pushing his luck though. But he’s just a minuscule bother at the moment. Plus, Cade and my father are the only ones I enjoy hurting.

Someone else decides to push his luck. The *What the fuck was that, Morgan?* expression on Ryder’s face is clear before he asks me, “What the fuck were you thinking?”

“A happy reunion for our star quarterback,” I tell my brother as I step past him and enter the banquet room. The fundraiser is still running smoothly with Ava at the helm. She actually wants to do this; I don’t need to be here. There’s nothing else left to screw up.

And it doesn’t look like Ryder is going to let up. “Morgan, I know something happened between the two of you. What was it? Because you were on the track to being less of a bitch. Like, you actually looked happy with Cade when we were hanging out at the Lakefront. What happened?”

Ugh. I really don’t want to have this conversation. Heading out of the event, I’m walking down the corridor as Ryder shifts in front of me. So, I lie. “Nothing happened.” Nothing new anyways. Except reality. Cade got his panties in a twist and reminded me of something I’d started to forget. We’re all liars, only I’d started to half-believe his bullshit.

The repulsion rising makes me want to do something else to hurt Cade. But the mom card was the move I had for tonight. I didn’t even have to utilize my bartender backup option in case Kelly flaked out. And it’s the moment I realize Ashton trailed me out to the parking lot, still following me around like the gullible fool he is.

“Do you want to go grab a bite?” he asks as I continue walking. “I noticed you didn’t sit down long enough to eat.”

I’m next to my car before I turn to look at him. On the exterior, he’s fuckable and not half-bad to look at. The black suit he decided to don reminds me of Bruce Wayne and fits Ashton’s form perfectly, his blond hair and blue eyes picture-perfect—a complete contrast to Cade’s dark hair and eyes.

Reaching forward, I grab the lapels of his jacket and bring his mouth to mine. He immediately obeys and kisses me back. His hands are on my back, pulling me against him. And when I feel his hard dick against my stomach, it turns my desire level even lower. Because all I can think about is the last time he fucked me on the bar of this wretched country club. The location was the most thrilling aspect. Because he—and the way he fucked me—wasn’t satisfying in the least. And that’s why Cade’s abilities, specifically with his tongue and dick, are front and center in my mind.

Attempting to push the asshole out of my mind, I focus on the fuckstick in front of me. And even when I tell myself this will be enough. I know it’s not. And when Ashton’s palm slides into the slit of my dress, it’s confirmed. His touch moves up my thigh and sends my aversion and boredom into overdrive.

“Fuck,” I groan out as I reach up, and shove my hands against his chest to get the waste of space off of me.

He looks dazed as hell as he asks, “What is it?” Stepping back to me, his hands land on my hips, eyes searching mine. “Did I do something? I thought you were enjoying yourself.” There’s a slight smirk rising on his lips. Guys really can be dumb fucks.

“No. I wasn’t. And this just reminded me how much I didn’t enjoy myself the last time.” I move to open my car door, but Ashton steps forward. His body presses against mine and pushes me back against my car, blocking my way.

There’s no humor or playfulness in his eyes. Only annoyance. “You’re such a fucking tease, Morgan. One day, someone is going to put you in your place. Might even be me.”

There’s no part of me that’s fearful. Zero. Zilch. This clown isn’t even a blip on my radar. After being defenseless and tormented by Lenny, I doubt there’s any threat that would truly frighten me. I escaped that. I can handle anything. “Try your best. But before you do, ask the last motherfucker who

thought he could overpower me how that worked out for him.”

Ashton fixes me with a challenging expression as I stay pressed into him, not making a move to back down or free myself from what he believes is an intimidating stance. Yeah, my car is blocking me from behind, and the ignorant motherfucker is blocking me from stepping forward, but I will get out of this position whenever I choose. But I won't let him think he's scaring me by trying to run.

Shifting closer to him, I move my face in his. “I'm waiting.”

He loses the standoff and takes a step back. “You know I can't hurt you. I'd lose my job. And unlike your pampered ass, I need my job. So just stay the hell away from me, Morgan.” Turning, he begins to walk away before he looks back at me. “But it's true. One day you're going to screw over the wrong person.”

“I'm counting on it.” No matter, though. I'll put that motherfucker down too.

CADE

Even though I'm making the drive alone to the away game, it still blows. Before, I was able to justify being on the team for one damn reason or another. Even if none were good. Well, except for going along with it because of Dustin. But would my brother still want me to join the Wildcats if he knew the complications it would inevitably bring? He doesn't even know all of it at this point.

When I pull into the Mustangs' stadium parking lot, I spot the team bus already here. Coach had insisted everyone ride together, but I didn't want to chance his spawn getting the bright idea to hitch a ride on it also.

Taking a quick glance around, I don't catch her in my sights. There'd been a few moments where I'd spotted her at school today, but the only time I'd actually looked at her, I'd been met with a smirking expression from the devil. Because she knows. This time she went too far. And she loves that fact. Why would bringing my mom back be the final straw after all the wicked shit Morgan has done? I don't know. But I think the realization that Morgan kept in touch with Mom is the worst part. All these years, I had no clue where my mom was, if she was okay, or even still alive. Meanwhile, Morgan was having girl chats over the phone with her.

I wait in my truck for another ten minutes until I finally force myself to grab my bag and walk into the visitor's locker room. Coach doesn't say anything when I walk past him, he only gives me a quick nod that confirms he's glad I didn't bail. I'm sure he was questioning if I would this morning after last night with my mom showing at the fundraiser. It didn't take a genius to figure out it was Morgan's scheming, but I didn't say anything other than quick, one-word responses to his questions.

Neil and Topher are chatting until they notice me approaching. Concern morphs over Neil's face as he watches me set my bag down on the bench.

"Hey, I tried to call you to see if you wanted to ride with here with Savannah and me."

"I drove." Obviously.

There're a few seconds where Neil gauges me before he continues, "Are you coming to my house after the game?"

"Not really up for a party." If that was ever the truth, it is right now. I'd rather swim across the river than spend a night partying in the vicinity of Morgan King.

"I can always call it off." Neil falls into his nervous speed-talking habit. "We can just hang. We don't have to have everyone over."

"Downtime sounds good," Topher agrees, but none of it sounds appealing.

"Nah. I'm good. I'll catch the next party." Doubtful, but I don't want Neil to feel guilty. He wanted this season to be a fun-filled-senior-year type of vibe. I'm not going to stand in his way, but I'm not going to participate, either. Not tonight. I'd rather sleep at the docks alone. Just like I did last night. I know it's a matter of time before Dustin or one of my worthless parents tracks me down there. But thankfully, they've all left me alone so far. And it's a good thing, because I'm not ready to face them. I'm not sure I'll ever be.

"Cade," Neil says, "let me know if you change your mind."

I nod. But that won't happen. I'm aware of a few more concerned gazes from Neil as I get ready for the game, and even Topher throws a worried glance my way. Thankfully, none of them want to chat and just leave me be until we take the field.

Surprisingly, once the game starts, everything falls into place. At least my body and mind do. Probably because I'm thankful to focus solely on football, the game, the plays, and winning. Not once do I look over to the sideline at the demon cheerleader.

Her voodoo hexes must not work, because I walk away unscathed. And the Wildcats are one game closer. There are two more regular-season games before playoffs begin, and then there'll be even more before we reach the finish line for state. Why can't I just quit the team? Winning is actually helping along with her plan to ruin her dad. But just walking away and spoiling that doesn't feel like enough. She'd easily veer off and find some

other tactic to torment him. God knows Morgan can make anyone suffer easily and with little effort. That is her talent—other than lying—she’s skilled at inflicting misery.

Just when I think I’m as miserable as I can be, I step into the parking lot and spot a few people standing around my truck. I’d almost rather see Morgan than the ones I’m spotting. Because it’s Dustin along with my mother and father.

I don’t acknowledge them at first and just walk past and drop my bag in the bed of my truck. When I finally look their way, all three sets of eyes watch me. Waiting. Expecting. They should get ready for disappointment.

“One big happy fucking family reunion,” I announce before reaching to open the driver’s door of my truck.

Dustin shifts in front of me. His hands up as he begs, “Please, Cade. We’re worried about you. *I’m* worried about you. All I want is a few minutes to check in with you. We thought maybe we could go grab a bite to eat. We don’t have to talk, just hang out for a few to make sure you’re okay. And hey”—he waves a hand over the stadium—“to celebrate that win.”

His beaming face sends a jolt of fury through me. I’ve never once wanted to hit my brother, but right now, I want to punch him in the mouth. He doesn’t get it. And I don’t get what he’s so happy about being surrounded by the two people who don’t give a fuck about either of us. “Yeah. I actually got to win tonight and didn’t have to lose the game on purpose.” I look over to my dad who won’t meet my eye. Shocker.

“Cade, don’t—” Dustin starts, but I cut him off.

If it was anyone other than my brother, I’d opt to use my fist to shut his mouth, but I stand nose-to-nose with him, restraining my hands at my sides as I say, “No, you *don’t*. Don’t push them motherfuckers on me like you pushed playing ball on me. It won’t work. There’s nothing on the surface of this planet that will get me to sit at a table across from them.” My hand lifts, pointed at my pathetic parents as I yell in my brother’s face. “And right now, I don’t want you in my sight either. So go play house with Mommy and Daddy. When they bail on you again, give me a call.”

Dustin remains silent. It’s Mom who steps beside us. “This isn’t Dustin’s fault. Don’t be angry with him.”

My brother shifts back. The only thing I move is my head, turning my face to look at my mother. “I’m more than fucking aware whose fault it is. My anger at him is because he’s allowing the two of you back into his life.

But that doesn't mean I have to."

"I don't deserve to be a part of your life. I understand that." A tear slides down her cheek. And my anger boils.

"I lost more than you could ever comprehend." Even as much of a bitch as Morgan is, and by her own doing, I can only imagine what would've happened had I not left when she needed me most.

"I know." My mom's voice is low as she says, "Morgan told me about the pregnancy."

The statement knocks the wind out of my chest. It takes me a few seconds before I can ask what I really want to know. "When?" Mom looks confused as I yell, "When did she tell you?"

Her eyes don't meet mine as she responds, "A few weeks after I left. I wanted to come back and check on you. Or call you. But I didn't think you'd want to speak with you."

"And you were right. Only I didn't even know about it back then." My rage is astounding, and my shouts are at max volume when I tell her, "I just found out. Morgan didn't tell me, but she told you."

"Cade, what are you talking about?" Dustin asks with sheer panic as he looks between Mom and me.

And somehow, I keep a somewhat steady voice as I say, "Morgan was pregnant. But she couldn't find me because I was hiding out after our mother left us. So she terminated the pregnancy and has hated me ever since." I turn to look at Mom. "But we all know it was for the best. Because I would've been just as shitty of a parent as the two of you are."

I step to my truck and pull the driver door open as Dustin pleads, "Cade, just hang on for a few minutes. That's what you've been dealing with? That's why you've been so stressed the last few months? Why didn't you tell me?"

Looking over my shoulder at my brother, I motion to Dad. "Because you were too busy bailing him out of his latest mess to deal with mine. And unlike him, I didn't want to bring you down to walk around in hell with me. But enjoy yourself. I won't be along for the ride with that piece of shit." Nope. I can get there all on my own. And it's much better alone.

Slamming the door truck door shut, I waste no time cranking the ignition and peeling out of the lot. Anger, rage, resentment, all of it is boiling over. And the one person who enjoys stoking the flame isn't around for the wrath.

God, I don't know how she does it. Because even with all the anger I feel, I still am bogged down by guilt. But only for what I said to Dustin. And the

anger I have towards him. I spoke the truth—they'll bail again no matter how much he wants to pretend our parents have decided to play their roles and be present. Eventually, they'll get whatever it is they need from him and take off again.

But what I really don't understand is how Morgan would tell my mother something so personal, so private, then keep it from me for years.

MORGAN

“He’s not coming,” Topher says as he takes a seat on the lounge chair beside me.

“I don’t give a flying fuck.” And I don’t. Even with how much fun it’d be to torment him a little tonight, I’m just exhausted.

“Sure,” Topher chuckles. When I turn a pissy expression to him, his smile remains. “Then why are you looking?”

“I’m not.” Maybe I have glanced around, curious to see if he shows his stupid face. But that’s it. “And don’t overestimate my kindness. Even if I’m not giving you hell, don’t overstep.”

“This is you being kind?” Topher lets out another laugh as he leans his head back, his hands behind his neck as he stares up. “But I do appreciate you bailing me out of a jam.”

“Yeah. Whatever.”

“Really, Morgan.” He sits up and turns to face me. “Now I have my uni paid and can help my little brother. He’s finally made some friends at his school and was devastated when Mom told him he’d be switching next year because she couldn’t afford the tuition.”

Ugh. Why the hell is Maddie surfacing in my mind? She’s *not* my little sister. Her well-being is not my concern. “Good for you.”

“You know you’re allowed to do it, too, right?” Topher speaks in code as I finally look at him. “You’re allowed to care and be nice every so often.”

“Fuck that.” I drop my head back down and focus on thinking about anything other than the little girl in Mississippi and my brother. Because they’re the only two I care about. And in this moment, I don’t want to care about anything, even them.

Fortunately, for his sake, Topher gives up on his let's-care-about-the-world-and-hug-it-out agenda and disappears inside the house with Ava. The sight of that bitch still makes me want to strangle her, but not enough to make me actually put in the effort.

It's about twenty minutes later when I feel my chair shift like something hit it and hear a grumbled, "Wake up."

When I open my eyes, I spot the last person that should be standing in front of me. Cade. And he clearly wanted my full attention as he looms in front of me.

"Can't stay away, can you?" I lean my head back and close my eyes. "How's the reunion with Mommy going?"

He doesn't respond. But seconds later, I feel a tight grip on my arm as I'm lurched forward. Then I'm tossed over his shoulder, and before I can yell for him to put me down, I'm flying through the air, the surface of the water breaking my fall as I go under.

I'm cursing him before my head even reaches the surface to find him stooping beside the pool. "You're going to pay for that."

He leans a little closer, but not within my reach as he says, "I already have."

He's not stupid enough to come anywhere close to me. Since he won't allow me to yank him into the pool, I climb out on the side. He stands up and faces me as I approach.

His expression is angry, twisted, and more furious than I've ever seen as he asks, "Why the fuck did you tell her and not me?"

"Tell who what?" I ask.

Surging forward, he seethes, "You know exactly *who* and *what* I'm talking about. I'm sick of the goddamn games, Morgan."

"That's what you're mad about?" I shake my head and watch as he gets angrier. His movements jerkier. But I'm not scared of him. As furious as he is, I know he'd never physically hurt me. Even if he'd like to hold my head under the water right now, I trust him in that regard. "What makes it worse, the fact that I could count on her when you couldn't or that she didn't come back for you even though she knew? She only came back this time because I told her I wanted her to. If I hadn't, she wouldn't be here." It really hadn't taken much convincing. She needed an excuse to show her face, and I gave it to her by asking her to come back.

He reaches up and grabs the nape of my neck as he lowly tells me, "Be

the bitch we both know you are. But remember, I know what you have planned for your father. And if it means hurting you, I'll gladly switch to his side. Then maybe you'll finally understand what real betrayal feels like. And you won't be able to hide behind that bitchy attitude." Releasing me, he turns and starts to walk away.

It takes me a few seconds to comprehend his words. If he really sided with my dad, it wouldn't make it impossible, but punishing Dad would be more of a challenge. "Is that why you're running away? Because even though I brought the worst out in you, you still can't betray me."

When he turns, there's a devilish grin on his face. "I'm not running. I just don't want to miss the show."

Show? What the hell is he talking about? There're a few seconds where I question, and a lingering nervousness develops as I wonder what he's talking about. Though, I know I can handle anything he throws at me. I think so, anyways.

Following him around the side of the house, I move to stand beside him. Before I can ask anything, the flames catch my eye, and I register sirens in the distance.

Seriously? He didn't. It takes a full minute before I comprehend that my Audi is no longer where I parked it and is instead four houses down in the street. Engulfed in flames.

I don't have to ask him. I know from the glee in his eyes that he set the fire.

Finally. He's reached my level of desperation, anger, bitterness. A reasonable person would be concerned. Me ... I'm thrilled as fuck. It's about time he gets on my level. Now the fun can begin. Because when someone finally stops giving a fuck, that's when their true self comes out.

CADE

“Crawford,” Otis shouts through the building as I make my way out of the office.

I spot Neil before my boss announces I have a visitor. When he sees me, Neil darts over. Quickly glancing around, he then whispers, “I’ve been trying to call you all morning.”

“Working.” I motion over to the dock where I slept then went straight to work before the sun was up.

“Did you start the fire, Cade? I know things between you and Morgan have been ... weird. But did you really do that?” When I don’t respond in two seconds, he pauses, then proceeds in a nervous, hushed tone. “That’s her style, not yours. You’re not a psychopath who sets shit ablaze.”

I regret the words before I say them, but I still speak it aloud, “You’re not a psychopath who’d shoot someone in the head either. But here we are.” The disbelief and hurt on his face make me sick to my stomach. But it also proves my point. “We really don’t know what we’re capable of until someone pushes us to that place.”

It’s a few minutes before he says, “An officer stopped by the house the morning, asking about the fire. But apparently Morgan told them it was an accident, offered to pay for any damages, then had a tow truck come get it like it wasn’t a big deal.”

Well, I’m thankful nothing fell back on Neil, which is why I made it a point to move the car. Luckily, Morgan is predictable and leaves her purse in the same spot in the kitchen cabinet with her fob inside. “It’s not a big deal to her. Everything and everyone are expendable.”

“Or maybe she thinks she’s expendable,” Neil mutters, his arms folding

over his chest as he stares off into the distance.

“Are you really taking up for her? Team Morgan, huh?” I let out a chuckle. But I don’t find it funny. Neil in her corner is terrifying. Because I can’t go against him or shield him.

“I’m on your side. And even though I agree she’s a little challenging, you actually seemed happy. It might’ve just been a glimpse, but you were. Then you changed the day your dad was in Dustin’s classroom before the pep rally. You don’t have to tell me, but I know something transpired or was said.”

Neil is my best friend. And has been my confidant the last few years when I had some of the toughest struggles of my life. He probably knows me better than most. “My father bet against us. The only option I had was to either take the loss or let Dustin suffer the consequence.”

His astonishment shows through as he gapes at me. “That’s why we lost. I knew something was way off with you that night.”

“Every fucking thing is off.” And no matter which way I turn, shit keeps getting deeper.

“Agreed. But that actually makes me feel better. Because I knew something was going on. And now it makes sense ... why you pushed Morgan away.” Neil exhales and drops to sit, “Is your dad still gambling on the games?”

I shake my head. “He’s supposed to be in some support group. But who the fuck knows. He’s never followed through with anything.” Except being a dirtbag. “I have to get back to work.”

“Okay.” Neil stands and looks around the marina. “Do you want to hang out later? It’ll just be me at the house. Savannah has some last-minute shopping to do for the masquerade tonight. You’re still coming, right?”

Another thing I’d signed up for that I really didn’t want to do. “I don’t know.”

“But you’ve already paid your portion for the limousine and everything. Plus, I think it would be better than sitting here alone.” He lowers his voice. “Or setting things on fire.”

Actually, both of those options sound better. “I’ll think about it.” But I already know I’m going to cave in. Besides, at least this time wearing a mask is required and expected.

MORGAN

“So.” Ryder leans against the doorframe as he tilts his head and looks to me. “What circus is planned for tonight?”

“You’ll have to wait and see.” Astonishingly, the truthful answer is *nothing*. I just want to let the previous spectacle play out. Moving around my bedroom, I’m acutely aware of Ryder still lurking. “Just say it.”

He waves a hand through the air. “Why would I have anything to say? It’s not like there was another fire last night or anything.”

“Yeah. Outrageous.” It is for Cade, not for me.

Apparently, my brother still thinks I’m responsible for igniting the blaze. “I saw the new Audi in the driveway. Nice. But why burn your car up just to replace it with a newer model?”

I don’t have patience for this right now. Or ever. Stopping, I glare at my brother. “I didn’t set the old one on fire. That was you trusty, perfect buddy. Go lecture him.”

There’s silence. And from the surprise morphing over Ryder’s face, I’m certain he’s trying to comprehend the news flash. “Yep. SuperCade is not as perfect as everyone believes.”

“What did you do to him beforehand? Other than blindsides him with his mom?”

I laugh as I shake my head. “Yeah. Being blindsided with a long-lost family member gives him the excuse to act like a psycho. Guess I can use that one too.”

“What are you talking about?” Ryder shifts unnervingly as he steps into my bedroom and shuts the door behind him. “Morgan, what did you do?”

It takes me a few seconds of studying Ryder’s terrified mug to grasp his

concern. “You know about her. Don’t you?” The tightening of his jawline, the way his eyes avoid mine. All of it confirms. “You really are a fucking liar too.” I laugh as I say the words, but I don’t understand why he’s been keeping everything from me. First that he’s actually a great ball player, and now that we have a sibling out there. “At least Maddie has a shot since she’s not a part of this fucked-up family.”

“Morgan, leave her alone.”

His defensiveness and effort to protect her rubs me the wrong way. I’m his sister. “That’s exactly what I did. I went to see her and realized she’s better off without me in her life. Luckily for her, Dad stayed away. But what about you? How long have you known? Have you been up there for a visit?”

He shakes his head and waits about a minute before he finally answers, “I knew Wendy was pregnant when she resigned. I heard her crying on the phone and telling someone she had to quit and how Dad wanted nothing to do with the baby. But I didn’t really connect the dots and look her up until a few years ago. All I do is send a birthday and Christmas gift. I never wanted to confuse Maddie or get her on Dad’s radar.” Ryder looks to me with determination. “We have to protect her from him. We can’t let her get caught up in the cross fire, Morgan. Swear to me that you won’t use her, jeopardize her, just to punish Dad.”

There’s no wonder why he’d question my morals, or the lack of them, but it does piss me off that he thinks I’d offer the kid up on a platter just to get back at our father. “I promise.” Which is something I never do.

And even Ryder is surprised. “You do care about her.”

Ugh. That really rubs me the wrong way. “And staying away from the people we care about is the best thing we can do for them. So, stay the fuck away from me too.”

I go to open the door, but before I can bail out of the room, he says, “At least you’re back to normal, liar.”

CADE

I take my time walking the few blocks along Royal to get to the event. Yeah. We had a limo but being trapped in it with the demon sounded even less appealing than the damn masquerade. And when I step into the ballroom, it takes me about two seconds to find her. I already know as I spot her ... even when I hate her, I want her.

I get a full minute to watch her before she notices me. Her emerald eyes lock with mine, the black lace mask surrounding them not enough to hide her even with the feathers on the side near her temple that coordinate perfectly with the vibe of the black dress she's wearing. My sight immediately drops to her exposed thigh, where the slit of the gown goes clear up to her hip.

Fuck. My dick responds to the thought—is she even able to wear underwear with that damn costume? And she's aware I'm checking her out. Not that I'm trying to hide the fact anyway. Her first response is to shift so more of her leg is exposed, the movement causes the full skirt to flow around her as she moves near some douchebag and whispers something in his ear while her eyes are still locked with mine.

He smiles at her and extends his hand, to which she places hers in his and lets him lead her to the dance floor. He's barely assumed his place in front of her and brought his hands to her hips before I'm standing next to them.

When I pause for the few seconds, I see the glint in her eyes, thinking she's about to get her way. Instead, I lean towards her and say, "Even behind a literal mask, you're so fucking transparent."

I don't wait for her words before I turn and walk away because the shock on her face is enough. Do I want to pry that motherfucker's hands off her? Yes. Will I give her the satisfaction of doing so? No.

Heading across the ballroom, I approach Neil seated at a table alone and take up residence in the chair beside him. “Where’s Savannah?”

“Dancing.” He nods to the crowd where I soon spot her due to the coordinating deep-red mask she wears to match his.

“Why aren’t you?”

