



HATEFUL

LIAR

A. J. LOGAN

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SAINT JULIET ACADEMY BOOK 1

A.J. LOGAN

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About the Author

MORGAN

Is this day ever gonna freakin' end? It sure doesn't feel like it as I squirm against the sticky leather seat of the golf cart, extending my legs fully over the dash. Even in what should be a comfortable enough position, I can't relax. The heavy, humid air shows no mercy, so even out of the sun, under the cart's roof cover, just being outside is enough to make me miserable. But it's the same conversation, on repeat once again that wears on my last nerve.

"If he doesn't play, Saint Juliet Academy is screwed. We may as well forfeit the entire season." Dad makes his plea once again to his assistant coach, the pitiful chump who's worked all summer to accomplish Dad's ridiculous request of getting a replacement QB since his star quarterback broke his precious throwing arm.

If only my dad cherished the people he shares a home with as much as he does his players or the prized state championship he's been after since assuming the head coach role at Saint Juliet a few years ago. It's obvious to anyone with eyes that it's the only position he cares to focus on.

"The kid's shown up for every practice since we got his brother on board. Mark my words—Cade Crawford will be on the field. And if not, we'll figure out a way to persuade him to be," Paul says with a tone that clearly indicates he's got no qualms breaking more than a few rules. Rules that were put in place to avoid players from being "persuaded" to play for the wrong reasons. And I'm sure Dad one hundred percent agrees with Paul's methods.

“Well, he didn’t show up today. Sweeten the deal. I need him or all this shit is pointless.” Dad tosses his 7 iron, highlighting his frustration. The steel club hits the grass with a thud. And he claims *I*’m the dramatic one.

Well, he’s not wrong about that one. I am dramatic. But I haven’t thrown anything. Today. “Can we go now?” My question is lost on Dad as he picks up the club and continues on his recruitment quest.

My brother, however, is happy to kill my dream of getting out of the stifling heat. “Stop whining. You wanted to come.”

“Yeah. For one round, which we finished an hour ago.” Since then, Dad and Paul have stood on the driving range of Crescent Fleur Country Club, running their mouths but not actually taking more than a handful of shots. “And usually by now, you’d be the one crying to go home. Why is today different?”

Hm. I hadn’t thought of that until now. Usually, Ryder grumbles about the heat or the game or something equally annoying that starts an argument with Dad before I even have a chance to complain.

“No difference. I’m just enjoying this fabulous sunny day before we’re imprisoned in the classroom tomorrow.”

“Bullshit. This weather fuckin’ sucks. It feels like we’re simmering in Lucifer’s ass crack.”

Ryder leans towards me and takes a quick sniff before scrunching his nose. “You smell like it too.”

“Not gonna work.” He’s trying to piss me off to distract me from something. Lifting my legs, my skin pulls away from the sticky dash as I drop my feet down and sit up, glancing around the area and down the line of players. There’re less members than normal around, but one catches my eye. His long, lean body, perfectly aligned from the start to finish of his swing, is hard to miss. And as much as Ryder wants to pretend he’s not paying attention, I’d bet he knows the exact form of said perfection. Harrison. “Ah. Pathetic,” I snicker, waiting for Ryder’s reaction.

And he obliges. “You’re fucking pathetic, not him.”

I laugh, watching as Harrison sends another ball gliding through the air. “I wasn’t talking about *him*. I was talking about *you*.”

Ryder isn’t sharing my humor. “Fuck off.”

“Right after you stop stalking Harrison and go talk to him.”

Ryder glances at Dad. “Nah. I’m good.”

“What? It’s not like Dad gives a damn.” He can’t. It has nothing to do with his precious title or glory days. And Dad has already shown that having a son who sucks at football is the ultimate strike to his ego. Dad’s, not Ryder’s. Because God forbid the former NFL player have a son who doesn’t follow in his footsteps and represent the King legacy. Which is what I believe Dad’s pathetic obsession with the silly high school state championship title is all about. It’s the closest he’ll come to his past glory days.

“No, but he’ll still make a point to interrupt and talk to Harrison about something sports related.”

“That’s nothing but an excuse to stalk him from a distance. Dad is too busy trying to suck Crawford’s dick to worry about whose dick you’re sucking.”

“Fucking drop it, Morgan.”

“That’s the plan.” I glance around, noting Dad is definitely not concerned about us or leaving anytime soon. Stepping off the golf cart, I look back at my brother before walking towards Harrison.

“What the fuck are you doing?” My brother’s gritted words tell me he’s pissed, and that just makes it that much more enjoyable when Harrison looks my way as I walk over.

“Nice form.” I don’t have to look over my shoulder to know Ryder is standing just behind me because I’d feel his fury from a mile away. “Ryder needs help with his swing.” It’s the truth. Ryder sucks at golf as much as he does at football. Another distressing point for Dad.

My golf game is great. Top-notch in fact. But I was counted out at birth; the moment Dad realized his firstborn dared to have a vagina. He was arguably even more disappointed when his second child, although a boy, didn't have a knack for the game. Surprisingly, Ryder doesn't seem to give two shits about Dad or his opinion. Wish I could say the same.

"I don't need any help." Ryder's hand grips my forearm, tugging me. But I plant myself in place.

"Liar," I snicker.

"Seriously, I'm not the one who had five shanks." Ryder's smile rises as he gives me shit about my performance.

"Yeah, because some dumbass kept yelling *fore* every time I took a fucking swing."

"Just training you under pressure."

"I'm not the one who needs training—or who's buckling under pressure." I smirk at Ryder before glancing to Harrison.

The poor guy looks a little confused, but he's still totally on board to help out. "I don't mind giving some tips if you want."

"Perfect." I slap Ryder on the arm. "I'm gonna find Mom."

I need to get at least one parent on board if I want to leave this godforsaken country club anytime soon. Usually I'd have my Audi, but today I'd opted to ride with my parents—like the dumbass I just accused Ryder of being. And I'm aware of the pissy look he gives me as I walk away, but his face lights up when he starts talking to Harrison. I'm sure Ryder doesn't love to chat it up about golf, but Harrison is a helpful guy and golf was the easiest way to break the ice. He's a junior—as is Ryder—and already has two full-ride offers on the table from elite universities.

About halfway to the clubhouse, I fully regret not hijacking the damn cart. Once I finally reach the side entrance, I head straight to the restaurant's bar along the back wall. Ashton gives me a quick wink as he slides a glass of ice water across the bar.

“A Jack and Coke too.” I take a big swallow of water, the icy liquid burning my throat on its way down.

He glances around, shaking his head. “Can’t do.”

I take a few sips of water, my eyes on him. “Yes. You can.”

There’s no one within hearing distance, yet he keeps scanning down each length of the bar. “No, I can’t. Not only would I be serving an eighteen-year-old liquor, but your dad would kill me if he found out.”

A grin stretches across my face as I watch Ashton’s panic increase. Leaning forward, I slide the water back to him. “He’d kill you if he knew you had me bent over this very bar.” I glance down the length of the smooth marble countertop as the less-than-thrilling night from months ago pops into my mind.

Ashton’s eyes drop to his hands, his jaw flexing as he reaches for a clean tumbler and fulfills my drink request. He drops it on the stone with a thud before sliding it over to me. “If you get caught, I’ll deny I gave anything to you or touched you at all.”

“Oh, trust me, I’d want to deny that two-minute dull show if I were you too. But at least you got off.” I hold up the glass in a mocking toast before taking a drink.

He mumbles some colorful words under his breath as I take my much-needed drink and head out to the pool area. I’d expected to find Mom there, enjoying several cocktails, but she might’ve already had her fill. Not surprising either way—we’ve been here for over five fuckin’ hours.

Once out on the pool deck, I glance around to see a few members lounging on chaises and only one swimmer making laps in the Olympic-sized pool. But nowhere do I see Mom. Great.

I make a full lap around the club, visiting all the places she could be before ending up poolside again. I’m standing there, looking around like an idiot, before I finally spot her. Only I wish I hadn’t seen what my eyes are witnessing. She’s walking out the banquet room door, heading towards me. And she’s

alone, but seconds later, Mr. Thatcher walks out and heads in the opposite direction.

Of all people, my freakin' principal. It's a good thing no one, including Dad, pays them much mind. Discretion is not their thing.

"Hey, Morgan." Mom grabs the glass from my hand and downs the liquid without a comment about the contents.

"Can we leave now? Dad is too busy trying to plot his great QB snag to worry about us melting to death."

"Yeah. I'll get him." Walking past me she says, "Go for a swim if you want to cool down."

"Sure." I wave my hand down my sleeveless mint polo and white golf skirt. "Because I'd planned to swim today."

Mom is already on the other side of the patio area when I spot Ryder headed in my direction. She halts and heads back my way behind my less-than-cheerful-looking brother. My guess is he's not happy with me whether the chat with Harrison went well or not.

As my brother approaches, he gives me a pissy stare. "Dad said it's time to go."

"About fuckin' time." I was three minutes away from calling an Uber or hitchhiking if I had to.

There's no time for me to celebrate the good news though, because Ryder walks directly at me, and I register too late that his hands move up and out. And before I know it, he's shoved me. I don't have a chance to react, I'm simply flying backwards through the air before landing in the pool with a splash. Swimming my way back to the surface, I brush my hands over my face, already cussing my damn brother out as I try and take in a few breaths.

Ryder squats down at the edge of the pool, giving me a sly smirk. "That's what you get for being a meddling bitch."

"Fuck you, jackass." I swat the surface of the water, sending a splash his way that mostly misses him.

He gives me another triumphant smirk before walking away as he hollers over his shoulder, “Love you too, sis.”

Swimming to the steps of the pool, I climb out then look down at my drenched clothes. Asshole. It might’ve been humorous if the pool didn’t feel like freakin’ bath water, but now I’m not only hot, I’m also stuck in drenched clothes too. Grabbing the hem of my shirt, I pull it over my head.

I don’t know how, but I’m going to get Ryder back for this. Yeah. I meddled. But for his own good, and if I hadn’t, he’d still be sitting in the golf cart drooling over Harrison.

“Morgan King, what on earth are you doing?” Mom’s expression matches her shocked tone as she looks to my lace bra. “Put your shirt back on. Don’t you have any respect for yourself? Or at least for your father and me?” She glances around, checking to see if anyone is looking, and all it does is piss me off even more.

Hooking the waistband of my skirt, I pull it down, remove it, and make a dramatic show of wringing the chlorinated water out of it. With my eyes locked on my mother, I say, “I forgot. It’s only respectable to remove your clothes when you’re fucking your daughter’s principal behind closed doors.”

Her wide-eyed expression gives me the satisfaction I craved. Yeah. I know her dirty little secret. And now the last thing on her mind is her daughter walking across the pool deck in her bra and thong.

CADE

I see the irritation in Dustin's stance before I spot the frustration plain as day on his face. I'm well versed, I've seen it plenty times. Not that I expect any different from my brother. Can't blame the guy—he's shouldered the burden of raising me the last three years since neither of our parents cared to do the job. Most of the time, Dustin doesn't seem to mind being responsible for me, his nuisance of a little brother who's always hanging around. But right now, he's in dad mode not big brother mode. And I'm gonna hear all about it.

He stands to the side of my truck, one hand on his hip and the other signaling for me to step out of my vehicle.

Sluggishly, I do as he asks. Why I even drove to this place, I couldn't say. Maybe because I thought he'd be annoyed and would've already bailed. But my guess is he's still here solely because there's a silver Maybach parked across the lot that belongs to Coach King.

Dustin keeps a tight expression and a way-too-calm tone, which reminds me of how our dad sounds before he explodes on us. "Where were you, Cade? You gave me your word you'd show."

Shrugging my shoulders, I lean back against the hot truck door. "I'm here. I showed."

"Hours late. What the hell are you trying to prove?"

"Nothing."

"Really? *I* think you're determined to run your life into the ground just like Dad—and just like him, you'll have no one to

blame but yourself.”

Every muscle in my body tenses as I look to my brother. He knows that’s the worst insult to throw at me. Nothing else could rile me more than being compared to that piece of shit. “I’m nothing like him.”

“Could’ve fooled me.” His sarcasm is heavy as he shakes his head, and the disappointment on his face is another thing that bothers me even if it shouldn’t.

“Why? Because I didn’t show up to impress some douche who wants me to throw a fuckin’ ball around to impress guys who are just like our father? I’ve done everything you’ve asked. I’ve attended that preppy-ass school full of assholes for the last three years and agreed to finish out senior year there and get my fuckin’ piece of paper. That was our deal.”

“That *piece of paper* is just the beginning. I went out of my way to get hired on so you could attend the best school in the city and have an actual chance to make something of yourself. And Coach King is offering you another opportunity that will have a direct influence on your future.”

“Sure.” I’ve heard it all. But that doesn’t stop him from going back through it again.

“If you play, it could open up so many doors.”

“Yeah. You already opened the one at Saint Juliet. That’s about all the doors I need.”

“No. It’s not. College. That’s the next door you need. We’ll figure out a way no matter what. But I guarantee you if you take up Coach King on his offer and y’all go to state, you will have offers from schools all over the country. Full-ride offers, Cade. Do you know what kind of future that could set you up for?”

“Yeah. A disappointing one.” Because as much as I wish it weren’t true, I am my father’s son. I will screw up. I will let my brother down. I will do something to fuck up anything good in my life. Just like Dad does.

“With that attitude, I’m sure it will be.” His fatherly tone is in full force once again. Even after three years, it still doesn’t

feel natural when he parents me. And maybe it's not natural to him either because his parental facade slips as he slowly exhales, turns, and moves to put his back against the truck beside me. He remains silent for a few moments, his brotherly tone back in place when he asks, "What are your plans after graduation, Cade?"

Nothing. Not a damn thing. "Get a real job"—because my part-time marina job doesn't pay shit, but it's better than nothing—"and pay you back for everything."

"You don't owe me anything."

"Yes, I do. You didn't voluntarily sign up to raise a kid at twenty-five."

"No, but I'm glad I did because otherwise I wouldn't have had my little brother around nearly enough. It's kind of a bummer you came along ten years later than me." He lets out a little laugh.

"I owe you everything." And I do. There's no way I would've kept my head on straight had it not been for Dustin. First with Mom bailing on us, then with Dad going off on his storm of destruction.

"Okay. Then repay me by joining the team and planning for the future. Play the season. See how it goes. Worse case is you get to enjoy your senior year playing the sport you love. Best case is you take the Wildcats all the way to the state championship. Either route could result in some future funding. There used to be a little boy who dreamed of becoming a marine engineer. He has to still be in there somewhere."

The little boy who wanted to work on ships was also the one who loved playing football. Until he realized his mom had dropped him off at practice and never looked back. "I don't want to be an engineer, and I sure as fuck don't want to play ball." Damn it. Why do I have to be such an idiot? "But I will for you, I guess, since you paid for my fancy education with blood, sweat, and tears."

“Truth. But my little bro is totally worth all the agonizing hours of teaching Shakespeare.” Dustin laughs, but it’s hard for me to do the same. He’d hated attending Saint Juliet as much as I do now, so I know it wasn’t his first choice to teach at. He one hundred percent did it to keep his baby brother enrolled, and since he is my legal guardian, his employment got me a free ride at the school. Sometimes, I wish it wouldn’t have been an option. Because even though I grew up with most of my classmates, none of them know me. They only know the former version of me, back when Dad was a congressman ... before he lost everything we had. Including our home.

“I hope so.” I mutter under my breath as I take a look around the fancy country club that Coach King invited us to meet him at. He’s the last person I want to see. At least I think that until I see his evil spawn headed our way.

“Um. What’s that about?” Dustin asks before turning his back. No doubt wanting to avoid the scene I can’t tear my eyes away from: Morgan King in a bra, thong, and sneakers walking across the parking lot.

“Who the fuck knows.” Best guess ... someone had enough of the hateful wench and attempted to drown the nastiness out of her. It’d never work. She needs a stake to the heart or maybe an exorcism to rid the vile demon from her soul.

If she wasn’t the very definition of living hell, I’d enjoy the sight of her sexy-as-fuck body. From her tits to her perfectly curved ass, it’s all a ploy to lure prey into her clutches. But there’s nothing except pure evil beneath the surface.

I notice there’s a bit of a crack in that surface the closer she gets. Her usually perfect blonde hair is drenched and tangled. Her makeup looks messy, and she looks even more pissy than usual. Her deep-green eyes keeping a direct fix on mine.

There’s less than a foot of space between us as she stops in front of me. Her hand props on her hip as she keeps a watch on me. “Now you grace us with your presence?”

Her frustration brings a genuine smile to my face. Part of avoiding the team is avoiding her—or more specifically her dad, which in turn is part of her. There’s nothing about Morgan King I want to be around. I know I’ll get burned. Again. But if I have to be near her, I’ll take pissing her off as a consolation prize. “Didn’t know you missed me that much.”

Her arm drops to her side, her body tensing as she steps to me and presses her chest against mine. “You know your fuckin’ place and it’s not here, stray.”

“Okay.” Dustin moves closer, taking a deep breath, and prepares his teacher voice as he clears his throat. “How about we take a step back and figure out a way to get along for a change.”

Never gonna happened. The she-devil cooperating with anyone—let alone me—would be a miracle in itself. “How about it, Morgue?”

“Morgan,” Mrs. King calls across the lot as she approaches with Coach beside her. I’m waiting for him to notice his half-naked daughter pressed against me. I mean, I’m sure as fuck aware of her and exactly how she feels, but his beaming smile surprises me. I’d expect at least a little confusion, if not outrage and indignation. Surely no doting father would want to see their baby girl pressed up against some random dude in the parking lot, never mind the fact that she’s flashing her ass for everyone to see. Then again, Mrs. King looks like she has enough concern and confusion for both of them. Holy fuck, what must it be like to be cursed with trying to rein in sheer malevolence? “Will you please come get in the car with me while your father speaks with Cade?”

Coach reaches his hand out, shaking Dustin’s first before looking to me. His hand stays extended to me as he says, “Glad you could make it.”

“Seriously?” Morgan bitches as she finally removes her body from mine and looks at her dad. “You’re glad he showed up hours late, right when we’re about to leave? Now I guess we’re stuck here for another five hundred hours.”

Coach doesn't seem concerned, but Dustin does as he speaks up first. "No, we just wanted to apologize for running behind. We don't want to keep y'all."

"Oh, no big deal. I have a few more swings in me if the two of you are up for it." Coach looks to Dustin because he already knows which Crawford is the easier and more agreeable brother.

"We don't want to interfere with your plans." Dustin nervously looks to Morgan, and I'm not sure if it's her lack of clothing or her suffocating hostility making him anxious. Being her teacher, he has to follow strict guidelines for student-teacher interactions, but he can't be blamed for some psycho chick parading around in her bra and some dental floss in a public place.

"Too late," she adds as her mother tries to quietly pull her away.

"It's no problem. We can talk shop. Get a good game plan in place." Coach is way too happy—and obviously not good at reading the room—considering the level of unease in everyone around him.

"Dad. I need to go home." The wet clothes in her hand swings through the air.

"I'll take you," her mother quickly volunteers.

"Don't you have some business to attend to with Principal Thatcher, Mom?" Morgan asks in such a way that I know nothing about the question is what it appears on the surface. Even her mother isn't safe from her own daughter's malice.

"I'll take you." Fuck. Why did I say that? Probably because staying here is another bad option but at least this way I can rile up Morgan a little more. And the shock on her face is priceless. It's not often she can be caught off guard.

She laughs as soon as the shock wears off. "Great joke. Kinda like you."

I'm aware. Why else would I even invite the she-devil to ride shotgun in my truck? "Hop in." I motion to my truck.

“But you might want to dry off a bit, so you don’t mess up my leather seats.”

“Now I know you’re full of shit.” She folds her arms over her chest.

Grabbing the hem of my T-shirt, I tug it over my head and hold it out to her. “Here. I’ll even give you this to wear so you’ll be cozy.”

Surprisingly, she actually takes the T-shirt from me, her eyes looking to the fabric as she shakes her head. Throwing the shirt, it hits my bare chest and falls to the ground. “You’re such a fuckin’ asshole.”

“Because I gave you the shirt off my back? That makes me an asshole?” I laugh, noting her eyes dropping to my stomach. And I can’t help but flex the six-pack I’ve spent plenty of time earning.

“No, you’re not an asshole,” Coach says. “That’s nice of you to offer her something to cover up.” It’s the first time he’s acknowledged the fact that his daughter is standing here with her ass out on display. But he still doesn’t seem concerned in the least. “But I need you here. We’re off to a shaky start going in with a new QB, but if we focus on what matters most, we’ll be able to capture that ultimate victory.” He reaches up, slapping his palm against my bicep as he looks to his daughter. “Morgan, just ride home with your mother and Ryder. I’ll get Paul to drop me off when we’re done.”

In that moment, I see her hatred pointed at her father, and it overrides the loathing she’s aimed at me. I mean, she’s given me some harsh death stares on a good day, but the disgust she has aimed at her dad almost makes me feel sorry for her. Almost. Because I know nothing down in her evil core truly feels bad for anyone but herself.

She stoops down and grabs my shirt off the pavement. “On second thought, I’d appreciate that ride home, Cade.” She pulls the shirt on and wastes no time walking around to the passenger side of my truck. Pulling the door open, she climbs into the cab before slamming it closed.

“Guess I’m leaving now.” There’s a bit of amusement festering in me as I eye the headstrong spitfire in my vehicle. There’s definitely a part of me that’s relieved about leaving, even if it means a holy terror will be riding shotgun when I escape this place.

“That’s a great idea,” Coach takes a few steps backwards, clapping his hands together. “Head to my house, and I’ll meet you there instead.”

Shit. Not what I wanted to do at all. And definitely not a great idea. But Coach and Dustin hurry away as I focus back on the raging vixen sitting in my truck. This day really just got way too fuckin’ complicated.

MORGAN

And I thought sitting in the god-awful heat with my thighs glued to golf cart's seat would be the most miserable part of my day. Nope. Now my bare ass is stuck to the raggedy seat of Cade's truck. My eyes stay focused out the windshield. But all I can hear is Dad's voice in my head. He all but got on his knees in the damn parking lot. How does he care so intensely who throws around an air-filled pigskin? Like, more than anything, or anyone, else? It's incomprehensible to me that he'd do just about anything for his ball players but discounts his own children.

"You good over there?" Cade's teasing, playful mood scrapes my nerves. I look over to see a smug expression covering his face. He's enjoying this shit show too much.

"I'd be much better if your raggedy seat wasn't scratching my ass."

"Ah. Used to some fancier ass pampering." He shifts in his seat, casually reclining with his left hand on the wheel, his other resting on the console between us. "Next time, ask one of those pompous country club boys to give you a ride home instead then."

"Will do." Not that there will be a next time, because I won't ever make the mistake of riding with my family—lesson learned. Always have my car. Check.

"No you won't. Because it wouldn't piss off Daddy as much."

Slowly, I look over to him to see that stupid smug smile still effortlessly situated on his face. He knows I only accepted his offer when I realized how much my dad didn't want him to leave Crescent Fleur. I don't care that he knows. Him being able to read me so well is what truly infuriates me. "You were nothing but a convenient tool. For once."

"My pleasure, princess."

Ugh. Nothing is going to make me feel better than getting the hell out of this truck and out of this goddamn T-shirt that smells too damn good. Why can't it reek? Why can't I be utterly repulsed? "Just shut up and get me home sometime today."

"Sure. Where do you live again?"

Too fucking far away. It's only twenty minutes or so without traffic in actual time back to Uptown New Orleans from Crescent Fleur, but a million minutes in the time warp that is this damn day. I know he's once again trying to yank on my nerves, and it's working. He knows exactly where I live because his stupid ass spent as much time at my house as I did when we were kids.

"Call your mom. She'll tell you how to get there." It's a bitch move. I know. But I don't regret it because, as was my intention, a furious expression appears on his face. Good. I'm tired of being the only miserable one on this trek across the city. Thank fuck he keeps his mouth shut until we pull into the driveway, and he parks in front of my house.

I bail out of his stupid truck as soon as he pulls to a stop. Surprisingly quick, he gets out and follows me up the porch. Affronted, I say, "Where the fuck do you think you're going?"

He doesn't have a chance to respond before I see Dad's car steer into the drive with Cade's brother following behind in his truck. Cade glances over his shoulder then looks back to me. "I'm going to chat with your dad about what really matters to him." He leans forward, his mouth near my ear as he adds, "And I'd say it's a safe bet that your name won't come up."

His words sink in as he quickly turns and hurries down the few stairs, heading to where Dad parked. And of course, my father steps out of his car with the brightest smile on his face. Much like pure joy, something I haven't witnessed in a very long time. Cade might be a bastard who needs his ass put in check. But he's absolutely correct when it comes to my dad. The earth could open up and swallow me whole, and Dad wouldn't notice unless it happened on the football field and interfered with his game.

Little does he know, the universe might not impede on his perfect season, but I sure as fuck plan to. And throwing off his precious new QB will be more than thrilling. It will be satisfying to finally put Cade Crawford in his place. On his knees, begging to be put out of his misery.

Dad walks Cade through the open garage bay as I make my way off the porch and follow them inside the house. By the time they reach the kitchen, Dad is already solely focused on the game. Cade tries to not acknowledge me, but I see the tightness in his stance and the strain of him struggling to not look my way. Moving in front of him, I lift his T-shirt off and drape it over his shoulder, leaning against him as I say. "You're nothing but a convenient tool for him too. You won't matter once he gets what he needs from you. *If* you can even perform."

Cade's muscle tense under my hand as it glides down his side, my nails trailing down his muscles as I step back. He's no longer able to pretend I don't exist or put my words out of his head as his sight fixates on me. And I know I'm already getting to him.

Football is as much a mental game as it is a physical one. I should know. I've heard nothing but the philosophy of the game discussed at the dinner table my entire life. And Cade will soon realize, as well as Dad, I'm more prepared than either of them. Because unlike them, I have nothing to lose. Including myself.

CADE

“You’re going. I’m going. Let’s go.” Neil stands across the kitchen, his arms waving towards the door like he’s flagging the way out.

Moving to the fridge, I grab out some deli ham and sandwich fixings then resume my spot at the counter. “I’m good. Go without me.”

“What gives? Yesterday you said we’d go. Besides, it’s a Saint Juliet tradition, and I need my wingman—the freakin’ star QB of the mighty Wildcats.”

“Don’t remind me.” I focus on making my damn supper and forgetting all about what I’ve signed myself up for.

“Come on, Cade. Do you know what this could do for your social status? Mine too. We could actually have a decent senior year, and I won’t have to hide in the janitor’s closet during gym class.”

