

## Keily | Aggressive

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Sun rays pleasantly warmed my exposed skin, and the light wind blew my hair into my face as I walked to the metal bleachers beside the football field. It was a nice day to be out, a perfect blend of sunny and a little windy.

And a complete contrast to the anxiety bubbling inside me.

James's dark expression in the lunchroom when I invited Lucas to sit with me still haunted my mind, and I expected his attack anytime now.

He was unreasonably persistent in keeping Lucas away from me, which would have been funny if it weren't for his constant body-shaming.

And I felt it was only going to escalate if the ominous look that had flashed on his face in Calculus (upon hearing I was coming to watch the tryouts) was anything to go by.

Heck, I wouldn't have put it past James to aim the football at my head and knock me out just for showing up here.

*Or maybe I'm overthinking. I do have a tendency to do that. Especially with him.*

On my way, I counted about twenty guys clustered at the center of the football field. Only a few of them were in their football gear with black jerseys, while others wore sweatpants or shorts and loose T-shirts.

Our team's coach stood out among them with his bald head, whistle hanging from his neck, and the boisterous way he shouted at the boys.

Cheerleaders were also on the field in a small corner, most of them dressed similarly in sweatpants and tank tops. They were doing stretches.

I saw Addison among them doing a graceful split, which made my eyebrows rise at her flexibility. She was so immaculate and elegant; someone like me could only wish to be her.

Matt and Lola were already sitting at the end of the middle row when I reached the bleachers. Some other students were also scattered in the seats; I deduced that football was important at Jenkins.

Matt was excitedly speaking to Lola, who, as always, was only listening and nodding.

I was hesitant to join the couple. They looked too engrossed in themselves, but Lola spotted me when I ascended the stairs and waved me over.

“Lucas managed to drag you out here after all,” Matt said, looking at me with a grin.

“He seemed pretty excited about tryouts,” I said as I sat next to Lola, taking the bag from my shoulders and putting it on my lap. “It was hard to refuse.”

“He does love football,” Lola added.

“Did Lucas ask you two too?” I asked.

“He doesn’t need to,” Lola answered and pointed a thumb at her boyfriend. “Matt here is a big football fan—so big that he sucked me into it too. We never miss our team’s games. Tryouts are kind of fun to watch too.”

“Then, why aren’t you on the team?” I looked past Lola to ask Matt.

“I have a heart condition,” he answered. “Hypertrophic cardiomyopathy. Got it from my grandmother, and my cardiologist told me to avoid extreme physical exercise.

“Football involves a lot of that, so I didn’t join the team, just to be on the safe side.”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” I said, my face falling with shock.

“Don’t worry, I’m not dying,” Matt continued with a laugh. “It’s not that bad for me. I can still do normal exercise like jogging or workouts, just not anything high intensity.

“I’ve made my peace with not being able to play, but I can’t stop watching it.”

I nodded with a smile. He seemed content with what he had.

Lola gave Matt a small peck on his lips and leaned on his side. I turned my head to look ahead, not wanting to intrude on their intimate moment.

Instead, my eyes searched for Lucas on the field—and maybe also James. I didn't find either of them.

"Lucas isn't here yet," Lola said, reading my mind. "Coach asked him and James to show some plays to the others. They both must still be putting on their gear in the locker room—lazy asses."

"They get a little leeway from Coach Martin." Matt pushed his glasses up. "James and Lucas are our best players and also our ticket to get this season's trophy. Coach knows that, so he goes easy on them."

"Isn't football a team sport? Why put only two people on a pedestal?" I challenged the notion.

"Nobody is putting anyone on a pedestal. Coach just doesn't breathe down their necks like he does with others."

"James and Lucas have been playing football since middle school, so they have his trust. But you can always expect him to whup their asses if they ever cross the line. Martin takes his game seriously."

"Very seriously," Lola joined in. "He even tried to pit them against each other for the quarterback position at the beginning of junior year, but James wasn't interested."

My brows rose. For someone so obviously arrogant, it was surprising to hear he'd given up on the position.

Lola continued, "They're both equally talented, but the game means more to Lucas. He wants to get into college on a sports scholarship, while James has admitted himself that he has no plans for football in the future."

She shook her head. "And why would he? Brat has rich parents and a successful business waiting for him to take over. He didn't give a shit about being a quarterback or a captain, so Martin finally had to settle on Lucas."

That was a big ramble for quiet Lola.

“Now, don’t dis James.” Matt wrapped his arms around her shoulders, and a small smile appeared on her face at the gesture. “He might want to study medicine like his mother. Probability seems high, since it’s the doctors’ kids who become doctors.”

“But his older brother is already in med school,” Lola countered. “I’m pretty sure Mr. Haynes wouldn’t like his other son going too. Who’d look after his precious company?”

I kept silent and soaked in the new information about James. Even though I loathed him, a big part of me was curious and wanted to know everything about him.

I reasoned that I wanted leverage to stop him from going after me, but till now, I’d found none, and it had only solidified the idea that he was perfect—minus the bullying part.

“Finally, they’re here,” Matt said, and I turned my head to the field.

James and Lucas walked toward the other guys. They were in their football gear and our team’s black jersey, with their helmets in their hands.

Even in heavy equipment, they managed to look suave. Coach Martin talked to them for a minute once they reached him.

When he let them go, Lucas looked at the bleachers and waved, his teeth shining in the distance.

I grinned and waved back, but my joy faltered when my eyes moved to James, who was standing behind him. I felt his penetrating gaze from across the field.