“Just not in the mood.” Neil leans back in the chair and watches her.

“Did something happen?” I ask.

“No,” he answers, but something tells me there’s more going on. I wouldn’t blame him for having a lot going on in his brain, because mine has been jumbled up since our conversation at the docks.

“I sorry for what I said earlier today. You know I don’t look at you any differently, right?” My eyes search out Morgan and find her quickly. “We’ve all been pushed to our limits lately. But it doesn’t change anything between us.”

His quick nod isn’t convincing, but Savannah is back at the table, opting to sit on Neil’s lap as she happily drapes her arms over his shoulders and tells him something that I don’t pay much attention to. Because I unwillingly find Morgan back in my sight. She’s let the douchebag out of his dancing sentence, and he has disappeared. It’s for the best.

Savannah eventually goes back to dancing, then Ava and Topher arrive along with some other guys from the team. It’s not exactly a Saint Juliet sponsored event, but it looks like every student is here, plus a few from other nearby schools.

Ryder and Harrison approach, and when Ryder whispers something in Harrison’s ear, he makes a beeline for the bar. After Ryder takes a seat beside me, he leans over and asked lowly, “Morgan said you set the fire.”

Well, he didn’t waste any time getting to the point. “And?”

“Hoped it was another one of her lies. But something told me it was the truth for a change.” Ryder shifts away, taking a glance around the room. “Have you seen her?”

“Yeah.”

“She’s still not okay.” There is evident concern on his face. “Her nightmares are worse. And she’s found out some more shit about our dad that has her edgy.”

“Wow.” I let out a humorless chuckle. “There’s more?”

Hesitating, he glances around before he leans over. “We have a half sister. Dad knocked up the maid, so she took off with her.”

Not surprising, but kind of hard to grasp. “Poor kid.”

“Right.” He lets out a breath. “But also lucky. Because Morgan found out about her and won’t use her against our father.” Ryder takes a few beats before he asks, “There’s hope for her, right?”

“Beats me.” I shove the chair away from the table. “But it doesn’t change that she’s a raging bitch.”

There’re a few seconds where he just stares at me before he tells me, “If you find her, tell her she left her phone in the limo.”

“I’m not going to find her.” But I know as well as he does I will. Eventually.

MORGAN

Squirming against the metal chair, I look over the balcony down to the street. People are celebrating, dancing, drinking, all of it just three floors away while I sit here all gloomy. I know Cade is tired of my shit. But him calling me on mine is beyond frustrating, even more so than him not getting riled up by me dancing with someone else.

I didn't take it far enough, I guess. Only ... I don't want to take it any further with whatever that fool's name is. So, I tilt my glass back and drink the remainder of the whiskey as I stand. Once I'm by the ledge, I dump the ice and watch it fall against the pavement. There was no one in the line of fire, but someone a few feet across the road looks up and yells something incoherently. Dumb bitch. Can't even hold her own shit.

The door opens, and I hear a familiar voice before I turn to see Warren and some chick ... I have no clue who she is. When he notices me, he holds up the two glasses in his hand and shouts, "Morgan!" before him and new chick head to the corner of the balcony. There're a few other random people out and about, but most are inside.

The music floats through the air as the door opens again. Why am I looking for Cade? And why the fuck hasn't he shown his face yet? I think we're both losing our touch for tormenting each other. Because this is boring. The masquerade has at least another hour, and I'm already tempted to head out. Just to be done with the night.

Reaching up, I remove the mask that's been itching the side of my face all night and drop it to the ground. The next thing I plan to do is grab another drink. But before I move to the door, I hear Warren's chick say, "I don't feel good."

She stumbles forwards a bit as Warren catches her, stabilizes her just enough to back her against the wall, then puts his mouth on hers as she pushes him away. Something inside me tenses, my stomach, my chest, I don't know. But I watch as she manages to push him back.

"Really, Warren, I need to sit down." She makes a low groaning sound as she rubs her eyes. "Why do I feel so off?"

"It's okay, baby. I got you."

"Where's Brooklyn?"

"She left already," Warren responds with his lips on her neck.

She clings to him, but it looks more like she's trying to stand up, and she's almost crying. "No, she was supposed to take me home."

"I'll take you." He moves his hand up her thigh, but she shoves it away.

"Stop it."

Stumbling towards the door, Warren's right on her heels. And she's barely staying on her feet as she practically falls through the doorway back into the building. Warren disappears behind her, and that's when I move, because every ounce of my intuition tells me to follow them.

Once I step into the hallway, I locate them just down the corridor. Warren's got his hands on her hips, and I watch as he grabs her and pulls her to him as they continue walking. I can't hear exactly what she's saying, but it's clear by the way she's shoving him that she doesn't want him touching her.

Hurrying forward, I move beside her, hook an arm around her waist, and pull her arm over my shoulder. "Come on. I'll give you a ride home."

"She's fine, Morgan. I got this."

Warren goes to pull her from my grasp but I cling to her. "Don't touch her."

The playfulness that was on his face morphs into rage as he watches me.

"Something's wrong," the girl all but cries.

And I don't have to guess that she's either had too much to drink or she's been drugged. But from Warren's next comment—"Don't ruin my fun because you're having a bad night."—I already know what his plan was.

"Did you drug her?" He doesn't respond, only goes to grab her again. "Did you?"

"What if I did? Now the Queen Bitch of Wicked Souls is going to sprout a fucking conscience?" A surge of pure anger flashes across his face, and something about it reminds me of the hatred that Lenny had on his face that

night.

I have to get out of here. But she's coming with me.

"I need to go. Where's Brooklyn?" the chick slurs as she trips over her feet. Walking is getting more difficult for her, but I try to get her down the corridor.

Warren hurries in front of me, blocking my path. "Fuck up my night, and I'll fuck up your life. Or should I say light it on fire?"

His threat doesn't scare me at all. Him preventing me from leaving sends my nerves a little on edge. But it's her weak, trembling plea of "Please help me" that makes me want to run, vomit, and fight all at the same time.

"Get the fuck out of my way!" I scream. Warren seems a little baffled but doesn't make a move. "I will fucking kill you if you don't get the fuck out of my way." I keep screaming, shouting, and clinging to the weak girl who's almost on the floor as I try to hold her up. Her mumbled groans and sobs hit me in the chest, sucking the air out of my lungs just like Lenny's boots did that night.

She whimpers in a string of what I mostly understand as, "Don't let him hurt me. Don't leave me with him. I can't see. I can't open my eyes, they're so heavy."

I know where I'm at. I'm in the French Quarter. At the masquerade. But every few seconds I get a glimpse of Lenny and the abandoned hospital. Or least the sensation that I felt when I was there.

Another jolt of agony hits my gut when Warren moves closer, his hand on my bicep.

I can't breathe. I struggle to breathe, wheezing in air and screaming for Warren to back the fuck off at the same time. I want to hit him, punch him, kick him, but I'm too scared to let her go. The sense that I should run and hide is still strong, and I hate that the feeling is overpowering my concentration.

"Don't touch me!" I shriek, my eyes shutting for a second as I shake the images of that night out of my head. "Don't fucking touch me."

Warren hollers back at me, his face in mine, screaming. Then he suddenly lurches back.

Topher. He's shoving Warren away, shouting at him. Ava is in front of me. Her frightened eyes a carbon copy from that night. "Morgan, what happened?" She helps me with the girl, supporting one side of her. "Morgan, are you okay?"

No, no, no. “He was going to rape her. He was going to kill her.” And when I hear Ava’s voice again, all I see is Lenny hovering over me.

Placing my hands to my ears, I yell for Ava to shut up. I don’t want to hear her voice. I don’t want to see his face. I don’t want to feel that way again. But I do. I’m back in the hallways, running and trying to find a way out. Only I’m not sleeping. I’m wide awake.

CADE

Her screams get louder as I get closer. Topher is already there, pulling Warren back and shouting at him. Morgan is clinging to some girl who looks like she's all but passed out. But it's the fear on Morgan's face that I keep a watch on.

I'm going towards her when Ava helps her steady the girl, then lowers to the floor, propping her up halfway against the wall.

Morgan's gut-wrenching scream pierces my core. I feel her desperation and terror as she screeches, "He was going to rape her. He was going to kill her."

Ava attempts to calm Morgan, but it doesn't help. Morgan crumbles to the ground, her hands over her ears as she screams over and over to shut up, to not touch her. And I know. She's reliving that night.

Dropping to my knees, I'm in front of her. Every time I touch her, she jerks away or fights even more. Seeing her like this is killing me. In this moment, I'd do anything to make it stop. And I keep trying until I finally place my palms against her cheeks, my fingers gripping her tightly as I yell for her to look at me. Her eyes remain closed for what feels like an eternity until her terrified eyes finally meet mine. Her hands are still over her ears, but I keep repeating, "You're safe. I got you. I'm here, Morgan. Look at me. Focus on me. I'm here. Forever." I make a circular motion on her cheek with my index finger.

She doesn't move or even blink for a solid minute until her hands drop from her ears and reach forward. Her arms hook around my neck, and her shaky voice says, "He was going to rape her."

It doesn't take but a second to put everything together what was about to

happen with Warren and the passed-out girl. “She’s safe, Morgan.” And I don’t have to guess on another fact. Morgan saw her in trouble and helped her. “You saved her. She’s safe. You’re both safe.”

There’s no way I can let her go. But thankfully, I don’t have to. Topher is nose to nose with Warren, the commotion obviously drawing the attention of a police officer who steps between the two of them.

Topher continues yelling.

Ava tries to wake up the girl as a few others approach to help.

But it’s Morgan’s body trembling that hits me the hardest. I release her just long enough to wrap an arm under her knees and put one behind her back as I scoop her up off the floor. She doesn’t resist. Her arms remain latched around my neck, her face tucked against my neck as I carry her away from the chaos.

It’s the moment I know, I’d break myself into a million pieces if I could just give her one sliver of myself to repair everything that is broken inside her, including what I damaged all those years ago when I vanished on her. Because I can’t do it again. Even after she continues to hurt me, I will stick around for more. Pain I can live with. But living without her isn’t a possibility.

CADE

There's a light tapping on the bedroom door. I move my arm from around Morgan and slide off the bed. She's hardly spoken a word since she refused to go to the hospital and agreed to come back to Neil's house with me. And when I open the door, I expect to see him. But it's Ava.

She peeks past me to where Morgan is lying, still in her dress. "I just wanted to check on her and bring this." She passes me a bottle of water.

"Thanks. And she's about the same. How's Emma? Did she get checked out?"

"Yeah. I stayed at the hospital with her until her parents arrived. They kept thanking me, but I told them it wasn't me that helped their daughter. They wanted me to tell Morgan that they are so grateful to her." Ava looks back at Morgan. "Do you think she's going to be all right?"

I nod. It might not be tonight. But she will be. I'll make sure of it.

Ava shoots another concerned glance Morgan's way before she tells me, "Let me know if y'all need anything."

Once she's out of sight, I close the door and move to the side of the bed that Morgan is facing. I notice her eyes are open, so I stoop down and get eye level with her, holding up the water bottle. "Thirsty?" She shakes her head. "Are you sure?" Another head shake.

I place the water on the nightstand. I can't take the silence much longer. I need her to bitch me out or get pissed for bothering her. Reaching up, I stroke my palm over her cheek. "Talk to me, please, Morgan."

"About what?" she asks, her tone way too calm.

"About what happened. If you won't go to the hospital or find a professional to talk to, you have to find someone. And since I'm the only one

here. Guess you're stuck chatting with me." I give her a grin, hoping to lighten the mood, but she just watches me.

"Talking won't change anything." She sounds defeated and tired, but it doesn't escape my notice that she tilts her head slightly where her face is firmer against my hand as her eyes shut. "I just want to sleep."

There's no way I can let her off the hook that easy, but something tells me tonight isn't the night to push her. "Let me help you take off your dress and get more comfortable."

Without refusing, she sits up as I move behind her and start unfastening her dress. The only way to describe her movement is zombie-like—from the way she's emptily staring to the limpness in her posture.

Once she's out of her dress, I grab one of my T-shirts and pass it to her. When she doesn't reach for it, I pull it over her head as she finally meets my eyes. In them is something unrecognizable and painful. Maybe good news will help. "Emma is okay. Her parents wanted to thank you for stepping in."

There's a little confusion on her face before she says, "I didn't even know her name."

All I can do is wrap my arms around her and pull her to me. The disoriented look on her face is just so agonizing, and I don't know how to fix this. But I can promise her one thing. "She won't ever forget your name."

I lose track of time while I keep her wrapped in my arms. When she releases me, I tell her, "Let's try to get some sleep."

For the first time in as long as I can remember, Morgan doesn't argue, refuse, or tell me to fuck off. So, we climb into bed together, and I hook an arm around her to hold her securely against me. Her face is shielded from my view, resting on my chest. It's probably an hour or so before I feel her fully relax. With her breathing evening out, she drifts off. In no time, I doze off too. Exhausted, worried, and defeated but happy to have her with me.

Only, when I wake a few hours later, she's not in the bed and nowhere to be found.

MORGAN

Cade hurries out of the café and onto the patio as he gasps, “I’ve been looking everywhere for you.”

“You found me.” I stay seated, looking out at the river.

He sucks in a few more strangled breaths as he sits beside me. “Why didn’t you answer my calls or one of the fifty messages I sent you?”

“Why aren’t you in better shape, Mr. QB?” I try to sound bitchy, but I know I sound drained. Because I am. And don’t feel like doing this right now. And obviously Cade doesn’t either. Because he just keeps a pointed *Are you serious?* stare on me.

In response, he pulls out his phone, clicks around for a few seconds, then shoves it back in his pocket. “You don’t have to answer me, but can you at least spare Ryder. He’s been worried about you.”

I take a sip of my coffee. “I don’t know where my phone is. But thanks for the concern. I’m good.”

“Yeah. Sure.” Shoving the chair back, he heads into the café. I expect him to leave, but instead, he returns with two paper cups in hand and sets one next to me.

“I have a drink already.” I hold up my cup.

“And now you have two. Because I know you don’t plan on leaving this seat for a while.” He gestures out to the water. “Still have about thirty minutes before the ferry starts running, right? Or we counting tugboats?”

How the fuck does he remember that? Shit. I’ve barely given it any thought over the last few years. Especially after Pawpaw passed, because it was him who always enjoyed having coffee on the Riverwalk with Ryder and me. Until Cade became part of the tradition.

“I don’t want to do this, Cade.”

He casually sips his coffee as he glances out the window. “Do what?”

“Us. Moment’s passed. I’m fine. Just had a little episode last night. Now, it’s all out of my system.”

“That’s your excuse for running away this morning?”

“I don’t need an excuse. Or an explanation. I need to be left alone.” I’m still trying to figure out last night. But every time I even think about it, the feelings start returning. The dread, the weakness, the fear. But the sound of Emma crying for help was worst of all. Because I can’t feel that way too. And the more terrified she sounded, the more panicked and pathetic I felt.

Cade doesn’t make a move to leave, just sits silently. I get it. He’s worried because of my meltdown last night. And I’m not surprised. SuperCade has to save everyone. But he can’t save me.

CADE

“Why are you still here?”

Not exactly the question I want to hear from her. But I’m glad she’s finally speaking after the last twenty minutes of silence. I know I shouldn’t push my luck with her. But I will. Because the silent treatment feels crueler than her hateful words. “You know why I’m here.”

The response doesn’t seem to hit a nerve because she just blankly stares over the river and resumes her muteness for a solid two minutes before she mutters, “No, I don’t.”

Instead of trying to snap her out of her hushed trance, I detour and go the simple route. Coffee. Standing, I grab my empty mug. “I’m going to get a refill. Want anything?”

She slowly turns to look at me, exhaustion on her face and in her tone. “I don’t understand.” I hear the confusion in her voice. It sounds too soft to have come from Morgan, but it had.

Wanting to know more than anything what’s going to her mind, I ask, “Don’t understand what?”

“Why won’t you forgive your mom but you keep coming back to me?”

Wow. I don’t know what I was expecting, but that wasn’t it. And unfortunately, I can’t answer. “I don’t understand it myself.”

I hesitate for a few seconds before I walk into the café. The question bats around my mind the entire time I wait in line to get a refill, then I head back outside. When I return, Morgan’s chair is empty. She’s running again. Another out-of-character move for this recent version of who she is. It’s a definite sign she’s struggling more in her mind than she’d ever admit. But I don’t go after her, instead choosing to give her some space. Mainly because

I'm still feeling out of sorts by her question. Morgan has made it her mission to make my life hell. Her tactics are definitely a bit excessive and unwarranted, but after finding out about the pregnancy, I can understand where her hatred for me stems from.

"Fuck," I mutter as I drink down the remainder of coffee.

This is the worst idea I've had in a while (and there have been some doozies), but I stand and head to see the last person I ever thought I'd seek out—my mom.

A quick message to Dustin is surprisingly effective as he divulges the information swiftly without a lecture or questioning to my intentions, sending me mom's hotel and room number. I half expected him to refuse to tell me or insist on coming with me. Thankfully, he did neither. There's a strong impulse in me that needs to ask her ... needs a response I never thought I'd get. But I want to know her reason. Want to hear why she abandoned her entire life, including me, and never looked back.

The hotel lobby is a blur, and I don't snap out of it until the elevator concierge asks me what floor I'm heading to.

"Fourth." This damn place makes Morgan's word echo in my head again. I'm certain she booked all this when she organized the circus of a reunion.

My heavy fist feels like it's full of lead as I lift it and knock on the door. A few seconds later, it opens to my mom's surprised face. Dustin must not have informed her I was heading over.

"Cade," she gasps my name and steps aside as she waves me in the room. "Come on in. I'm so happy you're here."

I step inside the room, and she closes the door behind me. As she goes to say some other bullshit, I cut her off and ask the only thing I want to know. "Why?"

When her smile fades into a tight expression, I know my question needs no explanation. It's clear I'm waiting for answers I already know I won't like. But in this moment, I realize there's some part of me that prays she has some logical reasoning, any sort of justifiable rationalization to explain what she did.

She stiffly moves to the opposite side of the room and drops onto the love

seat as she motions for me to sit. The silence grows louder as I watch her pour a glass of water, slide it across the table, then pour another that she takes a small sip from as I remain in place. “I don’t blame you for being on edge. Or for hating me. I do want to explain. But I want you to understand that I wasn’t in the right state of mind when I left.” Her eyes stay on the glass of water clutched between her fingers.

“Just tell me.” One way or another, I want this conversation to be over.

“It was too much. Everything with your father, finances, his gambling, my failures. Then, after what happened with your brother, I felt both of you would be better off without me.” She finally looks to me as she says, “When I drove away, I had every intention of ending my life. I tried ... but a housekeeper found me in the motel room, and I ended up in a psychiatric hospital for a few days and agreed to an outpatient program.” A slight smile rises on her lips. “There was a kind doctor who helped me, gave me hope that things would get better. And they finally did. Staying away was so hard, and I thought a million times about coming back, but I was worried I’d make it harder on you. Because there is still a nagging voice in my head that tells me you’re better off without me. So, I made the hard choice to stay away. Maybe it was my way of punishing myself.” She lets out a soft chuckle.

Glad she finds this comical. I don’t see anything fucking funny about it. “I get it. You were dealing with shit. But don’t lie to yourself. Staying away was the *easier* choice. Coming back would have meant you’d have to face the consequences of your own actions.”

All the hopefulness drains from her face as she says, “You’re right. I’m a coward.”

Her pity act rubs me the wrong way. “I don’t feel sorry for you. If you were well enough to speak to Morgan, you were well enough to speak to me.”

“I tried. I lost count on how many times I picked up the phone to call you. But nothing felt right. I would just set it down and tell myself you were better off with Dustin.”

The mention of my brother reminds me of something else she said. “What happened with Dustin?” There’s nothing I remember ... He wasn’t even living at home at the time.

She gives me a confused glance before quickly looking away. “He didn’t tell you?”

“Apparently not.” I wait for a response, but the only thing she says is,

“Maybe it’s a conversation you should have with him.”

Now I actually do let out a small chuckle. Because this is wild. There’s *another thing* being kept from me. “Does everyone have some big fucking secret they’re keeping? Can’t everyone just tell the fucking truth and not hide shit?” I don’t realize I’m shouting until I see her flinch. As pissed as I am, I still don’t want her to feel scared of me or relive the fear she had when my dad would go on one of his drunken episodes.

“I need to go.” I exhale, but it’s not enough to release the rage built up inside me.

Mom is beside me before I can get to the door. “Please stay. And I will tell you anything you want to know. I just need you to promise me that you won’t blame anyone but me. You and Dustin have been through enough. I’m the parent, this should be on me, not on either of you.” She shifts between me and the door. “I can have something brought up if you’re thirsty or hungry. I really want to spend some time with you.”

God, this was a stupid idea. “Room service, huh? Putting it on Morgan’s tab?” I wave around the extravagant room.

She is puzzled for a few seconds before she quickly shakes her head. “No ... no. She’s not paying for the room. I am.”

I take a step away from Mom and look around the room. This hotel is one of the priciest in New Orleans. “Wow. You must’ve really done well for yourself while you were making that hard choice.”

Her eyes drop to the floor as her arms fold over her chest. “I was lucky.” And that’s the moment I notice the ring on her left hand. “At first, I struggled with my health and finances. But once I decided to get a job at the hospital, everything fell into place. The work I do really matters. It gives me a purpose. And that’s where I met Elijah.” Her hand grips her bicep tighter. “He’s a heart surgeon. We met in the hospital cafeteria. First, we were just friends, but it became more as we got to know each other. I always joke with him that he’s so good, he healed my heart without even operating.”

“Hilarious,” I say flatly as she tucks her hand under her arm, hiding the ring.

“He knows all about you. Maybe the two of you can meet soon. I think you’d really like him. He loves being on the water and is out on Lake Pontchartrain every free moment he gets.”

On the lake? I wonder if he uses the same marina I work at. “Where have you been living?”

She hesitates for a second before she says, “Slidell.”

“On the other side of the fucking lake. That’s where you buried your head in the sand?” I’d always imagined her being in another state or somewhere far away, not just a short freaking car ride away.

She looks almost ashamed as she says, “I wanted to stay close in case you or your brother ever needed me.”

“Yeah, because I knew exactly where to find you in case I *needed* you, right?” This was all wrong. I should leave. The more I hear, the worse my stomach turns, my chest tightens, and my fist clenches.

I can’t lose my shit here. But all I want to do is throw something, punch the wall, fling the fancy fucking marble table over the balcony. But I won’t. It wouldn’t change anything.

“I’m sorry,” she cries, a soft sob escaping as she swipes at her cheek. “I swear to you, I will be here if you ever need me. I want to be a part of your life. I understand it might not be a big part, but I don’t want to lose you again.”

Her sad act doesn’t register on my radar. The pain and hurt she caused me won’t allow me to pity her. And all I can think is how Morgan hates me because I left her. This clusterfuck is mounting, and I’ve had enough.

“I forgive you.” The sentiment leaves my mouth before I think twice. I hear her gasp at my words, her tears falling faster. “But just because I forgive you doesn’t mean I want you in my life. Go back to doc and live in your happy world. Because I’ll never need you. My life won’t be any worse if I walk out that door and never set eyes on you again.”

I finally have the answer for Morgan, the reason I can keep coming back to her but not want anything to do with my mother. It’s because I know how it feels when someone leaves when you need them the most. My mother did it to me, and I can’t see any way to get over that pain. But I made Morgan feel that same hurt. And I wouldn’t wish that shit on anyone. So the reason I keep going back to her is simple: I will spend the rest of my life trying to earn her forgiveness; I can’t stand the thought of making someone else feel as low and worthless as I was made to feel.

MORGAN

“Come on! Let’s dance!” Savannah shouts as she begins without me.

“No,” I tell her, which doesn’t impede her gyrations.