I turn to look at Neil. “You said they stopped fucking with you.”

His shocked expression tells me he just realized what he admitted because he’d told me they’d stopped tormenting him. Obviously, nothing has changed—as usual. He stutters over his words, clearly guilty of lying to me. “I-I meant— I-I just think ... it could help up our social standing.”

“Who is it?”

“No one. Just humor me and let me live vicariously through your glamorous, elite senior year, please.”

“Yeah, fuckin’ glamorous.” Not buying the bullshit he’s selling. And if I had to guess, he avoided telling me after the last fight I got in with a blockhead ... when Principal Thatcher threatened expulsion if it happened again. But I don’t give a fuck. I won’t stand by and let them fuck with one of the few decent people at that godforsaken academy solely because they can. “Tell me who it is and I’ll go tonight.”

Hesitating, he drops into the chair, his eyes falling to his hands that rest on the kitchen table. I sit across from him, and though he never looks to me, he says, “It doesn’t matter. This year will be different. It has to be.” His voice fades out, making me want to put my fist through whichever asshole’s face it is that’s made him feel like shit. And I have a good guess who.

“It’s Topher, right?”

“You can’t do anything.”

Answers that question. But I need details even though they’re usually painful to hear. “What’d he do?”

“It’s not a big deal. Just drop it. He’s not worth getting kicked out of school over, and I really want you around. If you do anything, you’ll get expelled but not a damn thing will happen to that dipshit.”

It’s the truth. Topher’s pampered ass will most definitely have his pretentious Daddy buy whoever’s necessary to keep his deviant kid on the team and in the school. “If he screws with you again, I want to know.”

Neil hesitates for a second before nodding. “I can take care of myself you know.”

“Yep. But you shouldn’t have to.” Topher has nearly a foot of height and a good eighty pounds on Neil. Which is a common trait for all the guys Topher and his buddies jack with. They taunt me from a distance, but never go brute and get physical with me. And the last time (that I was aware of) when he bucked up to Neil, it felt good to beat the shit out of him until two campus guards pulled me off.

“Okay. So, let’s go have a good time now. It’s the last year we can partake in the ritual.” Neil perks up, but I’m not sure why. The annual last-night-of-summer party in the cemetery next to the school is never anything but a bunch of asshats drinking and previewing which jerks intend to be this year’s alphas.

“Give me a few to change.” Regrettably, I finish up with my food and head to my bedroom. I don’t give a damn how I look, but I have to get this freaking T-shirt off. Because every time I register it rubbing against my skin, I feel Morgan’s fingers trailing down my skin.

Tossing the shirt on the dresser, I stand and watch the fabric, waiting for it to come to life and wrap around my neck to choke the life out of me. Irrational? Maybe. But if anyone holds the power to hex a piece of fabric to choke the soul out of somebody, it’d be Morgan King.

MORGAN

I knew he'd be here. All that talk about not liking Saint Juliet, not wanting to be around us "rich" snobs is him being angry he's only a part of the elite crowd by default. And he always joins in on the fun.

I lean harder against the mausoleum, the stone wall biting into my back, as I watch him saunter down the walkway. The perk of him being brought to the top of my make-his-life-hell radar—the physical attraction is there. There's no denying he's more than fuckable. From his dark-brown hair and even darker brown eyes, to his strong body, that he definitely puts some effort into sculpting ... all factors that would usually piss me off also appeal to me. What a waste for such an impeccable physical specimen to be possessed by the personality of an asshole. But now, maybe I can put him to good use. Every inch of him. He wasn't that bad years ago, and I'm dying to know how much he's improved. Or hasn't.

He's yet to spot me, talking to the other waste of space that is attached to his side every moment of the damn day. There used to be a time when we were inseparable. Now, our worlds couldn't be further apart. Yet, those worlds are about to collide. Or maybe implode. We'll see.

Shoving off the hard stone, I make my way to them, stopping in front of Cade. A sly smile stretches across my face as my eyes drop to the black polo shirt covering the delicious muscles beneath. Damn, maybe I should get some because drooling over Cade Crawford is *not* allowed. Even if he was a good fuck, I shouldn't be this curious to find out if he still is.

Plastering on my best smile, I trail my fingers down the front of his shirt and feel his solid abs under the soft fabric. “Are you gonna let me wear this one too?”

The muscles in his jaw tighten, his lips remain closed. I can absolutely work with that. The less he says, the better. But it’s his eyes falling to my chest that truly delights me. Maybe I envisioned what he’d think when I picked out the strapless maroon minidress ... and from the twisted look covering his face, I picked well.

Turning my attention to his silent, stunned sidekick, I wrap him in a friendly hug. “I haven’t seen you all summer, Neil. How’ve you been?”

Neil’s mouth opens and closes a few times, but no sound comes out for a good minute before he finally says, “Good.”

“Come on.” I loop my hand in Neil’s elbow, guiding him along. “Let’s grab a drink.”

Neil doesn’t protest, and we’re already next to the drink area when he says, “Um. Okay.”

I pick up a red plastic cup and pass it to Neil. Just as he lifts it to his mouth, Cade snatches it from him, and looks directly at me. “What the fuck are you doing?”

“Offering my friend a drink.” My innocent smile doesn’t diminish his suspicion in the least.

“He’s not your friend. What the fuck is in it? Poison?”

I grab the cup from him, downing the sweet, green-dyed liquid before I toss the cup aside then reach for another and pass it to Neil. “Wildcat punch. You really shouldn’t be so controlling, Cade. Maybe it’s time to speak with a professional about those trust issues.” Cade doesn’t reply as Neil eyes the newly offered drink in his hand. I hold one up to Cade, but he doesn’t accept it. “Why’d you come if you don’t want to celebrate?”

He doesn’t get the opportunity to respond before someone lets out a whooping sound behind us, an arm drapes over my shoulder, and Topher grabs the drink I’m holding out to Cade and downs it in one gulp.

“Yeah, man. Let’s celebrate! State here we come!” Topher holds out his balled-up fist, but Cade doesn’t oblige in the bro move that is Topher’s go-to. “Are you just gonna leave me hanging like that?” Topher teases, but I note it’s Topher’s arm draped over my shoulder that has Cade’s attention. Perfect.

“Come on, Cade. We’re all on the same team now.” His eyes flick to mine. “At least, I know the team I’m cheering for.” The tension in him doesn’t ease at my words. Instead, he zones in on Topher.

“I don’t give a fuck whose team I’m on, I’ll always protect my friend.”

Of course Cade is still worried about protecting the nerd from harm. The meaning is clear when I hear Neil quietly mutter, “That won’t be necessary. Right, Topher.”

Topher removes his arm from my shoulders and fastens it over Neil’s as he gives him a friendly pat. “That’s right. Wildcats have to look out for each other. You’re on my team, bud.”

Cade lets out a cynical snicker. “We’ll see.”

“Okay. So now that we’ve buried all the bullshit, let’s have a good time before our souls are imprisoned until graduation.” I raise another drink to Cade, but he remains unmoving.

With his gaze locked on me, he mutters, “Too late.”

“Your loss.” I bring the cup to my smiling lips, eyeing him over the rim as I down the drink. Neil follows suit and chugs the contents of his cup, so I hand him another, then guide him back to where I was perched up next to the stone mausoleum. Topher and a few of his buddies join us, and of course Cade follows like a pathetic lost puppy. If anything, I’ll give him one thing—he protects who he cares about. Too bad I’ll never be on that roster.

“Morgan!” Ava shouts as she and Savannah make their way over. Ava wraps me in a tight hug. “I missed you so much!”

Because I hadn’t just seen her yesterday. Even if it had been a month, I doubt either of us actually missed the other.

We're more friends out of obligation than necessity. And in her case, I find it's best to keep your friends close and your enemies closer, which is why she holds the title of best friend.

It takes her only a few seconds before she lays eyes on the two additions to the group. "Hm. Didn't realize we were doing charity work tonight."

"Be nice," I tell Ava, almost tripping over the ironic phrase coming out of my mouth as I move next to Neil. "He's hanging with me, so if you don't like it, you can find somewhere else to be."

Ava lets out a snicker because she knows no matter how crazy I sound, she can't—and won't—go against me. "Whatever you say." Her sarcastic tone doesn't bother me in the least, but her eyes giving a blatant assessment of Cade does more than it should. He's mine to toy with, not hers.

Moving beside Cade, I snake a hand around his waist, finding the hem of his shirt as I slide my hand under the material, my palm smoothing across his taut muscles before I grip his side with my fingernails, his body responding instantly and immediately as I add, "I want to say it because Cade gave me a much-needed ride today."

I hear a few mutters around us, but I make a point to look up at Cade, who's not making a move to eliminate my touch from his skin, by the way. I can't tell if he's angry or shocked or both. But one thing's obvious by his strained expression. I'm getting to him. And I'm just getting started.

CADE

I don't know her game. But I know she's playing one because there's nothing nice about Morgan—except her body. And I should know since the image of her near nakedness is still vivid in my mind. Her goddamn tight dress, if you could call the small piece of fabric that, isn't doing much to help get her bare ass out of my head even if it is covering more than the damn bra and thong had. The only thing neither can conceal is her evil soul. And the smile she flashes me when she spots me checking her out reiterates nothing but misery is beneath the polished surface.

“Dude, why didn't you tell me about Morgan freakin' King being your new *friend*?” Neil leans against the monument beside me and my guess is it's to hold him up more than anything.

“There's nothing to tell.” I look to my actual friend, who has yet another cup in his hand filled to the brim. “Maybe we should head out.”

“Why? We're having such a good time. I told you this year will be different.” He swings his hand holding the cup around, and liquid splashes out of it. Good thing too, because the more he spills the less he'll drink. And he's had way more than enough. Especially for someone who doesn't indulge often.

“I hope so,” I mutter, looking back to Morgan slithering her way over to us.

“Are you sure you don't want a *taste*?” She makes a point to exaggerate the last word, and I have a feeling it's not only

the drink she's offering.

"Yeah. I'm good." Fuck. *I* need to leave. Because my eyes drop to her mouth, watching as her tongue touches the rim of the cup before she takes a sip.

"Hey, Neil!" Topher calls out, stumbling until he's all but on top of Neil who is having enough trouble holding himself up. "Back me up, bruh. Lenny doesn't believe me."

Neil's glassy eyes get wide as he goes into a detailed explanation of how a headless cockroach can live up to a week, and the two dumb jocks hang on every word.

My fist instinctively tightens at the thought of them screwing with him. If this is a game, they'll all pay. And the blonde vixen moving in front of me will be first on the list.

She doesn't seem concerned with my hostile demeanor. But I doubt anything would kill her buzzed wickedness other than holy water. And I might just need some, because she molds her frontside against me, her hands moving to my lower back as she holds on tightly. "Dance with me."

"Pass." There're more than a few people swaying to the music blaring through the dimly lit cemetery. How many of them actually think this is a good time, I can't understand. And whoever started this tradition is the biggest idiot of all.

Then again, the academy and guards turning a blind eye to the festivities is the real problem, though it's not surprising. The majority of the pricks occupying this space tonight could get away with murder. And I wouldn't be surprised if some of them have already.

Taking a quick glance, I spot Neil still animatedly educating the jocks.

Morgan's smooth voice pulls my attention back to her. "Why'd you come if you didn't want to have a good time?"

"I'm having a good time."

"Liar, liar. You're such a crier." She singsongs the phrase I have both heard and repeated many times as a child. But not since then.

Leaning back slightly, I look down to her. “We’re not kids anymore, Morgan.”

The sexy grin on her face fades away and is replaced by something I can’t read as she whispers, “I know.” Regret. Or maybe sorrow. But that doesn’t seem like the former or current version of Morgan that I know. And neither is the one who whispers, “Please.”

Her hand drops from my back, her fingers lace with mine. She slowly backs up, guiding me with her as she sets down the cup in her hand. And I follow. Like the chump I am. The chump I’ve always been when it comes to her.

I note that the music has slowed as she moves back against me, her body effortlessly molding with mine as she rests her arms on my shoulders, tucking her face against my chest. She begins swaying, but I stand still, unmoving, my feet and brain unable to sync up and participate.

Her head lifts from my chest, and her mesmerizing gaze holds me captive. “What’s wrong?” Her soft tone is so sweet, I know it’s an act. It has to be.

“I’m not gonna play this game with you, Morgan. I just want to finish school and get the fuck out of here.”

“Then I guess it’s a good thing I’m not playing a game.” She pauses for a second, her gaze shifting away for a few seconds as she whispers, “Maybe I miss you.”

Wow. She really can lay it on thick.

Slowly leaning down, I move my lips almost to hers before I stop. “Now who’s the liar?”

I feel her body tense beneath my hands, her bewitching gaze still on me when her eyes close, and she presses her mouth to mine. Her soft lips brush over mine, her tongue gliding across my mouth before my body responds, and unlike dancing, my brain and mouth sync up, failing me miserably. Because I kiss her back, savoring in the sweet taste on her tongue as her fingers dig into my shoulders. And what starts out as a slow, patient exploration is picking up in pace. Her need mixes with mine as she presses forward, and I’m more

than aware my dick also is on board. But finally, my brain catches up to the threat as I break away, pulling her hands from my body. I keep a grip on her wrists while taking a few much-needed breaths as I see confusion on her face, and maybe a little hurt which reassures me it's a game.

“We shouldn't do this.”

“Give me one good reason.” She stands in front of me, waiting on an answer I'll never give her. Because I can't.

Glancing around, my current problem fades quickly away as I spot the place Neil and the jocks were in is now empty. And they're nowhere in sight. Releasing Morgan, I walk towards where they were, looking around. And come up empty. “Neil.”

Nothing. Just drunken idiots partying and having a good time. But none of them are the one I'm looking for. And the stone vaults make it more difficult to spot him as I walk around.

“What is it?” Morgan says behind me, right on my heels.

Halting, I turn and get in her face. “Where are they?”

For a second, she almost looks scared before it morphs into anger. “I don't know. I was too busy with your tongue down my throat to see where they went.”

Stepping closer to her, she counters and takes a step back as I say, “Was that the plan?”

“What? What plan?” She seems offended, but I can't help but think the worst of her. Because she usually doesn't disappoint.

“If anything happens to Neil, *you* will answer for it.”

There it is. The hostile bitch I recognize props her hand on her hip. “You're a fucking paranoid jackass.”

I've been called worse. And by her.

“Whoa, bruh. Are you good?” It's the first time I've ever been happy to hear Topher's voice, and I hurry to the next aisle, spotting him a few feet away from Neil, who's clinging

to a crypt with one hand to brace himself. His other hand waves Topher off behind him while he spews his guts onto the concrete.

“There’s your precious friend, who you care so much about, in one piece. Mostly.” Her disgusted expression glances past me before returning. “See, there’s no sacrificial virgin ritual in progress. Happy now, or am I still on trial?”

“A witch is always a witch. Even if she can fool those around her.”

“All right, Cade.” She laughs and playfully slaps me on my stomach as she walks past me.

I watch as she moves a few feet from Neil, asking him if he’s all right and offering to grab him some water. But she doesn’t have to because Topher walks over, giving Neil an encouraging pat on the back as he passes him a bottle of water.

What the actual fuck?

This entire day has been confusing as hell, and it’s only getting more so as the hours tick by.

CADE

Another groan comes from Neil as he attempts to sit up, his words running together as he declares, “I’m never drinking again.”

Been there. But right now, I’m more concerned about getting out of here. “Come on. Let’s get you home.”

“Okay.” He unsuccessfully attempts to get off the ground, so I help him up. Once on his feet, he seems all right but definitely needs to sleep it off. And shower. “You don’t have to leave, Cade. I don’t want to ruin your night.”

“You’re not ruining anything. I didn’t even want to show, remember.” And why do my thoughts automatically go to her? Foolishly, my eyes seek her out. She’s been nearby, dancing, laughing, and partying with her clique, not a care in the world, as usual, for the princess of darkness.

And unfortunately, she zones in on us making our getaway and walks up beside me. “Perfect. I need a ride home.”

I avoid the she-wolf’s gaze and nod over my shoulder. “I’m sure there’s someone else here who’ll give you one. And the seats won’t even scrape your ass in the process.”

She moves in front of me, her fingers hooking on the belt loop of my jeans. “But I only want to ride you. *With* you, I mean.”

Fuck. Her meaning was clear before she clarified. “Stop, Morgan. You’re drunk, and I’m tired.” And all this shit is gonna be right back in my face in a few hours, bright and early for the first day of school.

“Yep. So, I can’t possibly drive in my condition.” She holds her key fob up.

“Where’s your brother?” I glance around, not recalling seeing Ryder in the last hour or so.

“He left already.”

“Of course, he did,” I mumble under my breath, continuing the trek to my truck while keeping in close proximity to Neil. Surprisingly, he manages to stay up right until I open the door and he climbs in the back, lying across the bench seat. Morgan resumes her spot from this afternoon, riding shotgun up front in the passenger seat.

“Don’t puke in my truck.” Pushing Neil’s legs out of the way, I shut the door behind him then climb into the driver’s seat, rolling all four windows down.

The drive is shockingly quiet as we make it the few miles to Neil’s and park beside the curb. Stepping out of my truck, I open the back door so Neil can slide off the seat, catching himself on the door as his other hand cradles his stomach. “I’m good.”

“Sure.” I step aside as he walks up to the garage and pushes the code on the keypad. The house is dark but that’s not surprising given the early morning hour. “Your mom home?”

“No. She went with my stepdad to Dubai.”

Of course. His parents are gone more than they’re home, but he doesn’t seem to mind. I believe it’s because he doesn’t know any different. The only thing that’s changed over the years is they don’t have a nanny sitting with him while they’re gone.

I follow him into the kitchen, grab some aspirin out of the cabinet, and toss him the bottle. “Take this and drink some water before you go to bed.”

“And don’t drink the water too fast.” Morgan’s voice startles the both of us as we look to her, standing in the doorway as she strolls into the kitchen, stopping beside me. “Seriously, it’ll come back up even faster.”

“Okay.” Neil stares at her for a few seconds before looking to me.

I’m just as confused as he is. “I’ll pick you up in the morning for school.” Which isn’t a long time from now, but I know he won’t miss the first day. It’s against everything ingrained in him.

“Thanks, man.” He grabs a bottle of water and heads upstairs. If Morgan wasn’t here, I’d probably crash in the guestroom, as I often do when he’s here alone. But I have to get her home and out of my sight. Even if she won’t be out of my mind for a good long while.

“Let’s go.”

Once I pull back onto the road, I dare to take a peek and find her with her head leaning over on the door, her face slightly outside the window. The humid air blows against her face, causing her blonde hair to swirl around. There’re two things that surprise me. One, she isn’t complaining about her perfect hair being a mess. Two, my fingers are itching to slide into the blonde strands and drag her mouth to mine. Because the relaxed, serene look on her face reminds me of someone I used to know—someone I *wanted* to be around. But Morgan was never that girl. She was just good at putting on a show.

It’s minutes later when I park for the second time in less than twenty-four hours in front of the King mansion. But this time Morgan doesn’t bail immediately. Instead, she sits in the same position, only now her eyes are open as she surveys her house. “I’m tired too,” is the only thing she mutters. And something about her defeated tone doesn’t allow me to say anything back as she looks over to me. My truck suddenly feels much smaller. Reaching for the door handle, I step out and walk around to the passenger side, pulling the door open and standing back as I motion for her to get out, but she doesn’t move.

“Come on. Go inside and get some sleep.” Because I sure as fuck need some sleep. I step closer, offering to help her out of the truck as she turns to the side. But instead of grabbing my hand, her fingers grip my shirt and pull me to her, her

knees going on either side of me as her mouth covers mine, kissing me for a few seconds until I shift back to look at her. “You should go inside. It’s late and you’re drunk.”

And I’m fuckin’ falling under her toxic spell as she leans forward, her lips feathering over mine as she says, “I know exactly what I’m doing.”

Her legs hook on my hips, wrapping tightly around me. Her mouth captures mine, her taste consuming all my rational thoughts. As her kiss becomes more desperate, the need follows and intensifies within me. Before I think twice, my hand moves up her back, every finger entangling in her hair as I grip tightly. Tugging her head back, her exposed neck is the first place I want to taste. So, I do. And the soft moan she lets out when she rocks her hips against me does nothing but fuel my desire. My mouth returns to hers, but it’s all wrong—because it feels so right. Finally breaking away, I ease back, though my hand remains tangled in her hair. Her blazing fuck-me eyes penetrate my soul as I say, “You need to go inside.”

“Why’s that?” Her lips form a sexy smile that grows when my eyes fixate on her mouth.

Releasing her hair, I drop my hands to her legs and grip her thighs, fighting the urge to slide my palms up her soft skin and under her dress. All while my brain is telling me to get rid of her grip on me. But I make no attempt to remove her hold from around me. “Because neither of us is thinking clearly.”

“Yet, I’m the only intoxicated one.” She closes the little space between us, kissing me for a minute before unhooking her legs from my sides. Getting out of my truck, she glances over her shoulder at me as she walks away, her teasing tone still in place. “Such a gentlemen, Cade. But I have a feeling that morally superior act will fall to the wayside when you finally give in to your desires.”

And as if she didn’t just set my world spinning off its axis once again, Morgan strolls into her house, shuts the heavy red door behind her, and leaves me standing here like the big idiot I am. Because she knows—even when I hate her, I want her. I always have. And always will. But there’s one thing that’s

different now. I'm aware that the blonde beauty will be my unraveling if I allow. And fuck, I already know I will. Because unraveling her from my soul is the only way I'll ever get past her. I hope.

MORGAN

Finally. My last first day at Saint Juliet. I've dreamed of this for years; since the moment I stepped foot into the building my freshman year after that dreadful summer. Yeah. It should've been a thrill to attend a school where my dad is worshiped like a god. The very school he and my mother met and the one my grandparents attended. But that great family legacy is nothing but bullshit. Just like my parents' so-called fairy-tale romance. And I'm reminded why it makes my stomach turn when I hear a knock on my door and Mom steps inside. Uncertainty flowing off her in waves.

"Morgan, we need to talk."

"I have to get ready for school." Standing from my vanity, I step into my walk-in closet and pull on the assigned Saint Juliet uniform—a white button-down with a hunter-green plaid skirt and matching stiff blazer are coordinated with a hunter-green tie boasting gold stitching that matches the emblem over the left breast pocket of the uniform jacket. It's too fucking hot and humid for this shit. Which is why I strip off the jacket and toss it on my bed. Fuck it. What are they gonna do? Expel me? I can't be that lucky. And I'm not lucky enough for Mom to have left my room. She's standing near the door, her arms folded over her chest, her hand clinging to her bicep. It's her telltale stance when she's uneasy. She uses it around my dad often when he loses his temper and trashes whatever is within reach. He doesn't lose his cool often, but when he does, he explodes full force. Which is what I'm assuming she's worried about. Dad finding out and flipping his fucking lid.

“Morgan.”

“What, Mother?”

“I need you to talk to me. Say what you need to say, what’s on your mind, and we’ll figure this out.”

Grabbing my book bag, I walk towards the door and stop a foot away from her. “What exactly do we need to figure out? Seems like you and Thatcher have everything under control.”

“I didn’t mean for you to find out like that.” Her gaze drops to the floor as she says, “How *did* you find out? You didn’t see anything, did you?”

“Ew, Mom. No. I didn’t see Thatcher screwing you, if that’s your main concern. But for the record, I’ve known for a while.” Just hadn’t called her out on it before yesterday.

“Did you tell your father? Are you going to?” she asks as I shake my head no. As much as I wanted to inform him at first, I didn’t have the heart to tell Dad his wife was screwing my principal. She lets out a breath as she says, “Thank you.”

“Are you fucking kidding me? ‘Thank you’ is the first thing that springs to mind?” “I don’t want to upset your father —”

I hold my hand up, signaling for her to stop spewing bullshit. When I take a step closer to her, all I see is a pathetic coward. “Then you shouldn’t have fucked another man.”

Pushing past her, I head out of my room and find Ryder in the foyer. “I’m riding with you.”

He doesn’t ask and probably knows I’m in no mood. And school isn’t where I want to head, but that’s where I left my car last night. And once we arrive in the lot and park nearby, it’s tempting to simply get in and drive away. But there’re a few people here who still require a much-needed lesson. And none of them academic, but I’m ready to educate.

And lucky me, but unfortunately for him, I see one of my pupils as soon as I walk over the threshold. Principal Thatcher stands in the doorway of the front office, his eyes searching students as they walk by, as he constantly does. I always get

the impression it's more for his perverted satisfaction than anything else given the number of times he tugs at the waistband of his slacks for a slight adjustment.

As soon as his eyes assess my incomplete uniform, he signals for me to come his way. Dumbass. I was already heading in that direction, and he's about to find out how much of a mistake he made picking me as his target this morning.

"First day of school and we're already out of dress code, Miss King." He motions for me to enter the office lobby, and I do just that. Thankfully, there're plenty of other students he's pulled aside sitting in the lobby, awaiting their sentence.

Most of my classmates look anxious, but all of them watch me as I stroll across the office, parking my ass on the receptionist's desk as she stands from her chair and moves to the side as she asks me, "Young lady, what do you think you're doing?"

Glancing over to her, I give her a smirk as I reply, "Whatever the fuck I want, Glenda."

Looking back over to Thatcher, I see his nervousness cranking up, and now I'm about to heighten it. "That is what you and my mother discussed yesterday at Crescent Fleur, right? Or was there something else you two were concocting?"

His eyes immediately register with recognition. And fear. Yeah, fucker. I know your dirty little secret. He stammers over a few words, or at least they're supposed to be words I'm assuming, though it sounds more like pleas of mercy while I metaphorically hold his balls in a vice grip.

Looking over to my peers lined up along the side, I decide for the first time to extend my gracious fortune to them. "I don't see anyone out of dress code." Looking back to Thatcher, I ask, "Do you?"

He pauses for a few seconds and looks at the students. Yeah, he'd planned to swing his tiny dick around and bust all these assholes on the first day of school to feel good about himself. Why my mom picked this pitiful chump to fool around with, I'll never know. But it's definitely looking like a

good benefit on my part, I can absolutely use this affair in my favor. I never had much of a rule book to follow in this dreadful place, but now I truly have nothing to stop me from unleashing whatever I deem necessary. And Thatcher decides to not test me as he glances back to his hostages. “It is the first day of school, so we can overlook some discrepancies.”

“Wise decision.” Hopping off the desk, I glance back at the dumbstruck receptionist. “Any other questions, Glenda?”

