

Keily | Illegal

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The bleachers were packed again, just like the last time, but tonight felt different. The air was charged with a tension that buzzed through the crowd.

It was the first official game of the season—Jenkins vs. Westview—and everyone knew the stakes were high.

I sat with Lola and Matt in the same spot as before, clutching my soda cup tighter than necessary. My heart raced, but it wasn't just the energy from the game. Weeks had passed since that first game, and a lot had changed.

James and I had admitted our feelings for each other, but somehow, things between us had only gotten more complicated. More intense.

I watched the cheerleaders as they took the field, flashing brilliant smiles. Addison was in her element, performing flips and jumps with the kind of effortless grace I could never dream of.

"They're good tonight," Lola commented, leaning into me. "Addison is killing it."

I nodded, my eyes fixed on the performance. "She's amazing."

"Tell her to start teaching us some of those flips," Matt joked, although his eyes were more glued to the field than the cheerleaders. He had been in game mode since we arrived.

As the cheerleaders wrapped up their routine, the players started emerging from the locker rooms, helmets in hand.

James was among them. I spotted him instantly. How could I not? His black jersey clung to his broad frame, his hair was messy, and his presence was undeniable.

He found me in the crowd, his dark eyes locking with mine, and a familiar heat crept up my neck.

Even from across the field, I could feel the pull between us, the tension that had only grown since we stopped pretending we didn't feel this way about each other.

His gaze lingered, sliding down my body like it had a thousand times before. He nodded at me, a small, knowing smile tugging at the corner of his mouth before he turned away to join his team on the sideline.

"Girl, he's got it bad for you," Lola teased, bumping her shoulder against mine.

I flushed, trying to focus on anything but the way my skin tingled. "Shut up."

The whistle blew, and the game began with a roar of cheers from the Jenkins side of the bleachers.

Our team took their positions on the field. I scanned the players, searching for James, and found him quickly, playing tackle.

The first play unfolded so quickly that I barely had time to blink. Jenkins's defense rushed forward, and in an instant, James plowed through Westview's linemen. It only took a few seconds for him to break through the line.

"Whoa!" Matt let out a low whistle.

James reached the Westview quarterback—Ryan—like a force of nature. His hands shot out, grabbing Ryan by the shoulders just as he cocked his arm back to throw. Then James yanked him down hard.

The crowd erupted around me, Jenkins students screaming in approval as the quarterback hit the ground, the football rolling out of his hands.

It was a clean, perfect sack—whatever that meant. It was something I'd heard Matt say once.

"Damn, that was good," Lola said, her eyes wide.

I nodded, not trusting myself to contribute.

A few more plays zipped by, the action moving so fast that I could barely keep track. Westview retaliated hard, but Jenkins's defense held their ground, thanks in no small part to James.

Then, things started to shift.

I didn't notice it at first. The play began normally enough—Westview had the ball again, their running back darting across the field, weaving between defenders.

But as the play unfolded, something felt...off. One of the Jenkins players—Lucas, I realized—was shoved roughly to the ground, long after the ball had left the vicinity.

I watched as our quarterback scrambled to get up. I couldn't see his face, but his arms flew up, as if to say, *What gives?!*

"Did you see that?" Matt said.

"See what?" I asked.

"They're playing dirty," he said, pointing toward the field. "That block was illegal—Lucas wasn't even near the ball anymore."

I frowned, trying to make sense of it. "What are they doing?" I asked, leaning closer to Lola so I could see him across her.

"They're holding on to our guys," Matt explained. "See how they're blocking after the whistle? That's not allowed. And they're pushing players down when they don't have the ball. The refs should've called it."

As if on cue, the next play began, and this time I saw it more clearly.

One of our defensive linemen was pushed into the ground hard, his body skidding across the grass as a Westview player—number 12—stood over him. Again, no flag, no whistle.

The Jenkins players were getting visibly frustrated now, a few of them shaking their heads as they lined up for the next snap. James stood among them, his fists clenched as he got back into position.

"That was a late hit!" Lola complained, her eyes narrowed as she watched the field. "Why aren't they calling it?"

"I don't know," Matt said through gritted teeth, "but it's gonna get ugly if this keeps up."

I could sense the growing anger from the Jenkins side of the stands too as more and more people began to notice.