Ava sits next to me on the stone step of the mausoleum and is more on my level, which is unenthusiastic at best. Halloween in the cemetery next to Saint Juliet has been a tradition forever. This year it seems like a waste of time. Why did I even show up? I don’t fucking know. I don’t fucking know why I did any of this shit today, including putting on my witch costume and playing along. On the outside, I’m going through the motions. But inside, I’m numb.

Refilling the shot glass, I down the whiskey, then fill it up again before pouring some in Ava’s tumbler. She stares at the liquid for a second before taking a sip.

Motioning to where several five-gallon beverage dispensers filled with Wildcat Punch are lined up, she says, “I can’t bring myself to drink any of that.”

“Same.” I gulp down another shot. Ava and I are of the same mind on that front—we both want to make sure there’s nothing in our drinks that we aren’t aware of. Which is why I’ve only drank from one of the many bottles supplied by Topher, but more importantly, one I opened.

“Everything is so different now.” Ava gives me a quick glance.

I watch the drunken students stumbling around, another group dancing as the music thumps in the distance. “Feels like the same bullshit to me.”

“Yes, it really is,” she mutters as she takes in the same scene I’m viewing.

Thankfully, she doesn’t say anything else. Because I really don’t feel like chatting. I don’t even feel like being here. But it’s easier than leaving right

now. So, I refill my glass and swallow the liquid down. It's no longer burning my throat, and I should slow down. Instead, I take another right after. Everything is numb. Maybe my thoughts will follow along. Because here comes Cade. There's something weird between us. And I don't like it. I can handle the hatred or sexual tension. But not the weirdness. It shouldn't be that way. But I had to go and stupidly ask him why he could forgive me and not his mom. Why do I care that his response was "I don't know"? But the lack of answer bothers me. Because the hard questions to answer are usually the ones that do the most damage.

"You might want to pace yourself." Cade drops on the step beside me.

"Sure will." I take another shot.

He shakes his head. He knows it's futile. Same way I know all this is pointless too.

"I'm going to find Topher." Ava disappears down one of the aisles between the tombs and leaves me and Cade sitting alone. Just great. Now going home is the easier option.

"Where's Ryder?" I try to stand but stumble a bit. Automatically, I grasp Cade's shoulder to steady myself.

"He left with Harrison, but I'll give you a ride home." Cade stands, his arm looping naturally behind my lower back to support me.

"You mean it's your turn on Morgan Watch. To make sure she's not gonna break." My laugh is strained. It pisses me off that they keep hovering and pass me off like I'm a fucking porcelain doll.

Cade halts, his arm latching tighter around me as he shifts in front of me. "We're past this, Morgan. We're not doing the bitchy I-don't-have-a-heart thing anymore."

I want to be done. But I don't think I have another mode. "Just because you say it's done, doesn't mean anything." Turning, I do my best to get out of his grip and walk away. But that isn't as easy as I thought. Maybe I did take a few too many shots. Fortunately, Cade doesn't try to continue the conversation and just walks beside me as we make our way to his truck.

He opens the passenger door and helps me up, but I swat at his supportive grip on my waist. "I got it."

"Sure you do." His frustration is thick, and his patience is thin. Good. Mine is too. After he slams my door shut, he walks around the hood and gets in the driver's seat. As he fires up the engine and takes off, I lean my head back on the seat and close my eyes, trying to relax. But I'm fucking burning

up.

I adjust the AC vents to no avail; I can't seem to cool off. "Does this not work at all?" Any air would be nice right now, so I roll down my window to let the cool breeze hit my face. Snatching the stupid witch's hat off my head, I drop it out the window. Reaching down, I pull off my stiletto pumps one by one, then toss both out too.

"What the hell are you doing?" Cade asks as he glances in the rearview.

"De-witching." Shifting around, I unhook the garters to my thigh-high stockings and roll them down before tossing them out to join the rest. Once I'm down to just the black dress, I lean my head back again and close my eyes. So much better. The breeze is flowing, and I don't feel all confined by the damn getup.

A few minutes later, Cade parks in front of my house. He shuts the truck off but doesn't make a move to get out.

"Your seat is scratching my ass." I laugh, shifting against the worn leather before I climb over and straddle him.

He lets out a frustrated groan as my mouth moves to his. But he kisses me back as I grind against him. His hands move to my hips and grip tightly to keep me from moving. "You're drunk, Morgan."

"It's not the first time." I rock against him as much as his hold will allow, my mouth trailing down his neck as I lick across his skin. Reaching between us, I go to unbutton his jeans, but he grips me by the wrist and moves my arm to my side as I lean back to look at him. "Seriously? I'm aware of what I'm doing. I want to fuck." He doesn't respond, just keeps an edgy watch on me. "Fine." I try to wiggle out of his control, and that's when he finally speaks.

"I went to see my mom yesterday."

The statement takes me by surprise. And my first thought is *I don't want to hear this*. Because he's undeniably in his feels. Why can't he keep his mouth closed and fuck me? "Well, there goes the mood."

He releases my wrist. One hand moves to my waist, the other on my face. His palm is against my cheek as his thumb strokes my skin when he murmurs, "I get it now. Why you want to hurt me. Why you want to make me suffer. And I know why I keep coming to you but don't want her in my life. I forgive her, but she abandoned me and made me feel worthless. And I'm the one who broke you. I don't need your forgiveness; I need to show you that I was wrong. Because you're not worthless."

I listen to his words. And I actually believe he means them as he speaks

them. But it doesn't matter. I don't want to feel them. "You can't undo the past. It is what is. And I don't need you to validate me. Even if you are the one who said it from your own mouth ... something about being worthless and pathetic."

His eyes close for a few seconds as he shakes his head. "What happened that night wasn't about you." There's guilt on his face as he watches me. "I was mad because you were right. I can't help but play the hero. I lost the game on purpose that night."

Okay. Didn't see that coming and don't understand. At all. "Why would you do that?"

"My dad made a bet with some shady people. It was either lose the game or Dustin would pay the price. And I had to save my brother."

Yeah. I get that. Mine is the one person I'd do anything for. But I still can't believe what he's saying. "That's what had your panties in a twist that night?"

"I hate him, Morgan. And I'm starting to hate Dustin for allowing him back in our life. Even as angry as I was at my mom, my dad is the one I despise most of all. And my brother is sitting there with him like nothing he did to us mattered, and he's *still* causing trouble." He pulls me closer; his mouth drops to my shoulder. "I didn't mean what I said that night. I'll always need you." His lips trail across my skin. "Forever."

I drape my arms over his shoulders as he lifts his head, my forehead falling forward against his. "This isn't it. We're not going to ride off into the sunset while your raggedy seat scratches my ass." When I lean back, I look him directly in his haunted eyes. "We were stupid kids when we made stupid promises to each other. I don't want to ever get married. I don't want to have kids. And I won't ever change my mind. Forever is bullshit, Cade, and you know there's no happy ending." I move to get off of him, but he keeps me in place. So, I turn a frustrated glare to him. "Let me go."

"Never," he states firmly.

"Oh my God. Stop it." I roll my eyes.

"I don't need you to marry me. I don't care if you don't want kids. It doesn't change my mind. The only person I want is you. I don't even need you to admit that you need me too. Or tell me that some part of that stone heart of yours loves me. All I need is for you to say that you're mine. Everything else I want comes along with that."

"I can't do this mushy shit." I finally squirm my way off his lap and pull

the door open as I get out of the truck. He's a step behind me.

"Of course not. Having feelings is too much for Stone Heart Morgan. You know you're only running away because you're scared." His words cause me to stop.

"Scared? Feelings? What the fuck do you want me to do? Fall apart because some dipshit tried to kill me? I'm here. I'm standing. And he's not. Fuck him. I won!" I scream, my finger ramming against Cade's chest as he reaches forward and holds it there.

"Still lying. But I wish you'd understand, you don't have to pretend with me." He threads his fingers in my hair and pulls me closer. "I'll walk with you in your nightmare every night and never judge you. Admitting you need me doesn't make you weak, Morgan."

I hate when he does that. Tunes in to something I can't speak into existence. But he does it so easily. I don't want to feel anything. I don't ever want to feel weak again. "That's what got to me. How weak Emma sounded." I can't believe I'm admitting it to Cade. I've hardly admitted the truth to myself. "Because that's how I felt in those few moments when I thought Lenny would actually get the chance to kill me and I couldn't stop him."

"But you did. There's nothing weak about you, Morgan."

This is too much. His words. The feelings rising in my core. Because I want to cry. And I've cried more than enough lately. "Good night." I release him and turn to walk away.

"Morgan."

When I turn back to face him, he lifts his arm in the air, making a circular motion with his index finger. I instantly raise my hand and give him the middle finger, to which he only laughs.

"My offer still stands. Forever." He moves towards me, eliminating the little space I put between us. He leans down, stopping just before his lips touch mine. "Give me the signal whenever you're ready." Then he gives me a soft, quick kiss before he turns and walks away.

CADE

She's barely glanced my way since our conversation on Halloween. Now, four days later, her eyes are pinned on me during the pep rally. *Please don't let her have anything planned.* I keep saying I'll take whatever she dishes out, but that's a lot easier said than done.

Principal Thatcher ends his version of a motivational speech just before the band strikes up our fight song. Morgan mechanically follows along, dully performing the routine's choreography as my teammates start jogging out of the gym. And as much as I don't want to, I follow them into the locker room and drop down on the bench as Coach starts his BS.

I prop back against the locker, my thoughts everywhere except the game until I hear Coach yell, "Crawford, wake up."

"Yeah," I reply but don't move.

Coach yammers on about being present and supporting each other, all a load of bull I don't believe he even buys. He will say anything to convince us to win but isn't actually a decent enough person to make the team rally behind him based on his leadership.

Finally shutting up, he heads back to his office. Neil and Topher assume their typical conversation about the afterparty which isn't at Neil's place for a change since his parents are finally home. So, the backup plan for tonight is hanging at the field. I don't want to be here any longer than need be.

Hours later, it's finally time to take the field against Archbishop Mathis High School. There're still two more games in the regular season—including today's—but this is the one that really counts. Winning this game will decide who gets home field advantage when we meet in playoffs, and it's a sure thing we'll both be there. Tonight, we'll find out who gets the advantage to

be on their own turf.

After losing the coin toss, the Eagles kick off to us. When I'm on the field, I call the plays Coach wanted. The man might be a complete trash of a person, but the asshole knows what he's talking about on the field. By halftime, we're up by seven, then quickly score another touchdown during our drive to start the third quarter.

Not that the Eagle's defensive line has made it easy. I'm fucking exhausted, especially being out on the field more to extend the plays and drive down the clock. Because one of Coach's main plans of attack was to hold on to the ball as much as possible, allowing the Eagles very little possession. *Less opportunities of possession, less chances of points.* The phrase was repeated enough by him that there's no one on the team who shouldn't know the intent of every play.

There's less than five minutes remaining of the fourth quarter when offense is back on the field after the Eagles kicked a field goal to conclude their drive. We huddle, I call the play, we break and the offensive line sets.

Something's different. I look at several sets of eyes fixed on me, all crouched close. My money's on a blitz. They're all headed my way. I know it before the ball hits my hands. So as soon as it touches my fingers, I start backing up, quickly looking for Becks. But it's pointless, a defensive player gets through the right tackle and crashes into me. Before we hit the ground, another gets through, his helmet going into my knee as I plummet to the ground.

Fuck. Immediate pain radiates in my leg as I grip my knee, staying on the ground. I hear a whistle and the call of roughing the passer. But that doesn't fix my fucking knee. One of the athletic trainers stoops next to me, asking me about the pain and if I can move it. I can. But it fucking hurts.

"I'm good."

"No." Coach is hovering over me. Giving instructions to his staff to help me off the field. "Bring him to the locker room and get his knee checked out. We need him more for playoffs than the last few minutes of this game."

"I'm fine." When I stand, though, I know he's right.

"Get your ass off of the field, Crawford. Second string can hand off the ball a few times to run the clock down."

I don't argue, not that I could. I keep an arm slung over the supportive shoulder I'm offered and limp off the field. Son of a bitch. It doesn't feel broken or anything. But it's sore as hell.

Topher slaps me on the shoulder as he whispers, “I’ll get the punk-ass bitch back for you.”

Normally, I’d tell him the piece of shit isn’t worth it. But right now, I hope Topher lays the fucker out. It was an obvious cheap shot and they had one intention—to get me out of the game.

MORGAN

Motherfucker. That was a dirty hit, and I see the source of the strategy when Archbishop Mathis's coach slaps his player on the ass before they take the field again. With the next snap, Topher goes helmet-first into the jackass. Another player, I think Becks, is on top of the other guy after sacking him. Of course the whistle is blown and now Saint Juliet has penalties called against us.

The opposing coach whines to the refs, as if his defensive players hadn't just sidelined our QB. Of course they're being retaliated against. And since the players have been handled enough by Cade's teammates, that leaves the coach in need of payback. Good. I need a project. I tell myself the hit on Cade bothers me because I need Cade in the game to get back at Dad. That's it. But even I know I'm lying to myself. I'm pissed they tried to hurt him. All over some stupid fucking game.

Walking off the track before the game is finished, I head to the locker room and find Cade in the medical room on the exam table. The trainer presses, turns, and examines Cade's knee before concluding, "I don't think it's anything to worry about, but for everyone's peace of mind, I want you to go over to the ER and have it checked out."

"No, I'm fine." He stands and doesn't quite wince, but I can see he's not fully putting his weight on it.

"We're going," I tell Cade as they both look at me.

There's a slight smirk on Cade's lips as he says, "Yes ma'am."

I ignore it for now and step beside him to wrap his arm over my shoulder. The trainer gets on his other side, and Cade complains about not needing help, but neither of us listen and just get him outside. When he drops into my

passenger seat, I hear the sharp intake of breath between his teeth. “Yeah. You’re totally good,” I mock before driving off.

“I am.” He exhales. “It’s a little sore, but it’s worth the pain since you’re worried about me.”

“No. I need you intact to play. That’s all this is about.”

“Okay.” He chuckles, not buying it but thankfully drops it.

I drop him off at the ER doors, then park the car and head inside. After a long wait in the lobby, we’re in the back waiting once again for the results of an MRI and a few X-rays.

One of the nurses peeks in the room. “He’s in here,” she tells someone in the hallway.

And Dad walks in. He completely ignores me and goes straight to Cade. “Any news?”

“No. But it feels fine.”

Even if it didn’t, he wouldn’t admit it.

“Just keep me in the loop,” Dad tells him before walking out of the room.

He was only here a minute, but it was enough to make me want to puke. I haven’t seen him much around the house, and it’s been nice. Mom actually seems happier since Dad has been MIA around the house while she just keeps saying he’s sleeping elsewhere for a little while.

Shifting in the chair, I cross my legs the opposite way to unstick my thighs from the plastic.

“You don’t have to stay.” Cade pauses as I look to him. “But I want you to.”

“It’s nothing.” I drop my head back as I cross my arms. My cheer uniform is giving me little coverage, and the hospital is freezing. He lets out a snicker, causing me to open my eyes and look at his smirking face. “Are you aware that it’s still an option to stab you in the shoulder?”

“Well, at least we’re at the hospital already,” he teases, because we both know I won’t stab him, not right now anyways.

My hands cling to my biceps harder as I stare at the smiling moron who tells me, “Come over here. I’ll warm you up.”

His suggestive remark annoys me because he’s all talk. Even in the private room, he won’t risk someone walking in. But I do want to warm up and call his bluff. Standing, I move beside the bed and carefully climb onto his lap, my knees pressing into the hospital bed as I straddle him, my arms resting on his shoulders. “I’m waiting.”

The smile that twists on his mouth surprises me more than his hands pulling me closer as his lips move to mine. He kisses me impatiently, without hesitation, completely different than I'd imagined he would, considering where we are.

I don't know how long we've been dry humping when I hear the door open and a loud throat clearing. "Looks like I'm interrupting." The doctor stops near the foot of the bed.

Leaning back, I glance down between Cade and me before saying, "Just making sure his dick still works. It's all clear, Doctor."

"Morgan," Cade fusses under his breath, but he doesn't immediately release me as I get off his lap and sit on the bed beside him.

"Everything came back good. You might have some tenderness and should stay off of it for a few days, but you should be as good as new in a week or two."

"I have practice and a game next week."

"That's what the backup quarterback is for." The doctor points to Cade. "Rest it."

The nurse who brought my dad to the room enters a few seconds after the doctor leaves. "I'll let you know as soon as the discharge paperwork is ready."

Cade stays silent, his fist pushing into the bed, eyes on the floor. "I can't miss the game."

"I'm sure you won't. You said it already feels fine. By Friday, it probably really will be." I take in a deep breath before I say, "And if not, it's only a stupid game."

His head slowly turns as his eyes meet mine. Yeah. I don't believe I said it either. But it's the truth. It *is* a stupid game. The insufficient thing my dad has always placed ahead of my brother and me. "My father will pay one way or another. We will figure it out."

"We'?" Cade asks, his eyebrow slightly raised at me.

I consider pushing him off the bed, but I don't want to stay here any longer than necessary. And another injury might delay us. "I'll wait in the car for you. It's too fucking cold in here."

I'm at the door when he calls my name, but I don't turn around or stop. I have no idea what he was going to say, but whatever it was, I'm not ready to hear it. I need out of this wretched hospital. It's a complete contrast to the abandoned one I've visited so many times in my nightmares, but it feels just

as suffocating at the moment.

CADE

The chatter at the lunch table is endless between Ava and Savannah. Morgan has only chimed in when they specifically address her. Other than that, she stares across the café, looking like she's completely lost in her thoughts. It's a scary question, but I ask her anyways. "Whatcha thinking about?"

"Nothing," she replies with an edge of frustration as she rests her chin on her hand.

Reaching in front of her, I grab a fry from her plate, then toss it in my mouth. She gives me a quick, irritated side-eye then slides the plate over in front of me before resuming her people watching.

"I don't believe you. I know there's something going on up there." I tap on her temple before pushing her hair behind her ear and sliding my palm against her neck. When her gaze returns back to me, I see the spark in it that tells me I'm in trouble. But for some reason, it's a relief. Because she's been too complacent lately.

"I was thinking about how I haven't had a good fucking lately. I can show you my solution since you're so eager to know what's going on up here." Instead of backing down, I lean over and capture her mouth in mine. It *has* been too long, but she breaks the kiss off, her hands shoving against my chest. "Yeah, not doing it for me."

The smirk on her face along with the words should be an insult. But I know. It's a challenge. She wants me to show her exactly how much I want her. And fuck, I do. But before we can get any further, Topher drops in the seat across from me.

"Y'all will never guess what happened."

Neil is the first to ask, "What happened?"

“The coach from Archbishop Mathis was just arrested.” Topher’s shocked pitch matches his wide-opened eyes. “Like handcuffed on campus and escorted out. That’s what the bastard deserves after that punk-ass hit last week at the game.”

“What was he arrested for?” Neil asks.

“He was caught selling drugs to students on campus.”

“Sounds like his actions finally caught up with him.” The way Morgan says it sets an alarm off in my head. *Did she ...?*

“Exactly.” Topher holds his hand up to her for a fist bump that she doesn’t return.

While I don’t feel bad for the guy, something makes me wonder if he actually should be in jail. I lean into Morgan and ask, “Did you set him up?”

“Nope.” I see the corner of her lip that is raised in a slight smirk as she continues, “But we all have shit to hide. Sometimes fate just needs a little nudge to bring it to light.”

“Hm.” I process the fact that she admitted it. She found his dirty little secret and exposed it. “If I didn’t know better, I’d say you did it for me.”

“Good thing you know better.”

Topher turns to me. “Are you playing on Friday?”

“Yeah. I’m playing.” There was never a question. My knee might still be a little sore, but it’s not any worse than pain I’ve dealt with while playing before. Coach doesn’t exactly care what’s going on with my knee, he just wants me in the game. I was shocked when he only let me get on the field to throw passes and made me sit out for the rest of practice. But he said he has no plans to bench me for the actual game, and I have no plans to step aside.

“Yes. Can’t do it without you, man.” Topher lets out a cheerful hoot then holds up his fist, to which I return the gesture.

“Ugh.” Morgan lets out an annoyed huff as her hands slap against the table and she pushes off to stand. “I’m so sick of hearing about the stupid fucking game.”

I know she hates the sport. But I also know her well enough to know that frustrated outburst is stemming from something else. Which something else? Who fucking knows. Quickly, I leave the table and head off in the direction she left in. With each step, there’s a tightness in my knee that reminds me I need to take it easy. But I have to catch up with her. And thankfully I spot her easily in the hallway since they’re still mostly empty. Once I reach her, I move in front of her and block her path.

“What now?” she asks but doesn’t attempt to get past me.

I move forward, and she takes a step back, turning to rest her back against the metal lockers. “That’s my question.” I reach out and place my hands on her hips, moving flush against her. “Is this really about football talk or is it something else?”

She moves her lips next to my ear. “Right now, it’s you who is getting on my nerves. So, do me a favor and fuck off.” Slipping out of my hold, she begins to walk down the hallway. I waste no time following behind her.

“Or should I just fuck you to put you in a better mood since you haven’t had a good fucking lately?”

That stops her. She rotates and walks to me. “I wouldn’t want you to hurt yourself and miss the game. I can handle my own shit.”

Her back is to me before the last word is even out of her mouth. Oh, she’s not sexually frustrated. I’m sure of it. This goes deeper. And I’m about to piss her off some more. “I’m here if you need me. Just give me the signal.”

A familiar middle finger is pointed my way as she holds it up in the air and keeps on walking away.

MORGAN

Me and my stupid fucking plans. If I had any sense, I would've said fuck all of this and ended the championship bid weeks ago. But no. I chose to go for the long-term torment. And in return, I've extended my own. Right now, it's in the form of cheering at another one of these stupid fucking games. And after this one, there're three playoff games before the championship. It seems out of reach for the team. But nothing is out of reach for me. Not usually, though this feels like it's never going to end.

And the main reason causing that feeling is running off the field after throwing a touchdown pass to Topher. Instead of jumping around with the other morons, he's taking off his helmet, keeping his eyes locked on me as the band starts up the fight song for the fourth time. The other team hasn't even put any points on the board, so it's not exactly a nail-biter.

Cade stops for a second to stare at me. The smile he had leaves his face as something like concern morphs across it. I turn my back to him and join in on the stupid routine. It's better than having some asinine staring match. I spot my dad heading in Cade's direction, shouting praises at him for extending their lead right as I turn around to face the crowd in the bleachers.

It's almost over.

It'll be done soon.

All of it.

When the band stops playing, I turn back to the field, my poms behind my back as I watch the game. Another touchdown is scored by the Wildcats before halftime. To my shock, when the team returns for the third quarter, Cade stays on the sideline when the offensive line jogs back out.

After a snap to the backup QB gains three yards, Cade turns to look back

at me. I know there's confusion on my face as I point to my knee and ask, "Is it okay?"

He nods. So, Dad must have pulled him since Saint Juliet has such a lead on the other team. Why does that make me feel better? Because for a few minutes, I thought there was really something wrong. And that's when I know for a fact that everything is wrong.

"Shit," I mutter under my breath before I hear Ava from beside me ask, "What is it?"

I was louder than I thought. "Nothing." *Everything*. Because as much as I've tried not to, I know I care about him. I know I have all along. If I hadn't, I would've ended whatever it is between us weeks ago and just fucked someone else until I found a replacement. But I don't want anyone else. Holy shit, I only want him.

But I can't let him know that. Even if I think he already does. Admitting the truth to myself and admitting it aloud are two different things. And I'd rather be a liar than be at the mercy of Cade Crawford again.

"What the hell, Morgan?" Topher hoots as he hangs over a pony wall at Neil's house.

"Great." I down another shot of tequila. "What did I do now?" I mean, whatever Topher is grumbling about, I probably did. I just don't want to fucking hear him whine about it right now; not that I have much of a choice as the intoxicated lug stops in front of me.

"Whhhhhy?"

"Oh my God. Just fucking say it, Fontenot."

"You broke up the band," Topher wails, and I get even more irritated.