I’m sure she has tons, but she only stares at Thatcher in stunned silence as I walk out of the lobby, planning my next move. Whatever it is, I hope it gives me more satisfaction than that. Because while it felt great, it was too easy. Will any of it ever be enough?

CADE

She's fucking everywhere. In the hallway. In my classes. In my goddamn head. And as she walks into yet another of my classes and takes a seat beside me, her sexy grin tells me she knows she's getting exactly what she wants. A mindfuck that is going in her favor. As usual.

"Welcome to English Literature 101, Wildcats," Dustin announces as he rises from his desk. I knew I'd eventually have my brother as a teacher, but why do I have to have the added obstacle of Morgan sitting beside me?

Thankfully, Dustin keeps his usual teachery tone and reviews the syllabus he's just issued to the class, explaining all the stupid papers he'll have us write over the semester. And just when I think I can get through the class unscathed, Morgan raises her hand. That in itself is a red flag—the queen bitch doesn't *ask* for permission to do anything, much less permission to speak.

"Yes, Miss King?"

"I'm just curious how you're going to be subjective when your little brother is one of your students." Her eyes meet mine as she says, "I'd hate for anyone to have an unfair advantage."

"Says the pampered country club princess." She's baiting me, and my response only pleases her more. Her smile grows, and I wish for the drunken and less bitchy version of her I witnessed last night.

“The two of you were there.” Her sights switch to my brother, her flirtatious tone in full force. “Another good point. Speaking of level playing fields, since you’ve seen me in a thong, I only think it’s fair that you reciprocate.”

Any student that wasn’t already paying attention to this shit show is now fully focused, several hushed mutters bounce around the room, and curious eyes looking between Morgan and my brother, whose face is currently reddening by the second as he stammers over his words.

How could they assume anything other than the worst, but they should know the princess well enough to recognize everything happens by design. “You were the one walking around with your ass hanging out, princess. And trust me, no one was looking.”

“Cade, that’s enough,” Dustin says to me while Morgan continues to gloat. Of course there won’t be a level playing field in this room. If anything, he’ll give me more shit just to prove a point to all these pansy asses.

“You’re right. That is enough.” I stand, my hand latching onto Morgan’s arm as I haul her out of the classroom. I slam the door behind us to drown out Dustin’s instructions to resume my seat or calm down or some shit. I don’t know, because all I can focus on is the pleased witch in front of me. Her back is against a row of lockers, my frame blocking her from moving. And she’s more than satisfied with herself.

“Stop fucking with the people I care about.” My command goes in one ear and out the other obviously, because her only response is to slide her hands inside my jacket. Her palms clasp my sides as she looks up to me with zero uncertainty or concern for herself. She knows she’ll keep getting her way, freely able to taunt every single person around her.

“Well, you’re not fucking me, so I have to fuck with somebody to occupy my time.”

Instantly shifting forward, I push her harder against the metal lockers, and her breathing increases, her excitement growing as I pin her securely in place. “Is that your problem?”

You haven't had a proper fucking to put that mouth in its place?"

"I doubt you could help with that." It's a challenge. And I know that's exactly what she wants. The one who controls everyone and everything around her wants to relinquish power for once.

"If I wasn't so worried about my head being bitten off afterwards, maybe I would." Fuck. I would if I knew it wouldn't be the death of me. But Morgan is the human version of a praying mantis, and I'm here only because she *wants* me to be. It's undoubtedly a trap, and I'd be a fool to let her pretty package ensnare me.

"I won't bite that hard. Promise."

Leaning closer to her, I stop when my lips barely touch hers. "I might believe that if everything out of your mouth wasn't a lie." My eyes watch for her reaction as I continue. "Just like when you said you loved me, then turned out to be a lying bitch like the rest."

There it is. A glimpse of the girl I used to know. And she slips away as fast as she appears, replaced by the familiar hateful one. "You left me. You disappeared for weeks. I didn't even know if you were dead or alive. You just dropped off the face of the earth and left me alone. Yes, you were having a hard time. But I needed you too, and you turned out to be a lying asshole. Just like the rest of them." Her playfulness is gone, her hatred oozing out of her as I keep her trapped in place.

"If you really knew me, you would've known exactly where to find me." And stupidly, I'd expected her to show. Day after day. Night after night. She never did. And the longer I waited, the harder it was to leave the only place I've ever felt safe. Because the pitiful boy gave her everything at that place, and she gave him everything in return. Her body. Her virginity. Took his. And his soul. And gave him hers. Or so I thought.

Her anger heightens as she moves her hands to my chest, shoving against me. "I couldn't get my head that far up my ass

to find you. Or maybe I'm just a liar and didn't give a fuck about you."

"Clearly," I state flatly, and it seems to enrage her even more.

"Boo-fucking-hoo. Mommy left you and ran off. Get the fuck over it."

She breaks out of my grip, her back to me as I say, "Just like you've gotten over Daddy caring about a game more than his precious daughter, right?"

Her body halts, furious eyes looking back to me over her shoulder.

The classroom door clicks open, Dustin steps into the hallway. "I need both of you to get back in my classroom now." He remains watching us as neither of us move. "Seriously, whatever this is, hash it out later. The both of you obviously have plenty more to discuss. Cool off, then try and talk about it later."

But everything has been said. The silent glare she keeps on me speaks louder than any words ever will.

The day is finally over. After the fun conversation in the hallway, I'd hid out during lunch in my brother's classroom. I know things are in the shitter when I'd prefer a lecture instead of enduring the dining hall. And that lecture is the only thing that kept me on course to be here. Football practice. But it's not just that. There's part of me that wants to work out, push myself physically so maybe the mental garbage can be eradicated from my mind.

"Hey, dude. Where you been?" Neil calls across the field. And once I see the practice jersey he's wearing, I know the shit is getting deeper. All of it.

"What the hell are you doing here?" I motion to the fabric covering his chest.

He proudly bows up, pointing to the jersey then to the bench area. “That’s why I’ve been looking for you. I’m the new assistant equipment manager. Topher said the team really needed some extra hands, and Coach said I could do the job, so here I am.” He wiggles his fingers in front of him, and the level of excitement beaming from him twists my insides. There’s no way this will end well. Not when Topher, or possibly Morgan, is involved.

“What about science club? Don’t y’all meet up after school?”

“Yeah. But since it’s just me and one other student this year, we arranged to meet in the lab before school because it works better for her schedule also.”

Great. He has it all figured out. Except that it might implode at any moment. Am I just being paranoid? Glancing down the field, I spot exactly who I’m seeking out. Morgan. She’s standing in front of a group of her minions, all matching their leader—black athletic shorts, hunter-green sports bra. Football practice would be much more stress-relieving if I didn’t have to watch her cheer squad practice too.

She takes a quick glance in my direction, offering me only a scowl. That hallway convo really got to her, and it got to me too, but nothing usually gets to her stone-cold heart. When she smiles and waves at Neil, I know it’s still perfectly situated in place.

“You need to be careful,” I tell him as he happily waves to Morgan then gives me a weary look as I continue. “Don’t trust them. They’ll stab you in the back the second they have an opening.”

His shoulders slump forwards a bit, his face falling to the ground. “Because they can’t actually like me, right?”

Damn it. She’s already working her spell on him because I can sense him getting frustrated with *me*. “They don’t even like themselves. They use people. And the second you’re of no use, they turn on you.”

Morgan might be full of shit, but I know she's correct in her assessment of her father. He's only on my side because he needs me to win him a title. I need to keep a promise to my brother, show him I appreciate him. Even if we're each out for our own purposes, the difference is I don't want to make anyone suffer in the process. Not like her. Because even as she goes about her day, ignoring me and practicing with her little squad, I know she's still on top of her vile game. And it will take everything I have to not get knocked out of the match.

MORGAN

“Are we gonna practice or just keep standing here while you eye fuck Cade?” Ava bitches as she stands beside me and does that exact thing, homing her beady eyes in on Cade.

Even if I’m still pissed the fuck off at him for throwing Dad in my face, I don’t want Ava to get the impression that he’s fair game for her. Because he’s not. He’s mine. To torment. To make miserable. And use and fuck until I’m finished with him. And it shouldn’t be too difficult. Because he’s obviously a pathetic chump who’s still holding onto some part of the past. If he wasn’t, I wouldn’t be able to push his buttons so easily. Luckily, I’m not holding onto that same bullshit. The past is over. My plan is for the future. Whether he likes it or not, I’m Cade Crawford’s future. And this time, I will be the one who ends whatever the fuck he thinks we had.

But right now, I need to get through this miserable-ass practice. Why the fuck am I even cheering? Oh yeah, because it pisses off Ava since I hold the title she so badly covets—captain. I don’t give a flying fuck about being captain for myself, but possessing what she wanted was plenty of motivation. Plus, it doesn’t hurt to reiterate that I’m in charge of this god-awful place.

I study the new QB for a few seconds. The little I’ve seen him play, the more I understand why Dad wanted him to fill in so bad. Cade always had a knack for the sport, but I’d sorta hoped since he’d quit playing some of his talent had diminished a tad bit. Unfortunately, it doesn’t appear that way. But I can work with that. It’ll be that much sweeter to watch

him fall from the top. And that's what I'm gonna do. Let him rise all the way to the top of the kingdom only to bring his world crashing down around him. That's what he did to me, after all. Promised me forever then yanked it away before I even knew what hit me.

“Seriously, Morgan? Is that why we're on the field and not in the freaking air-conditioned gym? So you can keep tabs on your new fuckboy?”

“No need to keep tabs on what's already mine.” Even if I want to be far away from him at the moment.

A snicker leaves her mouth. “You might want to tighten the leash. Because last time I checked, it's not freshman year, and you two aren't fucking.” The satisfaction she seems to get out of that notion almost pisses me off more than Cade's correct assessment of my daddy issues. Fuck all of them.

“Not surprising since you miss the clear and obvious even when it's under your bought nose. How is Lenny by the way?” I can't put into words the satisfaction I get from how fast her cocky bitchface morphs into shock.

“He's great. I know what you're doing. You're trying to make me second-guess my boyfriend because you can't control yours.” It only takes me remaining silent with a slight smirk for three seconds because she goes into scared-bitch mode as she looks to Savannah then back to me with an exaggerated eye roll. “You're so full of shit, Morgan.”

Stepping in front of her, I keep a smile for a few seconds but can't hold in the observation any longer. “Then why are your hands shaking while you search out Lenny now? He's by the fence talking to my dad.”

Her worry morphs to frustration but she remains silent as she turns away from me. Because deep down in that empty head, she knows her boyfriend fucks every ho who'll give him the opportunity. And no matter how often she turns a blind eye to it, she knows it happens. Why she would want to bury her head in the sand, I'll never know and don't give half a shit to figure out. It's actually made some easy material to get to her

with. Cheer and Lenny have always been her weak spots. Time to push her other button now.

Calling everyone to get in formation, I hear Ava mumble to Savannah, “She’s such a waste of fuckin’ space.” Not hard to figure out the snub is directed at me since her furious stare is set on me. But just like an annoying mosquito that can’t make a real dent in draining blood from its host before getting swatted away, Ava doesn’t cut deep enough to even register on my radar. But I will be sure to register on hers.

I announce the first cheer and count us off. And it’s not long before we’re setting up for the partner stunt. My hands cradle Ava’s foot, lifting up before leveling off in a stable firm grip. But instead of maintaining my position, I release her shoe completely. She’s immediately thrown off balance and falls in the direction where I should be supporting her. Quickly reaching forward, I grip a handful of hair, catching her just before she falls to the ground. The other base, standing opposite of me, holds onto her arm, a look of alarm covering her face.

Ava’s shocked eyes look up to me as I tell her, “Good catch for a waste of fuckin’ space, right?”

The stupid bitch surprisingly figures it out quickly as she staggers to her feet, her hands moving into her hair. “What the hell? You dropped me on purpose. I could’ve broken my goddamn neck.”

A smile rises on my face at the thought. “You didn’t. Though, there’s always next time.” Stepping to her, I look over to where a majority of the players are watching us. Probably from the yelling. I maintain a calm but stern voice. “But remember, I’m the one in control of this shit because you weren’t good enough. If I wanted you to hit the ground, you would’ve. And if you have something to say to me, do it to my fuckin’ face.”

Ava tries to sustain her bitchy, superior look but fails as her hand quickly swipes her cheek, her eyes blinking rapidly. “You’re a fucking psychotic bitch.”

“Better than a weak, whiny one.” It’ll take more than words or even someone dropping me on my ass to make me cry. But I will admit it’s one of the many reasons I allowed her sorry ass to be a flyer while I opted for the base ... I don’t trust any of these bitches wouldn’t drop me on my ass given the opportunity. The difference is, I don’t allow them the chance.

I haven’t cried or let anyone get to me since the boy I gave myself to disappeared then returned only to pretend I didn’t exist. Since then, I’ve made sure to show him and everyone else that I’m in control. Because I am. Of myself and of them. Only the latter is more fun to fuck with because they allow me to do so easily. Glancing over at Cade, I move my hand in front of my mouth and motion like I’m blowing him a kiss. He’s given me a little more of a challenge than the others. And I can’t wait to break him too. To see his tears and then walk away like he’s nothing.

CADE

“What the hell are you doing, Crawford?” Otis shouts from the dock, his aggravated scowl on me.

Just fuckin’ great. I knew football would be the start of even more misery. “Sorry I’m late, boss. I had practice.”

“No shit, Sherlock. I know you have practice so what the hell are you doing on that damn boat?”

The obvious answer would be *Cleaning it—you know, my job*, but apparently my boss isn’t gathering that intel. “Just getting it cleaned and fueled up. The work order said Mr. Hebert is planning a fishing excursion on Wednesday.”

Otis gives me his you-stupid-morons-drive-me-crazy look before he shakes his head. “We’ll have you covered until football season is over. Get out of here, Cade.”

What the actual fuck? “Are you firing me?”

“Did I tell you that you’re fired?”

“No but telling me I can’t do my job isn’t any different.” There’re still months left in the season. We haven’t even had our first game yet. “I need this job.”

Shaking his head, Otis pulls a towel out from his pocket and swipes it across his forehead. “You’ll have a spot to come back to. Don’t worry.”

“I need it now, not later.” For more reasons than one. And thankfully, Otis gives in after a few seconds where he looks like he’s debating on something.

“Fine. But school and football come first. If you need to cut back, just let me know. I’ll get your shift covered.”

“Thanks, sir.” But there’s something that is really strange. “How did you know that I joined the team?”

“Your brother called to give me a heads-up that your schedule was gonna be a little different this year.”

“Yes, it is different.” Entirely. But as I made clear to Dustin, I tell Otis, “Ball won’t interfere with my work. I might need to work a little later than normal, but I’ll get everything done that needs to be taken care of. Guaranteed.”

“No doubt, but don’t forget to have a little fun, Crawford. Senior year.” Otis laughs, his eyes dropping to his feet. “Man, what I wouldn’t give to be young and stupid again.”

Not trying to fulfill the stupid part, I agree I might be young, but I don’t feel it. Even though my meddling brother tried to let me have a carefree childhood, something doesn’t sit right when Mommy runs off and Daddy is too busy drinking to bother raising a child. But still. Dustin had no right. I assure Otis once again that I’ll get everything done and go back to cleaning up the Hebert yacht.

“Hey, Cade.”

I look up to spot Ava standing on the deck. Fuck. Now Morgan has her minions on the job too. “Hey.” I go back to spraying off the deck and hope she’ll move on. But it’s not surprising when she doesn’t.

“Is this one yours?”

Laugh. That’s all I can do as I continue my job. Ava is more than aware of the fact that I work here because I’ve fueled up her family’s boat on more than one of their trips on the lake. Though it’s not anywhere near the beast I’m cleaning now. A machine that cost more than ten years’ worth of rent on our apartment. And it’s just a play toy. It’s nothing that I haven’t seen in the years I’ve worked here at the marina. But until recently, it’s never bothered me. And with these little tormenters rubbing it in, it’s even harder to ignore that my

brother and I are in the bottom percentage of Saint Juliet earners.

And Ava keeps on reminding me. “Maybe you can take me for a ride on it.”

I don’t have time or the mental capacity for this shit. Even if it were mine, there’s no way I’d be up for a joyride with her. “Cut the shit and move the fuck on. And tell your bitch leader I’ve had enough for today.” More than enough.

Ava gets a satisfied grin. “She *is* a fuckin’ bitch. But you’ll have to deliver the message to her yourself. We aren’t exactly on speaking terms since she dropped me on purpose at practice today.”

Ah. It looked like something was going on, but I didn’t care to know more details. And still don’t. I just wanted to keep an eye on Morgan to make sure she remained across the field and away from me and Neil. “Yeah. Well, I have to get back to work.”

“That’s right. I forgot you worked here.” I feel her eyes on me as I look back to her and she adds with a devious smile. “Silly me.”

I have half a thought to hurl my body overboard and hide under the muddy water, but I doubt that would deter this one. None of these princesses seem to get a hint, or even clear and plain instructions like *I want to be left the fuck alone*. And I definitely want them to keep me out of their mind games. Which is my next guess—Ava and Morgan are in some petty battle, and I’m the card Ava is trying to play against her rival. Count me the fuck out.

“Not interested in whatever your play is. Go away.” I continue on with my job, but Ava doesn’t move. *Shit*.

Stopping mid-swipe, I stand upright and clutch the cleaning rag in one hand while I look over to the girl who tries her best for a pitiful look and says, “I’m sorry. I was just trying to be nice.” With that, she slumps her shoulders and walks away.

For a split second, I feel a little guilty. But I waste not a moment longer than that because I have experienced plenty of Ava's wrath to know she's a carbon copy of Morgan King. And even a lesser, weaker copy is way too messy and fucking vile to deal with.

MORGAN

Finally. “Neil, over here,” I yell across the café. I know that pompous ass won’t be far behind him. But for now, I’m happy to watch Cade’s sidekick make his way over hesitantly, his fingers clinging his tray as he stops beside the table. “Saved you a seat.” I slap the spot beside me.

Neil eyes it for a few seconds, then carefully sets his tray on the table before dropping into the chair and eyeing Topher and his jock friends who all sit around. Ava sits across from me, her arms folded over her chest while Savannah attempts to bring us both into a conversation about some bullshit I don’t care about.

Because it’s then I spot him. Cade. And I don’t even have to invoke the second part of my plan to invite him over because he’s already heading in our direction. Topher actually moves over without a word, and Cade takes a seat on the opposite side of Neil, his tray dropping to the table with a thud, but Cade doesn’t touch his food.

“Okay. I need a final count for homecoming.” I glance around the table, receiving all confirmations, even from Ava who is a little hesitant, but she wouldn’t dare say no since that would mean she might miss out. But there are two who haven’t said a word, so I look to the easier one. “How about you, Neil? Are you in?”

“For what?”

“Homecoming weekend, silly. After the pathetic game”—I glare at Cade for a second before turning a smile back to Neil

—“the real fun starts. We’re gonna grab something to eat, then take a party bus to the dance, and then head back to the hotel.”

His nervousness eases up and his excitement takes over. “Yes. Definitely. I’ll be there.”

Perfect.

I glance to Cade who doesn’t look at all excited, but he won’t let his bitch boy out of his sight. “And what about Mr. Star Quarterback? Are you going to celebrate with your teammates after the big game?”

Cade remains silent as a few people at the table encourage him with a whoop to say yes, and his sidekick even helps out by saying, “Sounds like it’ll be fun.”

Oh, he’s even more pissed now. But he concedes and says, “Fine.”

“It will be so much fun.” The smile grows on my face as I say, “I need the money for your spot by next week. It’s two thousand a person.”

“Two thousand dollars?” Neil asks but it’s Cade’s face that tells me how ridiculous he thinks it is.

“Yep. That includes the room, drinks, party bus.” I let that sink in before I add. “But not food. Meals are extra.”

Cade lets out a low chuckle as he shakes his head. “Two grand, and the damn food isn’t even covered.”

Money. I knew it’d get to him. And even with that smug look on his face, I know he feels out of place. I glance around the table. “Doesn’t the restaurant give free bread?” Looking back to Cade, “So you can at least get some bread and water. And I can always toss you a few crumbs from my meal if your still hungry.”

“I’ll cover you,” Neil offers before Cade can respond. Even better.

“Aw. That’s so sweet of you, Neil. I’m sure Cade appreciates the charity.”

“It’s not charity.” Neil quickly looks to Cade. “Seriously, I owe you for the concert tickets. And my mom won’t mind. She likes you better than she does me anyway.”

Cade keeps his furious eyes locked with mine as he says, “No. I’ll pay my own way. Or better yet, I’ll just miss out on Morg’s weekend of making herself feel better with material shit because the *pathetic* football game is more important than her.”

Motherfucker. “Oh, Cade. Don’t let your ego get in the way of being part of the fun. I’m sure we can do a bake sale or car wash if it’d make you feel better than needing to have your friend pay your way.”

“If Daddy wasn’t paying your way, you wouldn’t be sitting on your little queen bitch pedestal.”

“Well, ask your daddy—or better yet, ask Mommy, and I’m sure they’ll give you anything you could ever wish for.” Bingo. His mom is the one thing he can’t get past. He always has some asshole response. Instead, he stands and leaves the table. His little follower on his heels. I’m not done, but it’s a start.

Everyone at the table is silent as I look around to see several sets of eyes on me. “What?”

“Talking about his mom, really? That was a bitch move,” Ava (of all people) says.

“That was me being nice.” There’s a lot more I could say where his mom is concerned, but I don’t. Right now, I’m content with barely scraping his nerves. It’s not time to implode his universe. Not yet.

CADE

“Wait up,” Neil calls from behind me.

Fuck. I don't want to talk to him right now because I feel it, the need to yell and curse, but it's not Neil who deserves that wrath. “I'll catch up with you later.”

“Cade, please.”

Shit. My feet stop involuntarily but I don't turn to face him. Neil steps in front of me, his eyes not meeting mine. “It's not a big deal, Cade. You know my stepdad doesn't care, and I was being serious, my mom likes you being around. You know, since she never is.”

And that's the only reason I agreed to go to begin with, so he wouldn't be there with all the asshats without me. But two thousand fucking dollars for a drunken weekend of fun. “I can't ask you to pay, and I don't have that kind of money to blow for kicks. I can't keep up with them, and you shouldn't want to.”

His face falls, his arms fold over his chest. “I know. But it's the first time in my life that I've felt included. When I informed my mom I was part of the football team, she was so excited. It's like the only thing she's ever acted that way about.” He turns to let his back hit the lockers. “She even said she was proud of me. She's never said that. Not even when I won the science fair two years in a row or got accepted for early admission to every university I applied to. But assistant equipment manager of the Wildcats football team?” He raises his eyebrows. “And when Morgan mentioned homecoming,

the first thing I thought about was what my mom would think about it. She was so popular in school and always wanted me to be part of that.” He stops for a second before he looks at me. “And I only am because of you.”

“That’s not true.” I want to kick all their asses—including his mom’s. She’s a fucking idiot for making him feel like this. “They need something from me. That’s the only reason they speak to me. They use people. They don’t even like each other, much less themselves. So get that garbage out of your mind. You’ve accomplished more in the last few years than those jackasses will in their entire lifetimes. Things that actually matter.”

He lets out a sullen chuckle. “Yes, because first place at the science fair is so important.”

“It is when you’re planning a career in science.”

He remains quiet for a beat before looking to me. “I’ll pay for yours. You don’t have to tell them it was me. No one has to know. But I really want my best friend there or it won’t be any fun anyways.”

Double shit. “Let me think about it.” Because there’s no way I’d feel right about taking his money, but I can’t dig into my savings just to impress those dicks. And even if I did, it would never be enough. I’d never be able to keep up with them, so there’s no point in trying. And a piece of me gets why Neil wants to be a part of their group, but the rest would rather be friends with a pit of vipers.

“Okay. Just let me know what you decide.” Neil turns and starts to walk away before he suddenly halts, his back to me as he says, “I’ll understand no matter what you decide.” Then he continues walking. And I know he thinks he means what he’s saying, but I have a feeling he wouldn’t understand if I bail. But I know I can’t.

“Cade.” *Shit. Here we go.* I hear my brother’s teacher voice before I turn to see his equally authoritarian stare. “We need to talk.” He nods in the direction of his classroom and heads inside. He didn’t wait for me to acknowledge him, but I decide to follow his lead because hiding in his classroom does

sound more appealing than being anywhere else in this hellhole right now.

Once I step inside his classroom, he instructs me to shut the door and shuffles some papers on his desk. He's nervous. No bossy teacher or big brother in sight. Damn it. I shut the door and move to the front row of desks, sliding on top of the one directly in front of his desk.

"What's wrong?" I ask, my body relaxed but my nerves are heightening the more I pick up on his unease. "Dustin."

"It's Dad. He's back in town and wants to see you." My brother finally looks at me. "I told him it was up to you, but he's saying it's important and he really needs you to hear him out."

"Of course he does." I let out a long, slow breath, my hands rubbing over my face. The piece of shit has nothing to say that I'll ever want to hear. "But I'm not interested."

"I figured as much." Dustin moves around his desk, his nervousness not lessening any.

"Is there something else?" I wait for a few seconds and watch him move around in silence before I ask again, "What are you not telling me?"

Dustin halts, looks over to me, and my stomach drops. I don't like the expression on his face because I've only seen doubt on him a few times. "You should speak with him about it."

"Not gonna happen. I'm asking you."

My brother slowly moves away out from behind his desk and carefully props against the one beside me, his arms fold over his chest. "Dad's down on his luck and doesn't have anywhere to go."

"Okay," I reply bluntly. Maybe a little too harsh from Dustin's shocked expression.

"That's it? No questions?"

Why is he confused about my reaction? "What am I supposed to say to that? 'Oh no, life isn't working out great for

the man who walked out on us. What can I do to make him feel better?”

“He’s our father.”

“Nothing has changed. I don’t have a father. He’s already dead to me. Sorry if that’s not what you wanted me to say.”

“I know. But I can’t just turn my back on him. It’ll only be temporary, but I told him he can stay with us until he figures something else out.”

I thought Dustin was crazy when he asked me to play ball. Now he’s asking me to play house with the man who walked out on us years ago. And before that, when he was around, he was nothing but a tyrant who wouldn’t lift a finger for his kids. In fact, whenever he did “lift a finger” it usually involved him putting his fist through the wall (when we were lucky) or into us (when we weren’t).

Looking to my brother, I attempt to control my rage but it’s pointless. He can’t be serious. He can’t fall for that piece of shit’s sob story. “Are you fucking serious right now? You’re actually helping him? Gonna feel sorry for him after everything he’s done?”

