

# Chapter 1

Addison: I'm here.

After reading the message, I put my cell phone in my jeans pocket and finished the rest of my cereal. I grabbed my bag, wiped my hands on my jeans, and rushed out the front door.

"Mom, Addison's here!" » I shouted towards the kitchen. " I leave.  
Bye ! »

"Good luck on your first day!" » I heard Mom respond as I closed the door behind me.

Addison, my cousin, was waiting for me in the car. Her mahogany skin glowed beautifully in the sunlight, and her curly brown hair was tied into a high ponytail.

I tucked my shirt in a little more, making sure my stomach was covered. The shirt I wore today was longer than usual, but it didn't hurt to double check that it covered what it was supposed to cover.

"Hey," Addison greeted me as I got into the passenger seat.

" Hi. »

"So, are you excited?" It's your first day today," she said cheerfully as she started the engine. "You're going to be the news, Keily. »

"You sound like I'm on a teen show where hot guys are going to jump on me and cheerleaders are going to scratch me. » I chuckled, his good morning vibes rubbing off on me.

" Hey ! My girls are not going to scratch you, they are going to hit you. » Addison smirked.

"Oh, if that's the case, remind me to cut my nails and take boxing lessons," I replied jokingly.

Our exchange helped calm my frayed nerves. Today was going to be my first day at Jenkins High School.

I had spent the last eighteen years of my life in suburban Remington, so moving here and starting my senior year of high school in a completely new town was, to say the least, significant.

Moving wasn't really in our plans, but when mom's company decided to open a new branch here, and offered her the job of project manager, refusing wasn't an option.

Bradford was Mum's hometown, and she had grown up and spent twenty-one years of her life there. In addition, it was linked to a significant increase in his salary.

My father didn't care either. To be honest, he wouldn't have minded if we moved him to another corner of the world. He was a freelance software and web designer, so moving for him wasn't a big deal.

But it was for me...

I didn't want to leave behind the comfort of a familiar place and familiar people (even if those people were pretty tough). It was supposed to happen a year later when I went to college, not now.

We had arrived here right at the end of my school year, so I had almost two months to prepare and familiarize myself with this city before starting at Jenkins High School.

Addison, my mother's brother's daughter, had been an excellent tour guide and a very good friend (or cousin). Thanks to her, my aversion to the whole ordeal of uprooting our lives had gone down a notch.

We immediately agreed on our love for cartoons and Taylor Swift. He was a really fun and easy-going person.

She had introduced me to a few of her friends, which made me, as a loner, feel welcome.

She even promised to drive me to school, since her house was only a few blocks from mine. My theory was that she felt obligated to do it because I was her cousin, but I couldn't refuse either.

Being driven by my cousin seemed more appealing to me than sitting in the small seats of a bus, and being the object of condescending looks and taunts from other teenagers every morning.

I had quite a few at Remington.

"We are here." Addison honked her horn, dispersing the crowd around the parking lot, making her way to a spot.

I looked at the large building before us, and a heavy feeling weighed on my shoulders. My nerves reacted with all their might.

"Welcome to your new hell, miss," my cousin teased. She came out, and I followed like a lost puppy (a very big puppy).

Once again, I pulled my shirt down, feeling awkward walking right next to Addison.

My cousin was not only on the cheerleading team, but also on the track and field team, as one of their best sprinters, according to her friends. It was no wonder she had a body that every woman wanted to have.

She was slim, but with beautiful curves and muscles, and was just a few inches short of being six feet tall.

Dressed in tight jeans and a crop top, which only showed a glimpse of her sculpted stomach, she looked like she had stepped straight out of a fashion magazine.

I, on the other hand, barely reached his shoulder. I had a big stomach, flabby arms, and trunks for legs.

My only assets worth considering okay were probably my breasts and my hips. But sometimes even they were troublesome when it came to buying clothes.

Today I was dressed in a flowy top - to hide my fat - and black leggings.

Although I considered it my best casual outfit, next to Addison I felt underdressed, and also very uncomfortable.

Look at her, she's beautiful.

"You have your schedule, your map and your locker code, right?" she asked as we reached the steps leading to the open gates of hell.

"Yes, I got them on Saturday. You don't have to babysit me, no matter what my mother told you." We entered the halls, and immediately, I was surrounded by the familiar hustle and bustle of high school.