"I don't even know what you're talking about. But my mistake. Sorry." I take another swig of liquor.

"My boy won't even party with us anymore because you broke his heart." Topher tilts his head down and gives me a weird look, like he's scrutinizing me. "But since when do you say sorry for anything, even if it's a less-than-heartfelt apology?"

"Yeah. I'm not sorry about that." Because I really thought Cade would be here too instead of sulking off somewhere all alone. It's not like we're on

great terms, but I thought we were over this I'm-staying-away-until-you-give-me-the-signal-and-confess-your-love bullshit.

I really don't like the shit-eating grin that spreads across Topher's face and hate his words even more. "He got to you."

"Totally." I try to act unbothered.

"He *totally* got to you," Topher teases as he does some stupid celebration dance in front of me that reminds me of when he scores a touchdown on the field.

Standing, I move in front of him. "I will *totally* break your legs if you don't get out of my face."

He stumbles back, his hands waving me off. "Yeah. Yeah. I know you're still a heartless bitch. But it's about fucking time." Topher lets out another whistle before disappearing into the crowd. I've never wanted to knock him out as much as I want to right now. But I elect against it since he wants to keep up the idiotic announcement. And I decide to have another drink.

Fucking Cade Crawford will not get out of my head. And I'm not about to tell him that. Those words will never leave my mouth. But before I can think twice, I stand and head for the door. I won't admit to shit. But that isn't going to stop me from getting what I want tonight.

CADE

I see her sitting on the dock. For a second, I think I'm dreaming. Then I realize this might be the start of another nightmare. My gut tells me we're past that, but it's normal for Morgan to go out of her way to create a shock wave. I'd expect nothing less from her now. I just pray she's at least past hating me so much that she's only here to set shit on fire—literally and metaphorically. Please let her be here for any other reason.

She doesn't look to me. But her words are more annoyed than angry. "Topher was whining like a little bitch because you're here pouting instead of getting inebriated with him."

"Anyone else miss me at the party?" I ask, watching as she slowly turns to look at me.

"Nope."

"Well, should I expect anything around here to go up in flames? I really can't lose my job. Again." That's the truth if I ever spoke it. This place has been the only thing keeping me sane when everything else in life has been spiraling.

"Don't worry. Your beloved job is safe." She brings her knees to her chest, her arms wrapping around her bare legs.

I am a little surprised to see she hasn't changed since the game ended hours ago, not to mention the wind off the lake is no match for the skimpy cheer uniform ... even if the top has long sleeves. Reaching down, I pull my hoodie over my head, then hold it out to her.

Instead of the refusal I was expecting, she takes it from me and puts it on, then brings her knees back up, slipping them under the sweatshirt too, and wraps her arms around them. The last time she came here, it was with a

purpose—pretending to be drunk, an act I should've seen for what it was—but back then, she was up to something. I shouldn't let my guard down now, and I don't completely ... but I actually believe she doesn't have some evil plot to carry out for once.

Dropping down beside her, I let my legs dangle off the dock and glance forward to where she's staring. There're few lights on the water, mostly coming from the main area of the marina. Otis keeps saying he is going to install more, along with some cameras, but the owner of the place keeps saying having surveillance is more of a liability than a safety net.

And moments like this, I'm glad there aren't any cameras around. There's no one watching us. No one for her entertain. No one for me to convince of anything either. Just us. "Want to talk about it?" I ask, taking a quick glance her way.

She shakes her head. "Nothing to talk about. Just bored."

"God, Morgan," I breathe, unable to hide the frustration. "Just give me the fucking signal already." I know she wants this. Wants us. But she'd rather be stubborn and suffer than actually be happy for five seconds.

When she starts to move, I think she's either going to walk away again or push me off the dock. To my utter surprise, she doesn't do either. She climbs onto my lap, straddles me, and grips my shoulders. Her captivating eyes lock on mine. "I'm here. That has to be enough, because that's all I've got."

Reaching forward, I wrap my arms around her torso and pull her closer. "I'm so glad you're here." She's offering me a morsel. And I'll take it. I can't let her run off and hide now. Baby steps. Because for Morgan, it's one gigantic-ass effort. Closing the space between us, I move my mouth over hers. There's so much that needs to be said. But it won't happen tonight. It's not worth forcing her to face the truth. But I have to say something. "I've missed you. There's one thing I won't bargain on. I'm not spending another night without you. I need sleep. And I need you there for that to happen."

Do I sleep better with her curled against me? Yes. And I know she sleeps better too. Even with me waking her up, she never gets into the full-blown nightmares. Ryder says she still won't admit it to him, but he hears the horrible time she has in her sleep. He's had to check on her a few times during the night when her screams carried down the hallway.

"Just stop talking." Of course she doesn't outright agree and just slides her hands under my shirt. Her cold fingertips on my skin remind me that we can't sleep out here. And I'm not sure I want to go back to her place. "Want

to go to Neil's? I'm sure the party is still going on."

"In a minute." She rocks against me, moving her hand lower to unbutton my jeans. And I already know what she wants.

"Only a minute?" I joke. "Surely you want more than that."

"Shut up." Her fierceness finally kicks in as she firmly grips my dick, only loosening her hand enough to stroke me. Fuck. I need to concentrate, or it really will only be a minute.

Carefully maneuvering, I stand up and bring her with me, her legs hooked around my waist. Not breaking our kiss, I walk over to the nearest yacht. It's the Hebert one. I know I'm risking my job, but there's nothing I won't lose to make sure I keep her.

Stepping inside the cabin, I shut the door behind us. The glass still allowing for some of the light outside but just enough for me to see her fuck-me eyes as I set her down on the sofa. I remove my hoodie from her, thankful for the warmth of the boat's cabin as I peel every piece of fabric from her body. My shirt quickly joins the pile before I lean forward, my chest against hers, to capture her mouth.

Her fingernails dig into my back as she clings to me. My craving for her surges. Moving my hand between her thighs, I push my fingers inside her. She's so fucking wet for me. "Fuck, Morgan. I need to hear it. You have to give me a little more. Mine. Say it." It's not just for the sake of having her body. It's more. It's knowing that she's mine to keep. Mine to fuck. Mine to cherish. Forever. And she won't let anyone else touch her because she belongs with me, to me. And I fucking belong to her. Why else would I be panting like fucking dog in heat at the thought of tasting her again? And it doesn't matter what she says, I'm going to claim her again tonight. But I still want her to declare it.

Trailing my tongue down, I suck her nipple into my mouth. Her hand moves into my hair, clutching, as her hips rock, her pussy rubbing against my hand as she shoves my head lower.

"Just fucking get to it."

My laugh vibrates against her stomach as I move down but stop just below her belly button. "Still waiting to hear you belong to me, and no one else will ever touch you, taste you, fuck you."

"Like I have a fucking choice." Her words sound furious, but I know exactly where the frustration stems from.

Looking up at her, I say what might get me kicked in the jaw. "You made

me love you. It's only fair to return the favor."

Her eyes narrow and she finally admits defeat (even if it's very rage-filled). "Yes. I'm yours. Trust me, if someone else were a choice, I'd have found them. Now stop talking so fucking much and lick my pussy, fuck me, and be done."

I shift down a bit, my tongue licking over her clit as her body tenses. "Trust me. You'll never find someone else. And I'll never be done with you."

She goes to say something else, I'm sure an insult or colorful word, but she loses the words with a gasp as my face moves between her thighs, my mouth devouring her pussy. I look up to get a glimpse of her, her eyes closing as I lick and suck.

Propping her leg up beside her, her head drops back as she lets out an exaggerated moan. "Fuck." A minute later she tenses, unmistakably riding out her orgasm as I continue eating her. When she goes to guide me up, I grip both her wrists in my hand, holding them as my mouth only leaves her pussy long enough to tell her, "No. You need another one to get that frustration out of you." And maybe I need to give her another wave of pleasure after our last encounter, where I used her mouth, made her feel worthless and cheap. I need to make it up to her. Worship her body. Bring her every bit of pleasure possible to truly make her feel how irreplaceable she is. Even with the hatred, the evil, the agony, she's the other half of my soul. Every sharp broken piece of her fits into every jagged part of me. That's why, I'm certain, we can only be complete with together.

She lets out a few more curses under her breath as I continue licking her, savoring her until she rides another surge of pleasure. After her body relaxes, I move up, my mouth on hers as my finger slides back inside her. Her pussy tensing around my fingers, her hand catching my wrist as I pump my fingers inside her.

"Cade," she breathes, her body rigid as I continue to pump my fingers inside her, "please fuck me."

God, I could come just from those words alone. Morgan saying please and begging for my dick inside her is something I will never not love hearing. As I move over her, her hands shove down my already unbuttoned jeans and boxers. When her hand wraps around my dick, I move to sit beside her, hauling her onto my lap, her knees on either side of me. She's already positioning my dick at her entrance as she shifts forward, then eagerly slides down, taking my dick inside her. Fucking *home* is all I can think as I fill her.

Moving my arms up her back, I grasp her shoulders, following the pace she sets, pulling her down as she rides me. My hand tangles in her hair, gathering a fistful as I grip it and pull her lips to mine. My other hand drops between us, my thumb stroking her clit. "I'm not coming until you do." And fuck I hope I can hold out because I feel like I could easily unload inside her right fucking now. But I need this to last longer. Even though it's one of the few times I'm inside her, I don't doubt that I'll get to have her again.

And as soon as she's coming, the pleasure spreading across her face, her body leaning into me as she clings to me and says, "Yes," that's when I let go, releasing inside her. Stilling for a few seconds before thrusting inside her again, my hands grip her hips as I hold her down, like there's a possibility of me getting deeper inside her. And I know there's not. It doesn't matter what is said or done. This is it. Forever.

MORGAN

I feel him rubbing my back before I hear him. “Wake up.”

Ugh. I really don’t like those words. At all. “Let’s just skip.” I pull the comforter over my head, but the refuge doesn’t last long because the blanket is pulled out of my hands and off of me, leaving my naked body exposed.

Cade is fully dressed in his Saint Juliet uniform, hovering over me. “Maybe tonight you’ll sleep instead of begging me to fuck you all night.”

“Like you were complaining.”

His grinning lips give me a quick kiss. “Never. But I’m the one ready to go.” He pushes off the mattress, slips from the bed, and gives my thigh a playful slap. “Come on. Or we’ll be late.”

“Yeah. That’d be the worst.” I tuck my face in the pillow as I close my eyes.

His hand grasps my ass. “Fuck, Morgan. I’m already hard as a fucking rock.”

“Hm. Too bad.” I lean over on my side and glare at him. “Because we’ll be late for school.” I slide off the bed and head to the shower.

I barely have the water turned on when he appears behind me, removing his uniform quickly and dropping it to the floor as he follows me into the shower. He’s against me, his stomach to my back, his hand reaching around, smoothing down my torso to slide between my thighs. “We have time.”

“I’m not so sure,” I tease, knowing good and damn well that I’m not leaving this shower, much less this room, until he fucks me. It’s been the usually routine. Sex, sleep, sex, school, whatever bullshit, other bullshit, then more sex. He joked we were making up for the lost time. But I didn’t find the joke all that funny. I’m not making up for lost time, I’m getting every piece

of him while I can. After all this is over, we will be too. We'll go back to the years where we were nothing but a damaged couple who hate each other, only sparing a few choice words and hateful, resentful glances at each other.

"What's wrong?" he asks as he turns me around and studies me. The concern on his face is too much. He reads me so easily. And I don't want some heart-to-heart convo right now. I want to get a nut and at least make this a decent start to what is sure to be a miserable day. Game day. Yay.

"Just worried about that stamina. Aren't you supposed to refrain from strenuous activity before games?"

His hands slide down my back, gripping my ass as he lifts, then he's pressing my back against the cool tile wall. "That's a bullshit rule. If anything"—his head dips down, tongue on my neck—"this relaxes me and improves my performance on the field." He squeezes my ass. "Because if I don't get to taste you, I'll have a hell of a time concentrating once it's game time. All I'll be able to do is watch you on the sidelines, think about every single inch of you that I want to lick."

"Your tongue hardly stops wagging long enough to lick anything," I goad, frustrated at his playfulness because I need a release more than anything.

He recognizes my impatience with his laugh, his lips still teasing me. "But if you're really worried, we don't have—"

"Shut. Up." But he doesn't have a choice because my mouth is over his. With his tongue occupied by tasting mine, I'm satisfied when he grips my hips tightly, turning me to face the wall. His fingers dig into my skin as he pushes inside me. My palms brace against the tile, my ass shifting back to meet his thrust.

When he reaches around, his hands on my pussy, I know his intention. We're both about to come and get our quick nut. I'm good with that because I need this release. The craving building inside is almost too much, my body already wants to collapse onto the floor and just relax. But it's his unsteady rhythm that makes me wonder if I'm not the only one having trouble keeping up this morning. Before I can make some comment about him needing a break, I'm riding out my orgasm while he hurriedly pumps inside me. After going rigid for a few seconds, he pulls out.

I turn to face him. He gives me a quick kiss, then backs up slowly to sit on the shower seat as he says, "We're already late. So, I might as well enjoy the show."

His eyes greedily take in my naked body, but all I can focus on is the way he sat down. Because his leg was slightly extended, and he braced himself with his hands. Maybe I can read him, too, because I know exactly why he did that. “Your knee is still bothering you.”

“No, just want to sit and watch you.” His hand strokes his semi hard dick, his eyes on my chest.

“I thought we were done lying to each other, Crawford.”

Yeah. He’s busted. That expression tells me what I need to know before he says, “It’s a little tender but nothing that doesn’t go along with playing ball.” He stands with no hesitation, but it could easily be an act now that he knows I’ve noticed. Bending down, he gives me a quick peck before saying, “But don’t call me out on my lies until you’re ready to fess up to all of yours.”

“Motherfucker,” I mutter under my breath but loud enough to make sure he heard me.

“As always, truth hurts.”

CADE

She's barely spoken a word since we arrived at school. It's not like we were able to talk on the ride over because neither of us would cave on who was driving. I wanted to drive my own truck, and of course, she insisted on taking her Audi.

Once we're inside the school building and walking down the main corridor, I grip her wrist and pull her to me. "Be pissed at me. Hurt me. Tell me to go fuck myself. We're not moving backwards. You're not going to push me away." I move closer to her. "Because this time, I will push back. Like I should've done years ago."

I brace myself, but it's about a minute before she breaks eye contact, her vision locked on my chest where I feel her fingers fumbling with my tie. "You're lucky you waited before you decided to challenge me. Because I would have buried you without a second thought back then. The pain was too much. And I wouldn't have hesitated to hurt you severely." She tugs my tie, bringing my face closer to her. "And it still wouldn't have erased the pain. And doesn't matter now."

This is one of the few moments where I see the hurt girl I left behind again. Because she wasn't the same person when I returned. There're a million promises that I need to make to reassure her, but even if I was able to find the right words, Thatcher puts the brakes on the situation when he shouts down the hallway, "Get to class. No loitering in the hallway."

Morgan and I don't move from our stance as Thatcher approaches. "Mr. Crawford, Miss King, the two of you are already late. Run along." He gives me an encouraging pat on the shoulder. "Can't wait to watch the Wildcats win tonight. Don't get yourself into trouble and miss the big game." There's a

second where he nervously glances to Morgan before he tells me. “There’re a lot of people counting on you.”

Thatcher continues down the corridor as I lean forward and whisper in her ear. “There’s only one person I’m concerned about. I don’t give a fuck who else is counting on me. There’s only one person who matters to me, and she’s right here. And she hasn’t handed me my ass yet today.”

“Don’t count your blessing too soon, it’s only second period.” She wiggles out of my grip and continues down the hallway.

Damn. That could’ve gone better. But it could’ve gone worse. Thatcher is half right. I need to get mentally prepared for tonight. Because Morgan is the only thing on my mind right now.

Throughout the day, I’m able to shift focus as much as I usually would. I’m not worried about the game tonight, even after hearing again how much the Cardinals have improved. We faced them earlier in the season and easily took home the win. This is one time where history will definitely repeat itself.

“Where’s Morgan?” I ask Savannah when I drop down in the chair at the lunch table. She shrugs and glances around. “I haven’t seen Ava either.”

Well that gives me an uneasy feeling. As I stand, I hear Neil announce, “There they are.”

For some reason, my dread doesn’t decrease at the sight of them walking into the café together, and even more alarming ... Morgan smiling.

She steps over to me and drops on my lap, talking animatedly to Ava about the pep rally. Morgan is way too excited. What the fuck is up with that? Before I can figure out what she’s up to, a tone plays over the intercom. The café gets quieter as the sounds of voices become clearer.

“But you’re my principal, we shouldn’t do this ... but I want you.” A female’s voice.

Thatcher says, “No one will find out. My wife is out of town. Make yourself at home.” The speaker makes a scratching sound before what is clearly sounds of people having sex play over the intercom. “I knew you were a dirty girl.”

What. The. Fuck. There’s hooting, hollering, and whistling around the room. Students laugh, teachers scramble while yelling to shut it off, but the sounds keep playing to the entire school.

Morgan remains seated on my lap, contentedly listening. I knew she had something planned for him. But this? “Did you really just play that for everyone to hear?”

She leans back, her mouth next to my ear. “The video was too risky, being that she’s a minor. But NOPD should’ve received a copy of it already.”
“Morgan.”

Her amused expression watches me. “What?”

“What about the girl?”

“Willing. And happy to do it. My mom isn’t the only one he’s played. And unlike me, this girl didn’t want her parents to split. So this was her way of getting back at Thatcher and her mom in one move.”

“If you ask me, she got the shitty end of that deal. Having to fuck Thatcher.” Ava makes a gagging sound.

Why hasn’t anyone turned it off yet? We leave the café, and everyone is still in an uproar as we walk through the corridor towards the office. The secretary is beating on the entrance, which explains why it’s still playing—the intercom controls are behind a locked door.

Thatcher appears, running down the hallway. He’s fumbling with keys, trying to open the door, but he drops them several times and keeps putting the wrong key in the lock each time.

“Still having trouble finding the right hole?” Morgan laughs, leaning back against the wall. Thatcher is in too much of a panic to even acknowledge her.

“Get the fuck out of the way.” I hear the booming voice and know it’s Coach before I see him. His face is burning red as he rushes down the hallway, shouting for someone to shut it off.

He’s yelling at Thatcher who has resorted to hitting his fists against the glass windows. Coach glances around the hallway, then darts for a chair. He picks it up, walks over to one of the oversized windows, and slams it several times against the glass until it finally shatters. Thatcher climbs through the window as Coach continues yelling at him, then turns his shouts on the students gathered around. “Get to your classes. Now.”

That’s when his furious gawk lands on me before aiming for his daughter beside me. He frantically surges forward, gets right in her face, and hollers, “I know this was you! Why the fuck would you do this today of all days? Do you know what you’ve done?”

“What I’ve done?” Morgan asks calmly, almost amused as she points to herself. “Sounds like your colleague was fucking a minor. Maybe speak with him about the cost of decisions.”

I’m already on edge, so I see it before he can consider it further—his arm tenses and it’s enough to make me say, “Don’t you fucking touch her.”

His turns in disbelief to me. “Did you help her? Did you know she was going to do this?”

“She didn’t do shit. But right now, you should worry about your next move because if you touch her, all bets are off.”

“Stupid fucking moron.” Coach shakes his head. “Giving it up for some little bitch. But remember, if you don’t show at the game tonight, or if this little stunt causes the game to be canceled, I will make sure both of you pay.”

In a move I’m sure is meant to provoke him, Morgan asks, “Cash or credit? I’m sure those hotel rooms you’ve been staying in are getting pricey.”

He steps closer to her as I try to shift between them, but she holds her hand up. “It’s okay.” There’re plenty eyes still watching us as she loudly says, “He’d never hit me here, not when his fan club is watching.”

There’re a few hushed whispers and chatter as Coach and Morgan stay in their tense stance. Neither look ready to back down.

“Morgan.” I gently grip her bicep and recite our rehearsed script, meant to make him believe we’re still concerned. “Just leave it alone. We all have stuff to lose. Don’t make it worse. Four more games, then we’re free. Right, Coach?”

“Can you keep your bitch in line for that long?”

God, it takes everything I have not to punch the motherfucker in the mouth and just end this now. But Morgan only laughs and adds, “You’re just bitter because the King women will ultimately always be better than you, wealthier than you, and not willing to be controlled.”

It’s no secret that the King family’s wealth doesn’t run on Coach’s side; no, the fortune is from Morgan’s mom’s inheritance from her Pawpaw Benoit. And it’s clear that her statement struck a nerve. Because her dad’s face is as twisted and angry as ever.

This was supposed to be her getting Thatcher back for his plotting with her dad. But it seems to have gotten to Coach more than anyone. I don’t know how we’re going to make it through the day much less four more games.

MORGAN

When I hear the heavy metal door creak open, I already know it's Cade. And it really pisses me off that he thought to look up here for me.

"Wow"—he glances around the rooftop of Saint Juliet—"I haven't been up here since ..."

"Since we were together. Blah, blah, blah." I don't want a stroll down memory lane. I have another annoying topic to address. "I really need you to stop trying to save the day, fix everything, and rescue me. Because that is not what I need or want. And that won't change. *I* won't change. You can remove the hero cape and take a break, SuperCade."

He steps calmly beside me, leaning his elbows against the brick wall as he glances over towards the cemetery. "And what about what I want?"

"I don't fucking care what you—"

Before I can get the word *want* out, he's in front of me, his chest pressed to mine, my ass against the brick wall as he places a hand on either side of me. His lips brush against my chin before he drags his mouth along my jawline. "I will protect what's mine. I will defend you. And if I was here because I thought I could change you, then I'd be an even bigger liar than the one in front of me."

"You're really insistent on pressing your luck. Don't."

I can hear the smile in his tone. "I love pressing your buttons."

He's too cocky. Too self-assured. Because he thinks he can save me from myself. But I know how this ends. And I know after I follow through with my punishment for my father, Cade won't look at me the same. He calls me a monster, but that beast inside will truly have to emerge to see this through to the finale. And I will. There is no choice, and I wouldn't take another option

even if there were one. My father has to get what he deserves. Because it sets us all free—me, Ryder, Maddie, even my mom.

“Keep pressing and you’re gonna hit the wrong one.”

There’s no hesitation as his hand moves to the nape of my neck, his fingers pressing into my skin as he drags my mouth to his and kisses me. Then he breaks the contact to say, “All talk.”

“Try me.”

It’s one of the few times he catches me off guard by his response. “Okay.” And even more by surprise when he hops up on the waist-high wall and climbs to standing on the brick ledge. He balances himself before he takes a few steps.

“Ha, ha,” I respond, but when he acts like he’s about to lose his balance and fall three stories to the cement below, my stomach does deep roll or something twisty that I don’t like. “If you break your neck, you won’t have a very fun game tonight.”

“Is that all you’re worried about me breaking?” He continues to saunter across the ledge.

I fold my arms across my chest, watching his childish trek. “Maybe your dick too.”

His grin infuriates me because I don’t think this is funny. I see it as another one of his attempts to force an admission or declaration of giving a fuck out of me. “Get down or I’ll push you and get it over with.”

“That’s odd logic.” He stops walking but doesn’t get down as he watches me. “You want me safe, but you’ll push me off the rooftop if I won’t protect myself?” He takes a few more strides before hopping off the wall, his feet landing on the rooftop with a thump that makes me way too comforted. At least until he whispers, “Now you know how I feel.”

Asshole. “Nope. Can’t relate to the hero complex.” I reach forward and grab the front waistband of his pants. “Just don’t want to buy new batteries for my vibrator.” I give him a quick pat on the crotch then walk away.

So much for coming up here to get five seconds to myself. Now, I’m even more pissed and ready to unleash some rage. Cade is lucky he isn’t on my other list anymore. Because every name will get marked off. No matter the cost.

CADE

“Come on. I have a surprise.”

“I hate surprises,” Morgan complains as she follows me into the shed on the far side of the marina.