“Yes. No. I don’t know. I guess I’m just not ready to completely turn my back on him.”

“Why not? He did that to us. You think he’d give a damn if the situation was reversed? The bastard wouldn’t even give us a sober second of his time. Now I’m supposed to feel sorry for him and share a dinner table with him? Or hell, he might bail on supertime for some woman, and we won’t hear from him again until he decides to show up. Count me out. Fuck that and fuck you.”

Shoving off the desk, I head out of the classroom. And my brother lets me leave with not another word spoken between us, because this is so typical. The only thing we ever fight about usually involves the man who gave us life. But that’s where his impact on me stopped. Because everything I have is no thanks to him. And now, the one constant in my life, my brother, is on the wrong side regarding that worthless jackass.

How can a person who hasn't been around in years still make so many people miserable?

MORGAN

Where the fuck is Cade? Probably still pouting like he's been doing the last few days. I don't know what happened, but he's been less of an in-your-face asshole and more of a silent mope around school. I don't know what's gotten to him, but I need him to fight back. So far, every chance I've gotten, he's only walked away in a silent, disgruntled way. But after yesterday's uneventfulness, I made sure to secure some excitement for today. And it's about to get started.

"What is that face?" Ryder asks from beside me without looking up from his phone.

"Mind your business," I retort, but I know my brother usually recognizes when I'm scheming before I even do.

Ryder shifts beside me but doesn't look up from the device in his hand. "Morgan, it's too early in the damn morning for this shit."

"Does she have an off button any time of the day?" Ava mumbles, her stupid ass warming the bench on the opposite side of my brother.

"No," Ryder quickly responds. And he's right. So, they both might as well get the fuck over it.

Waving Neil over, I'm excited to see his silent brooding buddy a few steps behind. Even if Cade lingers, pretends not to socialize with us, I know he's listening and aware of everything going on around him.

"Here, I brought you a coffee." I pass Neil the beverage as he takes a seat beside me. "Just a way to say sorry for the

trouble yesterday. Just ignore him.”

“Ignore who?” Yep. Cade’s listening and zones right in.

“Oh, it was nothing. Just a misunderstanding.” Neil quickly brings the cup to his lips and takes a sip.

But Cade can’t let it go, which is exactly what I’d figured. “What misunderstanding?”

His glare is on me, but I don’t answer his question with anything but a slight smile. He remains silent for a few seconds until I look away and glance around the gym at everyone waiting for first period.

“Really, Cade, it was my fault.” Neil tries to defuse his pal, but I see Mr. Protector’s temper flaring. It’s amazing how much I can read him after all these years. Once I knew him as well as I knew myself, and though I might not know him as well now, I can still tell he’s barely holding his rage in.

“It wasn’t a big deal. I told Warren that it’d better not happen again, but Neil said he just lost his footing. Though I could’ve sworn that Warren tripped him on purpose.”

“He didn’t. I was walking to my seat and tripped on the desk. No biggie.” Neil rattles faster than I’ve ever heard him talk, but it wasn’t fast enough, because Cade is scanning the area and quickly locates his target across the room, propped against the wall, talking to his friends. Warren keeps glancing over at Cade, but it’s too late, he’s already headed his way. Neil darts out of his seat and follows behind.

“What did you do, Morgan?” Ava asks as she watches Cade and Neil make their way across the gym.

“Nothing yet.” I stand and make my way in their direction. No point in hurrying. I know how it’s gonna play out.

By the time I reach Cade, he’s already in Warren’s face. “If you even look at him again, I’ll break your fucking neck.”

Damn. Cade escalated much faster than I’d expected. Score.

Though Neil continues begging his friend to chill, it doesn’t work. Warren lets out a chuckle. “I can’t help if his

face hits the floor. Maybe tell your friend to watch his step.”

Cade reaches for Warren, grips his shirt, and shoves him into the wall. “And I can’t help if your fucking face hits my fist.”

Before Warren can react, Cade swings, connecting his knuckles to Warren’s mouth. Wow. Cade really spiraled faster than I’d predicted. So, I stand back and watch as the two idiots tumble to the ground. Warren gets in a good hit to Cade’s left cheekbone before Cade returns the blow then gets another good hit, delivered to Warren’s gut, before a few guys start pulling them apart.

Pity. They were just getting warmed up. But it doesn’t look like Cade was finished since he’s still going after Warren, yelling obscenities his way. For a second, I question why it was so easy to get him going. I mean, it’s never too hard to get under his skin, but he doesn’t completely explode so quickly. I don’t need to know the reason, even if it would come in handy for later, but I do want to enjoy the moment that the normally well-controlled asshole lost his temper and is now being hauled away.

“Was it worth it?” I hear Ava’s annoying voice ask from behind me.

Warren glances my way, blood trailing from a cut near his eye while a smile spreads across his face, and he gives me a quick nod. I return the gesture, and mouth “Perfect” to him in response for playing along. Warren was always up for a fight, but I’d thought it’d take a little more to get his opponent going. But Cade played right into my hands.

“Totally worth it.” Watching Cade lose control has been so satisfying. He wants to think I’m the out-of-control vile bitch. And I am—he’s not wrong. But he’s just as fucked up as I am. I simply choose to embrace my wickedness and not pretend to be some noble savior. I know they don’t exist and no one is coming to save me. I’ll save my fuckin’ self.

CADE

I hate this fucking place. I'm wishing for the walls to cave in on me when I hear the door open. And when I spot the trio walking in, I wish the entire fucking place would implode with me in it.

Coach King moves quickly across the office and takes a seated position on the edge of the principal's desk as Mr. Thatcher resumes his seat. For some godforsaken reason, Morgan drops into the chair beside me. Why the fuck is she in here?

Coach is the first to speak. "Are you all right, Cade? Is your arm good?" Coach leans forward a bit and does a visual assessment of my bloody knuckles that are balled into a fist on my thigh. "How's your hand? Can you move it okay?"

What the actual fuck is happening? "It doesn't matter," I say flatly.

"Of course it does!" Coach exclaims, his hands waving around before gesturing to me. "The first game is tomorrow, and we need you to be one hundred percent."

Is he fucking high? Or maybe I am. "The game?" I look between my coach and my principal. "Am I not being kicked out of school? Because last time I got in a fight, you told me it was my final warning before getting expelled." Is that what I'm hoping for? To be done with all of this without the option to ride out the year as their puppet?

"Nonsense." Thatcher waves off the notion like I'm the one who's crazy, but that really had been his warning the last

time I sat in this office. If I got into another fight, that was it. My brother being a teacher didn't make a difference according to him. But I guess being a goddamn football player is really the magic key.

"The entire thing appears to be a mistake that won't happen again," Coach implores Principal Thatcher. "Even Warren agreed, and Morgan vouched that it was simply a big misunderstanding."

I take the moment to look over at the vixen who has an innocent and concerned expression on her face, so I know she's here to further my torment. It was her who'd incited the entire *misunderstanding* when she said what Warren had done to Neil. She wanted me to know what he'd done. Had she planned it? I wouldn't put anything past the psycho. "Yeah. I'm sure Morgan knows *all* about it."

The slight smirk that peeks at the corner of her mouth confirms what I'd suspected. She waved her bitch flag, and someone did her dirty work for her.

"And she's graciously volunteered to bring you to the clinic for a checkup. They're expecting you and know to take a look at your arm."

"I'm fine," I respond, my focus still on the demon beside me.

"Let's be sure." Coach stands and starts to walk out the door. "I'll be in touch. Call me if you need anything."

The three of us sit in silence for a minute before Thatcher folds his hands over his desk and looks to me. "Take the rest of the day to relax after you're finished up with the doctor. The absence won't count against you." The man who usually lectures me with a condescending tone is giving me a warm smile and acting like he actually gives a shit about my well-being.

"You should just save us all the trouble and expel me." My comment draws a laugh from Morgan. "You know you'd miss us, Cade."

Leaning towards her, I look her straight in the eye and say, “No, I wouldn’t. I never have before. Walking away is the easy part. Coming back is the bitch of it all. So, keep that in mind.”

Shoving out of the chair, I hear Thatcher spew some bull about making sure to get my arm looked at while Morgan follows on my heel as I make my way out of the school and to my truck.

I stop and turn to face her. “You actually think I’d go along with this after that fucking stunt you pulled this morning?”

“I don’t know what exactly you’re talking about, but I promised my dad I’d help you to the clinic. You know, star QB has to be in prime condition for his strings to be pulled tomorrow night.” Her patronizing smirk sends my nerves into overdrive.

As I quickly step in front of her, causing her back to press against my truck, but she remains relaxed even with me having her pinned in place. “The only bitch pulling my strings is you. You knew exactly what you were doing in there. Leave Neil out of your mindfuck. He doesn’t deserve any of this, you heartless wench.”

Her smile only grows as she looks up to me, her eyes blinking a bit from the bright sunlight I’m guessing. Or maybe the poison inside her is finally at max capacity and seeping out of her. “Do you think it bothers him that you find him so weak and pathetic?”

I move closer to her, removing the little space between us. Her chest presses into mine, her hands grip my shoulders, her venomous grin remains constant. She knows I won’t hurt her. But I know she will obliterate me—physically, emotionally, mentally, any and every way I allow. “A bitch who preys on others is the real pathetic one. Find a new fucking target, or I’ll make sure you experience feeling exactly as worthless as you really are.”

Her amusement wavers for a split second before her hands slide under my jacket and move around my back as she leans forward. “You’ve already done that years ago. And you won’t ever have the chance to do it again.” Her lips press against my

cheek before she shifts back, her malicious eyes waiting for my reaction.

“If I did it once, I’m sure I can find a way to destroy your empty soul again. Until then, go tell Daddy you failed to deliver on the only use he had for you today, because I’m not going anywhere with you.” Stepping back from her, I pull my door open, and start to slide into the calmness of my truck.

“You’re running away again. Not surprising since you come by it naturally.”

I stop long enough to catch the smug look on her face before I slam my truck door shut and do actually that—run away. It’s better than being here with her.

Morgan remains standing in place, her arms folded over her chest as she watches me drive away. I expect her to wave a hand and send some witchy spell that’ll blast my truck from the pavement. Or maybe I’m only hoping she would. At least then I’d know she has some voodoo powers that cause her to be a terror. It would really make a ton of sense if there were some explanation for how truly evil she is.

One thing that grumbles in my head is her saying I made her feel worthless years ago. She wasn’t then. She used to be everything to me. I’d been the reckless piece of shit who’d had his reality shattered ... then I destroyed what was left on my own.

But now, neither of us are worth a damn.

MORGAN

That's right. Run, you scared little bastard. He might dish it out, but he sure as fuck can't take it.

Heading back into school, I go straight to the athletics area and find Dad in his office. Paul paces around, his arms flailing in the air. Dad actually looks like the calm one as opposed to his assistant coach and sorry excuse for a gym teacher.

I stand in the doorway and watch the two of them until Paul stops ranting and homes in on me. "What now, Morgan?"

"Where's Cade?" Dad glances behind me.

"He bailed. Guess the game isn't as important to him as it is to the two of you." Not shocking, though relatable. I'm down with Cade's standpoint more than the two grown men in here who are worried more about a high school football game than anything else. Though I think Paul's motivation is scoring some big promotion or, maybe just as importantly to him, some praise from Dad. He's been a mere peon who's been kissing Dad's ass long before they coached together at Saint Juliet.

Paul stares at Dad. "I told you I should have gone with him and not trusted her to get anything practical accomplished."

I tilt my head to the side and take a few seconds to do an evaluation of the prickly perv. "I get things accomplished just fine. Can't say the same from the little I know about your performances."

His face pales a bit as my satisfaction rises. Yeah. I've heard he's a shitty lay who has to go down on his conquests to

get the job done. But even more, I know his failed undertaking was with someone who should be off-limits considering she's underage and a student. When he remains silent with a bit of panic on his face, I enjoy it even more by adding, "What? No rebuttal? Pussycat got your tongue?"

Dad isn't entertained by the conversation, and Paul definitely seems ready to halt the discussion, which he does as he heads to the door. Stopping briefly, he shoots me a pleading look that says *Please stop talking*. I will ... since there's nothing for me to gain at the moment.

Moving to the chair in front of Dad's desk, I drop down and continue the conversation, knowing he'll just ignore me until I go away. "I need all the players to show up at the pep rally tomorrow." Mostly I mean Cade, but I'll leave that out for now. Dad will likely protect his prodigy.

"We'll try. The first game is tomorrow night so there's a lot going on." Dad presses a few buttons on his phone then holds it to his ear for a minute. "Cade isn't answering. I was counting on you, Morgan. How did you just let him run off not knowing if he's injured or not?" Dad taps the glass screen of his phone a few more times as he adds, "Hopefully Crawford will do the smart thing and get checked out."

"Yeah. God forbid the football god be less than tip-top for his big return to the game."

That gets Dad's attention. "It's his first time in a game in three years," he intones, finally glancing my way. "It is a big deal for all of us. We've worked hard to make sure he's ready to get back out there. And a little support from you shouldn't be too much to ask." Dad shoves up from his chair and hurries out the door as he adds, "If you hear from Cade, let me know ASAP."

"Whatever," I mumble and stay in the chair. This office isn't my fave place, but it's better than being in a classroom right now. Maybe if I sit here long enough, I can figure out why throwing around a ball is so important to my dad and why nothing else compares.

The band starts playing while I lead the team in our coordinated pom routine as Principal Thatcher announces, “Give a big welcome to this year’s varsity Wildcats!” Someone should really tell the prick that there’s no need to yell when he’s using a damn microphone, but he goes at it again. “Mighty, mighty Wildcats, let’s roar!” Again, what the fuck does my mom see in him? If she’s gonna fuck around, at least make it make sense.

The idiots around the gym aren’t helping as they shout and yell to encourage the moron to keep going. He starts into some wanna-be motivational speech, but I only focus on one Wildcat. And he’s doing everything in his power to avoid looking my way, which gives me too much gratification. Especially when it’s time for us to take center stage. We do a cheer and the crowd’s energy remains electric as I move to Thatcher and unhand the mic from him.

“Let’s give the team one more cheer because we need them to beat the Oilers tonight. And it’s all on Cade Crawford to lead the Wildcats to victory.” I peek to the side and give him a smile. “And we know he won’t let us down.” I make my way over to him, grab his hand, and guide him to the center of the gym. I keep my hold on Cade but feel him trying to pull away discreetly.

“What the hell are you doing?” he mutters for only me to hear.

I response in a hushed whisper, “Being your good luck charm.” I hear a few mumbled curses from him as I lift the mic back up and speak. “We all know how these football guys have their superstitions. Well, I happen to know Cade has never stepped onto the field without a good luck hug from his mom. And since she’s not here to do it for him, I figured I’d be the one to wish him good luck.”

It takes one second to register the fury flowing off of him as I lean over and hug him. I hold the mic back up and say

“Good luck, Boo-Boo Bear” before leaning forward to place a kiss on his cheek.

Every muscle in his body is tense, constricted under my touch, and I’m anticipating him exploding in anger. But he doesn’t. He remains solid as a stone statue while the crowd booms around us. Thatcher walks over and takes the mic back so he can go over a few quick reminders about the game tonight before the band strikes up the Wildcat fight song.

Since the band usually only plays that song after a touchdown, I shift over to whisper-yell in Cade’s ear, “Doubt we’ll be hearing that much tonight.” When I move back, his blazing eyes are locked with mine, but he still doesn’t say a word. I stand there, remaining in a stare down with him.

He probably thinks this is the worst part of the day. But it’s only gonna go downhill from here. I know he’s not been on the field since his mom bailed. And tonight he’ll face that head-on, and I’ll be sure to remind him at every turn how he’ll never be good enough to carry this team, or my dad’s championship dreams, on his shoulders. He will fail. I’ll make sure of it.

CADE

I thought the ride to the country club that day was the worst. I was wrong. Because steering towards the school and keeping my truck pointed in the correct direction is harder. I know there's nothing good that awaits me—win or lose—and my loyalty to my brother is hanging on by a thread considering I haven't been home in days because of the son of a bitch I'd be sharing air with. I knew Dustin was the nice one between the two of us, but I hadn't realized exactly how much of a pushover he truly is. I wouldn't have an ounce of guilt letting my father sleep under the nearest overpass.

Sadly, my truck pulls into the student lot way too soon. It's hours before the game, but I'm already done. Looking down at the place, Morgan's vile face swarms my mind. Part of me doesn't want to give in because she'll know she's won. But fuck. I'm ready to just let her have it and take the L. I know I can't compete with that queen of the underworld. But I'd hoped she'd get bored with me quickly. But from her torment and going after Neil, I worry she's just getting revved up.

Grabbing my bag, I head to the locker room, thankful to avoid the fire-breathing bitch. Once I arrive at my locker, I realize I've not gotten away from her and probably never will. My locker is decorated with green and gold sparkly shit and a handwritten note that says *Nothing will stop Boo-Boo Bear!* To anyone else, it's a sweet, encouraging message. To me, it's a bleak sentiment that the snake purposefully spewed in an attempt to throw me off. Morgan knows it's the last thing my mom said to me, her final parting words when she dropped me off at practice. What a bitch. Balling the paper up in my fist, I

toss it to the side, not giving a fuck where it lands. One day I'm gonna lose it and tell her exactly what to do with her torment. But the more I react, the harder she'll push.

I pull on my pads and uniform then drop down onto the metal bench nearby, leaning against the lockers as the other players laugh and joke around. They're my teammates but I've never felt so out of my element as I do in this moment.

"Crawford, we've got this!" Topher hoots from across the room, jogging my way as he holds up his fist and waits for me to return the gesture. After a moment when I don't, his hand falls to his side. "Come on, bruh. This is the beginning of our perfect season."

"And what if it isn't?" I already know the answer. Then the buddy act will drop real fast. But he doesn't say that and instead sits beside me, slinging an arm over my shoulder as he says, "Then we enjoy the ride we get."

The ride I'm on feels like an old wooden coaster that hasn't been operational in nearly twenty years, only now it's on fire too. And as much as I try, I can't get a good grip on the ride's course, am unable to predict the dips. Fuck. *Don't puke, Cade.* That would not be a great start to my first time back on the field. At least for a legit regulation game. I've played a few games here and there over the years but nothing that actually mattered. Those were for fun. They didn't remind me of my mom. Fuck. I'm gonna puke.

Leaning forward, I drop my head between my shoulders and take a deep breath. *It's just a fucking game. It's just a fucking game.* Repeating the mantra in my head doesn't help. Because this has nothing to do with the game, nothing to do with winning or losing. It has everything to do with what I never wanted to think about again. The moment I realized Mom was gone and never coming back.

Shoving off the bench, I head out the door and into the hallway that leads to the gym. No matter which direction I go, it feels like it will be the wrong one.

"Cade." I turn to see Neil slowly approaching me. "Hey, are you all right?"

“Yes.” I swipe a hand over my face and rub the sweat off my forehead. “Yeah. I’m good.”

“I know it’s none of my business, but you can talk to me if you want.” Neil hesitates for a second before he continues, “Between the game and what Morgan did at the pep rally, I know it can’t be easy.”

I stay silent and watch as he becomes more uncomfortable. I’ve talked about my mom with him very little—or with anyone for that matter—but he knows the bullet points. “I’m good. It’s a lot of bullshit for something that doesn’t even matter.”

“It matters, Cade.” Neil’s tone is filled with sincerity.

He really is a great friend that I don’t appreciate enough. “Thanks, man. I’m good. Really.” At least I will be. Because I won’t let my mother or Morgan derail what I need to accomplish. This game is not a must in my world. But right now, it feels more like I need to prove to myself that I can do this above all else.

“Well, I’m gonna help get the hydration station set up. If you need anything, I’m the dude to see. Water, juice, Gatorade, Wildcat Fuel that tastes like chalk. Just let me know.”

I actually let out a genuine chuckle and take a second to see how truly happy Neil is. Hopefully he gets to enjoy it and no one—namely Morgan—ruins that for him. Neil is almost through the locker room door before he turns around and comes back out, stopping a few feet away from me.

“If it’s not a beverage and you just need to talk, I’m still your guy. It wasn’t right what she did to you. Your mom, I mean. She shouldn’t have left you. It was a selfish choice, but if I’m totally honest with you, there is part of me that is selfish too. Because I can’t help but think that if she hadn’t left, we wouldn’t be friends. You would’ve stayed being a jock and never would have wandered in the bio lab to hide out all those times.”

All I can do is nod. Because I’d never thought of it that way. Life would be so much different had Mom stayed. I can’t

be positive, but I'm almost certain I would've kept playing ball and continued dating Morgan. Neither of those things have been a part of my life since my mother left. And for a few seconds, I'm grateful for her walking out of my life too. She freed me of her and of what a psycho Morgan would become. No, she hadn't been that person years ago. But there had to be something malevolent deep within her even then. Because you don't do and say the things that she does if you're a decent human being.

But there is definitely a silver lining, and he's named Neil. A smile rises on my face as I think of the kid who'd kept working on his science experiment, ignoring me for the first few weeks, before finally asking me if I wanted to hear about it. I didn't. But I did want to be his friend. And now he's my best friend.

Pushing off the wall, I suck up the pity I feel for myself and channel it into anger to fuel my determination on the field and crush this damn game. My mom can leave me. Morgan can torment me. But neither can control me unless I allow them, so they both need to get the fuck out of my head.

I'm mostly able to keep them out after that. There were a few seconds when we ran out of the tunnel where I caught sight of Morgan lined up with her minions as they cheered us on. But after that flash of the demon, I turn my back to her, my mind focused. Every urge I have to search her out is resisted. I don't know why I feel the need to locate her position. There's not any good reason, other than I want to get a feel of where she is and make sure she's not sneaking up behind me to put a knife in my back.

But once I'm on the field for the coin toss and the opposing team calls heads, they lose as the coin lands on tails. We opt to defer, and I note that my mind stays on topic better than I expected.

Lenny kicks to the Oilers and they get the ball on the fifteen-yard line, but their quarterback isn't able to match our defense and fails to gain the first down. Once they punt it to our receivers, it's time for me to take the field. The noise level of the stadium heightens as our offense takes the field. We get

in our formation as the play clock winds down. The snap is made with seconds left. The ball barely touches my fingers before I hand it off to Topher, who gains three yards. It's progress. Not enough but something.

The next play will be the real test. The one where I'll see if I can do this. The one that'll set the pace for my season. Because it's the first pass I'm throwing in a legit game. If it's intercepted or misses my target completely, the botched play will be on my mind every single throw afterwards.

Zulich hikes the ball to me and my fingers cling to it as I shuffle a few steps back, scanning where the receiver should be. And he is there, being covered one-on-one by a defense player.

It's now or never, because I can feel the defensive tackles closing in, my linemen can only protect me for a limited time. My arm works almost of its own accord, releasing a pretty spiral in a practiced fluid motion. The speed and aim look good as it flies through the air. Topher moves slightly to his right and catches the ball then brings it to his chest as the Oiler's cornerback wraps his arms around him, and they both go out of bounds at the thirty-two-yard line.

We're still in Wildcat territory but we got the first down. I hit the intended target. That's all I needed. We quickly move to the line of scrimmage and our center snaps the ball. I fake a handoff to Becks before shuffling back to get a view of the field. The play was for me to hit Smith who's around the fifty-yard line. But Topher is wide open, deep in Oiler territory.

Go for it, Crawford. Why the fuck not? I can do this shit. I walked away from this game, but the game is the only thing that never let me down. Seconds later, the ball is out of my grip and gliding down the field. It's a little overthrown, but Smith reaches up as he jumps into the air, his hands gripping the ball before pulling it down. Securing it in his elbow and holding it against his chest, he takes off running. There's a guy on his heels, but he's too fast. Smith's in the end zone before the Oiler's safety can stop him.

Touchdown. Three downs into the damn game and the fight song is blaring through the stadium as the crowd shouts and claps for us.

Jogging off the field, I pull my helmet off as I make my way to the sideline. This is the moment I can't resist any longer and search her out. The squad is doing a coordinated dance to the fight song, which Morgan said we wouldn't hear much. And she doesn't seem happy to be proven wrong as she stands unmoving, a pissy glare pinned on me, while the others perform around her. If being good at ball pisses her off, I might enjoy playing this damn game the rest of my life. But I still would rather avoid the vixen at all costs. But I can't help but rub this moment in a little deeper. Lifting my arm, I clench my fist, raising only my index finger as I move it in a circular motion.

Yep. She remembers. But to my surprise, she's not pissier from the gesture. Instead, there's genuine shock covering her face for a few seconds before she's able to slide her bitch mask back into place. It might not have been the wisest move since it doesn't mean shit now. But it meant something back then. And now I know for certain there's something in that black soul of hers that can be reached. But I can't be the one who captures it. Because I might've just signed *forever* to her. But there's nothing ahead for us together. Not now, not ever, much less forever.

MORGAN

“What’s your problem?” my brother asks as we walk up to Neil’s house. The party is already in full swing, and most of the school is celebrating the big win. One that was way too easy for Cade to claim. He looked like a natural. In his element. And he’d felt it too. Why else would he have done that goddamn signal to me? The one that used to actually mean something. Now he’s using it to taunt me and that pisses me the fuck off.

“I’m fine. Just ready to get a fucking drink.” And dish out a little return torment to the dickhead who I know will be here at his little friend’s house.

“Yeah. Okay.” Ryder laughs. “I’m going to meet Harrison by the pool. Try not to get into too much trouble, I’d like to enjoy at least a few minutes with him before all hell breaks loose.”

A real smile rises on my face as I study my brother and realize it’s the first time he’s admitting that he’s been talking to Harrison. I’d noticed signs that they’d hit it off after my matchmaking skills helped him out at Crescent Fleur, but Ryder has yet to mention anything directly to me. “You’re welcome by the way.”

“I never said thank you.” Ryder lifts his finger and flips me off. “But I might be a little grateful for the initial icebreaker.”

“Like I said, you’re welcome.”

“Like I said, I never said thank you, so don’t meddle again, Morgan, or I might have to do the same and get involved with

you rekindling things with Crawford.”

“Yeah. That’s under control but there’s no rekindling shit.”

“Alrighty.” Ryder chuckles as we make our way into the house, heading for the kitchen. “Speak of the devil.” When Ryder does some friendly fist-bump-handshake thing with Cade, his name goes right to the top of my shit list for fraternizing with the enemy. He’s not supposed to be friendly with the prick, but I might be able to use that to my advantage later. It still annoys me though.