And as the clock ticked down, it became clear that Westview's strategy was working. The game was slipping away from us.

Finally, the whistle blew, signaling the end of the game.

Jenkins had lost.

I stood up with Lola and Matt, my heart heavy. We slowly made our way down to the field, where the players were gathering.

I spotted Lucas first, then James, his jersey drenched in sweat, his dark hair sticking to his forehead as he pulled off his helmet. He looked frustrated, but when he saw me, something in his face softened.

"Hey," I said, offering a small smile. "You played well."

James grinned, though it didn't reach his eyes. "Thanks."

He stepped closer, his hand brushing against my lower back, lingering. His fingers pressed against me lightly, sending a shiver up my spine.

I swallowed hard, trying to ignore the heat building between us, but it was impossible. He took every opportunity to get close now. Every touch was loaded, every glance a dare.

"Maybe next time we'll win?" I murmured, my voice coming out breathy, betraying me.

Before James could respond, a voice cut through the moment.

"Can't believe you're into her, man," Collin, Westview's running back, sneered as he passed by. I recognized him from James's party.

His eyes flicked over me dismissively. "Didn't know you liked 'em big."

Time froze for a second, the words slapping me in the face. Heat rose to my cheeks, and I was ready to snap back, to defend myself, but James was already moving.

"What the hell did you just say?" His voice was low, dangerous, as he stepped toward Collin.

Collin smirked, unbothered. "You heard me."

James's fists clenched at his sides, and for a second, I thought he might swing at Collin right here. "She's worth ten of you," he spat. "Say another word, and I'll make sure you regret it."

He really believes that?

Collin opened his mouth, clearly ready to say more, but before he could, another voice joined the fray.

"You got a problem, Haynes?" Ryan, Westview's quarterback, appeared beside Collin, arms crossed.

Neither Ryan nor Collin had been this eager to challenge James at his party, but it seemed their victory today had given them an unwise level of courage.

Unwise, because the fury flickering in James's eyes was enough to make even me shrink away from him. I'd never seen this level of disdain in him, and that was saying something.

"Yeah, I do have a problem," James said. "How about you teach your team some respect?"

Ryan's gaze flicked between James and me, a smirk tugging at his lips. "Maybe if your team wasn't full of losers, you wouldn't have to babysit every game."

Before I could blink, Lucas appeared beside us. He stepped right up to Ryan, his shoulders squared. "You want to talk about losers? Your team couldn't win a clean game if your lives depended on it."

Ryan's smirk faded, his expression hardening. "Careful, Lucas. You don't want to start something you can't finish."

The tension between the two sides crackled, the players from both teams inching closer, fists clenched in a silent, heated standoff.

I could feel the heat of the moment rising, the sharp buzz of testosterone filling the air as the distance between them shrank to almost nothing.

Without thinking, I reached for James's hand, grabbing it before he could step any closer. "James, don't. This is stupid."

Unfortunately, my whisper caught Collin's attention. His eyes moved from James down to me. He sneered.

James's fingers curled around mine, but he didn't turn to look at me. Instead, he stepped in front of me, blocking Collin's view. "Say one more thing about her, and I'll break your jaw. You won't need to worry about running back—you'll be out for the season."

Collin's smirk faltered, his confidence wavering under James's unflinching glare. Ryan shifted to his defense, but Lucas wasn't having any of it.

"Touch him, and I'll put you on the ground myself," he warned.

For a terrifying moment, it seemed like they might actually come to blows. My heart raced as I stood there, watching them, helpless to stop what felt inevitable.

Then, finally, the coaches rushed in, shouting commands and shoving their players apart before the situation could erupt.

"Enough!" Coach Martin barked, stepping between James and Collin, pushing them back toward their respective sides. "Take it to the locker rooms. This is done."

The Westview coach was doing the same, corralling his players as they glared over at us, their lips curled in disdain.

I let out a shaky breath, my hands trembling slightly. My head was spinning, my body still humming with the adrenaline of what had just almost happened.

James turned back to me, immediately noticing how I was shaking. He reached out to hold my arms. "You okay?" he asked, his voice low and warm and filled with genuine concern.

I nodded. "Yeah...I'm fine."

But as I looked around at the remnants of the near brawl, I couldn't help but wonder, since when had I become the center of these stupid, boyish fights?

Next Chapter

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