“Yeah. I know. But this was more of a surprise for me.”

“Then why the hell am I here?” she asks as we come to a stop.

“Because I wanted to show you.” I hold my arm out, motioning to the sailboat.

“Um. Okay.” She studies it. “It’s a boat. At a marina. Very surprising.”

Yeah. That was heavy on the sarcasm. “It’s ours.”

Her eyes dart to me. “‘Ours’? I don’t want a damn boat. Didn’t you realize that after the last one went up in flames?”

When she goes to walk past me, I catch her forearm and tug her against me. “Don’t tell me that it doesn’t sound appealing. Open water. Just us. No bullshit.”

I see the wheels turning in her head. “Yeah. But we’d be swimming if that’s the vessel.”

“It’s a work in progress.” I reach over and grab the paper sack of supplies I’d stashed earlier, along with a sanding block, and hold it out to her. “Get busy.”

She laughs. It’s an amused snicker at first before it becomes a genuine laugh of disbelief as she glances between my face and my hand. “You’re serious.”

“Yep.” I drop the sack and sanding block to the ground and pull her to me. “Don’t you want to build something, repair it, make it even better than before?”

“Seems like it’d be easier to start from scratch. Or just buy a new one.”

I know she’s talking about the sailboat (I think), but I can’t help but dig further into her words. “Rebuilt is best. Taking something you thought was lost, never going to see the light of day again, and transforming it into an even better version than before ... that’s the best way.”

Her lips brush against my cheek as she says, “Subtle, Crawford. Real subtle.”

“I try.” *Fuck, I’m trying harder than she’ll ever know.*

“Yeah. I don’t.” She breaks out of my arms. “Let’s go buy a damn boat.”

“Nope. Already did.” I motion to the vessel that’s seen better days as she shakes her head.

“You really gave someone money for that?”

When I loop an arm around her lower back and pull her against me, she relaxes instead of tugging away, and I know I’m really wearing her down. “It has good bones and will be even better than the original one day.”

“Okay.” She pulls her phone out of her pocket and starts clicking on the screen. “I’m ordering food while you get started on your little project.” She looks at the vessel. “Or more like massive undertaking. Because I know once you get started, you won’t stop.”

It’s my turn to laugh. “At least you finally accept reality.”

“Totally.” Her annoyance is still evident in her tone but there’s some teasing to it too. And I know eventually I’ll be on the water with her and the sailboat we built. Because the only reality I’m willing to accept is us.

CADE

I'm working on sanding the hull on the side of the sailboat while Morgan is propped up on stool nearby with her nose in her phone. She's not exactly helping me, but she willingly hangs out. Her claim is because she likes seeing one of the few talents I have—working well with my hands. And the first time she said it, I did take a few moments to display my talents on her. It's one of the many reasons this project will take ten times longer with her here, but I wouldn't want it any other way.

I hear a knock on the wood door before it swings open. Dustin peeks his head in before stepping completely inside the old shed. Damn it. I don't want to deal with any family mess today.

“Why do you even have a phone, Cade? I've been calling and texting.”

“I responded. You just don't want to accept the answer.” I'd only addressed part of the message by declining an invite for Thanksgiving.

“Can you at least try to swing by this evening ... just to hang out?”

“Can't. Have practice.” And I don't think he “just” wants to hang out.

“During the holiday break, really?” Why does he sound dumbfounded?

“Yeah. There's still a game to play this week. It's the *big opportunity* you wanted me to sign up for, remember?” My aggravation towards him tells me I'm still holding some animosity towards Dustin for encouraging me to play ball. Part of the blame is on me for conceding, too, however. “Though, it did set up my future.” I glance to Morgan. “Just not the one I thought.”

“Ah. So that's why you don't need me anymore.” Dustin displays that smug, superior arrogance as he says, “Definitely went with the correct meal ticket.”

It takes every ounce of strength to not raise a clenched fist and punch my

own brother in the face at the insinuation. Morgan doesn't seem bothered, considering she laughs and says, "I get something out of it too since I'm typically the meal."

Wish I could write off the insult that easily. But my brother of all people should know this has nothing to do with Morgan's wealth.

Working to keep my arms at my sides, I slowly make my way to stand in front of Dustin. I don't know if I'm moving slow because I don't want to deck him and need to work hard not to do so, or if I just need some extra time to process his low opinion of me.

"It's not like that. I'm not like that. You should know better than anyone."

Dustin keeps an overcritical stance. "It's okay. You come by it naturally. You use people until you get what you want, then bail."

And that's when I realize there's something deeper. He's pointing his anger at me, but there's someone else who has him unbalanced, and it doesn't take a genius to figure out who. "Told you he was a piece of shit." I take a few steps back and resume sanding the hull. But I'm still curious what the bastard did to finally show Dustin his true self. "How'd our father fuck up this time?"

"He put me in the middle again with no regard for what this is doing to me." Dustin sounds defeated, but I can't actually feel sorry for him. I warned him. And even if I hadn't, he should know the asshole won't ever change. I'm not shocked at all when Dustin admits, "Dad made another bet on the game."

I keep a stern steadiness to my tone as I look over my shoulder to my brother. "I'm not losing the game. It won't happen." He anxiously glances to Morgan, before his eyes drop to the floor at his feet. And I can see the shame on him as I confirm, "Yeah, she knows about it."

That fucking night almost cost me her. It was my fault. My unhinged headspace. But I won't go back there again—not even for my brother's sake.

"He didn't wager on a loss. So as long as you win, he does too."

That son of a bitch. Of course. Now, I'll win knowing he'll benefit from it too.

"Who did he make the bet with?" Morgan asks.

"I don't know."

Dustin is lying. I know he is. And Morgan must too because she singsongs, "Sure you don't."

“I made him leave the apartment. Mom is back across the lake. So it’s just me. I’ve been hanging out at home alone. If you would’ve returned my call, I could’ve told you that. You don’t have to mooch off the Kings anymore.”

Again, he’s angry at the situation Dad has put him in, because he was perfectly happy to have replaced me with Dad not so long ago.

“I’d rather be a mooch than Randall Crawford’s chump.”

“Y’all really need to stop.” Morgan intervening in an attempt to keep the peace throws me off enough to get my attention. “Seriously. Is that prick really worth arguing over?”

“No.” I turn back to Dustin. “But I knew he wasn’t worth the effort beforehand.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Morgan stands and appears more annoyed than anything. “Get the ‘I told you so’s’ out of your system. Because if you take it out on your brother, you’ll regret it. Then I’ll have the pleasure of telling you I told you so.” She gives me a quick kiss as she walks past us and adds, “You really need to cash in that meal ticket. Then we don’t have to spend all our time here with that piece of shit.”

Of course she’s bitching about the sailboat as she walks out of the old building. But I know she’s only doing so for the sake of dramatics. But she is spot-on about one thing. “She’s right. That bastard shouldn’t come between us. And I won’t tell you I told you so, but I will let you know that I don’t care what mess he has gotten himself—or you—into. I will win the game. And it won’t be for him.”

“I thought he’d try harder this time. I really thought there was a chance. You were correct—he’ll never change.” Dustin turns and starts to leave as he says, “I’ll catch you later.”

“Still going to Mom’s for Thanksgiving?”

“Yeah. Her new man has a big family that always gets together.” He hesitates before adding. “You’re invited too. And the good thing is there will be so many people around, so it shouldn’t be awkward.”

That seems more like hiding than facing anything, but I won’t be there either way. Though it makes me think of what Mom said about why she left and found a new life and husband. “Mom said something happened with you that made her think we were better off without her.” His face pales, his movements become a little jittery as he breaks eye contact with me. Shit. I know that look. I’m not going to like this. At all. “Just fucking tell me.

Because the only thing I can't handle is another fucking lie."

There's a heavy silence as he walks over to the old stool I have next to the boat and sits down. "The day she left, she'd called and asked if I'd pick you up from practice because she needed a break. She was crying and saying she couldn't handle everything anymore and needed some time to herself. That she couldn't stop thinking that everyone would be better off without her." He takes in a struggled breath. "I told her to just do it. That we didn't need her. I didn't realize she was serious until I got the call from the hospital. And even then, I didn't want to believe it. And couldn't bring myself to go see her."

"Why the fuck would say that to her?" I get it. But how could he tell her that? "And why wouldn't you tell me all of this three fucking years ago?"

"I was so angry at her." He takes a sharp breath and swallows like he's got something stuck in his throat. "Dad is a piece of shit. I get it. But I'd caught her fucking my roommate in *my* goddamn bed."

Shit, that's a lot to take in. And I don't know which is worse. That he knew where she was. Or that he told her to kill herself. Or that she fucked a college dude in her son's bed. God, I don't even know what to do with all this.

But Dustin continues before I have to think of something to say. "I never thought she would actually try to hurt herself. And I never thought she'd just abandon you." He barely makes eye contact with me as he utters, "It was my fault she left that day."

I get why he'd think that, but there's no way I'd ever be angry with him about her decisions. We all made stupid, irreversible choices back then. I know I'd take back mine in a heartbeat, and I'm betting they would too. However, at the end of the day, Mom didn't just leave that day. She stayed away for years. And now I realize why Dustin tried so hard to make it up to me. "Guilt. That's why you took me in. That's why you got hired at Saint Juliet."

He nods. "Partly. But the main reason was because you're my brother. And you didn't deserve our shitty parents any more than I did. But I think they did the best they were capable of."

Now that I have a lot to say about. "Bullshit. I don't have to accept their scraps because they are shitty people." I glance over the tattered sailboat. My dream. Despite whatever else comes at me in life. "And more importantly, I won't let them ever do it again."

“And what about me? Do I have a place in your life?”

There’re still a million different emotions going through me. But he’s my brother. “Depends. Do you really believe I’m with Morgan for her money?”

He shakes his head. “But maybe I’m a little jealous of that fancy lifted pickup outside.”

“What pickup?”

“There’s one in the lot. I just figured it was yours because it has a Saint Juliet parking sticker on the window.”

“Well, it’s not mine, so you wasted your time being jealous.” But it makes me wonder who would be here. When I walk outside, I spot exactly who it is. Warren. And he’s in a heated exchange with Morgan, who is screaming and yelling at him.

Fuck. Here we go. But before I can get over there, he spots me, gets in his truck, and drives off. Morgan stands watching the direction he disappeared in.

“Are you okay? What was that about?” Even though I already have a few guesses.

“Oh, you know, how could I mess up his life, everyone knows he’s a date rapist, no one trusts him anymore.” Her annoyance is highlighted by an eye roll, but I see her hand shaking as she reaches for the handle of her car door.

When I put my hand on her, she stops and looks to me. “I’ll make sure he doesn’t bother you again.”

“I’ve got it, Cade. Don’t you dare do a fucking thing.” She yanks the door open, but only manages to crack it a few inches before I slam it back closed and situate myself between her and the car.

“Um. I’m gonna go.” Dustin awkwardly points to his vehicle.

“See ya later. You’re welcome to join us on Thursday for lunch.” I tell him without breaking eye contact with her, mainly because she looks like she’s ready to kick me in the balls.

“Move. Now.” Morgan quickly shifts forward when I don’t immediately follow her command. I relax my back against the car and wrap my arms around her.

The good thing is I don’t think she has enough room to get her knee high enough to injure me, so I inform her, “Only if you tell me what you have in store for him.”

She takes a few sharp breaths before she says, “To make sure he never causes another person feel that fear or weakness again.”

I undoubtedly shouldn't hear more details, but I ask any way, "And how are you going to do that?"

"You're about to get a demonstration if you don't get out of my way."

"I don't buy that." I call her bluff. She won't hurt me. But I worry about what she plans for Warren. "You can't kill him, Morgan."

"I'm not going to." Her blunt response is a relief. There's enough blood on our hands already, even if the dickhead deserves to be six feet under.

"Alrighty. Handle it how you want. But if I see him in your face like that again, it's my turn to demonstrate what happens when someone hurts what's mine."

"Yeah. Got it. Now move." She shoves her arms against my chest to get out of my hold, but I don't let her.

"Only if you confess"—I shift forward, moving my lips over hers to softly kiss her. Her body relaxes a bit—"you secretly love working on the sailboat and can't wait to sail on it."

"I confess"—she moves her mouth over mine, her teeth nipping at my bottom lip—"that you're a fool and the damn thing will probably never see water. At least not from the surface."

"Challenge accepted. If I succeed and make her seaworthy, you have to marry me on her maiden voyage."

"That's ridiculous. I'm not marrying you. And I certainly don't want an Under the Sea wedding theme—which is where the damn vessel will end up on its first sail."

"Fine. Second sail. You marry me."

"You're such a dumbass. And delusional."

"So, what's your hesitation in agreeing since it'll never happen? What're you so worried about?"

Her usual stubbornness and defiance come roaring back. "Deal."

The bargain is sealed with a kiss that I don't pull away from. And thankfully, she doesn't try to get out of my grasp again until it's time to head to Saint Juliet for practice.

The end of the season can't come fast enough. Neither can our sailing date. Because then she'll officially be mine.

MORGAN

“I’ve been at school more this week than an actual week we’re required to attend class,” Ava complains as we leave the locker room. And I’m in complete agreement. It’s almost time for the game. But we’ve been here every day for practice or some reason or another, then for the stupid pep rally that the interim principal insisted on having to distract from the fact that Saint Juliet’s own Principal Perv has been all over the news, including a less than flattering mugshot when they booked him.

It made for some interesting Thanksgiving conversation. Unfortunately, Dad wasn’t at the table to join in on the topic of his buddy’s demise. Dad was MIA—like he is on most holidays. But Dustin showed. And even though Cade said it wasn’t a big deal either way, I know it was.

When we round the corner leading out to the field, I spot Cade sitting just behind the length of the building against the brick wall. Without thinking, I head in his direction. “I’ll be back in a minute,” I tell Ava as she goes with the rest of the team towards the field.

Placing my duffel bag on the pavement, I drop down to sit next to him, back against the wall, view forward like his. I don’t have to ask. I already know what he’s struggling with. Winning tonight helps his father, but as he’s said a million times, he won’t lose again on purpose. That would be out of spite purely, but it would scratch our plan, because that requires us to get to the championship game. *That’s* the one he’ll lose for sure.

“Game day jitters? I didn’t think the star QB ever doubted himself,” I tease as he stares at his hands that are linked, his forearms resting across his knees. I don’t like the silence. And I don’t like the vibe he’s giving off. It feels a lot like the one he had in the locker room that night after the game he

lost on purpose for his piece of shit father.

“Cade,” I utter, then he turns his face to me. “Can you go through with this?”

He nods. “I have to. I just can’t believe he’s going to profit off me. It makes me feel cheap.”

I know the feeling. “Fuck him. Even if he wins a fortune, he’ll snort it up his nose or bet it on the next game and lose it. He’ll always be the same miserable fuck.”

“Really? Because you seemed to adore him when you invited him to play a round of golf at Crescent Fleur.”

“You know why I did that.” It physically hurts to admit this, and I have to unclench my stiff jaw to get it out. “You know it was always about you.”

There’s disbelief on his face. He looks the same as I feel inside my core as he watches me, his hands finally unclasping to reach over to me. His thumb rubs along the top my cheekbone where there’s a painted paw print with green and gold glitter spread over it.

“This should be my number.”

Yeah. Savannah offered to paint it there before she did the wildcat print. Ava has Topher’s on her, and a few others did their boyfriends’ numbers, but I couldn’t. “Didn’t want to be branded.” I go to stand because I don’t like where this is heading. “Need to keep my options—”

Cade grasps my wrist and pulls me on top of him. His hand quickly fastening around the nape of my neck, his hold strong, controlling but not angry. “You’re already branded. And so am I. It doesn’t change anything if it’s not here.” His fingertip trails over my skin. “But I still want to see my number there next game.”

“If we have a next game,” I goad him.

“We will.” He doesn’t release me, only pulls me tighter to him. “But I can’t wait until all this is in the past. But not just the games, the entire school year. Graduation and all this shit. Out of Saint Juliet forever.”

“Until the class reunion,” I joke, knowing I won’t ever set foot on this damn campus again.

“Fuck the reunion and this place. I’m not leaving anything behind here. Everything I want I’m going to keep with me.”

“That table in the science lab?”

“Yeah. And the bench in the locker room.” His mouth drops to my neck, his tongue trailing across my skin. And I automatically rock against him, my

eyes closing as I think about both times we had sex. There're a few more places around campus where we got after it, but those stick out for sure. And I'm ready to add this spot to the list until he whispers, "Can I keep you?"

"You can try."

I hope so.

CADE

The afterparty feels the same as any other. It should feel better since it was a playoff game and we won. But fuck. So did he.

I take another sip of beer from the longneck and watch Morgan make her way across the field. We'd planned to go back to Neil's, but everyone wanted to hang out at the stadium. Unlike me, they're actually going to miss this. When I said I wasn't leaving anything behind, I meant it.

Savannah cackles, grabbing her stomach as Neil jogs up behind her, a guilty look on his face. Savannah and Morgan keep talking as Neil walks past them and comes to sit beside me on the tailgate.

"Do I even want to know?"

"Nope." Neil reaches in the bed of my truck and grabs a beer out of it. "Where's Toph? Him and Ava were supposed to meet us back here."

I'll probably regret asking but I do. "What did y'all do?"

A sly grin peeks at his lips. "You know how the AP was bitching that the school was out of control and wasn't even civilized enough to use a toilet? Topher just made it true and used the desk drawer in his office for demonstration."

"Yeah. I didn't want to know."

"The dude has been a dick all year. And now that he's in charge, he's even more of a tool. Savannah said that sophomore year, he told her uniform skirt was so short it belonged on a low-cost prostitute who should be on the corner because that's all it made guys think about."

Um. I know he's a jackass but damn. "Yeah. Should've shit in there too."

He chuckles.

"Y'all didn't."

“Not me.” The laugh Neil lets out answers the question. I just shake my head and do the same—laugh. However, when it dies down, an awkward silence stretches between us. And I hate it. He’s my best friend, but there’s something uncomfortable remaining between us. I peek over as Neil takes a sip of his beer, a confident assurance radiating from him. I hate everything that’s happened this year. But I’m thankful to see him happy and not cowering down and hiding in the science lab.

Neil’s smile beams as he glances around the parking lot. “Are y’all coming back to the house?”

“Yeah. If that’s cool with you.” Of course, I know it is, but I still want to make sure. We haven’t exactly been as close as we were when his guest bedroom was pretty much my room.

“Yes,” he exclaims excitedly. “I’ve missed having you around. Savannah being there is awesome, but I miss my best friend.” Neil pauses. “And I’m worried about you.”

I can’t help but laugh. “Same. But not about me.” I take an assessment of him as I ask. “Are you okay?” He’s the one who’s had a life-altering moment this year.

“I started seeing a therapist. Again,” Neil admits quietly, like he’s embarrassed. “I’ll never outright tell her what happened that night. But she is helping me deal with everything. She actually told me the same thing you did back when you said I shouldn’t go to NAU just because Savannah was going. And I gave it some thought and decided Yale and Dartmouth are my top picks. So now I’m just waiting to see who accepts me on Ivy Day.” He motions over to Savannah. “I was so worried to tell her. I thought she was going to hate me. But she wants to come with me. She applied to schools within a reasonable commute of my choices. So we each will follow our own plan but together and away from here. Does that make sense?” He laughs as I nod, and he continues with a little less humor in his tone. “We both agreed that we want a change of scenery after what happened.”

“Don’t blame you a bit. And I’m happy for you and Savannah.” I’m so fucking happy for them, but mostly him. Because Neil has someone who will be there for him. His parents never were. And I haven’t even been lately because I’ve been stuck on my own issues and up Morgan’s ass.

“Have you decided what you’re doing after graduation yet?”

I effortlessly seek out Morgan, my thoughts not so easy to sort through. Because I’m over here doing exactly what I told Neil not to do. Because I’m

not going anywhere without her. “I don’t know.” She hasn’t mentioned uni other than to say she won’t attend NAU because her dad is affiliated with it.

“Well, thankfully we have time, right?” Neil says.

We should. There’s still another semester left in the new year. So why does it feel like I’m running out of time and need to do something fast before everything slips away?

CADE

The week passed by in a chaotic blur. Coach kept preaching about maintaining a steady pace, getting to the finish line, and not wearing ourselves down. And I tried, but I'm fucking exhausted, and it's only halftime. Archbishop Mathis is putting up a harder fight than last time, and that was when I had a game-ending injury in the last few minutes. There's still a nip of pain in my knee, but nothing that alarms me.

"Watch the fucker. He's getting desperate. And we know what happened last time he was in that spot." Topher points at the jackass that made the dirty hit last month. Sanders. And the asshole is staring me down. I wouldn't know his name if it wasn't on the back of his jersey. The only problem we have is one will lose and one will win. But he made it personal last time. He won't get another chance to take a cheap shot on me again.

"I can handle him." Part of me had hoped the Wildcats wouldn't face the Eagles in this rematch. But I'm actually grateful now. It'll make the victory even sweeter. Last game we won home field advantage. This time we'll secure our spot in the state championship.

Coach calls a huddle and gives us the same pep talk he always does before, during, and after every game. I try to keep focused, but I'm ready to get on the field and get this shit done.

Shortly after the third quarter begins, it's time for offense to take the field. As soon as the first play is called, the ball is snapped and the stupid lug is fighting his way to me but is held off by my right guard. Quickly handing off the pass to Zulich, he's about two yards short of the first down when he's tackled.

Coach wants us to run the clock down, especially since the game is tied. I

want to put numbers on the board. I trust my defense enough to let them do their job so that's what I do. Instead of calling the play to just push through the pile and get the yards, I Hail Mary that shit into the end zone where Becks is wide open and waiting. Touchdown. Saint Juliet takes the lead.

Which means I'll have an even bigger target on my back. And when I spot Sanders walking my way, I don't miss how he moves straight into my path. In no time, he's on me, his shoulder pad slamming against mine.

My automatic reaction is to shove him. "Back the fuck up."

He quickly turns, his chest crashing into mine, his helmet hitting mine. "What are you gonna do about it, bitch?" Whistles start blowing, players surround us, and I think he says something like "I'm gonna fuck your other knee up next" before we're pulled apart, neither of us quick enough to throw a punch.

Coach is at my side, yelling for me to get off the field. And after a few minutes, we're all back on the sidelines, and special teams head out to secure the extra point.

"What the fuck was that, Crawford?" Couch shouts at me.

"He was in my fucking face."

"To piss you off, to get the best of your temper, and you played right into his hand." Coach is right. But he's not about to lecture me on self-control.

I step forward, causing Coach to slightly stumble as he steps back. "Because you're so fucking great at controlling your temper, right? Tell me your secret, *Coach King*, please." The shock, disbelief and anger on his face is enough for me to stand down. "That's what I thought. So get the fuck out of my face."

I'm so fucking done with shit. I slam my helmet on the ground, frustration and anger humming through my veins. I try to calm it. But I can't. And I don't think it's only the asshat on the opposing team who's getting the best of me. There's so much rage in me; I want to hurt someone, and that jackass Sanders will be perfect to release some of my wrath on.

But I'm walking a fine line. We must win this game. I *have* to win it. All this can't be for nothing. So, I try to control myself, put my head down, and extend the lead a little more. After a few plays, we're consistently moving the ball down the field. The clock winds down, bringing us to the fourth quarter. The Eagles added a field goal on their last drive, so we're now only up by four. Sanders must be desperate, because he takes another shot—the same as last time, one low, one high—only this time I'm able to protect myself

enough to not take the hit too bad as I tuck the ball to my chest and get tackled to the ground.

Fuck this. I call a huddle to relay a quick formation change to Topher and Smith. Both are confused a little at first but quickly get the purpose. Swiftly, we line up, the ball is snapped, and my fingers grip it tightly as I look down the field.

I have no intention of throwing it as Sanders comes towards me. I was supposed to pass it off to Smith, but I can't. I don't have enough time. Sanders is almost to me. Topher goes low, falling right in front of Sander's legs, I secure the ball tighter against my stomach, put my head down and drive straight forward into Sander's rib cage. Yeah, he has padding on, but it only helps so much. The momentum of my hit thrusts him back as he lets out a grunt before hitting the ground, then I land on top of him.