Everyone loves Cade Crawford so fucking much. Mr. Protector. Mr. Stellar Quarterback. Mr. I Look Good Enough to Fuck. Cade fucking Crawford—my nightmare.

Ryder stands by for a second, no doubt to further my torment for me giving him shit about Harrison as he says, “Maybe you can get her to cheer up because she’s been bitchier than normal.”

“Doubt anyone can adjust that attitude. Least of all me.” Cade lifts a beer bottle to his mouth and takes a swallow.

“Oh, you adjust it all the time. For instance, you just sent it plummeting to the pits of hell.”

“Good. That’s where you belong.” Cade’s lips curl into a smile as he takes another drink of his beer.

“Oh, come on,” Ryder chimes in. “You two have lots of making up to do. There’s no substitution for history.” Ryder grabs a drink for himself, and instead of dropping it and moving on to Harrison outside, my brother keeps on going. “Didn’t y’all have some top-secret flashlight signal or something? I tried to learn it, but y’all were too good at keeping it a secret. Like a secret code between only the two of you lovebirds.”

“I don’t remember any of the signals we used to give each other.” I can tell he knows I’m full of shit. I remember the one he gave me on the field tonight, and he registered it right away. I grab the bottle from his hand. “Wasn’t anything worth remembering.”

His eyes drop to my mouth, watching as my lips touch the rim and I take a swallow of his beer.

Ryder is finding this a little too enjoyable. “Sure. That’s why the fuckin’ tension right here is as thick as your skull, Morgan.”

I glance to the back of the house towards the patio. “Don’t you have a date waiting for you by the pool?”

“Yep.” Ryder holds his beer up in the air in a toast that no one returns. “You two try not to murder each other.” Then he walks off, disappearing into the crowd.

“No promises.” The music seems to grow louder, and my nerves seem to be wearing thinner as Cade and I remain in our absurd stare down.

Cade grabs another beer, twists the cap off, and downs it before his lips stretch in a smile and he tilts his face slightly up to look at me. “I should be safe tonight since you never were any good at keeping promises.”

“Boo-fucking-hoo. Your whiny bitch routine isn’t surprising seeing as how you’ve got all those pent-up mommy issues.”

He shifts closer to me, his face near mine as he says, “Keep her out of your mouth. The only issue I have is I want to forget her as much as I want to forget you.”

“Ah, poor baby is still deeply wounded from the past. Will Mommy coming back to kiss and make it better help?”

He shifts away, his eyes trailing over my legs and the dress I’d purposely picked to get his attention. Not that I’d ever admit that to him. But it’s working because his gaze lingers a little longer than necessary on my thighs before he looks back to my eyes. “At least I’m not the one who pushes their misery onto others because I can’t handle being a worthless bitch.” He leans forward and whispers in my ear, “Your daddy told me how proud he was of me after the game. How my performance tonight made him prouder than he’s ever been.”

Motherfucker. I move back enough so my mouth is near his as I say, “At least your performance was able to satisfy

someone.”

I watch as most of the arrogance fades from his face. A hooting yell sounds from behind us as a few jocks crowd around. Topher is the one who moves beside Cade, smacking his shoulder. “That game was fire. I can’t wait for next week.” Topher throws his arms in the air and yells, causing a few people to turn and join in on the silly celebration.

I just stand there and watch as the idiots all brag on their skills. “It was one win. Don’t get too excited just yet.” I walk past Cade before looking back over my shoulder to him. “Stamina’s never been Cade’s strong suit.”

Laughter breaks out along with an “oh” and “damn” and “ouch.” But it’s his harsh glower that allows me enough happiness to walk away for a while. He’s not going anywhere. It’s Neil’s house, so he wouldn’t leave his precious friend alone with all of us evil villains. Cade won’t leave him unprotected.

I need a stronger drink—that shitty beer Cade was drinking did not hit the spot—before we go at it again for round two. Which leaves me wondering how his stamina actually is now. It wasn’t bad back then. And something tells me he’d be able to more than satisfy the need I’m feeling at the moment. Because all I want is a good fuck and to get off. He’ll either give me what I need or prove my point that he can’t hang. Win-win if you ask me. He had his victory on the field earlier. It’s my turn to win my game now.

Stepping onto the patio, I quickly spot Ryder talking with Harrison. My brother gives me a don’t-you-dare-come-over-here look, but he doesn’t have to worry. I flip him the middle finger then walk off in the opposite direction to a bar lined with drinks and skim over the selection to find a full, unopened bottle.

“What can I get for you, Morgan?”

“Who are you?” I ask the dude playing bartender, though I don’t really give a fuck.

“Gabriel. I’m in a few of your classes. And I’m on the team.”

“Of course you are.” All these stupid motherfuckers are on the fucking roster for Dad’s magnificent team.

“I can make you a drink. Just don’t tell Coach.”

I grab a bottle of whiskey and a shot glass. “Fuck off.”

There’s a hint of embarrassment on his face as I turn and walk away. I head to where Ava is sitting on a lounge chair and stop beside her. “Get up.” She doesn’t move, ignoring my presence altogether. Not a problem. I’ll have her attention soon enough.

I shift to the chair beside her and drop down into Lenny’s lap. Her boyfriend never misses a beat as he continues talking to Zulich. Further, his hand slides up my back, massaging my shoulder.

I don’t attempt to hide my smile as I watch Ava’s expression grow from shocked to irate as she jumps up out of her seat. “Are you fucking serious right now?” Only she’s not asking me, her fury is aimed at Lenny.

I take a look back at him. His face may express confusion, but he totally knows what she’s furious about. “What’s wrong, babe?”

“You know exactly what’s wrong.” She takes a second to give me her best angry stare then stomps off. Lenny curses under his breath, grips my hips a little too comfortably as he gently guides me off his lap, and sets me on the lounge chair he was just occupying. “Let me go unwind her cunt string.” He looks down at me. “Unless you’d like to unwind with me instead.”

“Not a fucking chance.” I already got all I needed from him. He was only a tool to piss Ava off and show her I could break her if I wanted. I won’t. Mainly because I don’t want Lenny’s grimy hands on me. Even I have my limits, and I’d rather fuck that bartending bitch than Ava’s fuckstick.

Lenny can’t take no for an answer and says, “Offer still stands,” before coolly walking off in the direction his hostile

girlfriend disappeared in.

Finally. They're both out of sight, so I recline back on the lounge, opt to not use the shot glass, and take a swig directly out the bottle. Scanning the partygoers, I spot a few dumbasses that I have no use for and don't feel like searching out the ones I do have a use for at the moment.

I'm tired. This shit sucks. I never get this tired, but tonight I'm fucking done. So, I take in the party from my spot, drinking whiskey until its effects finally start to grip my intrusive thoughts. Most of the time, I welcome them. Right now, I just want to sleep. What the fuck is up with that? I've only been here for maybe an hour or so. Usually, I'm just getting started about this time. All this bullshit isn't enough to hold my attention anymore.

And for a few seconds, I wonder what life will look like next year wherever the hell I decide to go. I have options, though none are appealing at the moment. I don't believe any are really going to make me happy. Because I'm never happy. Cade is right about one thing: I'm a miserable bitch who loves to drag others into the shit too.

Shoving off the chair, I keep the bottle tightly clutched in my hand and make my way back into the house. Not spotting any of the assholes I'm searching for, I walk to the rear of the kitchen and head up the back staircase that leads to what looks like a formal living area. People are situated around it, and there's one that catches my attention immediately.

Cade.

He's on the opposite side, perched against the pony wall. His attention fixated on something on the other side of the partition. Walking over, it takes me two seconds to spot what he's viewing. Neil is sitting with Savannah. They both look very interested in knowing more about each other.

Neil looks like he's making a move, his mouth next to her ear as he whispers something to her. She laughs and playfully slaps at his chest. He's so fucking awkward, but it looks like it's working because her hand is on his thigh, and I can say for

damn sure she wouldn't be doing that if she didn't feel some kinda way about him.

“Looks like your buddy has better game than you.”

Cade turns his body to directly face me but motions with his head towards his lovesick buddy. “Did you do that?”

“Do what?” I have a feeling I know what he's talking about, but I really can't take credit for this one.

He takes a step closer, and I stand my ground, his face stops only inches from mine. “You know exactly what I'm talking about. I swear to God, Morgan, if you're doing this to fuck with me, I *will* end you.”

I tsk-tsk, shaking my head slightly as a smile stretches across my lips. There's been no effort from me to hammer his button this time, but here he is, all puffed up. “I didn't do anything. But I find it funny that you think Neil can't get his own girl without it being about you.” I glance down at Savannah and Neil, they are oblivious to what's being discussed about them.

Looking back to Cade, I give him a pitiful look. Because he is pathetic. “Maybe you should stop hovering and give him the chance to have a friend other than you. Or just go tell him you don't believe he can secure pussy on his own and cockblock him all the way out of the game tonight.” I raise the whiskey bottle up and take a swig. Before I step away, I grasp his hand and lead him back with me. Shockingly, he stiffly follows without complaint but keeps a suspicious eye on me as I guide him to sit down on the sofa and climb on his lap. I hold the bottle to him. “Want some?”

He roughly snatches the bottle out of my hand then drinks down a few large gulps. Fuck. He's going hard tonight. And not just on the drink. I rock my hips, feeling him under me. His head turns to the side as he flings the bottle to the floor.

“I wasn't done with that.” I lean forward, pressing my ass into his lap. “Guess I'll have to taste it from your tongue.”

And he allows me, though his guard is still in place, but he's definitely into this as much as I am. His body leaves no

doubt as his hips lift up and his hands control my hips, pressing me against his hard cock. When his mouth meets mine, his tongue moves with a desperation I feel in my core.

Breaking away from the kiss, I move forward, his lips trail down my neck as my hands grip his shoulders and hold tight as I rock against him. Fuck. How does he feel so good and all we're doing is dry humping? Maybe I shouldn't take it all the way with him, because in this moment, I'm questioning if I'll get enough and be able to walk away. Ugh—his mouth, his hands, his touch are all making me feel better than anyone else has in a long time. Even those years ago when we were both inexperienced, I'd felt it.

This is just sex, Morgan. That's all it will ever be.

His hand moves over my dress, one coming up to cup my breast, the other in my hair as he pulls me to his mouth. Suddenly, he breaks away, his breathy words floating over my throbbing lips. "I can't do this."

Good. At least he's still fighting against what he wants and believes he shouldn't, struggling to resist me. That'll make it even sweeter when he caves and gives in to what we both want. "And why is that?" I lean forward, my tongue trailing over his jawline as I feel the muscle tense.

"Because we're in the middle of a goddamn party." His words are saying one thing but his hands are communicating another. He holds me to him still, fingers digging into my hips, and it don't feel like he cares to release me or put a stop to our public display.

"I don't mind spectators." I lick my way down his neck, then prop my arms on his shoulders, my hands sliding into his hair as my hips slowly sway and move against him, my mouth next to his ear. "What's really holding you back?"

"Because it's you," he admits, and that's when I know I've won.

Covering my mouth with his, I kiss him for a minute before I break away. My fingers work the button of his jeans until I get them unfastened. "Tell me you don't want to fuck

me.” Dragging the zipper down, I reach inside his jeans as he turns his head to the side. His body tenses beneath me when I take his cock in my hand, then, stroking him, I rub my panties against him. “Tell me, Cade.”

He lets out a frustrated groan. And fuck, I know the feeling all too well. I’m ecstatic that he’s feeling it too, because I need him to give in to me. There’s no way either of us can deny the other tonight.

“I didn’t hear you, Cade.” I move my hand up and down his length, our eyes are locked, and his gaze is fierce as he stares at me. Suddenly, his hand grips my wrist to stop. For a second, I think he’s going to end everything. But I’m thankful as fuck when he releases my wrist to move his hands under my ass. Grasping ahold, he ensures a good grip and lifts me as he stands.

Walking across the room and down a hallway without a word, he carries me while I remain latched onto him. He steps into a bedroom and kicks the door shut behind us. Apparently, he doesn’t prefer spectators. I can deal with that.

Surprising me, he unhooks my legs from around him, and when my feet hit the floor a split-second later, he spins me around and presses my chest into the solid surface of the door, pinning me in place. Capturing my wrists, he holds them against the paneling above my head. The weight of his body presses me harder into the door, and his mouth moves over my ear, nipping at it before he shifts slightly back and positions both of my wrists in one of his strong hands. I don’t try and get free, but I know if I wanted to I couldn’t. He’s in control, and his firm command isn’t going to be forgiving, and it fucking sends my excitement into overdrive.

He skims his free hand down my spine, then slips it under my dress. His fingers greedily squeeze my ass cheek, and my body responds by shifting into his hand, willing his fingers to move my thong over.

Reading my body language, he says, “You’re such a needy bitch,” then his grip tightens on my wrists as his fingers twist beneath the material of my panties and move over my clit. “A

ready, wet, needy bitch.” His fingers dip inside me, pumping as my breath hitches. What the fuck?

It’s ... everything. His touch. His words. His command of my body. I’m fully ready to get off knowing he’s going to do as he pleases with me. I don’t mind. I want it. I want him. Fuck.

“Tell me, Morgan.” He turns my demand around on me as his fingers push inside me from behind. My ass moves back to meet each of his thrusts. “I didn’t hear anything,” he prods. His fingers move faster, cruelly pumping inside me as my eyes snap closed. His words a harsh whisper in my ear. “Or maybe you can’t perform without your audience. There’s no one here, but I’ll fuck you until that mouth learns a good motherfucking lesson. Is that what you want?”

He suddenly withdraws his fingers from me and spins me around to face him. His exposed cock presses against my stomach before he shifts back, replacing his hand between my thighs to shove two fingers inside me. A sinister grin spreads across his face. “You want this. You’re getting off on being controlled. Aren’t you? Is that what it is? Your bossy, superior ass needs to be shown some fucking manners?”

Fuck yes. “I doubt you could teach me anything.”

His hold tightens, his smile growing as his fingers pump faster. “Say it, Morgan.”

“Yes. Fuck me.” His fingers move harshly, his hand unrelenting, but it’s not enough. I want to feel him. “Or will I have to settle for a finger fuck?” I glance down at his hard cock. “Still worried about that stamina?”

He removes his fingers from my pussy, bringing them up to my face to grip my chin. “You know I can fuck you better than anyone else. That’s why your desperate ass is begging for it from *me*.” His slides a finger inside my mouth. “That’s why you’re wet and primed for me.” Releasing my wrists, he takes a step back. “Take off your dress.”

Reaching down, I grip the hem of my dress and pull it over my head, keeping a steady watch on him. He can be in control,

but I will maintain a semblance of it too.

“Now the bra.” I reach back and unclasp my strapless bra, letting it fall to the floor. His eyes drop and fixate on me. “Your thong. Off. Now.”

His command sends a thrilling shiver down my body. I do as he instructs then hold them up on my index finger before dropping them on the floor. He can try and act as authoritative as he wants, but his tense expression tells me he’s having a hard time refraining. And he’s not planning to wait too long. “Take my shirt off.”

Stepping to him, I slide my fingers down his stomach before I grip the hem and remove his shirt. My fingers trail down his abs before I flatten my palms against his skin. Sliding them around his sides and down the small of his back, I dip into his jeans and over his ass to push his boxers and pants down, squatting to drag the fabric down the length of his legs. He slowly steps out of them, and as I look up to him, his fingers hook under my chin, guiding me to standing again. “Remember when this is over that this was all your doing. You wanted it more than I did and ever will.”

“Liar, liar. You’re such a crier,” I hum against his cheek and smile when I feel his face tense. His body stills momentarily until he quickly snatches my arm and tosses me onto the bed. My stomach hits the soft surface at the same time his hands roughly keep ahold of my arms, pinning them at my sides. He hovers over me, his chest pressing into my back as his mouth moves next to my ear. “I fucking hate you, Morgan King.”

“Same.”

He shifts back as I answer him and thrusts forward, plunging his dick inside me. A freakin’ whimper leaves my lips as he fills me. Did his fucking dick get enlarged? He hadn’t felt this consuming before. Every cruel thought I want to tell him leaves my mind and only how I feel—excited, sexy, on fire, desired—remains. And there’s only one thing I want to scream at him—fuck me. And he does, his hands tighten on my arms as he uses them as leverage to pull me back to meet

his thrust. His skin slaps against my ass every time he sinks inside me. No words leave his mouth, only sounds that tell me he's enjoying this as much as I am. But I need more.

“Fuck me harder.”

Releasing my arms, he moves one hand to my hair as he pulls me to stand upright next to the bed. With my back still to his chest, his other hand wraps around my throat. His fingers squeeze as he pounds into me. “Needy, bossy, miserable. Can't get enough to satisfy that pussy from anyone else. Need a good fucking to remind you what you should've had.”

Whoa. There is definitely something more than sex being referred to. But that's all this is. Sex only. So why am I worried about wanting to do it again when this time isn't even over yet? “Then shut up and fuck me.”

He lets out a low, sultry laugh. With the one hand remaining on my throat, the other moves in front of me to stroke my clit as he says, “Come on my dick. Let some of that pent-up frustration out so you can stop being such a vile bitch.”

I grind my teeth, taking in a breath, but barely manage to say “Not a fucking chance” before I reach my peak. An orgasm explodes inside my core, flowing through every limb of my body, but I'm not able to relish in it because Cade gives me several more hard thrusts, then forces me onto my knees.

One hand is on his cock and the other is in my hair as he shoves his dick in my mouth. His body tenses as he comes, my lips wrapping around him. I trail my tongue around the base of his cock while his hand strokes it. His eyes never leave mine as he guides me up. As soon as I'm halfway standing, his mouth immediately covers mine. As he kisses me, his hands move over my ass, then he grips, lifts, and drops me on the bed. Falling to his knees in front of me, his mouth trails down my chest and over my stomach. One hand remains on my breast and gives my nipple a harsh twist as his head moves lower.

Is he really? Yes. Yes, he is. My back arches as his tongue flicks over my clit then sucks on it. My body lightly shakes

from him paying extra attention to the spot that's already so sensitive. But he doesn't let up. His fingers push inside me. When he looks up, his eyes on mine, his mouth curves into a wicked grin. Yeah. He's as evil as me, but fuck, his tongue is godsent.

I grasp his hair and hold his mouth to me, rocking my hips. Unable to resist, my head drops back as I savor every lick, every suck, every twist of his tongue until another wave flows through my body. Releasing the hold I have on him, he crawls up and drops on the bed beside me.

As I lie there limply, my eyes still closed, I feel him move over me. When I open my eyes, his face is there, unrecognizable because I can't read him. I swear I see an ache in his expression, but no. No. He can't after what just happened. I need him to be an asshole, not look at me like he wants more. I need that commanding, in-control-asshole look or this won't work.

He lowers to me but doesn't touch anything except his lips to mine, giving me a slow kiss. It's not tender, but it doesn't have the passion, or hatred that was just flowing between us. He drops down on the bed beside me, his hands rub over his face as he says, "I'm so fucking exhausted."

"Same." But I don't think sleep will cure anything for me because all I can imagine is sleeping long enough to get some energy to wake up and ride his dick and his mouth again. I glance around the bedroom. "Whose room is this? Did we just fuck in Neil's bed after you've been cockblocking him?"

"It's my room. At least for the last few nights."

Last few nights? Why is he staying at Neil's house and not home with his brother? He reaches over, extends an arm across my stomach, lets out a sigh, and closes his eyes. A relaxed look overcomes his face as he utters, "I still hate you." There's no anger behind his words, just hurt. But I don't want to fucking hear it.

"Good." I slide off the bed and (more importantly) out of his arms and start to gather my clothes off the floor. When I find my thong, I pull it on first before trying to hook my bra.

I feel his eyes on me when I hear him ask, “Where are you going?”

“Back to the party.”

“Really?”

Goddamn it. I hear the hurt again. And I don’t give a shit. I want to hurt him. That’s what this is about. Hurting all of them because that’s what they do to me. I just wanted a good fuck in the process.

“Yes. We’re done here.” I wave over the room before I reach down and grab my dress off the floor and pull it over my head. When I look to him again, I see his confused look. “What, Cade? Did you think we would fucking cuddle and declare our undying love for each other?” I hold up a fist, my index finger pointed at the ceiling, as my arm moves in a circular motion—the ASL sign for *forever*, and give him a mocking expression to accompany it. “It was only sex. I did need a good fuck, and you were good enough, I guess.” I walk over to him, lean down as I place a palm on each thigh and press my lips to his. “But that’s all I want from you. Your dick inside me and the taste of my pussy on your tongue.” I stand and walk out of the room, not waiting for him to say a word because the anger is back on his face.

It’d be better to hurt him, make him think there’s a chance for us. But I can’t take that. I need him to hate me. I don’t want to feel anything else for him. Because the last time I did, *forever* ended up being nothing but a fucking joke to him. This time, joke’s on him, not me.

CADE

The banging on the bedroom door doesn't stop, so I know it's not Neil. He'd knock a few times, yell that it was him and say whatever he needed to, then leave. Whoever is on the other side of the door isn't going away. And none of the guesses I have as to who is out there are people I actually want to face.

Nevertheless, I slide out of bed and make my way to the door and open it.

Dustin.

From his furious expression, it's not going to be a fun brotherly catching-up moment, but I tell him anyways, "Come on in," and drop onto the corner of the bed. He looks around the guest room that I've been crashing in since he invited our father to stay at his place.

"You haven't been home in days. Are you ever gonna come back?"

"Is Dad still there?" My question doesn't receive a response, and Dustin only glances away from me. "Answers my question. And the answer to yours is no, not while he's there."

"Cade, I get it. But I'm still your brother and your guardian. Yes, you're eighteen, but don't you think I deserve a little respect after everything I've sacrificed for you?"

"You deserve more than respect but take a moment to consider why you were put in the position to raise me. Why would you have to tend to your kid brother who had two able-bodied parents? And I appreciate it, but why don't you take

some of this irritation and direct it towards one half of the equation that set this whole situation up from the start.” I wave my hands around the room.

Dustin just shakes his head. “Fine. Stay away from home as long as you want. But you will keep the other obligations you have to me.”

“Like what? Playing precious football?” The game was awesome. Once I got out of my head at least. But then Morgan King happened, and now all I can see is her back on the way out the door after we fucked. Why had I given in? Why had I allowed her to embed her claws deeper within me?

“Yes. Football. Coach said you were supposed to meet with him this morning at Crescent Fleur to go over a game plan for Friday. The Cardinals aren’t a team to take lightly, and Coach wants to help you prepare.” Dustin takes a dramatic look at his watch. “It’s noon and you don’t look like you’re heading that way any time soon.” He walks over to my bag and tosses it to me. “Find something to wear or we can stop at the apartment to get something decent. But we’re leaving here in five minutes.”

Yeah. Because golf at his country club is gonna prepare me for the game. I should probably just be thankful he didn’t want me to meet at the house again. Hopefully after Morgan’s last miserable wait at the Crescent Fleur, she will opt out of going. *Please, for the love of everything holy, don’t let her be there.*

“I don’t want to go,” I utter and shove my bag on the bed beside me, but already know Dustin will win this one, so I’ll save us both the trouble.

I have the crazy notion that maybe if I blow the game next week, Coach will call in the backup. Yeah, he doesn’t have many options, or he wouldn’t have put me in this situation, but he’ll pull me if I fuck up bad enough. The old QB had no chance of being back this season, but I was hoping for a miracle or maybe that it was just some fluke and he’d be magically healed up. There’s no chance. But I can still hold on to my naïve delusion. Because if Fabian could play, Coach would drop me in a heartbeat. King wouldn’t be pushing so

hard for me to play. And his malicious offspring wouldn't be aiming to make my life miserable.

I grab a clean change of clothes and head to shower. It's been more than a day since she was in the bed with me, but I can still fucking smell her intoxicating scent everywhere. Maybe that's another one of her freakin' voodoo spells. Wouldn't put anything past the siren.

I'm about five minutes over Dustin's timeline because it's ten minutes later when I get in my truck and follow him to Crescent Fleur. Is it bad that I hope a sinkhole has swallowed the place whole? Or maybe it can just swallow me before I get there.

No such luck because when I pull into the parking lot, everything looks intact and precisely as shiny and lavish as it was when I last saw it. Coach's Maybach is in the lot, but I don't see Morgan's car. Doesn't mean the demon won't pop up like one of those whack-a-mole games, but still, I breathe a little easier.

Dustin is beside me when I give him a questioning look. "Don't you have better places to be? I know I wouldn't be here if I had a choice."

"Coach King asked me to join you all, and I'm here to support you Cade. I know you don't want to be here. But I know in the future you will be grateful that you put in the time to secure a better future for yourself."

God, I hope he's right and all this bullshit is worth it. At the moment, there's nothing that feels worth it within grasp.

When Coach spots us on the course, he waves us over to where he stands with a man I don't recognize.

Coach slaps me on the shoulder. "Glad you could make it this round." He laughs then motions to an unfamiliar man. "This is Arthur from New Acadia University."

What the hell? I take his extended hand and give it a firm shake before looking to my brother who appears as shocked as I feel. He quickly recovers and introduces himself.

A fucking scout? This has nothing to do with Friday's game because a college rep wouldn't be here for that conversation. Right?

"So, Cade, Coach King tells me you're considering NAU in the fall."

Fucking A. We're only at the first hole, and he's already trying to recruit me. I glance to Dustin. He knew. That's why he wanted me here so badly. Maybe. "I haven't considered any schools yet, but I need a minute to speak with my brother. Alone."

Dustin agrees and gives the other two men an apologetic wave as he says, "Excuse us for one second." He follows me to the edge of the green and out of earshot. "You knew about this, didn't you?"

"Coach mentioned a scout might stop by soon, but he wasn't certain. Look. No harm, no foul. Play a little golf. Talk some football. Maybe even entertain attending NAU. It's not the end of the world, Cade. Some people would kill for an opportunity like this."

"Like you? Is that why you're pushing so hard? You didn't get to live out some fantasy football dream, so you want me to? Because I can't imagine why else you'd be pushing so hard for this. I have a plan. Even if it doesn't include college and throwing a damn pigskin around, that doesn't make it a bad plan. Just makes it not your plan for me."

"My only *plan* is for you to be happy and successful," Dustin says sincerely, and it does make me feel a little guilty. But just because others would be thankful for this meetup doesn't mean I want it.

"Well, the first half won't happen anytime soon." And the latter doesn't feel within reach either.

"Hey, guys." Motherfucker. Morgan is here. And that's not the worst of it. When I look to her, she's with the last person I want to see. My father.

Morgan pats his forearm as she says, "Look who I found. Now we're all here to enjoy a great day of bonding." She

prances past me while my dad stops and gives me a hesitant look before following behind her to where Coach and Arthur stand so they can introduce themselves. I look to Dustin and see the alarm on his face.