After making the remaining arrangements and lining up the candidates, tryouts began. In the beginning, there was no tackling or one-on-one like I had expected.

Coach simply blew the whistle and made them run laps. He repeated the same exercise again and again. Then he made them run crisscross around the long line of orange cones at least five times.

By the time those poor boys finished, they were drenched in sweat from head to toe, their shirts and pants sticking to their bodies.

“He’s testing their stamina, and what’s better than running?” Matt commented. “Half of them are going to be rejected by now.”

And he was right; almost half of them left, panting and barely walking.

“Now’s the fun part,” Lola said when Lucas was handed a ball. He had his helmet on. “They’re going to perform a play.”

Lucas marched past a white line, twirling the oval ball in his hand. I saw James standing near the midline, facing our side. My breath hitched as he looked up at us—or at me—before he put on his helmet.

The whistle blew, and everything happened in a flash. Lucas sprinted to the other side before he was tackled to the ground by James.

I flinched at his fall. Even with all the padding, it had to have hurt a lot. I hadn’t known the game was this violent.

Matt oofed, and I looked at him. His nose was scrunched as he stared ahead. “James didn’t have to go *that* hard just for the tryouts,” he said.

“What do you mean?” My face whipped back to the field. James had his hand held out, and Lucas was using it to stand up.

“Nothing. That tackle was just more aggressive than it needed to be. Maybe James didn’t mean it.”

Soon enough, Matt was proven wrong. *James totally meant it.*

By the third fall, James offered Lucas a hand again—but Lucas didn’t take it. Both his fists remained firmly planted on the grass, his helmeted head hanging low as he panted.

Concern made me sit up straighter.

James crouched, dipping his helmet closer to Lucas’s, presumably to say something. Then Lucas shook his head and pushed himself up.

James immediately stood to help, but I didn’t miss the way Lucas swayed once he was back on two feet. Coach must have noticed too, because he called both boys over before directing Lucas to the bench.

Lucas limped as he crossed the field, and I don't know what came over me, but I jumped to my feet and ran down the bleachers to meet him at the water cooler.

He tore his helmet off, letting it hang limply at his side, and scrubbed his free hand over his sweaty face. The action made him wince.

"Lucas, are you okay?"

He looked at me and gave a small smile. "Keily, you came!"

"You were so excited, I couldn't miss it," I said, guiding him to the bench. The way he was wobbling, he seemed like he was ready to pass out.

"But I couldn't even show off," he said as he sat. "I'll make sure to compensate for that when you come to see our games."

"Sure," I answered, trying to smile back at him. "I at least saw you run. You were fast."

"The fastest," he said weakly.

I frowned. He had been looking forward to tackling the boys who had come for tryouts, and even though I didn't understand his excitement, I felt bad.

It was all because of James.

Anger and anxiety flared inside me at the thought of the devil. He was so petty, going after his friend just to punish me. My grip on my bag tightened, and I looked at him.

His eyes were already on me as he nodded to Coach, who stood in front, speaking to him. My brows knitted in a glare, and he smirked back.

*That asshole!*

I focused back on Lucas. "Can I get you anything? Water? The nurse?"

He shook his head—then grimaced. "No. I'll be okay, Keily. Just need to let my brain stop bouncing around in my skull."

He patted the space on the bench beside him, and I obeyed, sinking onto it. Lucas appeared to look across the field for a second, and his parted lips quirked into a smirk.

He glanced down at me. “Maybe I’ll feel more steady if you hold my hand?”

I was going to giggle, but burning on the side of my face made me look out again. James, once again, appeared to be trying to set Lucas and me on fire with only his eyes.

I scoffed inwardly. *You know what? Screw you, James.*

I placed my hand in Lucas’s offered palm. “There. Feel better?”

He closed his warm fingers around mine, and his smirk turned into a warm smile. “Much.”

As brave as I felt with the quarterback by my side, I didn’t look across the field again until I was sure—based on what I was hearing—that Coach had occupied James with a task that wasn’t spontaneous combustion.

It seemed James was now assigned Lucas’s task of tackling the others, and the boys didn’t look happy about that after watching him pin their quarterback so brutally.

However, their fears were put to rest. When the first player took Lucas’s place, wearing a helmet and shoulder pads, James went easier on him—a lot easier.

This angered me further.

The training continued for another hour. Coach used James and another one of his teammates to teach some other moves like kicking, handling, and passing the ball.

Football was not my forte, so I couldn’t keep up with everything. But despite my rage, I discerned that James was really good at it.

His movements were swift and experienced, like he knew his opponent’s mind better than he did his own. My eyes couldn’t waver from him, even if I wanted them to.

By the end, only four sophomores had made it onto the team. They received pats on their backs from their teammates as part of the initiation.

Lucas stood up to join them, and I used our linked hands to steady the dizziness that threatened to topple him.

“Don’t be a bitch. It’ll stop hurting by tomorrow,” James said to him as he approached, making me scowl at how he was treating his friend.

Lucas finally let go of my hand. “You know I don’t fucking care about that,” he spat.

“Oh, yes. You wanted to be a big macho captain to those kids.”

“Better than being a jealous motherfucker like you.”

“James is jealous?” Matt questioned as he reached us with Lola. His face lit up with amusement as he looked between the two. “What is he jealous of, Lucas?”

I wanted to know that too. Maybe Lucas’s predicament was not on me after all.

James glared at him. “Fuck off, Matt.”

Lola rolled her eyes beside me.

Lucas let out a tired sigh. “It’s nothing.”

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