I'm slow to get up even when I hear the whistle blowing, knowing I just cost us yards, both from losing the field placement and from a penalty that is sure to be called. But it's worth it. The satisfaction that brought me is undeniable. I tell Sanders, "This is my fucking house. Try your dirty shit again, motherfucker."

He's grunting, cursing, and acting tough, but he's also in obvious pain. I'm hauled up by my shoulder pads, surrounded by a group of my teammates. Coach calls our final time-out. He spends the first sixty seconds of it staring at me like I'm a fucking moron. And I wouldn't disagree. But fuck, I had to do something. That pansy ass had to be shown his cheap shots won't be tolerated here.

"Do you want to lose? Do you want to blow everything over some trivial vendetta?" Coach asks me, his voice way too flat and calm.

"I won't lose." I can't lose. And the fucker breathing down my neck right now is the main reason why. This coach telling me the right thing to do ... who has never done right by anyone. What I wouldn't give to tackle him, beat his head into the ground, for the pain he's caused his own daughter. "That motherfucker needed a lesson. You don't get to hurt people without consequences."

Realization. I see it in his eyes. I'm talking about him too. Or he's at least questioning the meaning behind my words before he goes into another pep talk with my teammates again. But he seems like he's over this shit too. He will soon enough have his own penalties served to him.

The time-out concludes and offense take the field again with a fifteen-

yard penalty for unsportsmanlike conduct, but it only takes two plays to get the yardage back, plus more as we capture another first down. The clock has a little over a minute on it when Archbishop Mathis gets the ball back after a successful field goal attempt by Johnson. And sure enough, our defensive line holds the Eagles back. They did manage to get a first down, but after two more plays, they're nowhere near field goal range, so they go for it on the fourth. And defense fucks up their plans, giving the Wildcats enough time to run one play before it's time for the second snap. With only eighteen seconds left on the clock, I kneel. the play stops but the seconds keep ticking away off the game clock. The entire stretch is perfect as I smile and watch Sanders.

Time runs out.

Wildcats win.

Holy fuck. We're in the championship. How did that happen? Even at the beginning, before the season ever began, when Coach and Dustin started with this pipe dream, I never thought the day would come where I would actually be able to get here.

Everyone is one the field, celebrating the win, and I spot the one I want to celebrate with. The sight of her reminds me we won't have a win next time. The Wildcats will lose, and she'll make her dad suffer even more in the moments that follow. I get it. She wants him to get there, close enough to taste exactly what he wants. And she knows he'll lose his temper and play right into her hand.

Why am I disappointed? How am I just realizing that I actually want to win next week? I mean, it's a live, televised game on a national stage. The chance of a lifetime. And I'm already walking into it knowing it ends badly. But she's worth it.

There's no mistaking the joy on her face, especially when she rushes up to me, her arms going around my neck as I lift her off her feet and kiss her. This would be the perfect finish to the game if there wasn't so much baggage behind this congratulatory smooch. I still make the best of it and give her one more long, deep kiss before I place her back on her feet.

Her hand slaps my shoulder pad. "I can't believe you and Toph did that. That could have ruined everything." Her voice lowers not that anyone is paying attention to us or can hear with all the rejoicing going on. "But that bastard deserved worse."

He really did. But I'm satisfied with the hit I got in and taking the win. And I should be partying with my team around me, instead I stand with her.

“This is not what we agreed on.” I rub my finger along the SJA painted on her cheek in glitter.

Her lips curl into a mischievous smirk. “I’m wearing your number. You just have to find where.”

“Fuck,” I groan, my hands reaching under her skirt and grip her ass to pick her up. Her legs wrap around my hips. “Why the fuck did you have to tell me that right now?”

“Anticipation,” she hums into my ear, her teeth nipping at my earlobe and not helping to calm my need to search her body for my number.

“Crawford.” Goddamn it. I set Morgan down and look over to Coach. He doesn’t acknowledge her and only addresses me. “Good job. But don’t lose focus now. One way or another, you’ll be free after next week.”

Yeah. The motherfucker won’t be able to hold anything (like murder) over my head, he won’t have his title, and he will be exposed on national TV. Morgan wants it to be on the biggest stage possible. So that’s what I’ve provided for her. I just hope it’s enough for her to let go of this and move on. Because I know better than anyone how lethal her hatred can run.

Coach has already walked off but has left a slight damper on the mood. So, I focus back on her, take her hand in mine, and lead her off the field. “I have some searching to do.”

MORGAN

His fingers trail up the front of my thigh. “It must’ve washed off in the shower.”

“Yep.” I close my eyes as I feel him brush his lips over the same spot where his number was before he moves on top of me.

“I dare you to tattoo it there.”

“Never gonna fucking happen.” Talk about a permanent brand. Pass. He owns enough of my body without having his stupid number on me. “Besides, you don’t even like football, remember?”

“True.” He’s watching me when I open my eyes. “So maybe just my name or initials will do.”

I’m more than aware of his fingers drawing CC on the side of my thigh.

Reaching up, I trace a MK on his forehead. He wrinkles it, then says, “I’ll do it. Let’s go.”

“Go to sleep.” Freaking morning people. I still want to close my eyes, especially since we didn’t sleep much seeing as how we were up fucking most of the night.

“I can’t. Let’s go get some pancakes.”

“I’m going to just buy some pancakes to keep here.”

He doesn’t say anything for a few seconds before quickly rattling off. “That reminds me. I found a place near the marina. But I was wondering what your plans are after graduation.”

“Why?”

“You know why,” he states. When I stare at him with annoyance, he adds, “What good is it to have a place to call mine if you’re not around?”

“Don’t let me impede your plans.” He goes to say something, but I cut

him off. “Stop, Cade. Make your choice. I’ll fuck you there too, even if you have a raggedy couch that scratches my ass.” I don’t want to help him pick out a place to live. “Besides, you seem content sleeping at the marina and Neil’s. Or in my bed. And I’m sure Dustin wouldn’t mind you back in your old room. What’s the rush?”

“None of those are mine. And that’s what I need. I want you to come and look at it with me. Because I want you to be comfortable there. I need somewhere to call mine. Then as soon as football is over, I can up my hours and actually halfway afford it. But I probably won’t have a couch for a while, so it’s really not going to be what you’re accustomed to.”

“Can we just drop this? Pick a place, and I’ll buy you a couch. How’s that?”

His finger traces along my jawline. “I don’t want you to buy me a couch. I just want you there with me.”

It doesn’t matter. Because after I carry out the sentence on my father, Cade won’t want me in his place at all, much less on his fucking couch. “No promises.”

He lets out an exasperated huff then pushes away from me and gets off the bed. He tugs his T-shirt on and keeps his back to me.

Shit. “What the fuck is your problem now?”

“I don’t have a problem.”

“All right. Guess pancakes are out.”

“Nope. Let’s go.” He continues getting dressed, then stares at where I’m sitting on the bed. “We still need to eat even if you want to deny the future will actually happen.”

“Oh my God, Cade. Me not wanting to pick out curtains with you is not denying the future.” *It’s just accepting the inevitable.* “I’m not hungry. Go feed yourself.” He lets out a little laugh that sends my irritation even higher. “What?” No response. He just shakes his head. His smile growing. “Let’s see if you’re still laughing after the game, then we’ll talk.”

There’s a flash of alarm across his features for a few seconds before he resumes his sarcastic demeanor. “All right.”

An uncomfortable hush falls over the room as I pull on a sweater and some yoga pants. I’m looking for my shoes when my phone rings. It’s a local number I don’t recognize but still answer.

After I say hello, I hear a hushed voice. “Morgan, I need to speak with you.” The voice is so low I can barely understand them.

“Who is this?”

“Thatcher.”

“Um. Okay. I thought you were in jail.”

“I am. And if you knew what it took for me to make this call, you’d understand how important it is that I speak with you.”

This is weird. Entertaining, but odd. “About what?”

“Your father. What else?” he says impatiently before he whispers again. “Visitation starts in an hour. When I say that you have to hear me out, I really mean it. Your life and your brother’s depend on it.”

Is he bluffing? Trying to set me up because he knows I played a part in him being caught? “Are you fucking with me?”

“No. See you in an hour.”

I keep the phone to my ear for a few seconds after the line goes silent. Why would he try and reach out to me? And what is he talking about? My life and Ryder’s?

“What was that about?” Cade asks.

I consider lying, but I can’t sort out the conversation in my head and have to say it aloud. “Thatcher. He asked me to go speak with him at the jail. Said that my life and Ryder’s depend on it.”

“He’s probably screwing with you. Or just needs a way out of his mess.”

“Then why not call my dad or even my mom since they were fuck buddies. Why me? He knows I’m not going to help him.” I have to find out why. I start looking up how to register to visit the jail.

“You’re really going, aren’t you?”

“Yes.”

“I’m going too.” Cade tosses his hoodie and a T-shirt at me. “Put that on and change out of the leggings. Just put on some jeans or something not revealing.”

I clutch the hoodie to my chest and study as he moves around the room. His movements edgy. “This isn’t the time to be a protective caveman.”

He finally stops his agitated pacing and faces me. “They won’t let you in dressed like that. It’s for your safety, not my sake.” It hits me that this isn’t his first time visiting the jail. “You saw your dad when he was there, didn’t you?”

“Yeah. It was the last time I saw him up until this year.” He seems upset but acts nonchalant as he checks his phone then shoves it in his pocket.

“Are you okay to go with me? I can do this alone.”

He finally meets my gaze as he flatly says, “No promises.”

MORGAN

We're finally finished with the visitor check-in process. And now I see why Cade had me change clothes. They have rules and follow them strictly. I thought for a second we wouldn't be able to get through because of some list, but apparently Thatcher had Cade and me added to it. The guard said Shelby King was on it too. Which surprised me. But now I'm more curious to know if my mom has actually been here.

After being escorted to the second floor, we're instructed to sit at one of the round tables.

"Well, this is fun," I mutter, glancing around the room.

Only one other inmate is speaking with a woman holding a small child on her lap, and I don't realize I'm staring until Cade asks me, "Are you good?"

"Yep." I think. "Just felt a bit like I was going to jail with that pat down search." Not to mention they took everything from me—my phone, my keys, my wallet. Cade had warned me to stash my purse in the car and not bring it in. But I wasn't expecting to be patted down and stripped of my possessions. "I'm not built for prison." The words ring familiar from what Ava said, and I shift against the hard chair. I need to find out what Thatcher is talking about, but I have the insane urge to stand and leave. There's only one person on this planet that I trust less than him right now, and that's my father. I need to know what he's up to.

It's about five minutes before Thatcher appears in the doorway, his hands cuffed in front of him as the guard ushers him to the table where he takes a seat across from us. The guard rattles off a few instructions to Thatcher: keep his hands on the table; don't get up; let him know when he's ready to leave and he'll be accompanied up from the table.

Thatcher glances to Cade. “Figured you’d tag along.”

“Yeah. So, why are we here?” I ask as he nervously looks to where the guard has perched up against the wall. I’m sure he could still hear the conversation if he really wanted, but he doesn’t look like he really cares and is talking to another guard.

“Your father double-crossed me.”

“Okay.” I shrug my shoulders. “How is that my problem?”

“Because I want you to help me get him back. And in return, I’ll tell you what he has planned for you, your brother, and your mother.” Thatcher glances back at the guard again before continuing. “He won’t even take my calls anymore. And neither will your mother.”

“Do you blame her? You fucked her to help my dad get their prenup voided.”

His eyes widen and give away that he thought I was in dark about that one detail. Perhaps I know more than he would like me to. “I had no choice, Morgan. Your father backed me into a corner.”

“A corner that would pay you well, had you not made a deal with Satan.”

Thatcher curses under his breath, his hands pressing harder against the table. “I had to.”

“How about you just spit it out. Tell me what he’s planning and cut the chatter.” I lean back and wait.

“The money was supposed to be for my campaign and some debts I owe. And for a future that didn’t involve dealing with you deceitful heathens all day. But now I need it to save my ass from being locked up the rest of my life.”

“Well, don’t fuck minors or their moms. That’s a start.”

He gives me a pointed glare, and it’s the first time I see hatred—fury—directed at me from the coward who checks out short skirts for jollies. “I know you were behind this, Morgan. But I need your help. And trust me, you need mine.”

“How can you help me? You can’t even help yourself.” I laugh, but I am still curious enough that I don’t leave this entertaining conversation.

“The deal I had with your dad is off, obviously, but even before all this”—he points his finger around the room without lifting his hands off the table—“he was going to swindle me. He figured our plan wasn’t a sure deal. So he devised a win-win plan where he’s the only beneficiary.”

The word sends a cold chill down my spine as I hug Cade’s hoodie tighter

to my chest. Cade is the one who speaks. “Get to the fucking point.”

“Not until you promise you’ll help me get out of here.”

“I’m not going to help you get away with any of this.”

“I need money, Morgan. And you have plenty of it. I just need a decent lawyer to lessen the sentence and funds to help my family so they don’t lose everything. And so some bad people don’t come after them for my debts.” Thatcher words fade off as his face drops to look at the table. “They shouldn’t have to suffer because of me.”

“Yeah. Maybe you should’ve considered them beforehand.” Cade doesn’t take it easy on him, and I know that stems from his anger at his own dad.

“Fine,” I agree as Cade’s eyes snap to me. And I explain it to him. “If it means keeping Ryder safe, I’ll do it.” And maybe I feel less guilty giving the perv money since it’ll keep his wife and kids’ heads above water. Fuck. I really have to stop hanging around SuperCade because his goodwill is rubbing off on me.

Thatcher’s metal cuffs scratch against the table as his hands bounce and he takes another glance to the guard before he utters, “I need the money first.”

“No. I need to know this isn’t some bullshit I already know that you’re just trying to *swindle* me.”

“How can I trust you?” Thatcher mumbles.

“You can’t. But look at this way, if I’m really in danger, you won’t get the money for sure if I’m dead.” I take a beat before I add, “I will follow through if you truly are helping my brother.”

“Five million dollars. That was the agreement I had with your dad.”

“Three million is the one you’ll have with me.”

I hear Cade’s sharp intake of breath as he mutters, “Morgan.”

“Four million,” Thatcher counters.

I fucking hate bargaining. “Two million.”

“That’s lower,” Thatcher whines.

“And now it’s lower. One million. I don’t have time for this. Whatever you have on my dad, I can figure out on my own if I have to.”

“Fine. Okay,” he quickly agrees. “One million. Wired to my wife. Please, Morgan.”

“Tell me what I should know.” I wait for him to speak; it feels like waiting for an eternity.

Thatcher observes the guard as he whispers, “Your father is going to kill

the three of you. He has it planned. When Saint Juliet loses the championship, he'll make arrangements to drive y'all to supper. Only the three of you won't make it."

"How do you know this?"

"It doesn't matter."

"Um. Yeah, it does," I reply.

"No, I mean the evidence doesn't make a difference, and your father knows it's not admissible in court. I bugged his office. He and Paul hatched out the plan. That prick has the biggest crush on your father and will do anything for him. Even murder."

So ... that is kind of news to me. I knew he worshipped Dad, but I never got the vibe that he had a thing for him. So it makes sense he can't get it up for sex. Limp dick Paul was sleeping with underage students instead of the person he had a hard-on for—my father.

"Does my mom know about Paul's crush?"

"No. I did tell her about the deal I had with your father. She said it didn't matter because she already had proof of his infidelity from years ago, and her lawyers have an ironclad confirmation."

Maddie? She must know about Maddie. And she's going to use her in court. Why is my heart in my throat while I listen to Thatcher continue?

"And your father knows your mom is about to divorce him and take everything. So, with the three of you dead, he stands to inherit it all. That's what he's been after this entire time. And in his own words to Paul, killing you all is the easiest solution, and a guarantee that he'll get everything."

My throat grows tighter. And I can't speak. Thankfully, Cade asks, "Why didn't you just go to Shelby with this and leave Morgan out of it?"

"She won't take my calls at all since we ended things. And even worse, now, since the news of my arrest broke, she had her attorney tell me that she's filing a restraining order if I don't stop trying to contact her. But I swear I'm trying to help."

"Yourself," I squeak out. But I'm not even mad at him. I understand him. Who I don't understand is my father.

Thatcher levels his vision with mine. "If you ask me, this helps us all *except* your father."

"And Paul," I add because that weasel is about to suffer too.

"He set up the bet." Thatcher glances to Cade. "With the same bookies your father deals with. They're all fucking crooked. I actually did want the

school to take the championship.”

“How do you know about my father’s gambling?” Cade asks.

“Because I used the same guys when I got in a tight spot. It just got me in a worse one when we lost that game.”

Cade laughs. “The one my dad bet on. It keeps getting better.”

“Comforting,” I add, “but why is he wanting Saint Juliet to lose? I don’t get it. The championship is the only thing that has mattered to him.”

“No. It mattered to me. I needed the leg up for my political career, which is dead for sure now. But your father wants to use the moment as a pity party. It’s a cover for him. He’ll be the poor man who lost the championship and his family on the same day. Not to mention he’s going to line a lot of pockets by losing the game. And in return, they’ll owe him a favor, which he’s cashing in by hiring them to kill his family. No record. No financial trail. He gets away with murder.”

“Where?” It’s the only thing I need to know.

“On the Causeway. He’s going to have the limo pushed over the railing of the bridge at the twenty-mile marker. There will be individuals waiting under the bridge to make sure the three of you don’t escape the vehicle, while ensuring he’s the only one who does.”

The room spins. Maybe it’s just the lack of oxygen to my brain because I can’t seem to take in much air. My dad has plotted and planned to kill me, my brother, and my mother. That motherfucker isn’t going to just suffer, he’s going to remember me every waking second and even in his nightmares. All this shit for money.

I shove the chair back from the table and tell Thatcher, “One million next week when my brother is safe, and my dad isn’t a problem for anyone anymore.”

He nods his head and remains at the table as we approach the guards to leave. I need out of here. I feel trapped. They’re not moving fast enough. I need to get my things back and get my ass out the door. “I have to go.”

I almost say *Fuck it* and leave everything here. I’m barely holding on before the lady finally gives me my belongings, and I tear outside, Cade on my heels. “Morgan, talk to me.”

“What do you want to talk about?” I take in a deep breath, finally able to fill my lungs.

“I’ll win. I know we can. Then your dad will be screwed. The bookies will handle him.”

“No.” I shake my head erratically as I step up to Cade. “You’re going to lose the game. Or I swear to God I will never speak to you again as long as I live.”

He grabs me, squeezing tight enough that it hurts, as he shouts, “He’s going to kill you, Morgan. Did you not hear that?”

How could I not have? “He won’t get the chance.”

“You can’t guarantee that.”

“Yes, I fucking can.” I will. I will make sure it goes exactly how I plan. I just don’t know what that is now because Dad totally wrecked by previous scheme. It wasn’t perfect. But it has to be now. And it will be. For Ryder *and* Maddie’s sake, I will make our father regret ever having me.

CADE

“Seriously, man. That’s what he said.” I doubt Ryder believes I’m making this shit up. He has no reason to. But I don’t blame him for needing me to repeat it. I was there and heard Thatcher say it with my own ears, and I’m still having a hard time understanding it.

“But can we really trust Thatcher?”

“Fuck no. But we can’t put our fate in your father’s hands either. So, who would you rather take a risk trusting?”

“You already know the answer to that.” Ryder sits on the edge of his bed; his head drops to his hands. “But what the hell are we supposed to do?”

“I want to win the game and let the crooks deal with him.”

“There’s no guarantee that’ll happen. I mean, you can’t know with a hundred percent certainty that you’re going to win. The Trojans are tough. They’re undefeated. I clearly don’t feel as good about gambling as the adults around here.”

As soon as the bedroom door begins to open, I already know it’s her before she steps into the room with a pissy stare pointed at me. “Jeez, let me guess. You told him.”

Good guess.

“What part of ‘leave him the fuck out of this’ did you not understand?”

“I had to. You’re not taking this seriously enough. We’re not talking about winning or losing a high school football game.” I lower my voice but keep it blunt. “Your dad wants you dead.”

“Yeah. I understood that part.” She turns to Ryder. “Now that I don’t have a choice but to work with the two of you, what’s your big plan?”

“Don’t have one yet,” I respond.

“That’s just great,” she sulks as she walks over to me. “Whenever the two of you figure it out, let me know.”

“I think *we* should kill *him*,” Ryder declares.

Morgan points a stunned look at her brother, and I have to say, I feel the same way. Dumbfounded at his words, even if I do completely agree.

Ryder looks like he’s carrying the weight of the world. “We’ll never be safe. The man wants to kill us for money. And I don’t think he’ll give up until he succeeds. So, even if we avoid this particular situation, are we supposed to look over our shoulders our entire lives?”

“I won’t,” Morgan retorts. “So, let’s turn the tables on him. But I think we should make him suffer a little bit. Not make it too quick and easy.”

“What are you thinking?” I ask hesitantly.

“We win the title. Let the bet go sour. They’ll deal with him just like you said. And if they don’t. Then we will.”

“But what about if we lose the game?” I ask, because Ryder is right. I’ve been lucky so far to be in control. But the tables can turn at any second.

“We don’t get in a car with him. We know when and where he’s planning it. So everything will be good.”

“It’s risky.”

“Not as risky as trying to get away with murder again.”

Morgan has a point. Unfortunately. I look to her. “Then it’s settled. We win the game. Watch the pieces fall into place from the sidelines, and you don’t put yourself in his path any sooner.”

“Yes, SuperCade. You’ll be able to save the day.”

“Do y’all really think this will work?” Ryder asks as I consider the same question. “It has to.” Because I won’t lose her again.

MORGAN

“It’s so much colder than normal.” Mom glances around out the back door as she pulls her Saint Juliet sweater on. “Do you need a ride to school?”

“No, Cade’s picking me up.” The entire thing is stupid. Dad insisted that everyone meet at the school to ride the bus to the Dome just a few miles away. I think it’s more so he could have his stupid send-off party for a game he believes the Wildcats will lose.

I hear Dad’s chipper voice before I spot him walking into the kitchen. “Hey, everyone ready for the big day?”

What the fuck has him in a good mood? Oh yeah, killing his family in a few hours.

“I’m ready,” I tell him as he gives me a puzzled expression before a warm smile stretches across his lips.

He’s really playing up the part today and lays it on even thicker as he walks over to Mom, reaching for her hand and gently clasps it in his. He just stares at her for a few seconds before he says, “I know I’ve been a tyrant to live with, and everything has been in disarray. So, after the game, let’s just focus on us and getting our family back on track.” He brings her knuckles to his mouth, giving them a soft kiss. “Just like we used to be.”

Were we ever a happy family? I don’t recall it. And I don’t think I’ve ever seen Dad openly show affection to Mom. It’s fucking weird to witness. Even worse is her heartfelt smile and her almost teary eyes. “That would be amazing. We’ve really missed having the old you around.”

Humph. Old him was just as much of an ass as current him. And Mom knows that. How is she falling for his shit?

“How about a celebratory meal after the game? Just the family, as kind of

a reset. There's a new restaurant on the North Shore that sounds incredible."

"Wonderful. It's a date." Mom looks so hopeful and serene. "We could all use a reset."

I could use a reset from this shit because it's insane. And so are his acting skills.

"Doubt I can make it." He'd probably be suspicious if I easily went along with it.

Dad moves in front of me. It takes everything I have to keep a calm, unbothered exterior, but I do. The alternative is showing him fear or revealing a glimpse of the pain he's caused, which isn't gonna happen. This man should protect me, yet he wants me dead so he can enjoy a life with full pockets, free of a family weighing him down. He goes to reach for me, then stops and drops his hand back to his side. "I know it will take time. But you'll see that I'm not as bad as you think. You should know better than most, when a King wants something, they go a little crazy to get it. The championship has been a dream of mine since I attended Saint Juliet. And now we'll capture it and bring it home where it belongs. Then I'll move on to my next dream. My family. I think we should take a vacation or maybe go visit the ranch. We haven't done that in forever."