I keep my watch on my dad as I ask Dustin, “Are you sure the world’s not gonna end? Because it sure as fuck feels that way.”

MORGAN

The sheer horror on his face is loads more rewarding than his face being between my thighs. Although, the latter is wonderful.

I quickly figured out why he was avoiding his place, and it didn't take long to arrange for our guest of honor to join us. And it's my pleasure to ruin this little meeting or just this day in general for Cade after hearing all about the scout coming to kiss his ass. You'd think the dude was sucking my dad's dick for as excited as he was to have the dupe tag along today.

Glancing around the course, I spot Cade standing off to the side of the tee box while my dad prepares to tee off. Dustin speaks with Arthur over by the golf cars, and Randall stands nearby, shooting his youngest son nervous glances every so often. This is so much more entertaining than the miserable day I had to wait for Cade to show up and grace us with his presence. By the end of the day, he'll wish he'd bailed on today completely.

Moving next to Cade, I keep my focus on Dustin. As he bends down to place his ball on the tee, Randall gives him a few pointers. "Aw. Isn't that the sweetest? He's finally dad-ing."

"Don't you ever get tired of being a dreadful bitch?"

"Not really." I get tired of other things. But being a bitch isn't one of them. "Did you not sleep well after I left your bed Friday night?" I say it loud enough and I accomplish my goal as all eyes look towards us.

Cade remains silent until the other men turn back to their game. “I slept great. After the demon left my bed, that is.”

“Hm. Seemed like you wanted me to stay, but okay.” I step closer to him. “Though I wouldn’t mind another good fucking if you have anything left inside you. But don’t forget this time ... it’s just sex.”

We get a few more peeks our way before Cade steps up to take a swing. His dreadful attempt is over soon enough. And it thrills me when Randall makes his way over to Cade who moves in the opposite direction and walks to the edge of the cart path and stays there to pout.

Paul appears out of nowhere and approaches me but keeps a watchful scan on Dad who is fixated with his scouting buddy. “I didn’t know you were joining us today.”

This dweeb is really annoying me today. “Yep. Just wanted to bring Randall so we could ride along for fun. I didn’t realize you’d be here either. I guess being Dad’s caddy is better than nothing, right?”

“I’m here because your dad needs this meeting to go well. This is really important to him,” Paul informs me, like it’s news that anything football related is top priority to my father.

“No way, really? Is it like a big deal or something?” I ask with mocking shock and amazement.

Paul just gives me a tight expression before he steps away and takes his place watching from the side.

The next few hours go about the same. Cade pouting and the men chatting.

I walk up beside Cade after his final shitty hole and let my amusement show. “Good thing your skills on the gridiron are much better than on the green.”

“Not all of us are pampered princesses who hung out at a country club growing up.”

“Obviously.” We step inside the clubhouse and head for the restaurant, and the blast of cool air is such a welcomed relief. I hadn’t even realized how smoldering it was out in the

sun because I was so preoccupied with Cade's misery. And it's not over yet, Dad and the other men sit at one of the tables across the room. Cade walks up to the bar and asks the bartender for a water as I slide onto a barstool. "Water and a Jack and Coke."

Ashton gives me a don't-get-me-fired look and I nod over to Cade. "Don't worry. He won't tell. He could probably use a drink too."

Cade stares at me before he turns back to Ashton. "I could use a drink and some holy water if you have some?"

Ashton smirks, and places two glasses of ice water on the bar then starts fixing the drink I really want. But I still take a few sips of the water as I peek over my shoulder at the men who don't seem worried about their prized performer not joining them. They're probably happy to be away from his sourpuss attitude. I myself am enjoying it.

"So, NAU, huh?" I ask, to which Cade attempts to ignore me, though I see the tightness in his jawline as Ashton slides the two tumblers in front of us. I take a few swallows before I dig the knife deeper. "You know my dad has a stake in the school. So don't think he's doing this for you. It's never been for you."

Cade lifts his drink to his mouth, downs the contents, drops the tumbler back onto the bar with a thud, and walks away. I down half my drink then follow behind the grump as he goes into the restroom. Shoving the door open, I step inside, prop against the wall, and watch as he stands at the urinal, his back to me. He goes about peeing like I'm not here, but he knows I am.

He moves to the sink and washes his hands before bending over to splash water on his face. When he stands upright, his eyes lock with mine as he grabs a towel out of the basket on the counter and rubs it across his face. I move behind him and keep my gaze on his reflection as I lightly scrape my nails up his forearm.

"Back the fuck off, Morgan." He turns to face me. "You win. I'm done."

His muscles constrict under my palm as I rub up his bicep. “Are you really that hurt that I didn’t want to snuggle with you?”

“You know damn well why I’m done with this shit. You knew I didn’t want my dad here.”

“Eh. He’s not all that bad. Maybe if you’d remove the stick from your ass, you’d see not everyone is out to get you.”

“Yeah. Sure.”

Even when we dated years ago, Cade made a point to stay away from his dad, saying all the man did was drink and gamble and act like a complete dick. But Cade would always shut down before the conversation went into detail. “What’s so bad about Daddy? At least he came back, unlike Mommy.”

I’m caught off guard by his rapid movement. His hand grabs my arm and shoves me back against the wall while his other hand grips my hair. “I said back the fuck off.”

A thrill flows through me as his fingers tighten in my hair when I smile up at him. “I will. But answer one question first—who do you hate more, Mommy or Daddy?”

His hand jerks my head back as he commands, “Open your fucking mouth.”

I do, partly following his directive and partly as a reflex from him snatching my head back. His eyes are on my mouth as he leans into me and spits into my mouth then looks back to me. “You.”

With that, he releases me and storms out of the bathroom. I know he meant to degrade me, but it had the opposite effect—I’m turned the fuck on. By him, his reaction, and how freaking easy it is to get under his skin. And I don’t feel a fucking morsel of guilt. He created this situation. I’m just the bitch bringing it full circle.

CADE

This day is going to be hell. It can't be good. There's no way. Not when it's starting out bright and early with a meeting in Coach's office. I'm assuming it's about the visit to the country club yesterday. After the bathroom break with Morgan, I'd had enough, so I'd just left. Dealing with the consequences of that today was better than sitting at a table for hours with some of the people I hate most in this world.

And when I round the corner and step into the doorway of Coach's office, I spot the worst of them all. Morgan. She's seated in the chair across from her dad's desk, her leg crossed over the other. And it pisses me off that my eyes are immediately drawn to the soft skin of her thigh leading up under her short skirt. I swear she has them shortened because there's no way the uniform is issued standard like that.

"I'll come back."

"Cade," she calls out, and I stop to look at her because there's something in her voice. Regret? No way. This is Morgan King. She'll strike faster than a king cobra if given the chance.

She stands from her chair and walks to me; her hand entwines with mine as I stupidly allow her to lead me back in her dad's office. "It was me that asked you to come in."

"Why?" I ask knowing even if I get an answer, it'll more than likely be a lie.

"I wanted to apologize."

Yep. Lie. Morgan doesn't apologize. She attacks. And I don't want to be in her web.

"Okay." I move to step back as she tightens her fingers around mine and pulls me to her. I plant my feet, so she ends up moving to me instead. Her emerald eyes look up to me. And if I didn't know better, I'd almost fall for her angelic, innocent act.

"I'm sorry, Cade. After you left, I thought about it. And I did cross a line this time."

I lean down, my face in hers. "You're never sorry about anything except not getting your way. So what the fuck is it now? What do you want?"

A smirk stretches across her face. She's as fucking despicable as they come. "I want the same thing you want." She closes the space between us. "To forget the pain and feel good. And I'll admit, you make me feel better than anyone ever has." Her lips press to mine.

I reach up, my hand grips the nape of her neck to pull her away and get some much-needed distance. It's not a lot, but anything is better than nothing because I want to fuck her right now. But I know it always comes with consequences. Her.

"Ah, you're still spitting mad. Aren't you?" She watches my mouth, her teeth biting at the corner of her mouth as she smiles.

Fuck. I have half a mind to stick my dick in her mouth just to shut her up, but from that devious glint in her eye, I'm afraid she might bite it off. "If I fuck you, will you leave me alone?" I don't resist the urge to drop my mouth to her neck.

She tilts her head to the side to allow me better access. "As long as you realize it's just fucking and nothing more."

My tongue darts out, my teeth nipping at her skin as I grab her ass and hold her to me. "Agreed. That's the only good use I have for you."

Instead of getting pissed like a normal person would, she just lets out a soft laugh, her fingernails digging into my biceps as she holds on to me for dear life. Fuck. I'm gonna

need an exorcism to rid her from my soul, because I want nothing more in this moment than to slide my dick inside her. The thought alone making me hard.

Turning her around, I move her to the side of the desk and shove her forward. Her hands shoot out to catch herself on the surface, and she braces to push her ass against me as I reach under her skirt and find she's only wearing a thong, giving me easy access.

It wasn't surprising for the party. But it is for school. I know it's been years, but I have no doubt she still wears boy shorts under her uniform skirt. She always said she didn't want her bare ass on the chairs every student sits on.

I run my fingers along the string that's between her ass cheeks and, fuck, it thrills me that she was planning this. "You wore these for me, didn't you?"

"Yes. I know you can't resist me."

Yeah, I want to feel her pussy again, but she wants me just as much. Moving the thin material aside, I slip my fingers inside her. Yeah. She's fucking ready for me. "You're the fucking deprived one."

She lets out a satisfied moan, knowing she has me wrapped around her finger. With one hand, I unbutton my pants and shove them down, pushing my boxers aside. I stroke my dick once, my fingers following the same rhythm inside her. Fuck. I'm gonna regret this.

Positioning behind her, I remove my fingers and instantly replace them with my dick as I push inside her and quickly snatch her arms, pinning them behind her back with one hand then use the other to push her face into the hard surface of the desk as I fuck her from behind. And it doesn't escape me *where* she's made sure it happened. Her dad's office. But I don't care. "Think Daddy will care that his little princess is getting fucked on his desk?" I grit out, pumping inside her, her breathy words not registering as I try to not explode right now inside her. I'll pay deeply for this, so I'm gonna get as much pleasure out of it as I can. Pulling her up by her arms, her back

hits my chest as I tell her, “Does it make you feel good to get back at him?”

“You talk too fucking much,” she hisses and leans back to brace against me.

Turning her around, I grip her legs, lift her up, and drop her ass on the desk before moving between her thighs and pushing inside her. Her eyes close as I reach behind her and grab her hair, pulling her head back. My mouth moves to her exposed neck and my other hand moves between us, stroking her clit. It takes barely any time for her to respond, and I know from her movements that she’s riding out her orgasm. And that’s all it takes for me to lose it, pounding hard before I spill inside her. Every muscle in my body strains as I lean forward, my chest against hers as she lays across the desk beneath me.

Son of a bitch. Why the fuck did I do that? “Are you on birth control?” I ask her and hold my breath until she speaks.

“Yes.”

Is she lying? That’s my first worry. The next is the consequences if she is. It’s not having a child that I fear. It’s her. Being tied to her the rest of my life sounds like a nightmare. Then again, even without a child to link us together, I have a strong feeling Morgan will always be a thorn in my side even if she’s not in my sight. Because whether I want to accept it or not, she’s already managed to cut deep and embed her being in my soul. My real worry—how the fuck do I get her out without self-destructing?

CADE

Thank God this day is over. Every time I turn around, I see Morgan. If I don't see her, I can smell her scent on me. Suffocating me. Fucking her before school wasn't the smart thing to do for any reason. But the lingering smell of whatever the hell perfume she wore turned out to be the worst.

Leaning against my locker, I spot Neil down the hallway with Savannah by his side. She tells him something then gives him a quick kiss on the cheek before heading in the opposite direction. Neil heads directly to me, a smile on his face from ear to ear, and I can't help but return the contagious grin.

"What?" Neil asks, shrugging his shoulder but I don't say a word before he says, "She's great, Cade."

She'd better be. "I'm happy for you." I don't think Morgan had anything to do with their matchup, but I can't fight the little voice telling me it's still possible. Anything is possible with her. "Let's get to practice." I'd rather be going to the marina, but not because I don't want to play ball, because I don't want that cheer vixen taunting me from across the field the entire time.

Once we enter the locker room, I'd no sooner dropped my backpack on the bench than hear, "Crawford, Coach wants to see you in his office."

Fuck. What's the punishment for fucking the coach's daughter on his desk? I mean everyone knows how toxic Morgan is. I should have a good shot at the insanity plea. And

it wouldn't be a lie. She does drive me insane. No matter, it's time to face the music.

Stepping to the doorway, I tap my knuckles against the door. Coach looks up and waves me in, pointing to sit in the chair across from his desk. As I take a seat, my mind pictures Morgan bent over his desk. And fuck, I should be scared right now, not reliving it. Goddamn, I work to direct my thoughts elsewhere to keep from getting hard. Or harder.

Coach writes something on the paper in front of him and passes it to me. "Arthur said he can't offer anything official yet, but he wanted you to join the NAU workshop they're hosting soon. The best of the best will be there."

Okay. So, this meeting is the one I thought I was attending this morning. Does he really not know about the *meeting* that occurred with his daughter in here a few hours ago? Coach takes my silence as hesitation in considering the NAU workshop.

"Do you want to consider NAU? It really is one of the best schools around. It'd be my first choice for my son if he had any talent in the sport."

Damn. He might as well flash *disappointment* across his forehead to match his disappointed look when he speaks of Ryder. If you ask me, he's my favorite King out of the bunch.

"I'm not sure I want to play ball next year."

His expression morphs into disbelief. "Why wouldn't you use your God-given talent to excel?" Coach stands and moves around his desk, propping against the front of it. His arms fold over his chest. "Your brother mentioned you were hesitant about this all working out. But I have faith in you, and Arthur does too. We're all supporting you, Cade. You're a bit behind some of the other prospects only because it's been their sole focus since grade school. But you have something guys can only dream of. You're a natural. You stepped away for years, then walked back on the field and took control. Now, it's up to you to take control of your future."

My gaze wanders beside him, to where I'd had his daughter laid out. Controlling her made me feel better than the thought of my future ever has. But I want out of this office. "I'll consider it."

I stand and walk to the door. And he thankfully doesn't keep me longer, so I head back to the locker room, dress out, then head to the field.

Sure enough, the cheerleaders, led by their mutant, are on the far side of the field.

Neil jogs up to me with a water jug, passing it to me, and I drink some down. "Is everything okay with Coach?"

"Yep. Just trying to push me into NAU." I can't help but recall what Morgan said about him having stake in the school.

"That's awesome. It's on my list." Neil's statement catches me off guard.

"I've never heard you mention attending there before." All the Ivy League schools? Absolutely, every day. He's been obsessed with them the last three years. But NAU? Never a word. Not once.

"Yeah. I've given it some thought. It's one of the universities Savannah applied to too."

Fuck. He's a goner already. "Are you seriously considering it for that reason?"

"No. That'd be crazy." His eyes drop to his feet. "I mean. We're not even official yet."

"Even when you are, don't throw your life out of whack for some temporary relationship."

"Why would it be temporary?"

Damn it. "I'm not saying it will be. You just never know how long it will last. And you don't want to change all your life plans over some girl who might not be that serious about things."

He nods his head. "Yeah. You're right. It was just a thought, and it sounded like a good one since I'd be close to

home. Then when you just mentioned it, I got excited about going to college together. I guess things have to change sometime.”

He doesn't sound very excited about the imminent changes, but the one thing I know in life is the only thing that stays the same is that everything changes. I've seen it with every single person and situation in my life. Nothing is like it was years ago. Even months ago. This morning is a perfect example. I thought I was done with Morgan years ago, yet I can still feel where her nails were scratching along my skin this morning.

I toss the water jug to the sideline and jog down the field. I need my head in the game because it keeps drifting places it shouldn't be. Finally, my mind cooperates, and I get a good, exhausting workout during practice. Now it's time for work. I need to be drained, that way I can't think of anything except how tired I am.

I opt to skip the showers and pull on my clothes. There's no point in cleaning up just to get drenched in sweat again at the marina. Actually, jumping off the dock and going for a quick swim sounds really appealing right now.

Neil catches up to me as we walk to the student lot. “Are you staying at my house again tonight? My mom said she won't be stateside for at least another week or two.”

“Yeah. If it's cool with you.”

“Of course. It really beats being home alone all the time.” He heads off in the direction of his car as I stop and scan the lot. “Where's my truck?”

“What?” Neil calls out and walks back my way.

“My truck.” I continue to scan the lot, but I already know. It's not here. “Where in the fucking hell is my truck?”

“Did you park in your usual spot?”

“Yes.” I take a step back and look over to where her Audi is parked. She didn't.

“Did you maybe park in someone else’s spot by mistake? The office has been bad about having vehicles towed when they’re not in their assigned, paid-in-full spots.” Neil tries some more logical reasoning.

I’m aware they will remove a student’s vehicle and get testy if they park in a spot that’s not theirs during the school year. But there’s nothing logical about what happened to my truck. Because there’s no logic regarding Morgan King.

Heading back to the field, I hear Neil ramble about how we should go talk to the office staff but there’s only one person that will have answers. She’s not on the field and her car is still here, so, I head into the girls’ locker room and find her rummaging through her bag.

“Hey, Cade.” She continues digging in her bag.

I stand across the room because I don’t want to be near her. I don’t know what I’m capable of, but I know what she’s capable of. “Where the fuck is it?”

She slings the strap of her bag over her shoulder and innocently asks, “Where’s what?”

“Cade!” Neil calls from outside the locker room.

“I know you did it, so just tell me where my truck is.”

“Oh, you lost your truck. When’s the last time you saw it?”

I want to strangle her. I really do. But I know I won’t, even when she deserves it. “This morning, right before I fucked you.”

A few gasps sound around the room but are they really surprised? This bitch runs a twenty-four-hour circus, and I happen to be the clown of choice she’s decided to play today.

“Well, obviously I was too tied up today reminiscing about that fucking. But I can give you a ride.” She walks past me, her shoulder hitting mine.

My truck is a piece of shit. But it’s mine. And I need it. Unlike this pampered ringmaster, I have a damn job to get to.

Turning, I exit the locker room, shoving the door open so hard it slams into the wall with a loud rap. Neil's eyes widen as he rattles off a million questions behind me as I march to the parking lot and spot Morgan propped against her car.

Neil tries to calm me down. "Come on, Cade. I can drive you wherever you need to go until you find your truck."

Will I find it? As I head towards Morgan, her amusement grows. I stop a few feet away from her. "Want that ride after all?"

I want to close the distance between us, get in her face and call her every name that's running through my mind. But what's the point? It will only make her happier. That's what she wants. A reaction. My misery. "No, I don't want a fucking thing from you."

Even as I walk away, I feel her words deep in my bones as she says, "We'll see about that."

God, is there anything she won't do? I mean I'm not surprised, but I figured she'd at least simmer down enough to stop making me completely miserable. But clearly, she's just getting started.

MORGAN

“Morgan, you have company,” Mom calls from downstairs. Looking to the screen on my phone, I see it’s 10 p.m., then drop it on the bed. The show I was watching had barely been holding my interest. Hopefully, the company at the door will be more entertaining.

As I make my way downstairs, I see Mom standing in the foyer, inviting our guest of honor inside. Cade. Yep. This should be entertaining.

He declines Mom’s offer and says he’ll remain on the porch because it shouldn’t take long. Mom looks a little concerned, but she steps away as I stand in the doorway. I see Neil next to his car in the driveway. And he looks hella nervous.

“I need you to tell me where my truck is.” His voice is flat, calm even. But I see rigidity under the surface.

“I thought you didn’t need anything from me.”

He shakes his head; his hand covers his mouth as he laughs. “What do you get out of tormenting me?” His face almost looks amused as he asks, “Does it get you off more or less than my tongue on your pussy?” He doesn’t wait for a response. “My guess is the torture feels better because no one hates you more than you hate yourself.”

“Eh, both are enjoyable. But I think you’re right. Watching you squirm is much more satisfying.”

His hands go into his pockets as he turns away from me before rotating back. “That’s funny considering how much you

beg me to fuck you.”

“Boredom is the worst.”

We stand there for a minute, locked in a stare down, before I hear Dad behind me. He doesn’t say anything to me, simply steps out onto the porch with Cade. “Shelby said you were here. What brings you by? Is everything alright?”

“Everything’s great,” Cade says, his glare on me.

“He’s having some truck problems, Dad.”

Dad finally acknowledges that I’m there, turning towards me. “What problems?” I guess he figured out Cade isn’t exactly forthcoming with the information so he may as well question me.

“Turns out, his old truck just isn’t dependable at all.” I can see Cade getting angrier with each word. Dad seems unaware, as usual, and glances to Neil in the driveway, who gives him a nervous wave. “Oh, that’s terrible. Do you need a car until yours is up and running?” Dad gestures to me, instructing, “Go grab the keys to the Jeep,” then faces Cade. “You can keep it as long as you need.”

“No, I really should have my truck back sooner than later, because it’s the right thing to do.”

“Are you sure?” Dad asks. “It’s not a problem. The Jeep doesn’t get driven often, so you’d be doing me a favor.”

“Yeah, and we know Cade loves doing favors for others.” Fuck. I’d like him to put his face between my thighs and do a quick one for me, but I don’t have the willpower to break my hostile shield tonight.

“It’s against the rules. It could be considered a bribe or payment. And I’d hate to disappoint you, Coach. I know how much the title means to you. How it means more than anything else.”

Wow. He enjoys rubbing that in a little too much.

“Thanks for looking out, but I’m not giving you the vehicle, it’s just a loaner. If you need it, it’s here for use anytime. I’d do it for any of my players.”

What a load of bullshit.

“Thanks, Coach. I know you’re here for me if I need you.”

Another dig at me. Doesn’t hurt as much. I’m used to Dad putting his jocks ahead of me. Difference is, they’re expendable once they’re of no use to him. And Cade will learn that lesson soon. “It is nice of him to be there for you since your parents didn’t care enough to stick around.”

“Morgan.” Dad goes to fuss at me, but Cade stops him.

“It’s alright, Coach. She’s right. Us Crawfords know when to walk away from a hopeless endeavor.”

Motherfucker. Okay. That one pisses me off. “It is the only thing you’re good at following through on.”

Cade’s apparently had enough, because he steps back and makes his way off the porch. Dad and I stand and watch as he drops into the passenger seat of Neil’s car before he drives off.

I feel another lecture coming on since I upset his precious tool. And Dad doesn’t disappoint. “Morgan, I don’t know what that was about, but I need you to be there for Cade. He’s important to me and the team. And even to this family. He’s proven I can count on him. I need you to do the same because right now, I’m questioning if you’re with this family or against it. I know where his loyalties are.” Dad’s shoulders slump forward as he steps into the house and moves past me.

He’s questioning *my* loyalty when his star player fucked me on his desk this morning, his wife is fucking my principal, and my brother would rather jump in the river than speak a word to him. But *I’m* the problem. He’s not wrong. I am a problem for every one of them. But what Dad doesn’t realize is that I’d have his back better than any of the fuckers he puts his full trust in. He doesn’t know how shitty they truly are or what an asset I could be on his side. So, he’ll find out eventually what it’s like to be my rival. He’ll quickly learn how pathetic his choice allies really are.

CADE

One of the tougher opponents we'll face this season will be tonight. Yet, I can't think about the game because I'm riding in the passenger seat of Neil's car on the way to school.

"I'm sorry." Obviously, I won't have my truck back anytime soon, if ever. "I'll figure something out, so you don't have to keep driving me around."

"I don't mind. And I've already told you that you can use Mom's car. Or you can use mine and I'll drive hers. She even said she didn't mind."

He is coming from a good place, but it bothers me that all these people just have spare vehicles sitting around to offer up like candy when all I want is my old truck back. "Thanks, but I'll handle it." And by *it*, I mean her. Because other than shelling out money I don't have, my only other option is making the wench give me my vehicle back. It's crossed my mind that she might've destroyed it. I wouldn't be shocked. She destroys every single thing she touches—and even some things she doesn't.

When we walk into school, Neil says he's heading to the gym, but I've been avoiding it at all costs since Morgan's last stunt was in there. Actually, I've avoided everywhere she's been. So, I head to my brother's classroom and find him behind his desk.

"Pick a seat." Yeah, he knows I just want to hide out in here for a while, but I think it's about time I tell him. "Just

wanted to give you a heads-up in case someone calls about my truck.”

He centers on me and drops his pen on the desk. “What about it?”

“It’s missing.”

“Missing? Since when?”

“Monday.”

“And you’re just now telling me?” He shakes his head. “Did you file a police report?”

“No.” I didn’t really think to because I know who took it. I just don’t have proof. And they’ll take one look at her and fall under her spell.

Dustin watches me silently for a few seconds before he slowly says, “Why didn’t you report it?”

“Because it’ll turn up.” I hope. “I think it’s some of the guys hazing me or something.” Lies. But I’d rather steer him in that direction than put Morgan on his radar. I don’t want him questioning her at all, she’s more lethal than any of the guys on the team. Besides, he’ll go to Coach and that will be an interesting conversation. “But I’m handling it. I just wanted to let you know in case they call you.” The truck is titled in his name even though I paid for it because I made the purchase before I was even legal to drive.

Dustin doesn’t seem convinced. “Just promise me you’ll come to me if you need help or if it’s something you can’t handle on your own?”

“Will do.” Though I don’t think I can handle Morgan on my own.

“Are you ready for the game tonight? We’re planning to drive up there.”

“*We’re?*” I repeat, and he realizes he’s slipped up.

“Yeah. Dad wants to watch the game. He’s really trying, Cade. I wish you’d at least give him half a chance to prove himself.”

I stand and grab my bag as Morgan's face clouds my mind. "Every time I give someone a smidgen of a chance, they take everything."

Once I'm in the hallway, I head to my first period class and wait outside the classroom. The only good news is the day is shorter than normal since we're on an abbreviated class schedule to allow for a quick pep rally to see us off. The bad news is everything else about today. The game, the pep rally, spending a day being near Morgan.

Though she's been staying away mostly this week, it almost makes me more nervous. As crazy as it sounds, I like when she's tormenting me outright. Because then I know exactly, or at least have a good guess, about what she's up to. When she lurks in the shadows, I know her mind is planning her next play. And there's no defense I can build to offset her.

I jog to the center of the gym with my teammates, keeping focus on the painted banner hung across the side wall as Thatcher repeats much of his "motivational" speech from the last pep rally. Can't that one just apply to the entire season? Apparently not, because the band strikes up and starts playing the fight song. And I break the deal I had with myself and search her out. Her attention is on me while her body goes through the motions of her routine so easily that it looks natural. Once the song ends, she holds her arm up, shakes her poms, and gives me a smirk that tells me to hold on tight because she's up to something.

Coach takes over the microphone as I hear phones ding around me with messages, then a few more. Then I feel mine vibrate. When I look to the stands, I see a few people looking at their phones. My teammates are doing the same. Then I notice their eyes going from the phones to me way too quickly. And the only thought in my head is *What did she do now?*

Neil steps beside me. "Cade. We should go."

Go? Go where? I glance out to the student body filling the bleachers as more eyes focus on me then shift towards her. She's watching me when Ava steps up to her, showing her something on her phone, but Morgan's eyes stay fixated on me.

"What is it?" I ask Neil. I know it's on my phone too, but I'm too afraid of losing sight of the threat that is gearing up. The phone can't obliterate me. She can.

"Let's go in the locker room, and I'll tell you."

It's bad. I can tell from Neil's rushed hurried words and when he grips my bicep and tries to pull me away, I can't resist finding out what it is. Reaching into my pocket, I pull out my phone and find an unopened message from an unknown number. Swiping the message, it opens, and a video starts playing.

I was wrong. She doesn't have to be nearby to obliterate me. Because what's happening before my eyes, what I participated in will take care of it for her. I watch a recording of me fucking her from behind. And if there was any doubt as to whose desk she's bent over, the message sent along with the video fills in the blanks. *Star QB fucks Coach's daughter in her dad's office. Let's geaux, Wildcats.*

Coach still has the mic in hand and attempts to settle the crowd as Thatcher approaches him, covers the mic with his palm, and whispers something to Coach. When his disbelieving eyes land on me, I don't have to guess what he's been told.

When I look back at Morgan, I almost expect to see her upset, maybe a little rattled. The entire student body is watching us have sex, not to mention her dad is aware. But she's standing there, hands behind her back, her head tilted a little to the side where she's looking at me through hooded eyes. And there's no mistaking the smile she's biting back. She isn't upset because she did this. What the actual fuck?

Coach shoves past me. "Locker room. Now." He yells the same at Morgan as I follow behind him. No point in delaying

the inevitable. And sadly, my next thought is at least I don't have to deal with this shit anymore.

Before I'm in the locker room, I hear Coach shouting. But his words don't register for a few seconds. "How the fuck could the two of you be so careless? A fucking recording?"

That's his complaint? Not that I fucked his daughter or that it happened in his office, but that there's footage of it? He's as unhinged as his daughter, who is standing silent, arms folded over her chest, with an expression on her face that says she doesn't give a damn what his opinion is.

Coach throws his hands in the air, cursing as he paces around. The door opens and Topher steps into the locker room but Coach yells for him to leave. He gives us all a concerned look then backs out. *Yeah. I'm with you, buddy. Please take me with you.*

"Morgan, how could you let this happened?" Coach directs his fury at her. "Why the fuck would you let a sex tape of my player get sent to the entire fucking school? You know it doesn't stop here, right? It'll be everywhere—including social media, where every single scout can find it."

Um. What. The. Fuck. So, this is her fault it's out there, and my guess is it was her recording to begin with, but is he really blaming her and more worried about a damn scout seeing it than the fact that his daughter is *in* it? I don't care who sees it now. The worst, I figured, would be my coach—*her father*—but apparently, the optics of the video's existence is more of an issue than me defiling his little girl on his office desk.

Her response. "Guess he'll have to pivot to a new career." She glances at me. "He might have a chance as a stripper. He does have some good moves."

Oh my God. Will the fucking floor open up and swallow me, please?

"Shut your mouth, Morgan." Stopping in front of her, he points a finger in her face. "This is your fault. I've seen you flash your ass in front of him plenty enough. And good job.

You did it—you got his attention. But don't let it interfere with what matters." Coach waves his arm around before moving his finger back in her face. "This game is important and so is he. If you want to fuck him, go ahead. Take good care of him. Keep him happy. Suck his dick as much as you want. But don't ruin his future, not when he could get a piece of ass from any bimbo at this place. And I'm certain there are plenty who would spread their legs for him in a heartbeat just like you did. But they'd be discreet about it instead of letting the entire damn academy watch them get nailed like a cheap whore."

"That's enough. It's not just on her." Why am I defending her? Maybe because for the first time in forever I see actual hurt on her face. "If you want to yell some more, direct it at me."

He actually seems shocked that I'd defend her. Shit. I'm shocked too. But I can't watch it anymore. "No, Crawford. I know how manipulative females can be. Particularly this one." He flicks a finger at his daughter. "I'm married to her mother."

"I said that's enough." Her eyes snap to mine, and it looks like she might cry. Morgan doesn't cry. She doesn't show weakness. And she won't break.

"It's fine, Dad. I'll be a good little whore and keep him happy." She saunters out of the locker room, but even if her body language exudes confidence, I know she's covering the hurt. I feel it for her.

"I mean it, Cade. You two have all the fun you want, but don't let her wreck your future. You will regret it. I promise you that. You'll end up with a useless son who can't play ball and a mini version of the girl you just wanted a nut from." He walks past me and slaps my shoulder. "Don't forget to wrap it up."

I'm in an alternate universe. It's the only thing that makes sense because Morgan is upset, and her dad is talking about her like she's a pocket pussy I can pull out and fuck anytime as long as I'm careful not to get her pregnant.

In a daze, I walk out to the bus. Avoiding every person who tries to speak to me, I climb on and make my way to the

very back seat in an attempt to process what just happened. Minutes later, when the rest of the team starts climbing on the bus, I'm no closer to figuring it out. Neil takes a seat next to me. "Are you good?"

"Ask me tomorrow." Because today is off the rails and only getting worse.

But when I hear commotion at the front of the bus and look up to see Morgan speaking with her dad, I know this isn't going to end well.

MORGAN

“The girls have their own bus, Morgan.” Dad tries to keep his voice down but fails as several of the guys seated on the bus watch us.

“But how can I take care of Cade, as you requested, if I’m not on the bus with him?” I shove past him and make my way to the back where I see him seated by the window. Neil looks like he’s about to pass out as I ask him sweetly as I can manage, “Do you mind switching seats with me?”

“Ye— I mean no,” he stutters and clumsily stands to move two rows in front of us.

“What are you doing, Morgan?” Cade asks, and his concerned tone pisses me off more than the question.

“Like I told my dad”—I reach over in his lap and grab his dick—“how can I take care of you if I’m on the other bus?”

He remains tense for a minute before he asks, “Why did you do it?”

“Oh, I’m just so, so sorry for ruining your life with our home movie.”

He leans towards me. “I don’t care who sees it. What I want to know is why would you want that video out there?”

I release him and sit against the seat back, grabbing a compact out of my bag. Once I’m staring back at my reflection, I get more pissed off as I nonchalantly rub my fingers under my eyes. I hadn’t cried. But I’d come close. Close enough to where my makeup smudged. I can’t get that

close again. But I'd never imagined my dad would react like he did. I knew he'd be pissed. But he was mad about the *video*. He was upset that *Cade* might get played or burned. Both of which I plan to do.

“Do you want me off the team so bad that you'd sacrifice yourself to do it?”

A laugh escapes my mouth as I snap the compact closed and shove it back in my bag. I reach under my skirt and shimmy in the seat as I remove my boy shorts. To my left, I spot Lenny watching me. So I look over to him, give him a wink, and shove them in my bag before dropping it on the floor.

I climb over Cade and straddle his lap. His hands grip my hips, but he turns his face away from me. “Let's talk about what I want right now.”

“Morgan, we're on the freaking bus,” he grits out as I rock against him, my hands fumbling with the buttons on his jeans. His hand quickly catches my wrist and holds it away from him.

“What? It's not like they haven't seen us fuck already, right?” I try to unfasten his button, but his grip is too strong. When I lean forward, I grind my ass against the hard bulge I can feel in his jeans. “Besides, my dad told me to keep you happy.”

The words taste bitter off my tongue. I've never been discreet about my sex life, but I've also never imagined my dad would offer me up as a whore to keep one of his players happy. Shit. He'd probably offer me up to all of them if it'd help their game, but there's only one I want to fuck. And he's not cooperating at the moment. I lean back, pull my hands out of his grasp, and move them to his shoulders as I ask nicely, “I need to know what's gonna make you happy.”

“I'm not fucking you here, not like this. Not when you're only doing it to piss off your dad.”

I cling to him and rock my hips. “Don't tell me that doesn't thrill you. I felt how much you enjoyed it when you

fucked me on his desk.”

“Morgan,” I hear Dad yell. “In your seat.”

Yeah. Keep dreaming, Coach.

“Come on, Cade. Tell me you don’t want to do it just to show him you can? You don’t want to be here any more than I do, but you do want to fuck me.” I move my mouth to his neck and stroke my tongue over his skin.

His hands grip my sides in an attempt to pull me off. I hear someone—my dad I think—yell for me to sit again. I lean back and, with my gaze on Cade to see his reaction, I call over my shoulder, “Don’t worry. We just need a little longer. It takes him a minute to get primed when there’s lots of pressure.”

I don’t hear a response and figure Dad gave up. My father knows me well enough to recognize I’m going to make a bigger scene if he keeps on. Fuck. He asked for it.

Cade, on the other hand, is giving me a look that is begging me to stop. “I’m not fucking you, Morgan, so just stop. I’m not gonna do anything with you until you give me my damn truck back.”

“Oh my God, that again.” I roll my eyes and press my lips to his as I say, “It’s in the auto classroom. Now fuck me.”

“You’re such a bitch,” he grinds out, his hands pushing me back. “I knew you had it. Stop playing your fucking games and maybe you won’t need to beg me to fuck your desperate ass.”

“True. But would you be having as much fun if we played by the rules?” I lean in and prop my forearm against his chest. “And don’t forget, I have options too. Just as fast as these legs spread for you, they’d do the same for plenty of others who are happy to eat me, use me, fuck me.”

A flash of rage crosses his face. He’s jealous. I knew it. I glance to the side and see Lenny very interested in what’s happening between Cade and me. When I glance back to Cade, he looks livid. “Is that what you want? For me to service

everyone else here instead? Gotta keep the boys happy for Daddy.”

“Stop it.” His hands hold me on his lap. He doesn’t want to give in. But he doesn’t want me to fuck anyone else, not that I’d want to. I just wanted to know if I did if it would bother him. And from the grip he has on me, I know it would drive him crazy.

“Don’t worry. I don’t need them—or you—to get me off.” I move my hand up my thigh and slide it inside me. The wetness coats my fingertips as I stroke my clit. My other hand clings to the nape of Cade’s neck as I lean forward, my hand working me and body using him to further the excitement.

“Holy fuck that’s hot,” I hear Lenny say, stoking Cade’s anger.

I whisper in his ear, “Your mouth feels so much better on me than this. But if you’re not up to it, I’ll find a replacement.”

He swiftly reaches up, grips my hair ruthlessly, and pulls my face to his. “I should stick my dick in that mouth to shut it up.”

I laugh, but my eyes flutter closed, I’m almost there. “You won’t. You’re too scared.”

My body goes tense as I ride out the wave of my orgasm, propped up by him, and then I stay that way for a minute as I enjoy the sensation. Once I sit back, I dip my fingers inside me before I remove my hand from under my skirt and bring it up to his face. Holding my index finger up to his mouth, I rub my wetness over his lips like it’s lip gloss. And the sight of me glistening on his mouth sends a sliver of satisfaction through me more than the praises from Lenny beside us.

“Just to remind you of what you’re missing.” I place a kiss on his cheek and climb off him and sit in my seat. The fun is just getting started. And so am I.

CADE

The bus stops in front of the visitor's side of the stadium and everyone stands to bail off the bus. I can't imagine anyone is more ready to get off this bus than me. Morgan chilled out once she finger fucked herself on my lap, but damn, I already know there's some devil fire that was stoked inside her today, and she's not gonna stop until everyone is incinerated with her. As I make my way to the front of the bus, I stay behind her because I don't like the way Lenny is watching her and has been since her performance.

Damn it. I don't want to want her. But I do. And I sure as fuck don't want anyone else touching her.

"Not you two." Coach points at Morgan and me and guides us to move into the front row of seats to wait while everyone else exits. Even the driver bails from his sinking ship, leaving us behind. Don't blame him, but damn, throw a dude a life raft or something.

Coach breaks the silence as he looks to Morgan. "I'm going to let that little indiscretion slide because I know you're pissed about what I said. And I'm sorry that you don't like what I had to say earlier. But I need you to think about someone other than yourself for a change."

A smile spreads across her mouth, and I debate covering it with my hand, but she'd probably just bite the shit out of me. "Oh, I was thinking about someone other than myself." She nods to me. "But he was a little scared to perform with a live audience."

“Will you please stop now?” Coach lets out a frustrated breath. “It’s all water under the bridge, but we need to focus on the game. Can we do that?”

“Sure,” Morgan answers too quickly. “I’ll go see if the other team needs some hand jobs to get their engines revved up.” She steps past her dad and bails from the bus. *Okay*. Now Coach is looking at me, and I have no clue what the hell to say.

“She’s out of control. Can you try and get her to calm down?” He sounds desperate but I don’t feel sorry for him because I think he helped create the monster she’s become. Maybe not directly, but he’s had a significant part in it.

“She’s your daughter and you can’t control her. How the hell am I supposed to?”

He looks a little surprised by my blunt response, but it’s the truth. If he can’t rein in the hellcat, how does he expect me to do it?

“Are you good for the game? I need your mind on that field, not on what’s under her skirt.”

Yeah. Maybe more than a small hand in it. “Did you just refer to your daughter as a piece of ass? Maybe *not* doing that should be your first step in getting her to calm down. But yeah, I’m good to go. Mind on the game.” And ready to get off this goddamn bus.

“Good.” He slaps me on the shoulder and bounds down the steps. Apparently, he only heard the latter of what I said. Now I know why she’s so bitter about his love for football. He doesn’t simply care more for it, he truly cares about nothing else.

When I step off the bus, I involuntarily search for her but don’t spot the demon cheerleader on the loose. I tell myself she was only trying to piss her dad off with the cavalier comment about hand jobs for the other players. But the only thing I’m certain of now is that she only wants me. It shouldn’t thrill me, but it does. When I thought she might elevate her crazy display on the bus and let someone else touch her, it’d

made me insane. Because if that's what she wanted to do, she would. And there's not a damn thing I could do to stop her.

I follow behind Coach as we enter the locker room. Red and black cover the walls, reminding us we're not on home territory. I don't need a reminder. I don't feel home even at Saint Juliet. But I pull the green-and-gold uniform on over my pads and wear the jersey anyway.

It's not long enough when it's time for us to hit the field. We're announced first and get a mixture of boos from the home section but there're cheers from the visitor's stand that drown them out. Saint Juliet is serious enough about football that the stands are nearly full with a sea of green and gold to cheer us on. For a second, I study it until I remember Dustin saying him and Dad are coming to the game. I'd rather pretend Dad flaked out and he's not here. Because the bastard doesn't need to see me. He doesn't need to cheer for me. I can do this without him.

Scarily, I search out someone I should be afraid to make eye contact with but I'm not. Morgan doesn't have her usual sinister, devious smirk. Instead, she's standing on the track, her arms tucked behind her back, her legs in a shoulder-width-apart stance.

She might be on our side of the field, but I can guarantee she is hoping for us to fail. And right now, I'm worried we might do just that.

Once the coin toss is over, the home team wins and opts to kick to us, which means I'm going in the game and have no choice but to be ready. I don't feel it, but I jog out to the ten-yard line.

The first down goes off as planned, the handoff to Becks gaining four yards. The next is a fake to Becks before a handoff to Topher. We only get a yard. Third down, and now it's time to work for it. The ball is snapped, my fingers grip the pigskin as I shuffle back until I spot Smith and throw the ball to him seconds before a red-and-black wall sacks me.

The blow takes my breath away for a few seconds, and I struggle to regain it. Slowly coming to stand, I see Smith made

the catch at the twenty-one-yard line. It's not great, but it's enough. That's all I need for now as I take in a few deep breaths and step to the line of scrimmage.

And it really is all I need. After the fourth quarter ends, the scoreboard reads 14–13, Wildcats for the win. The second for us this season and still plenty to go.

Every bleacher seat on the visitor's side remains occupied as Wildcat fans continue to cheer from the stands. I watch Morgan. She's still in her spot on the track, arms folded over her chest as she makes no effort to take part in the celebration. It should make me happy that I'm making her miserable. But I'm not as good at this as she is. I don't want it to be like this. It just is.

MORGAN

By the time I arrive at Neil's, the place has people everywhere. I head inside and find the party host has Savannah on his arm. Another reminder that Cade thinks I'm an evil bitch. I am. But not *everything* is my fault.

"Another party, huh?" I yell over the thumping music.

Neil nods his head. "My parents travel a lot, but they found out about the last one. The neighbors snitched. I thought my mom would be pissed, but nope. She was happy about it and said I was finally being a 'normal teenager.'" He holds up his drink to an invisible toast, then downs it. "A fucking house party." His mumbles don't seem happy or cheerful. I don't care. The one I want to use tonight should be around here somewhere. But first, I make my way over to the drink setup and take a bottle of tequila to pour myself a double, then down it before I pour another and down it too. After I make myself a proper drink, I spill a bunch as I push through the crowd of bodies. I don't give a fuck about the nasty looks aimed my way. Get in line. Everyone hates me. Clearly not enough, though, because when I make my way up the stairs, Lenny is right behind me. He places a hand on the small of my back as I walk up the stairs.

"I haven't seen you all night."

"Lucky me," I reply, taking a look over the balcony. I don't spot Cade, so I take the chance of him being in his room and head that way.

“That thing you did on the bus. That was so fucking hot, Morgan.” Lenny stops beside me as I side-eye him. He doesn’t catch my vibe as he continues, “I’ve thought about it ever since.”

“Okay.” I continue walking and find his bedroom door open, so I step inside, Lenny still on my heels like a bitch in heat.

“You know, if Crawford won’t help you handle that tonight. I’m available.”

“I’d rather finger fuck myself again,” I admit aloud.

Lenny doesn’t seem offended or surprised as he takes a seat on a chair in the corner of the room. “I don’t mind watching again.”

“Where’s Ava? You have her pussy readily available to fuck, so why are you here?” Normally I’d enjoy this a little more, but my patience is wearing thin. I really don’t want to take care of myself again. I want Cade to do it.

“Ava’s somewhere. Doesn’t matter. Watching you is hotter than boning her.”

“Charming.” It should be delightful, but it’s Lenny.

I turn to walk out of the room as Cade comes through the doorway. “What are you doing in here?”

I step closer to him and admit the truth. “Looking for you.”

“And what the fuck is he doing in here?”

“Begging to take your place.”

Cade grips my ass as he pulls me to him. “And you know you don’t want him to touch you.”

“Y’all know I’m still sitting here, right?” Lenny whines.

“Yeah, we know.” And I don’t care about anything but the one whose hand moves under my shirt. “What’s it gonna be, Crawford?”

His rough skin brushes up my back as he pulls me to him. “Get out of here, Lenny.”

“Damn it,” Lenny grumbles but doesn’t make a move to exit the room. “Just let me watch. You’ll never know I’m here.”

Highly fucking doubt that, but now that I know Cade is on board for taking care of my needs, I know I can use this Lenny BS to get back at someone who could still use a lesson or two in manners. “Eh, let him watch. It’s kinda our thing at this point.” I laugh. The entire school has seen us fucking, no point in being shy now.

Cade doesn’t seem happy, but he obliges. I think he’s more ready to get started than I am because his mouth is on mine, hot and hard, as he backs me to the other side of the room. I notice it’s the furthest space away that he could get me from where Lenny sits. I also notice Lenny’s unzipped his pants and is stroking his cock as he watches us. Cade licks down to my collarbone as I close my eyes and enjoy his mouth on me. His fingers move under my skirt and push my panties down as I step out of them.

Turning me to face the bed, his chest presses against my back as I feel his hand between us and recognize he’s unbuttoning his jeans. His hand is between my shoulder blades, bending me over the bed, and seconds later, he plunges inside me. A freakin’ moan escapes my lips because ... *Fuck. He feels so good.* My hands grip the comforter and hold on tight as I push back to meet every thrust.

“Back the fuck off. Now.” Cade’s harsh tone causes me to open my eyes, and I see why he’s not happy. Lenny is a few steps off the chair but holds a hand up while his other still strokes his dick as Cade tells him, “You can watch or get the fuck out. She doesn’t need anyone else to touch her. I know exactly what she needs, and I don’t fucking share what’s mine.” Cade pounds harder into me, his arm grips tightly around my body, hauling me upright as my back slams against his chest then his other hand clasps firmly around my throat. I look over my shoulder to see the challenging stare that stays on Lenny until the chump takes a few steps back and resumes his seat.

Cade's movement stay rough, frenzied as he turns his eyes back to me. Looking down, he asks, "You like that, don't you? Me claiming your pussy as mine."

His hand is suddenly on my back, shoving me forward until my stomach is pressed onto the bed as he fucks me. His hands grip my arms and pull me to meet him. I hear him whisper, "Mine. All fucking mine." But I can't think about anything except him inside me. Him using me. Him making me feel better than I've ever felt.

I don't want it to end, but he pulls out, grips his dick, and threads the other hand in my hair, forcing me down on my knees beside the bed. His dick is between my lips before I can get a breath, and he spills in my mouth. My eyes stay on him as his body tenses, his hand stroking as he grunts and gives his dick a few jerks as he empties into my mouth. My tongue teases the head before I take him in my mouth again, giving him a good suck. Then I stand, take a step back, and sit on the bed, bringing one leg up to rest on the mattress to give him a view of me.

"I'll do it," Lenny offers from the other side of the room.

That earns him a "Shut the fuck up" from Cade as he drops to his knees in front of me. There's a fire in his eyes. He wants to act disgusted, but I see the need and gratification he's getting out of this, knowing he has what someone else wants. And I'm all his even before his tongue licks across me. He keeps his eyes pinned on mine, and it takes everything I have not to close my eyes and relish in the sensation because the guy knows the right spot to hit better than he should, and I want to watch every second of it.

His fingers grip my thighs as his tongue dips inside me before focusing on my clit. His other hand moves between my legs, his fingers pushing inside me. Fuck. It's not supposed to feel this good. Will I ever get enough of him making me feel like this? I'll have to stop fucking him at some point. Not right now though. On a gasp, my hand grips his hair to keep his mouth on me as I shudder in release. The best fucking orgasm soars through every single freaking inch of my body.

Holy fuck. Yes. Again, please. Soon. But first, I have to recover. Especially when I hear a sexy laugh and feel it vibrate across my pussy as he licks me clean. Rising, he leans forward, hovering over me as he glares at Lenny. “Show’s over. Get the fuck out.”

I hear Lenny grunt and don’t want to know if he finished or not. Then I hear the door close, and Cade looks down at me, his mouth is on mine, kissing me until he moves his mouth next to my ear and mutters, “Poison shouldn’t taste so goddamn sweet.”

CADE

Every single muscle in my body aches as I shift against the mattress. When I open my eyes, I stare at her for a minute. Is she even real? Because I sorta can't believe she is in my bed, sleeping and lying on me, her blonde hair draped over my chest, her breath even and steady. She can't be real. Morgan King looks peaceful and content right now. And I know that's the furthest thing from the truth.

I trail my knuckles up her nude back as she nestles deeper against me. Fuck. Why can't we just stay like this forever? Not because her naked body feels great on mine, but because we're not fighting, not hating each other, and she's not trying to break me. And that's how I need it. Because if anyone can break me, it's her. She already has.

She stirs a little, her eyes blinking open as she glances up at me. Her peaceful expression quickly morphs into surprise before she takes a look around the room. Without a word, she slides off the bed and begins picking up her clothes that ended up strewn across the floor after that dickwad left my room to find someone else to stick his dick in.

I hadn't even wanted him to watch, though she was right—I might've enjoyed claiming her as mine in front of him a little too much. But I'd left her covered, not wanting his grimy sight on her, and waited to strip her down for myself. And even with my stiff muscles, I wouldn't mind doing it again.

Getting off the bed, I move behind her, wrap an arm around her stomach, and pull her back against my chest. "You don't have to rush off."

“I’m not rushing. I need to get the hell out of here. How could you let me fall asleep?”

“Let you’? I think I dozed off before you did.” I smooth my palm up her stomach and cross my arm over her chest, my hand getting a good hold on her shoulder. “And just so you know, I slept better than I have in a long time.” Why did I admit that to her?

“I didn’t. But yes, you’re right. I was freaking exhausted.” She pulls out of my embrace and turns to face me. “That’s the only reason I stayed with you last night.”

“Are you sure about that?”

Apparently, my smile pisses her off because her hand quickly reaches forward and grabs my nut sack. Her mouth twists into a sneer. “Yes. And your dick was the only reason I came in this room to begin with.” Her fingers squeeze tighter as she leans forward. “Don’t get attached, Cade, you know everyone leaves you in the end.” Her hand releases me, then she picks up her shoes and starts to walk to the door. She’s not rushing. She’s running.

“Never thought I’d see the day.”

Halting in the doorway, she turns to look back at me. I casually move around the room, grabbing my jeans off the floor and pulling them on as she takes a step towards me. “What day?”

Once I’m in front of her, I lean down and whisper in her ear, “The day I found out what Morgan King is afraid of.” I kiss her cheek then walk out of the room and head to the kitchen.

“I’m not scared, dumbass. I just don’t have time to entertain your little freshman fantasies.” She leans on the island, her hostile glare shooting a hole through me. She’s not afraid, she’s petrified. If I were a gambler, I’d place money on her bully act all being a cover for what’s truly beneath it. The seven-year-old little girl who’s afraid of the dark and asked me to have a special light signal to ward off the invaders.

“Okay.” I drink a swallow of water and down a few aspirin. I remove a skillet from the cabinet and grab the egg carton out of the fridge. “Do you want some breakfast?”

“Are you stupid?” Her arms fold over her chest, her head shaking as she laughs. “You actually think this is something.”

“Yeah. Breakfast.” I take the bag of coffee that I’d bought yesterday and scoop a heaping amount into the filter. Even if she doesn’t drink it or Neil passes, I could probably manage to drink the entire pot on my own. I grab the carafe, move to the sink, and fill it with water. “Do you still take two teaspoons of sugar and a dash of cream?”