"Sounds great." It's not hard to be cynical—it sounds like the worst punishment ever.

He slowly leans forward, his hand patting my bicep, his cheek touching mine as he makes a kissing sound. "You'll always be my little girl."

Gag me. Actually, there's no need. I'm already about to puke on his green-and-gold windbreaker. The stupid jacket looks more and more like a preposterous costume by the second. But he plays the part of enthusiastic coach and doting dad well. I just can't understand how Mom could fall for it after Thatcher said she's aware of his affair and was planning to leave him. It'd given me some hope that she was stronger than I thought and wasn't going to lie down and take whatever shit he serves her. Like she has for years.

Dad moves around the kitchen island before grabbing his keys. "I'll see you at the game, sweetie," Mom tells him.

"You can't be that fucking gullible," I state once he's walked out the door.

She freezes, her shoulders stiffening as she glances back to me. "Glad I was convincing. I need him to believe everything is okay until it's time to file

for divorce and all his transgressions come to light.”

We won't make it to that point if she goes along with his post-game charade. Things will go bad way before she serves him divorce papers. “You can't use Maddie against him.” I almost regret saying it, but I need her to know that Madison must be left out of this. Just in case I don't succeed, and it comes to that.

“How do you know—” Her words die off in a gasp as she quickly rushes across the kitchen. “When did you find out?”

“Does it matter?”

Mom shakes her head. “No, it doesn't. But please understand I wasn't planning on getting her mixed up in this unless absolutely necessary. She's just an innocent bystander in your father's twisted lies.”

“Seems like we're all liars.” *How could she keep such a secret?* “The real question is when did you find out?”

“It's been a while.” Mom looks like she's the one who's about to puke now. “I thought staying with you father was the right choice. I did it for you and Ryder. Figured I could deal with him until the two of you were graduated and out of the house. I kept our family together because I thought it was for the best. I was wrong.”

“Yeah. Dead wrong. And Dad of the Year won't be missed.” At all.

CADE

She heads towards the bus as I move behind her. “We don’t have to do this. We can just grab Ryder and your mom and leave now.”

She turns, her palm against my nose, fingertips on my forehead, as she pushes my face back. “Shut up.”

“Morgan!” Coach shouts her name. “Cheer team is on the other bus.”

“Yeah. I’m good. Cade needs a blow job to get his game face on.” Morgan goes to climb the stairs when Coach grabs her arm, holding her back from boarding the bus.

“I’m trying, Morgan. I can only apologize so much for the past. Let’s get through the game and then we’ll start over with a clean slate.”

“Indeed. Perfectly clean.” Morgan jerks her arm out of her father’s grip and climbs onto the bus. Coach looks to me with pity and maybe some pleading to feel sorry for him. But I don’t. At all. The bastard hasn’t received half the hell he warrants.

“Don’t touch her again.”

“I can’t do this today, Crawford. Stay in your lane and just play ball.”

I literally bite my tongue to keep from asking “What’s the point?” because Coach already has the outcome predetermined. Wildcats lose, he wins. That’s all his goal was all along. For him to win. Not today, jackass.

When I step on the bus, I spot Morgan in the very last row in the seat against the window. Last ride on the charter bus. Can’t say I’ll miss it.

I drop into the seat beside her, but she keeps her gaze pointed out the window to where students are getting back in their vehicles after the cheerful sendoff AP Ferguson had arranged. Now the fool is the one who strides onto the bus. He searches around before stopping on me and curls his finger for

me to come. “Off the bus, now.”

“Why? What’s going on?” Coach asks him.

“We’ll discuss it in my office.”

Coach waves over the bus. “We have a game to get to.”

“Mr. Crawford won’t be attending.”

“Why the fuck not?” Coach shouts, and I wonder the same.

“There’s evidence that the incident in my office was Cade’s doing. So, we need to have a discussion about it.”

“You mean the shit on your desk?” Coach looks flabbergasted at me. Hey, I’m just as fucking shocked because I wasn’t the one who did it, so what evidence he has, I don’t know. Coach shakes his head. “I can’t believe this. What the fuck are we going to do now? The game is hours from kickoff. Way to let your team down, Crawford.”

That’s it. Coach set me up to get me out of the game, and I have a feeling the evidence was something provided by him. A few of the players are cursing and hollering, and when I glance over to Morgan, she looks as baffled about what to do as I am.

Ferguson shouts for me to exit the bus again. So I stand and tell him, “I didn’t do anything. I propose we discuss the ‘evidence’ *after* I win the game.” Yeah. That’s the best threat I can give Coach right now without outing everything.

“Unacceptable. You won’t be playing. There’s a backup to take your place. The team can play without you.”

Topher shouts, “No, we can’t. I did it.”

Fuck. I don’t want to play this game without him.

“No, I did it,” Neil shouts from a few rows in front of me.

Then Johnson, who is seated beside him, says, “Stop taking credit for my shit. I did it.”

One by one, every player on the bus stands and says they’re responsible for the mess.

I can’t see Ferguson any longer, but I can hear him yelling for everyone to sit down. No one is listening until Coach lets out a high-pitched whistle, then everyone settles back into their seats except me. I look at Coach. “Guess it’s a forfeit. Won’t even count as a game played. Sorry, guys.” I apologize to my team for show, but I know the game will be played.

“Let’s take a second to regroup. Ferguson, I think this is better sorted after the game. You can’t reprimand the entire team because of one person’s

bad decision.”

Ferguson looks pissed. “I guess I can’t suspend the entire team ... But I will if the guilty party isn’t in my office first thing Monday morning. No exams. No socializing. Straight to my office and that’s it.”

Topher lets out a hoot. “I think they should maybe make a pit stop in the bathroom before going straight to your office.”

I can’t even with him right now. Topher is the one who should be sitting there but I know he’ll never turn himself in or get caught. And Ferguson will have to suspend us all because we’re going down as a team one way or another. Not to mention, I’m not leaving Morgan’s side today. So, getting off this bus and allowing her to go alone with her father is not going to happen.

She resumes her quiet contemplation as the bus finally starts up and heads out of the Saint Juliet lot. We’re only a few miles from the field, and even with traffic, we’ll be there too soon. I’m not ready for any of what is going down today.

“Our first bus ride on here was enjoyable.” I lean over toward her. “I wouldn’t mind a repeat.”

“I’m not giving you a blow job, I just said that to my father to piss him off.”

“Okay. That’s not what happened during the other bus ride and not what I was expecting to happen on this one.” When she turns to me, I grasp her hip and pull her on top of me. “I think a little stress relief will do you some good.”

I start to slip my hand under her skirt, but she climbs off me. “Not in the mood.”

That’s a first. Especially since I’m more than willing to put a show on in public. “Morgan.” I wait until she looks at me before I tell her, “We will get through this together.”

“Yeah,” she utters and looks back at the window. I reach over, grab her hand, and clasp it to me as she adds, “I can’t wait until it’s all over.”

I’m ready for the “over” part but am scared to death of the steps leading there. The plan is as solid as possible, but Morgan is a rogue, unpredictable factor that can’t be controlled any more than the weather.

MORGAN

The Dome is packed, which is wild considering it's a high school game. But these people take this stupid sport as seriously as my father. Or at least as seriously as I thought he did. Now he's ready to throw everything down the drain, quit on his entire team and what he bitched about all season, so he can win another way.

They've added some extra spectacles to the pregame, so it's nearly an hour later than normal when the game starts. Halftime is even more extra with all the fluff. But what really concerns me is the amount of time Cade has been on the field. It seems like every time he gets out there, he hardly has the ball for ten seconds before the Trojans get it back.

By the fourth quarter, the score is tied. The first snap he gets back on the field, a flag is thrown for false start on Saint Juliet. But I didn't see shit; no one jumped the line. The Wildcats actually get the first down and start moving the ball after that. When Cade throws a pass, Topher catches it, coming down in the end zone. The stadium erupts in cheers until there's a flag thrown. The ref signals that Topher didn't have possession of the ball. The pass was incomplete. No touchdown.

And that's when it hits me. Dad always has a backup plan. The refs ... he must have paid them off. A few blown calls can change the entire trajectory of a game. And they're doing it. The next pass is thrown to Smith, but he's unable to make the catch. The Trojan defensive player in his all over him while looking back to Cade. It's a textbook pass interference call, yet no flag is thrown. The crowd voices their displeasure throughout the stadium.

"*Humph*. That's not the first time that penalty was missed on this field," Ava says, clearly aware that the call was blown.

The remainder of the game goes about the same. But when the Trojan's defensive tackle aims low for Cade's bad knee and a roughing-the-passer call isn't made, I've had enough.

He's on the sideline, dropping onto the bench as the trainer kneels in front of him to look at his knee. "It's fine. He barely clipped me," Cade tells him.

"Bullshit," I say. "Just quit. It's not worth it." And he knows I don't mean the game. I'm telling him to lose and let my dad win.

"I'm fine, Morgan," he seethes before ignoring me as Dad approaches.

"Get back to your squad, Morgan. We need to concentrate."

"No. You need to stop taking cheap shots at your own players." I shouldn't have said it, but I had to. It's a fucking game. And he's willing to risk Cade's well-being, but should that really surprise me? He's willing to end my life for a royalty check.

Cade doesn't heed my advice and is back on the field the next opportunity he gets. But it doesn't make a difference. Our offense is stopped. Trojans take the field and are able to score a field goal to put them in the lead. I know it's over even before the last few seconds tick off the clock.

Wildcats lose. Why does that bother me? Maybe it's not the losing part but the way Cade stands. He appears defeated, like he's let everyone down. Like he's let me down. But he hasn't. He actually tried. And no matter what, we'll find a way out of this mess.

CADE

We lost. How did this happen? Well, several ways. The refs were bought. The other team knew my knee was my weakness for sure. So, I don't know what the outcome would've been had all things been equal, but it's fucking obvious no matter how well we played, one way or another we weren't going to win that game.

The last time I spotted Morgan, she was running off the bus after giving me a kiss that felt more like pity than anything. She said she was going to find Ryder and would meet me back by my truck. Only, it's Ryder who's running up to me—without Morgan.

“Where's your sister?”

“She said she was coming to find you.”

I race across the parking lot and look for Coach's Maybach before finally finding it with her standing beside it. When she sees me, she looks shocked then pissed. “What are you doing?”

“You're not getting in that car.”

“Yes, I am. I'm telling you, if you fuck this up, I will hurt you.”

If he hurts her, it won't matter what happens to me. “You're either coming with me or I'm going with you. But you're not being left alone with your father,” I tell her quietly.

Morgan is infuriated, but Ryder agrees by saying, “It's all of us or none.” He walks around the trunk of the car and pulls open the back door, dropping onto the seat at the same time Morgan slides in on her side.

Coach seems oblivious to our quarrel as he announces, “Let's go, kids. Cade, you can meet us later. It's a family thing.”

“Nah. I'm good,” I say as I all but shove Morgan into the middle of the

seat. Once I've pulled the door shut, I ask Coach, "So, talk to your buddy Thatcher lately?"

Coach glances at me in his rearview mirror. "No. I don't associate with perverts."

Just murders.

Morgan squeezes my hand. When I glance at her, she gives me a *Stop it or I'll cut you* expression.

I can't do this. "I'm gonna be sick. Can you pull over?"

Her eyes widen, her mouth gapes open.

"We're on the damn Causeway, I can't just pull over," Coach grumbles as I struggle to inhale.

I really might get sick. "Morgan, please. We need to get out of this car," I whisper to her. And I see the recognition in her eyes. She knows I can't just sit here and leave her in danger.

She slowly leans forward, her eyes closed as her lips tenderly press against mine before she mutters "I'm sorry" over them.

Her apology alone is enough to throw me off, but I can't gather my thoughts fast enough because seconds later, the car jolts, and we're skidding across the bridge. There's another hit against the car. It's all happening so fast. All I can do is cling to her as we go over the railing and the car plunges into the lake with a hard crash.

No. This isn't right. It's too soon. It's too fast. Thatcher said mile marker twenty. We're barely on the bridge—only three miles or so. Nothing makes sense, but my adrenaline kicks in as I jerk at my seat belt, finally getting it free. Morgan is beside me, way too calm. effortlessly unhooking hers. The car is already filling with water, it's only a little for a few moments until it surges in, and I realize the windows have been busted.

Someone dressed in a scuba suit appears. My fear peaks, and I try to shield her, put my body in front of hers to keep him away from her. But I can't get to Morgan fast enough, there's someone behind her with a hand over her mouth and nose, and the more I fight to get to her, the farther I'm pulled back. Someone's got me too, a hand is over the lower half of my face, and I realize there's a cloth there. Everything gets fuzzy, eventually darkness consumes me. But it wasn't the dark murky water that overtook me, it was something else.

CADE

I hear shouting before I can get my eyes open. They're heavy, impossible to move. And it takes me a second to recognize that it's Ryder screaming. "Where's she at? Where's my sister?"

Those words send enough panic through me to get my eyelids to finally open. I'm on the pavement. On the Causeway, paramedics hovering over me. How did I get here? I went over the ledge. We were submerged in water.

Ryder is a few feet away on a stretcher. Several paramedics restrain him as he fights against them and screams. I push off the ground, my head pounding as I brace myself on the hot cement.

"Where is she?" I ask the paramedic attending to me.

"Sir, lie back down." She guides me back, and I realize I'm on a stretcher. That wasn't the pavement? Why am I so out of it?

"No, where is Morgan?"

"We're doing everything we can," the paramedic assures me. "Just stay calm."

When has asking someone to stay calm ever worked? And how would it when I don't know if she is alive or dead?

"Please tell me where she is." It wasn't supposed to happen like this. He changed the plan. "I need to find her." I manage to sit up with the help of the paramedic.

She points to Shelby on her own stretcher with an oxygen mask over her face. "She's okay. Everyone is accounted for except the driver. They're still looking for him."

If everyone is accounted for then why don't I see her? "No, where's Morgan?"

The medic gives me a confused look just as an officer approaches. “Who?”

“Morgan King. Where is she?”

The officer stoops down. “Son, there was only one female in the car.” He glances at his notes. “Shelby King. I believe you’re mistaken. You had a hard hit to the head and an extremely traumatic experience.”

No fucking shit. But I know one thing. “She was there. She was in the car.”

He gives me a once-over like he thinks I’m insane and I feel fucking crazy.

“The driver who hit you all took off. But there were witnesses who jumped in to help. They said there were only three passengers plus the driver. Though he was able to make it out under his own power, there was a man who waiting down there and forced Mr. King on an airboat with him. We can’t be sure, but it seemed planned. The vehicle that hit y’all was a blue pickup with a brush guard. Can you tell me anything about the vehicle or driver who hit you all?”

I shake my head. But not because I can’t answer but because I don’t want to believe the answer. “My father. He drives a truck like that.”

The officer glances back to his notes. “What’s his name?”

“Randall Crawford.” And I pray to God he didn’t do this or get to her. He knows how important she is to me.

“Can you describe him?” the officer calmly asks.

I mechanically rattle off his description. “About six foot, stocky build, brown hair, brown eyes.” Like me.

He gives me a strained look before admitting, “That matches the eyewitness description.”

Motioning for his partner to come over, he asks, “Is there any reason why your father would do this or want to harm any of you?”

The only thing that makes sense is the game. “Football maybe. He’s had some shady dealing with placing bets on Saint Juliet in the past. And I know Coach was involved with them too.” But I can’t bring myself to say he hired them to kill his family because I don’t know who to trust right now except Ryder.

Irate, Ryder yells, “It was your father?” He huffs at the paramedic who is trying to give him oxygen and tells him to calm down. “Y’all really need to get some new ‘calming’ tactics. If anything happens to her—”

I don't blame him for being scared, but he has to know there's no way I would ever allow anything to happen to her. Even though I feel like I've already failed her, and it's entirely my fault. How could I let her get in the car to begin with, thinking I had any control over the chaos?

MORGAN

I hear him groan and look over to see him open his eyes. Finally.

“Hi, Dad.” I stare at him as he groggily shakes his head and glances around. “Where are we?”

“The old hospital in New Orleans,” I answer. I really wanted to take him to the same one Lenny took me to, but I knew Cade and Ryder would look for us there. They’ll never think to check here. “It should be familiar, but that damn chloroform makes your head all hazy for a while. It’ll wear off.”

There’s panic on his face as he tries to get free. His movements jerk the chair that he’s tied to, causing it to scrape across the floor. “What the fuck is going on?” He’s panicking already. “This is not right. Can you get loose?”

Ha. He’s so far off base. “What isn’t right? That I’m alive? Or that you’re not dead yet?”

His eyes snap to mine. In a slow, obvious motion, I fold my legs under me and cross my arms over my chest, then lean back and let him comprehend the fact that I’m not restrained. Only he is.

I’m in control.

“What did you do?”

The triumphant smile I feel spread across my face radiates through me. “Nothing that you weren’t planning to do.” The rage inside me stiffens when I think of my brother. “How about you convince me that you weren’t going to really kill me, my brother, oh, and our mother. Then maybe I’ll have a little mercy on you.”

“You fucking cunt. I will kill you.” He attempts to jump off the chair but fails since the restraints won’t allow him much movement.

“When I was tied up, that was the worst feeling. I wasn’t scared of my

captors. I was petrified of being defenseless, not in control.” I stand and walk over to him. “Are you scared?”

His furious eyes glare up at me as he says, “No. You don’t have the balls to kill me.” He lets out a sinister laugh. “I’m surprised you even had the guts to turn on me at all; you’ve always begged for my approval.” Another snicker. “I never loved you. You were always a tool to use against your mother, and a means to keep her around. I knew she would’ve left me years ago if not for you bastards.”

“We’re not the bastards. That would be Madison. But I’d rather you not speak of my sister that way.”

His breath hitches as his face morphs into disbelief. “How the fuck do you know about that little bloodsucking leech?”

He’s going to make this so much easier. The more he speaks, the more I want him to stop. “Bloodsucking leech, huh? Not sure how that works since you never gave her a thing in her life. Lucky her, she didn’t even have to deal with you at all.” I grab the cigar cutter on the medical tray nearby. “But please remember that I will make sure she has all the wealth and fortune she could ever want. The same money you will never touch.”

Dad spits at me, spraying his saliva all over my face.

“They said this hurts.” I slide his finger in the hole. “I really didn’t think I would enjoy any of this. It was more a means to an end. But you’re making this very delightful.”

“You’re crazy. And will never get away with another murder.”

“Oh, I’m not going to kill you.” I squeeze the cigar cutter, the blade slicing completely through his bone as his finger falls to the floor. “I’m going to make sure you never speak to anyone ever again and make sure you never lay a finger on me or Ryder again.”

After he stops screaming, he manages to say, “You really think I’ll keep my mouth shut after all this? No. I’m going to tell them everything. And I can’t wait for you to pay the price.”

“I know you would squeal on us if you could. It won’t matter though. No one will be able to understand you. But keep one thing in mind, if you try to say anything about this or what happened with Lenny, I’ll come for you. And no one will hear you scream.”

“I never did anything to you. Why are this doing this? I tried being a good father, but you’re a miserable person.”

“Scared, huh. Begging for your life. For mercy.” I study the bloody cigar

cutter in my hand. “I knew I was stronger than you. Mentally and emotionally. I never begged. I never showed fear. Because I knew my weakness would be used against me. And I finally found your weakness. Money. Only it wasn’t how you’d think. You did win some today. But that little money was all it took to put an end to the almighty famous quarterback Coach King, who is nothing but a washed up, pathetic failure, undeserving to live.”

“Just kill me then.” He squirms, screams louder.

“Nope, you gotta stay alive. Because I want you to remember every time you hurt my brother and every time you thought a fucking sport or money was worth more than us. But most of all. I want you to live with the fact that you’re only alive and miserable because of *me*, the child whose very existence you hate. And you’re going to regret bringing me into this world even more after this over.”

I wipe the metal against a rag. “Oh, and for your little allegiance with Paul too.” I point to the asshole who’s still passed out. “He helped all this work out seamlessly. And will learn *not* to plot to kill my family.”

I snap another finger off and go for the next while I tell him. “It’s such a shame that Randall hated you so much for double-crossing him with that shady bet. Losing the game so you could win while he didn’t sent him over the edge. And this is the state he left you in as punishment. Unable to speak, barely clinging to life. A medically induced coma for the remainder of your life. But don’t worry, you’ll be awake just enough to hear and feel everything happening to you and around you. And no matter what you do, or how loud you scream inside your head, no one will help. No one is coming to your rescue. It’s the worst feeling ever. I know. It’s how I felt when I ran around that damn hospital. I never thought you were coming to help me, but I also never imagined you knew I was taken and allowed it to happen. How could you?”

“I just thought he’d rough you up a bit, maybe fuck some of that resolve out of you. But I prayed he’d end you and save me the trouble.”

“Thanks for not helping me. I don’t need you or your approval. And by the way, Ryder is a fucking awesome football player. He just didn’t want you to use him.”

“Yeah. Whatever.” Dad laughs. “Both of you are useless.”

“Useless but efficient.”

“If you go through with this, I will make sure Crawford never sees the

light of day. He'll go down for murdering Lenny and I will walk free. No one will believe you over me."

"You won't have the opportunity to tell your story. Ever. Because I'm silencing you now."

"Go ahead and cauterize the wounds so he doesn't bleed out," the man they call Doc says. He's here to make sure I don't take it too far. He passes me a blowtorch, and I turn on the propane and light it.

"Yeah. We wouldn't want that."

Dad yells, his full attention on the flame in my hand. "Don't do this. We can still walk out of here. I'll leave. I swear. I don't need your money. I won some on the game."

"About that ..." I move closer but stop before the flame touches his skin. "I made my own bet. Only it wasn't under my name." I nod over to the corner where Randall is lying unconscious. "Your buddy over there placed a bet on the game. One that will show you promised him a win that would make him a fortune. Instead, it looks like you lost the game on purpose and screwed him out of his big payday for your own gain. So needless to say, he's pissed and out for revenge. At least, that's how it'll *appear* to the authorities."

"What the hell are you even talking about? I never made a deal with him."

"Yeah, ya did. His prints will be all over this. All over you. His mind will be reconstructed, that's the beauty about good drugs. Sometimes, you don't know what's a hallucination and what's reality."

Dad lets out a string of curses directed towards me. Nothing he says registers. I shut off every emotion and feeling I have except malice and hatred. "But you remember reality, don't you?" I laugh, moving the flame over his skin.

"You motherfucking bitch! I will kill you, but first, I'll kill that bitch brother of yours in front of you. And it will be all your fault."

"Still haven't the gotten the point." I look back at Doc. "Do you think it's the pain making him delusional enough to think he actually has a chance?"

"Probably adrenaline," Doc responds.

"How do I bring that down?"

"I have something for that." He holds up a syringe.

"No. I don't want him too complacent." I watch as he cries in agony. "He needs to be fully awake and aware for this next part."

“I should’ve killed you when I had the chance. I should’ve ended you like I did your asshole grandfather.”

That catches me off guard. Pawpaw died of a heart attack, and I’m going over the memories in my head. And my father sees me questioning my memories.

“That’s right. The old bastard was trying to talk your mother into leaving me. So, I got rid of him. No one ever suspected me because I was *away* on business. But I did it. And I’ll show you proof. Let me go and I’ll turn myself in for it.”

“Seriously, that’s your play?” I laugh while my insides twist, my gut telling me it’s true.

I can finish this. I just don’t think I can hear much more from his mouth or I’ll end up killing him and that isn’t what I planned. That’s not what he deserves. “You should rot in hell. But first, you’re going to rot inside your mind. And please make me the monster in there. Go ahead. But don’t you dare forget to note which chapter you made me this way.”

I shove a metal gag inside his mouth. He’s fighting me, but he’s weaker. He thrashes, screams, but I keep at it until I get the contraption in place. His mouth is now forcibly open and there’s nothing he can do.

I reach forward, grab his tongue with one hand, and bring the scalpel in my other hand up. His eyes widen as he studies the blade in my hand. He squeals, squirming in a useless attempt to retreat. A lot of it sounds like begging and pleading. But it’s too late. I slice the blade across his tongue, cutting at it until it’s completely detached from his mouth.

I stand there, holding his tongue in one hand and the bloody scalpel in the other. Blood pours out of his mouth. I knew I wouldn’t be able to come back from this, but it had to be done. “You’ll never hurt us again. You’ll never lay another hand on my brother. And you’ll never touch me with your fingers again. And you’ll never speak to anyone ever again.”

I drop the tongue and blade to the floor and look at Doc. “Are we set?”

He nods. “Yes. He’ll be taken to West Promenade and won’t ever leave there until he’s dead.”

“Perfect. But let’s hold off on that last step for a while.” I glance back over my shoulder, my dad apparently passed out from the pain. Pity. I wish he would’ve stayed awake to take it all in. But one thing is for sure, he’ll remember all of this when he wakes up.

It’s risky to keep him alive with the information he has. But I have more

trust in Doc and their organization than I ever had in the legal system. Doc assured me that the hospital is run by shareholders just like him. And as long as they receive the yearly payment, they'll make good on their deal. And I have to say, it's worth the money. The amount won't even put a dent in my inheritance. But now knowing the truth about what he did to my grandfather, I'd spend every penny if it meant keeping him there to suffer. In his mind. In his own hell. Where he belongs.

CADE

“Where the fuck is she at?” It’s been hours. “We’ve looked everywhere.”

“I don’t know,” Ryder mutters, wiping a tear from his face. The news has already reported that her dad is in the hospital and my dad is responsible because of some bet that went south. None of it makes sense until you add Morgan into the mix. She made them both pay. But I need to find her. I need to make sure she’s okay and that someone didn’t hurt her too.

Ryder stands, shoving off the couch. “She’ll be found when she’s ready.”

Why the fuck didn’t I think of it hours ago? “I know where she is.” I can barely breathe out the words, my mind and feet moving as fast as possible.

“Where?” Ryder yells as he runs behind me.

“Myrtle Grove. At the camp.” That’s where she’s at. That’s where she’ll be. Because that’s where I went. That’s where I waited for her. But she never showed. I will find her and prove that I know her better than she knows herself. And that she’s mine.

It seems like forever, but about an hour later, we’re on the road that leads behind the row of camps lining the canals. I haven’t been out here since I hid out here all that time ago. Because when I stepped back into my life, nothing was ever the same. My mom was still gone. My dad left. Dustin was my new parent. And Morgan hated me. I won’t leave this place without her again.

Ryder slows the truck way before we arrive at the camp. It’s still a good half mile down the darkened road along the canal before we get to her. “What

are you doing?”

“We need to make sure we’re not walking into a trap. What if they turned on her? Or they’re holding her for leverage or money? None of these fuckers can be trusted.”

“That I agree with.” But I need to get to her now. I refrain from running straight over there because if Ryder is right, we need to be able to help her.

Exiting the truck, I close the door and keep walking down the paved road before ducking into the grass. Taking out my phone, I shine a dim flashlight down the path we’re walking. I spot a figure sitting on the dock. It’s her. I know it is.

“Morgan,” I shout. Before I can take off, Ryder holds me in place.

“Wait a second. Are you sure that’s her?”

“Not entirely.” It’s pretty dark, but it has to be her.

That when I see the flashes of light. Two short, quick flashes.

“It’s her.”

Ryder watches towards the dock for a few seconds. “Are you sure?”

Never been so sure of anything in my life. “She just gave the signal for ‘coast is clear.’” It was usually me waiting to sneak into her house or on her balcony.

“From when y’all were kids? How do you even remember that?” Ryder asks.

The real question is ... “How could I ever forget?”

There’s another quick light on, then it goes off, followed by the light on for two long beats then flashes a quick third time.

“What’s that mean?” Ryder asks.

“It means”—I don’t think I can get the words out because she just gave me the sign I’ve been waiting on—“I love you.”

I don’t run. I just slowly and steadily make my way to where she’s at with Ryder in front of me. He’s yelling and cussing at her before he even reaches her, then wraps her in a hug and continues carrying on. “What the fuck, Morgan? Do you know how scared I was?” Ryder cries, clinging to her. “I thought you were dead.”

“I’m sorry,” she tells him as she wraps her arms around him.

Pulling back, he tells her, “I swear to God, I will not forgive you if you ever do anything that stupid and dangerous ever again.”

“I won’t. It’s over.” She exhales. “All of it.”

Ryder continues yelling while Morgan remains silent. He must feel bad or

is just plain exhausted when he finally stops. He lets out a deep breath and tells her, “I’m going back to Mom. Are the two of you good, or do I need to wait and give you a ride back?” he asks me.

I pray I’m right when I respond, “I’m good. You can go ahead.”

He hugs his sister again then tells me bye and walks away. The silence is deafening as I move to sit beside her. Her hair is wet, twisted up in a bun on the top of her head, her arms wrapped in the hoodie that I notice is mine.

“You planned all of it didn’t you? The collision earlier, the abduction. All of it.”

“You weren’t supposed to be there.”

The excuse infuriates me. “You shouldn’t have been there. What if something had gone wrong, Morgan? We had no fucking clue where you were, what had really happened, if you were safe. Do you know how fucking scared I was?”

I fully expect her to go into some explanation to justify her actions, but she shocks the fuck out of me when she says, “I’m so sorry, Cade.”

Fuck. I already know I can’t stay mad at her. But I can’t lose her over some bullshit vendetta either. I push back from the edge of the dock and shift over, moving one of my legs to the other side of her. Once she’s between my legs, I pull her back against my chest, my arms clinging as tight to her as possible as I bury my face against her neck. “Are you okay?”

“Yes,” she says flatly.

“Thank you for giving me the signal.” I give her a soft kiss behind her ear as her body tenses.

“You’re gonna hate me when you find out everything I’ve done. When you find out I became the monster you’ve accused me of being.” Her body quivers, and it almost sounds like she’s crying. No. I can’t handle that.

I loop my arms under her knees and turn her to the side to face me, but she just puts her head on my chest as she sits across my lap. Fuck. This is painful. “I already know everything.” Her hands cling tighter to me, and her body goes even more rigid until I tell her. “And I’m not going anywhere.”

She leans back to look at me. I’ve never seen so much doubt on her face before. “You know everything?”

I nod. “You framed my dad, right? He wasn’t the one who did any of it—the fingers, the tongue, or Paul. But now he’ll be locked away for the rest of his life.”

“He deserved it.” Her eyes close as she says, “He would have never left

you alone either. He was planning to try and have your brother help coach the team next year so he could have an inside person.”

“How do you know that?”

“The people he thought were his friends like me more.”

“I definitely like you more too.” I take the chance and say, “I even love you. I hope I can finally get that admission now.”

Her eyes find mine. “I gave you the signal. That’s as much as I can offer for now.”

The statement rings familiar, and I give her the same answer because I’m willing to keep waiting since I know she’s still breaking down walls. “It’s more than enough.” I think the gesture, the fact that she remembers, means more than the spoken words ever will.

EPILOGUE 1

MORGAN

Graduation Day

“I’m not going. And I won’t change my mind,” I tell Ryder as he lingers nearby even though I’d been doing my best to ignore him.

“You’re only going to graduate once, Morgan.” He holds up the white dress I’m supposed to wear today. “I’m surprised you even graduated this time.”

“Me too.” Especially since I gave Ferguson hell the remainder of the year. I have a feeling he’s as ready to be rid of me as I am him. He sure as shit made sure I didn’t return next year since he’s been officially named principal.

“Let’s go!” Mom shouts from downstairs. “We’re going to be late.”

“Not going,” I yell back.

“You’re intolerable.” Ryder leaves the room, finally getting the point that I don’t care about walking across some stupid stage. I didn’t leave anything at that damn place and don’t need to be handed a piece of paper. They have my address. They can mail it.

“Ready yet?” Cade asks as he knocks against my bedroom door. “You’re supposed to be dressed.”

“Damn it. Does no one listen? I’m not going. Who the fuck cares about it?”

“Everyone but you.” He laughs and moves over to me. “Dustin asked me to walk, and I agreed because he did raise me when my parents bailed. And I really want you to go too. It’s the last time we ever have to go there.”

“Can I at least set the place on fire?” I joke. Kind of.

“No. But you can start the bonfire at Topher’s house tonight.”

“Not the same.” Still fun though. Since Topher purchased his childhood home, we’ve been there more than not. But what I really want is to not go back to Saint Juliet. “Let’s go find a place of our own.”

“Right now?” he asks, and I think I have him hooked until he says, “Nice try. But we’re going to graduation or your mom is going to lecture me for the rest of my life. And I don’t want to get off on a bad foot with my mother-in-law.”

“She’s not your mother-in-law.”

“Yet,” he adds confidently. He knows I’m going to cave to him like I always do.

“This is bullshit.”

“Get dressed. I’ll wait downstairs for you.”

I state a few more of my less-than-happy thoughts to help the crummy feelings. Most days, I’m fine. I’m happy. I get on with life and push everything else out. Mostly. But this is a final chapter. One that I never dreamed my father would miss. And it doesn’t make a difference. Even if he weren’t in a medically induced coma, he probably wouldn’t have shown.

“Time to go,” Mom shouts again, and I halfway consider simply throwing myself off the balcony but figure that’s a tad too melodramatic and just pull on my dress, touch up my hair and makeup, and call it a day.

When I get downstairs, there’re all watching me like they’re waiting on me to sprout a second head. “What is it?”

“A gift from me.” Mom holds out a small velvet box. “Well, kind of from Pawpaw, too, because he gave it to me the day I graduated.”

I swallow the lump in my throat, not wanting to think about how he might be here if Dad had not murdered him. There was no way I could bring myself to tell my mother, not to mention I’d have to say how I pried the information out of him, but Ryder and Cade know everything. Which I’m guessing is why Cade has a supportive hand on my lower back as I open the present.

Once it’s open, I pull out the necklace, a B pendant dangles from the chain as Mom says, “He said it was a reminder that I have Benoit blood and can accomplish anything.”

“Thank you” is the only thing I can think to say. This is why I didn’t want to deal with all of this. It’s all about the sappy shit that doesn’t matter. “Let’s go before I change my mind.” The balcony is starting to look more appealing than the stage.

We ride over to the school in Cade’s truck as I shift against the seat.

“You can sit on my lap if the seat is scratching your ass.”

“Yeah, then I’m sure I’ll have a dick up my ass.”

“Not a bad idea.” He laughs as he reaches over and clasps my hand. A few minutes later, we’re pulling into the parking lot of the school and making our way to the field where there’s a swarm of white. The girls all in white dresses and the guys in their white suits. There’s a teacher walking around passing out yellow bouquet of roses. She goes to hand me one, but I don’t take it. Cade grabs it from her and tells her, “I’ll hold it until she’s ready.”

The woman is happy enough and moves on. “Ready for what? For the ceremony in our virginal white dresses to let them know we’re virtuous?”

“No one thinks you’re virginal,” Topher teases as he runs up behind me, slings an arm over my shoulder, and gives me a kiss on the cheek. “I’m so glad you changed your mind.”

“Yeah. I didn’t have a choice.”

Ava makes her way over, standing beside me as the guys start talking about something. Neil hurries up, trying to tuck his shirt into his pants and adjust his tie. “Did you get dressed on the way over here?” I ask him as he grins.

“Nope. Just got dressed in the hallway near Ferguson’s office.”

“Oh my God,” Ava exclaims. “You know he put a camera up to see who was shitting on his desk, right?”

“Yep. And I hacked into the feed and put it on a loop. He really didn’t invest in that great of software. His fault.”

“Wow.” Cade looks at Neil and laughs. “Remind me to tell this story to your kids.”

Neil blushes and Savannah does the same as she tells us, “That is going to be a long time from now.”

“Yep. We’re going to be busy for a few years. Me at Yale and *someone* will be occupied with her nursing program nearby.”

“But you are coming back to visit, right?” Topher asks Neil who looks more devastated than anyone to be losing his buddy.

“Of course. And y’all can come visit us on break. Or just bail on Tulane and come with us.”

“Dude, I would”—Topher really does seem bummed—“but my little brother needs me nearby.”

I knew that was why Topher bought his house back from the bank to keep his little brother in the same home. And it might be why I accidentally

transferred another million into his account. Besides, I owed him after he helped me with the Warren situation. He didn't stab him in the shoulder, but he did help me get him good enough that he won't ever be able to get his dick up again.

Ava adds, "And I need him nearby."

I'm happy for them. I really am. But this is too much. "Let's get this stupid thing over with."

Thankfully, the ceremony and posing for a thousand pictures are done and we're heading to Topher's after a quick pit stop to change clothes. When we get there, the bonfire is already going. "Guess I'm not lighting it."

"I'll find something else for you to set on fire, like marshmallow or something." Cade finds a spot for us to sit on the side of the levee.

"Can we go now?" I ask after about ten minutes.

"Are you really ready to go? We can't leave yet." Cade watches me as I stand.

"Then let's go get a drink because I'm about to fall asleep." He reaches up and grasps my hand, pulling me to the ground where he hovers over me. "Great. Now I have grass in my hair."

Tugging at my blonde strands, he says, "And you don't care because you know I'm about to wake you up. Just like I did on the sailboat days ago."

"Pretty much."

"Any thoughts on when we're taking that second sail? Because I'm ready."

I'm not sure if I am. I never thought the damn thing would stay afloat. But it did, and now here we are ... I'd agreed to marry him on the boat when we sail it a second time. "What's the rush?"

"No rush," he adds unconvincingly.

"Then why have you asked me every day for the last four days when we're going again?"

I can hear the smile in his tone. "Maybe I am in a rush. But only because I know there's no one else. You're stuck with me. Might as well make it legal. I'll sign a prenup or whatever if that's your hesitation." He goes to kiss me, but I push him back and sit up, his eyes intently watching me. "Morgan, what's holding you back?"

I really didn't want to get into this conversation yet, but he won't let up. "I meant what I said. I don't want kids. I don't want a big family. I don't want to be a mother. And I think you'll regret being with me later on."

“I don’t need kids. I can’t say I even want them. Never really thought about it much until you told me about the pregnancy. But the more I thought it afterwards, the more I agree. I’d make a shitty dad. And they’d have shitty grandparents. And even though I think they’d have a wonderful mother, I understand where you’re coming from. It hurts to have your heart walking around and not be able to protect them.”

“You’re going to hate me.” I really think he might one day. If he has some other life planned for us in his head.

“Not going to hate you.” He kisses my cheek. “Maybe argue with you.” He kisses the tip of my nose. “Maybe hear you tell me to go fuck myself more often than not.” His lips brush across my mouth. “But never hate.” He gives me a real kiss, slow and patient before saying, “There’s really no rush. We have time. I’m staying here. You’re here. And we’ll just figure it out as we go.”

“I was thinking about that plan.”

“And what were you thinking.”

“Let’s get away for the summer. Sail around for a while, maybe go somewhere the water is actually clear.”

“Um. You have a little more faith in the sailboat than I do.”

“No, I really don’t. I picked out a few yachts that have an undercarriage for the sailboat. A new, working, dependable vessel. So, that’s my compromise. We can take the damn sailboat with us.”

“I don’t feel right about you spending that kind of money on something. Plus, I have responsibilities. I can’t just bail on Otis.”

“He’ll understand.”

“Yeah, but it’s the point, Morgan.”

“What is the point?” I grumble.

He hooks a finger under my chin and turns my face to his. “Us.”

“I’ll marry you if you agree that I can buy *us* a boat.” I hit him where I know it’ll help. “Imagine a three-month honeymoon on the water. Just us. No clothes. Just sun and lots of sex.”

“Fuck.” He groans. “That’s not fair.” After he stands up, he extends a hand to me. “I need to go let my best man know he has plans this week.”

“Neil?”

He nods and asks, “Who’s your maid of honor?”

No question about it. “Ryder. And can we leave the guest list at that?”

“We can do whatever you want. But are you certain you don’t want a big

wedding or at least one with more of our friends to celebrate?”

“No. I just want it to be the four of us, someone to officiate, a casual dress, and no stress.”

“So,” he laughs as we make our way down the levee, “you have given it a lot of thought.”

“Wipe the fucking grin off your face or you’ll hear ‘go fuck yourself’ before you even get a chance to hear ‘I do.’”

We’re back on flat ground by the fire when he pulls me to him. “Can’t wait.”

EPILOGUE 2

CADE

Two weeks later

“Are you sure you don’t want to just hire a captain?”

“Nope. I’m all licensed up.” The yacht Morgan picked out is bigger than I’d originally anticipated. I’ve worked on all these, but being on the open water alone without a crew was a little intimidating. But having her all to myself sounds so much better. “The thing practically drives itself. Besides, I’ll be bored out of my mind if there’s not some things around the vessel to keep me busy.”

Her exasperated stare is pointed at me. “Because you won’t anything to do?”

“Oh, you’re plenty of entertainment. But I need to keep my hands busy, so I don’t lose my talents.”

A throat clearing signals that I won’t be getting any practice. Turning back, I see Neil. “Sorry, didn’t mean to interrupt.”

“It’s cool.” Soon enough, I’ll have her all to myself. I still feel a little sad about leaving the marina and Otis, but he said there’s always a job for me when we get back.

“Finally,” Morgan huffs as her brother walks over. “We need to double-check that you have all the information because we’ll be out of reach some of the time. But we have the satellite phone—”

Ryder stops her excessive explanation. “Everything is set. And I’ll be fine. Mom and I are actually going on a road trip of our own up the East Coast. Or maybe just to the ranch for a while to get away.”

“Have fun.” Morgan hugs her brother. I heard enough of the conversation that I know Morgan gave Ryder all the details he needs in case something

happens to her. Not that it will, but she said she wanted to make sure nothing allows her father to wake up completely. So Ryder has the contact information and instructions for the yearly payment if he needs to get in touch with them for any reason.

My father is another story. He's still in jail, yelling about his innocence and that he was drugged and didn't know what he was doing. He still thinks the bookies set him up, and they've made it clear to keep his mouth shut. So, he's been quietly awaiting trial for the attempted murder of King and the murder of Paul. I can't say any of it sits easy with me, but when I think of what Coach planned alongside Paul, and the times my dad roughed us up, every ounce of guilt vanishes.

About ten minutes later, we're standing on my sailboat, the one I rebuilt with my bare hands while Morgan mostly sat by and watched. But the significance of it is everything. And even though we have the new yacht, my favorite is this one.

And I can't think of a better place for our ceremony to take place. The mood is perfect. She looks gorgeous in her cream dress. I'm comfortable in my white button-down and khakis. We can focus on what's important. Us. I'm glad she wanted this, because it's everything plus more. And after we say our vows and seal them with a kiss, it takes a second for me to comprehend that she is officially mine. Forever.

EPILOGUE 3

MORGAN

Five Years later

“What time does the wedding start?” Cade asks as he ties the rope on the dock of the old marina he used to work at. Not much has changed, but I feel like a completely different person. What started as a three-month honeymoon turned into “let’s just stay on the water.” And that’s what we’ve done. We’ve been sailing everywhere and anywhere possible. Until now. Because we’re back in New Orleans for Ryder’s wedding to Harrison.

“Ceremony starts at three o’clock.” We’ll be staying for a few days before heading back out. Unless we leave sooner. I know Cade loves being on the water, but I think being away from New Orleans was the best thing for the both of us.

“We’d better go get ready.” Cade heads inside the cabin, and I follow behind.

Of course, as soon as I step in the shower, so does Cade. “We’re supposed to be getting ready for the wedding.”

“We are. Just saving water.” He presses his chest against my back, pushing me against the wall. His fingers slipping up between my thighs is a clear indication that this will not be just a shower.

“I think we waste water because we’re distracted the entire time we’re supposed to be bathing.”

“I’m not distracted.” His fingers pump inside me, his mouth on my neck as I push back against him. “I’m so focused.”

“So am I,” I say reaching back to grab his hard dick that’s pressing into my backside, but he grabs my hand. “Nope. I’ll be inside you when I come.”

And that’s exactly what happens. After I finish my orgasm with his

fingers inside me, he quickly replaces it with his dick. Pumping inside me until we're both going over the cliff.

"Yeah. I love saving water and showering together." He kisses my shoulder before we actually get to the rinsing off part.

When we arrive at the hotel, we still have plenty time before the ceremony begins. I'm not nervous about seeing my mom, necessarily, it's just been so long. But as soon as she spots us, she's over and wrapping her arms around me, then giving Cade a warm, welcoming embrace. They fall into conversation as I glance around. A brown-haired girl catches my attention. Maddie. She's grown so much since the time I saw her all those years ago.

I stay out of her sightline as much as possible because I don't want to intrude. Wendy looks nervous enough as it is. She wanted to tell Maddie the truth about who her father was a few years ago when she thought her daughter was old enough to handle it, but in the end, decided it was best to wait. Which I think is a good call. We're friends of her family now, she doesn't need to live with the fact that her father never cared enough to even meet her.

"She's getting so big," Ryder says as he approaches me.

"That's what I was thinking."

"Wendy said she appreciated the tuition and trust fund for college that was sent over for Maddie." Damn it. Of course, he knows because he gives me a smirk as he says, "I didn't send it."

"Hm. Guess we'll never know."

But we both know. We'll make sure she has everything and anything she ever needs. Ryder wraps his arm around me and pulls me in for a tight hug. "I've missed you."

"Me too. The offer still stands to join us on the water." But Ryder has never been a fan.

"We're going to fly out to Paris for the week. Then we have to get back." Ryder starts law school in the fall, but I know Harrison has a foundation he's running over the summer. One that I help out with often even though it's usually remotely.

We chat for a few more minutes before he heads off to speak with some of his other guests. It's not a big wedding. But there are more than Cade and I had when we married. The day still is one of my favorites, and I wouldn't change a thing about it.

Ryder's ceremony is picture-perfect, and the reception goes off without a hitch. It's already dark by the time we make it back to the boat.

I drop my dress to the floor, then climb into bed with Cade right behind me. We're laying in our plush bed, the windows open to where we can see the stars on one side. It's my favorite thing about the yacht. The views. Even here is peaceful.

"Do you still want to hang around here a few more days?" Cade asks.

"We can."

"Did you want to consider finding a place or somewhere permanent while we're here?"

The question confuses me. I thought he loved being on the water. I prop up on my elbow and watch him. "Are you ready to stop sailing?"

"No, but I saw how much you loved being here with Ryder. I know you miss him."

"I really do. But I love our life. I'm not ready to give it up. I love being on here and going wherever we want. I do want to visit Ryder more though."

"That can definitely be arranged." He gives me a tender, soft kiss before asking. "Still want to head up to see Neil and Savannah?"

"Yes. And Topher said he wanted to hitch a ride up there," I inform Cade.

"What about Ava?"

"She's going to fly up there later. She said she needs a break from Topher."

He rubs his thumb across my cheekbone. "Can't relate."

Me neither. But I keep that to myself. The man owns every part of me. And his cocky ass is well aware of it. Every time he lifts his index finger in the air and gives me the sign for forever, I actually believe it's possible.

Thank you so much for reading Cade and Morgan's story!

ALSO BY A.J. LOGAN

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Today the devil returned.
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Until I'm forced to return home.
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My brother's former best friend.
My first crush.
My first kiss.
And the boy who tried to kill me.

***Brutal Redemption* is a dark high school bully romance. It contains sensitive topics that some may find triggering and is intended for mature readers. *Brutal Redemption* is Book One in the Sacred Creed Academy series and a STAND-ALONE.**

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A.J. Logan spends her days with her head in the clouds and her nights with her nose in a book. She's a hopeless romantic at heart with a weak spot for dark, gritty antiheroes and the fierce, feisty women who bring them to their knees (sometimes literally).

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