Based on her livid expression, you’d think I just asked her to milk a damn cow. She walks around the island, grabs the pot from me, then proceeds to dump it over my head. “Just cream, no sugar.”

Swiping away the water dripping from my brow, I watch her throw a fit. Who would have guessed me remembering how she takes her coffee would piss her off so much. It shows her I still know her, that the years apart don’t mean shit. She’s not just mine in the bed, she’s been mine forever. Why I got stuck with a spitfire, I’ll never know. But there’s a part of me that wonders if anyone will ever make me want to try like she does. That’s what terrifies *me*. I grab a towel from the drawer, pat myself dry, then sling it over my shoulder. “If you wanted to shower, you should’ve just told me.” I begin to fill the carafe with water again as I keep my watch on her.

Her wheels are turning. I can see it on her face. But I don’t know which direction she’ll head. I pour the water in the tank, then hit the button. When I grab the loaf of bread, I hold it up and possibly sign my death certificate when I ask, “Do you still sprinkle cinnamon on your toast?”

“You don’t want to do this anymore than I do. You know as well as I do this won’t end well. *We* won’t end well.”

The loaf of bread drops out of my hand to the counter as I step to her, wrap an arm around her lower back and pull her to me. First thing I do is kiss her. A slow, patient kiss that communicates I can do this. We can do this. We just need to be

patient with each other. “I’m not going anywhere. Trust me. And please don’t throw the toaster at me.”

Her stunned silence as she slides onto a barstool is enough of an answer, so I go back to making breakfast. When she remains quiet, I look back to make sure she’s still there and hasn’t snuck off. She’s there. Watching me as I scrape some scrambled eggs and her cinnamon toast on a plate. And leave the rest in the pan for Neil.

“Eat up.” I slide her plate to her as she gives me a strange look.

“You’ve made yourself at home here.”

“Neil’s parents are gone more than they’re here. And you obviously know why I don’t want to stay at my brother’s.” I hear voices coming from upstairs. “Apparently, Neil still has company.”

Seconds later, Neil hurries into the kitchen, Savannah on his heels. “Please, just talk to me.”

Immediately, my nerves shift into overdrive. Savannah is crying and so is Neil. “What the fuck happened?”

“Get out!” Neil yells at Savannah then looks between Morgan and me. “I want everyone out of my house now.” He goes to walk out, but Savannah is in front of him.

“Please don’t walk away like this. I’m sorry. I really care about you.”

Neil holds his hands in front of him and looks away from her. “It was all a lie. All of it.” He glares at me. “I want everyone out of here. Now!”

I call after him, but he’s gone before I can even move off the stool. Savannah stands there and sobs, her shoulders drooping in defeat. When I look at Morgan, she looks stunned and innocent, but I know she’s not. “What the fuck is going on?”

“I don’t know,” she says lowly. Her eyes quickly darting from her friend to me.

“What did you do, Morgan? Is that why you stayed last night? Why you kept me busy all night?” I stand from the chair and kick the barstool back with my foot as I grab her arm and pull her to me. “Tell me what happened.”

“I really don’t know.” Morgan looks to Savannah who appears in shock. “What’s going on, Savannah?”

The innocent act. The surprised act. The fuck me while I torment you, look the other way while I stab the knife a little deeper. It’s all her. It always comes back to her. The girl who will release a video of herself just to get what she wants. She’ll stop at nothing. But this one is on me. I knew to keep her away, I knew she was up to something.

Standing toe-to-toe with her, I say, “You’re such a fucking liar, Morgan. Tell me what the hell you did this time.” I sling an arm in the air in Savannah’s direction but keep my eyes on the monster in front of me. “I knew you were playing him too. That’s all you do, fuck around with other people to make yourself feel something. You’re rotten in your soul; not even your father can love you.”

I step back, my eyes on her. She has the act down good. But she drops it. “You wanted my trust, right? Trust this. Tell him, Savannah. Tell him how I made you do it. How it’s all my fault.” She reaches and grabs her breakfast plate, slinging it at me with force. I raise my arm and dart to the side just in time for it to zip by my head. “Tell him how all the bullshit of this morning was nothing but a motherfucking lie like everything else.” Morgan clenches her fists at her sides and yells at her horrified friend, “Tell him I did this! Now!”

Savannah’s no longer sobbing, her mouth opens and closes a few times as she begins to say something until she finally admits, “She did it.”

Dumbass. Chump. Worst best friend ever. Pick one. Because I’m all of them. I fell for it. I thought I was falling for her again. But she’s the same vengeful bitch she’ll always be. “Liar, liar, you’re such a crier. And you got exactly what you wanted. Now get the fuck out of my sight.”

My search around the house gets more painful by the second, because I quickly realize that Neil isn't here, and I wasn't there for him when he needed me. I will find him and try to fix this, but first, I have to get the image of Morgan out of my head. I can't believe it was all an act. It was all a lie. Just like her.

MORGAN

“Morgan, wait.” Savannah follows me.

“I have places to be.” I can’t get my car fast enough. Why the fuck did I even stay last night? I knew not to fall asleep with him, but more than that, I knew not to fall for his little breakfast performance.

“Why did you do that?” Savannah keeps on going as usual.

“Just playing the role he expected of me.” I halt and get in her face. “And you won’t say otherwise. Got it?”

She nods quickly, and I know she won’t out me. Satisfied with her response, I walk away, but she can’t let it drop. “Don’t you want to know why Neil’s upset with me? What actually happened?”

“No. Don’t give a shit. But good work.” I drop in my car, push the start button, and clutch the steering wheel. I have to get a grip on myself. I can’t fall apart now, not like this. I just don’t understand how he can stand there and smile while I dump water over his head—something I *actually* did—then turn on me in a heartbeat for something he thinks I did.

I close my eyes and take a few steadying breaths. *You’re looking at this the wrong way, Morgan. It’s for the best.* Because whether I want to admit it to myself or not, I was starting to get a little too attached to him and his dick. When I open my eyes, I let my anger consume me. He can trust one thing—he’ll regret crossing me. I don’t know what the hell happened with Neil. But I can guarantee that I could’ve done worse with little effort.

The day gets even more dreadful when I pull into my driveway and spot Paul's car in front of the house. One fucking day. That's all I want. One flipping day where football, sports, and all the bullshit isn't his focus. Obviously, it won't be today because as soon as I step into the house, I hear the game blaring from the theater room. And since it's closer to my bedroom than this, I know I'm in for hours of hearing Dad and Paul yell at the NAU players on the screen and armchair quarterback about how they would've called the uni game better.

When I reach the doorway, I look in the room to see them shouting at the players. You'd think they'd want a day off after the game too.

"Why the hell can't they get it together?" Paul asks, his hands pull at his hair.

Dad shakes his head and watches the replay of the botched field goal. "He never makes the right calls. NAU won't win until they get the right coach."

Of course. He thinks everything comes down to the coach. And I'm sure they have plenty influence over the outcome, but they aren't the ones on the field. I swear sometimes I half expect Dad to run out there and snatch the ball from some student athlete and run it in for a touchdown. Anything to relive his glory days that didn't seem all that glorious from my viewpoint.

"Maybe the coach is too busy screwing co-eds to focus on the team." My comment gets a quick glance from Dad before he resumes ignoring me. But it hit the right nerve with Paul. Bingo! His frustration with the game is gone, replaced by alarm that his idol is about to hear about his indiscretions off the field. Except unlike the coach on TV, Paul's pool to pick from is mostly not legal.

Dad waves a hand at the screen when the broadcasters appear for the halftime report. "I don't want to hear that jackass's opinion."

"Isn't that jackass your old teammate? I thought it was like a blood brothers bond until the end." Because I've heard him

brag on the guy more than a few times when someone is around, but he's always cussing him lower than a dog behind closed doors. "He's got your full support and you have his ... that's what you told ESPN."

"Not today, Morgan." Dad doesn't look to me as he speaks, but says to Paul, "I'll be back. Need to grab some more drinks from the kitchen."

I stand unmoving as Dad storms past me. Paul keeps his nervous demeanor as he gets closer. "I wanted to talk to you." He's speaking in a hushed tone, so this should be good. He wants to hide. Nothing stays hidden forever.

"Then talk."

"Well, more like plead for you to not mention anything to your dad. It won't only put me in a bad spot, but him too since he brought me on at Saint Juliet." Paul shoves his hands in his pockets, his shoulders dropping as his head hangs down. "I just don't want to disappoint him. He's like a father to me."

I prop a hand on my hip and give him puppy dog pout lips to match his pathetic demeanor. "Aw, Coach asked you to keep the boys happy too? Hope you're better with them than the ladies I've had a pleasure to hear from." I take a step toward him, lean forward, and whisper in his ear, "If not, Daddy will surely be disappointed with you."

As I turn to walk out, I hear the clown beg a little more. "Please, Morgan, just don't say anything. Let us get through this season before you ruin everything."

Hm. He thinks I hold a lot of power. At least he's clued into reality. Glancing over my shoulder, I give him a wink. "No problem. As long as you understand that I'll need a favor sooner or later, and the only thing you're gonna remember is the word *no* isn't in your vocabulary."

He looks like he's about to shit his pants, but he quickly nods in agreement. I don't plan to use him, but it never hurts to keep some tricks in my pocket. Especially with how Dad's been lately. Football has always been front and center, but this

feels different. He's treating this stupid state title like it's life-and-death.

When I step into the kitchen, I see Ryder has assumed the task of chafing on Dad's last nerve because they're both throwing insults back and forth. It's not anything new, but this time, instead of walking away, Ryder turns to Dad and says, "I'm not going. You'll have to find someone else."

Before I can process, Dad flies across the room, snatching Ryder's shirt, and shoves him into the wall. "You will attend the workshop and pretend that you're happy to be there. People don't need to know you fucking suck at the game."

"Make me."

I rush beside Dad and tug at his arm to pull him off Ryder, but he's too strong. His right arm only releases long enough to shove me back, then he swings it around to connect with Ryder's stomach.

My brother lurches forward, a gut-wrenching sound leaving him. I was ready to scream and freak out, but Dad storms off, hollering slurs that echo throughout the house. I've never seen Dad like this. Yeah. I've seen him fuming. But never to the level where he'd manhandle his kids.

"Are you okay?" When I reach for Ryder, he cowers and shoves my hands away. "Don't fucking touch me." He staggers back with a groan, his arm still pinned to his gut where Dad's fist connected with his body.

"Ryder, please. Are you okay? We have to do something."

"No, Morgan!" Ryder shouts in my face. "Doing something makes it worse. The only fix for this is to get out of this motherfucking house and never see that piece of shit again."

Do nothing? That seems harder than anything else. Because I'm watching the only person on the face of this earth that I truly love walk away from me with tears streaming down his face.

It won't be today but doing nothing is *not* an option. Dad can treat me like a whore, but he won't punch my brother in

the stomach and walk away unscathed. I just have to make sure the penalty doesn't connect back to Ryder. Right now, I'm truly terrified about what Dad could be capable of. Because I have a feeling that was only a preview to what rage truly lurks beneath the surface. After all, I wasn't taught to be wicked. It comes naturally for a reason.

CADE

“You’re here late,” Otis calls from behind me.

“Just wanted to get some hours in while I could.” Yeah. I’m here past quitting time, but the work hours have very little to do with it. I don’t want to go anywhere else. Neil hasn’t spoken to me since yesterday and refuses to even be in the same room with me. And Dad is still at Dustin’s. So this place is the most appealing option.

“Don’t overwork yourself, Cade. There will be plenty of physical labor waiting when you’re done securing that title for Saint Juliet.” He says it with such proudness that it makes me want to hurl my body off the dock.

I find plenty of busywork around to keep me occupied long after I clock out. There’s no way I want to explain to Otis why I stayed all night. Because before I realize it, my eyes are opening to the sunlight as I look around the water. If I were here for any other reason, this would be the best view to wake up to. Involuntarily, the memory of waking up next to Morgan flashes across my recall and the only thing it does is make my stomach turn.

Once I get control of my brain, I head to my truck and drive to school. I have two clean uniforms in my truck so I’ll either be visiting a laundromat or going to my brother’s soon. Until then, I’m going to avoid it as long as possible. So it’s a good thing the showers in the locker room are open early, more than sufficient, and don’t involve sharing air with my father.

But when I enter the locker room, someone has beat me here. Coach is standing in his office speaking with Thatcher. They look like they're in a casual conversation until Coach spots me and immediately halts Thatcher from speaking. When my principal spots me, he tells Coach, "We'll discuss it more later" and coolly walks past me, cheerfully asking, "Excited for the game this week? Oakwood shouldn't be a problem for you at all."

Shouldn't be. But everything that shouldn't be a problem lately has turned into a heaping pile of shit.

"Crawford, what can I do for you?" Coach glances at his watch.

Shit. I don't want even more questions since his spawn is partly the reason for me showering here. "Just had a workout and figured it'd be smarter to shower here so I'm not late for class."

"Good thinking. And I'm proud of you for taking the initiative to put in the work." He gives me a proud pat on the back then heads out of his office in the same direction my principal hurried off in.

Once I'm in the showers, I keep an eye out, waiting for an evil troll to pop her head out at any moment. Can't say it's an irrational fear because I'd expect nothing but further torture from her. But what I really want to do is find out exactly what she did to Neil. So I make it a point to shower and dress in record time then head to the bio lab. If I know my best friend at all, I know he'll be there hiding away from everyone. Just like I'd hid in here three years ago, he used it as an oasis too.

Yep. I know my best friend, because Neil enters the classroom about five minutes before class is set to start. He doesn't see me, luckily, so I'm able to close the classroom door once he's inside. Trapping him isn't a good choice, but I feel like it's the only way he'll talk to me.

"I didn't know someone was in here."

Someone? Ouch. Apparently *best friend* isn't the first thing on his mind. "I want to know what she did."

“Savannah didn’t do anything.”

“Not without encouragement. I meant Morgan. What did she put Savannah up to?”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about.” He goes to grab the doorknob, but I shift to block it. “Cade, I have to get to class.”

“We’re not leaving this room until you tell me what happened Friday night.”

There’s some fear on his face as he takes a step back, his hand clutches the strap of his bag, pulling it tighter on his shoulder. “It’s none of your business.”

“Yes, it is. This is my fault. She’s fucking with you to piss me off.”

Hurt. That’s the only thing in his eyes now. “Not everything is about you. Me, Cade. They did it to *me*.”

Son of a bitch. I’m gonna kill them all. “What. Did. They. Do?”

“I’ll never tell you. It’s not worth it.”

I’m confused as fuck, and my mind is going places it shouldn’t. “There’s nothing good going through my mind so if I have to, I’ll just beat the shit out of every one of them until I get answers. Whatever they did, they will pay.” I don’t know which ones were involved, but I know they all have a connection to Morgan, so it won’t be that hard to figure out.

“It’s not even that bad.” His eyes drop to the floor.

“Then why won’t you tell me?”

“Because they filmed it. And they said if I told you, they’d post the video. I don’t want to be the highlight reel at this week’s pep rally.”

I don’t know what to do. Every bone in my body aches with tension. Every muscle is rigid with rage. “I’ll make sure the video never gets out.”

“You know that’s impossible. I’d be surprised if it’s not already.”

“Neil, whatever they did, I will make them regret it. I just want to know what they did. And I want to know you’re okay.” He doesn’t speak so I continue. “Did they hit you?” He shakes his head no. My stomach lurches as I ask, “Did they assault you ... sexually or something?”

He shakes his head quickly and part of me is relieved. “Did someone hurt Savannah?”

Another no. “I’ll only tell you if you swear on our friendship, that you won’t do anything to retaliate. We’ll leave this room and pretend that night and this conversation never happened.”

“I don’t know if I can do that.” I respond honestly because I don’t know what they did.

“Then I can’t tell you.”

Fuck. “Fine,” I regrettably agree.

“You swear?” Neil starts fidgeting.

“I swear. What did they do?”

He slowly walks over to the nearest lab station and drops his bag on the table. “Do you remember the night before school started ... the cemetery party.”

“Yeah.” What does that have to do with it? Have they been fucking with him this entire time? “Neil.”

He lets out a breath and says, “I told them about cockroaches living for a week without a head. They were fascinated by it. I felt like they actually cared; they seemed amazed by the nerdy information.” His eyes glaze over like he’s reliving the memory, a half-smile spreads on his face before it’s overtaken by sadness. “He knew I had them for my science experiment because I told them all about it.”

He stands and paces around the room. “Savannah and I were in my room. We were just kissing when Lenny barged in with some random girl. And when I told him to get the hell out of my room, he flew off the handle. He started yelling about you being a talentless prick who everyone was kissing up to, and I wasn’t about to kick him out of another room without

getting some action.” Neil lets out a little chuckle. “I guess it is your fault too. He was yelling about you having sex with Morgan in front of him and not letting him in on it. He said you’ve always thought you’re better than him and whining about how Morgan stays on your dick.” He looks to me. “I don’t blame you. I really don’t.”

I do everything I can not to shake the rest of the story out of him, but I wait as patiently as possible because I can see he’s struggling and re-experiencing it as he’s telling it.

“Lenny stormed out, and I thought it was over until he came back with Becks and Zulich. Before I knew what was happening, Becks had Savannah pinned down on his lap. Zulich held me down, then Lenny set up his phone to record. I thought they were gonna hurt her. And I couldn’t do anything about it. She was begging for them to leave, and I couldn’t do a goddamn thing about it. But Lenny said he only wanted to hurt me. And I was relieved. At least they weren’t gonna violate her.”

He takes a few seconds before he says, “Lenny told me if I didn’t do it, he’d screw her in front of me like you’d just done to Morgan in front of him. So, I did as he instructed. He shoved all ten cockroaches in my mouth. I gagged the entire time while they laughed, but I ate every single one of them and prayed they wouldn’t go after her even though I was doing what they wanted. They humiliated me. They laughed about it. The biggest kick they got was when he made sure I only bit the head off the last and it flopped around on the floor still alive. They laughed a little more, but they left after that.”

God, I don’t know if I can keep my word. Because I want to murder every single one of them.

Neil clears his throat and continues while I pray for some peace for him. “I locked myself in the bathroom and puked my guts out. Too embarrassed to face Savannah. Once she finally talked me into coming out of the bathroom, she just hugged me and cried. She apologized to me.” Neil looks at me like I have an answer. “Why would she apologize for what they did?”

“I don’t know,” I whisper.

“The funny thing is, I was more worried about her watching what they made me do than the video. But she stayed, and we fell asleep. When we woke up, I went in the bathroom, brushed my teeth for the hundredth time, and got back in bed with her.” His muscles constrict as he wipes his hand over his mouth. “She wouldn’t kiss me. When I tried to kiss her, she flinched away.” He swipes at the tear that falls down his cheek. “And I don’t blame her, I wouldn’t want to kiss me either after witnessing that.”

What the fuck do I do with this? Murder seems to be the only solution on my mind right now.

I grab Neil’s bag and sling it over my shoulder. “Let’s go.”

Panic spreads on his face. “Go where?”

“Away from here, because if we stay at this godforsaken school today, I won’t be able to keep my word to you. I need to get the hell out of here, and so do you. Fuck all of them.”

“I’ve never missed a day of school for something that wasn’t academically related and excused.” I think he’s gonna refuse until he flashes a big smile to me. “Fuck ’em all. Let’s go.”

As we make our way down the hallway, I pray to get out of the building without seeing one of them. Especially when I hear the pain in Neil’s voice as he says, “I really thought this year would be different. I just didn’t realize it would be a worse different.”

MORGAN

This fucking sucks ass. How did I become the desperate bitch that is watching for a dickhead and wondering where he is? Because I haven't seen Cade all day. And now, he's not at practice.

"Where's your boy at, Morgan?" Ava asks with a gleam in her eye. She knows I'm struggling, and she's taking pleasure in it.

"Don't know. Haven't seen him much since he fucked me Friday night." I make sure to have her and everyone else's attention before I add, "But if you want more details, ask Lenny. He watched. He wanted to join, tried to, but had to settle for jerking off instead because Cade wouldn't share." Her face flushes as she starts to say something, but I cut her off. "Or how about we just settle this right now, we can go over and ask him who'd he rather fuck." I take a step in the direction of where Lenny is practicing down the field, but Ava remains in place. "What? Scared you might not like his answer?"

Her lips actually tremble as she crosses her arms over her chest. "You're such a bitch. Wouldn't it be easier to just be nice than such a bitch all the time?"

"Sure. And it would've been easier for your mom to just swallow you. But yet here you are. Some of us like a challenge." I stand my ground until she full-on cries and hurries away. The others are looking to me like they're afraid they're next on my hit list. Good. "Practice dismissed."

I don't want to be here. When I approach Dad, he gives me the usual cold shoulder. "Where's Cade?"

"Don't know." He tells Paul something then looks back to me. "But I'm sure you know why he's not here."

"Maybe he got punched in the stomach by someone he thought was a half-decent person."

Instead of shock, Dad just gives me an I'm-tired-of-your-shit look before he turns his back to me. I stare at the back of his head. I could punch him, and he wouldn't even see it coming. He wouldn't let that slide. But it's not enough. When I serve his payback, he won't see that coming either. And I don't give a damn about the consequences. First, I need to find the other jerk who claimed I set fire to his world. He's about to find out how right he can be.

CADE

“Boy, don’t you ever get tired?” Otis jokes as he drops down to sit on the ice chest.

“Yeah.” I’m fucking exhausted. But after skipping school and practice to hang out with Neil, my anger is still alive. What they did to him is unforgivable. I promised I’d leave it alone. But how can I? I don’t know how to get them back and keep my best friend.

“I heard you slept out here the other night.”

Damn it. It’s not like I’ll be in trouble, but I don’t want to explain the reasoning behind it. “Yes, sir.”

“Well, I want you to take the rest of the evening off.” Otis stands and stretches. “We’re already the last stragglers here, so we win the hardest-workers-of-the-month award.”

I’m not ready to leave. “I’ll just finish up with this, then head home.”

“The ole’ King machine. Coach hardly takes it out anymore.” Otis glances down the length of it. “Are you going with him?”

“No way.”

“Ah. I just thought maybe that’s why he finally decided to get some use out of it. His papa used to take it out all the time.”

That was before my time working here, so thankfully I’ve only had to deal with watching Morgan prance around her

floating throne four times in the last few years. Not that I'm counting.

But those are the times I miss, when Morgan King was just a buzz in the background and not a permanent pain in my ass. As soon as I was put on the football team, I registered on her radar. Maybe I should quit the team. At this point, my promise to Dustin will be easier to break than keeping the deal with Neil while playing. Either way, I already know I'm fucked.

“Not much longer, and I'll be done.”

“Alrighty, Cade. I want you out of here within the hour though. We can see to the rest in the morning if need be.”

“Got it.”

Otis waves and heads up the dock. The hour passes quickly as I continue working on things, moving along the dock to straighten up. Is any of it necessary? No. But I'm not ready to go to Neil's yet. Because when I look at him, all I can think about is what Lenny and the other assholes did to him. And I'm scared. I'm terrified that once the anger builds up more, I won't be able to stop myself from pounding his fucking face in.

Glass breaking in the distance catches my attention. Motherfucker. She's at it again. Morgan is perched on the side of her dad's yacht, her feet dangling as she watches me approach.

“Get the fuck out of here. Now.”

Her head falls back as she laughs and brings a glass tumbler to her lips and drinks down the liquid in it. I can only guess it's alcohol from the smell that is strong enough for me to get a whiff of. And if I had any doubt, her slurred speech clarifies the rest. “Ah, his feel-wings are still hurt.”

She's drunk. Morgan King is spiraling, and I'm the target she's about to unleash on.

“Morgan, just go home.” I turn to walk away as she giggles, which is another indicator she's drunk.

“Don’t you want to use me a little first? Maybe take control and come in my mouth to make yourself feel a little better?”

When I move closer, I watch her stand and sway a bit. She’s gonna freaking fall off the yacht and drown. No one will believe that I didn’t do it. At least no one that knows what a miserable, suffocating creature she can be.

I step onto the yacht a few feet away from her but don’t make a move to touch her. “No. I just want to be done with all the bullshit. And I want the people I actually care about to stop getting hurt.”

Her chin is tilted down as she looks at me with innocent eyes. “What about me?” She goes to step to me but trips, and I reflexively reach out and steady her. She keeps her gaze locked with mine as she asks, “Don’t you care about me?” She pushes some loose hair out of her face. “You even made me breakfast. You started to make me feel things. Like we had a chance. Then you threw me away.” She’s not drunk, she’s wasted.

“Because you don’t care about anyone but yourself.”

“Well, you care too much.” She pouts and looks away. “Except about me.”

Her and Lenny were in the room alone before I got there. They could’ve easily plotted out the entire thing there. I mean, she claimed it was all her the next morning. “I know what happened to Neil. And even if you didn’t lift a finger to do the dirty work, I know that you had a hand in it.”

Her nose wrinkles up as she does her best to glare at me. “Fine. Keep your bestie and forget about me. Because I *ha-ate* you.” She reaches down and grabs a clear bottle of alcohol and pours some in the tumbler but misses the glass. She fumbles with the bottle, and it slips out of her hands completely. The bottle hits the deck with a thud as it empties on what was a perfectly clean and freshly washed deck.

“Just fucking great,” I mumble under my breath and grab her arm to steady her as she clumsily stoops down to clean it

up. “I’ll get it. Will you please let me take you home?”

Her silence worries me because I don’t want to have to fight her all night or explain to my boss why there’s booze all over the place. “Please, Morgan.”

“I still hate you.” Her low words hit a little more than they should.

“I still hate you too.”

She lets me help her off the yacht and onto the dock. We’re barely down to the pathway when she starts complaining and says she can walk by herself. So, I release her. She walks a few steps in front of me then stops, her arm clenches against her stomach and she holds up her hand for me to stop.

“Great. Another mess to clean up.”

There’s silence around us as she takes in a few deep gasps and stands without throwing up. We take one more step before she’s in front of me, her stomach pressed against mine as she gets on her tippy-toes and whispers, “Are you sure you hate me? Because you’re going out of your way to be extra nice to me ... the evil tyrant who sets your world on fire.”

I shift back enough to see her cunning grin, her clear and sober tone registers faster than her words in my mind. Her steady steps alarm me as she takes one back then another. What the fuck? She’s completely sober. I’d let my guard down again. I knew better. Drunk or not, Morgan doesn’t have feelings and doesn’t show weakness.

“Oh, and if you didn’t want another mess, you should be more careful with your choice of words and that liquor.” She motions behind me.

“What?” I ask and look behind me. Flames. The fucking King yacht is on fire. And when I turn back to the monster in front of me, I know she lit the match.

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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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