Addison scowled. "Keily, I'm not with you because your mom or dad asked me to. I really enjoyed spending my vacation with you. I really consider you more of a friend than a cousin."

I felt guilty for my remark.

"I'm sorry. I do not want to bother you. You're already taking me to school. I don't want to be a burden."

"What are friends for if not to be a burden?" Addison joked, making me smile. She is perfect.

"Now that you put it like that, I see what you mean." I replied, unable to follow his witty remarks.

"Speaking of burdens, let me introduce you to a few." She started walking towards the group of girls, all skinny, pretty and tall. A

look, and anyone could tell that I didn't belong in this group.

I mentally scolded myself for my thoughts and stifled the complexes that were eating away at me.

Without Addison, I would have been completely alone here. I should have been grateful that I didn't spend my first day clumsily shuffling around these large premises.

So, with an enthusiastic smile, I followed Addison, letting her be my mentor.

\* \* \*

"How's the first day going for everyone?" our teacher asked. It was the third class of the day.

A collective groan was his response, with a few "boring" and "good" among the responses. Clearly, these students did not share his enthusiasm.

"Is it in your nature to always be so anxious?" He sighed and started writing on the board. Joseph Crones.

"For the new students," – his gaze lingered on me a little longer – "my name is Joseph Crones. You can call me Mr. Crones."

I nodded when he looked at me again. Am I the only new one in this class?

"Since it's our first day of English, why don't we..." He was interrupted when the classroom door opened.

A boy came in and handed Mr. Crones an index card. I couldn't help but study his features. He was tall, easily over six feet, and built like an athlete.

From the bulging muscles in his arms, one could easily guess that the rest of his body was just as strong and muscular.

His eyes landed on me, and I realized I was looking at him. I immediately looked down, my face starting to turn red.

I hated the way my face easily betrayed my embarrassment, turning red at the slightest opportunity.

"Mr. Haynes, tell coach to either let you go early or keep you on the field with him," Mr. Crones chided. Haynes.

"Tell him yourself," I heard Haynes mutter as the sound of footsteps grew louder. Our teacher didn't hear it, or even if he did, he decided to ignore it.



My head was still down, so when a pair of Nike shoes came into view, my eyebrows furrowed, and before I knew it, my head came up. Haynes made himself comfortable at the table right next to me.

A few other tables besides the one next to mine were still free. It's my luck. He had to take this one! Oh my God...

I knew I was exaggerating, but this guy had just caught me watching him. It was embarrassing. If I had looked like Addison, I wouldn't have panicked so much.

But it was me, a big girl, and we had no right to chase after pretty boys like him.

"As I was saying," Mr. Crones began, "it's our first day, so I'm giving you all an assignment due before the end of the semester. Okay with you?" He gave a gentle smile.

Another collective groan was the answer to his question.

"Alright." He wanted us to write a thesis, or a five thousand word essay on one of Shakespeare's works.

We had to do an in-depth analysis of his work, and also present how it was affected by the politics and culture of the Elizabethan period.

Honestly, I was excited about this assignment. I liked literature, it was fun.

"Hey!" A hand slammed down on my table, almost making me jump. Mr. Haynes had placed his hand on my table.

My eyes went first to Professor Crones, who was busy writing on the board, then to the boy next to me.

Strands of his dark brown hair fell across his forehead, and somehow it made him dangerously handsome. I could see a look both calculating and mocking in his dark eyes.

His pink lips moved, he tried to hide a smile. Even though this boy seemed to be the embodiment of Adonis himself, the look he was giving me meant trouble.

Uh...

"Yes?" I hated the plaintive tone in my voice. My face was already burning. Stop being so weak right now!

I saw his eyes scanning my body from head to toe. I didn't know if my mind was playing tricks on me, but his look reminded me of all the ones I had received during my adolescence.

I could already feel him judging me: fat and lazy.

"So," he said, snapping me out of my stupor.

"Eh ?"

His lips quirked up in a smug smile. My face blushed even more.

"I asked you if you could lend me a pen. I forgot mine."

Oh.

I wanted to take a pen from my backpack, but my gaze fell on the pocket of his jeans. Two pens stuck out.

What was he up to?!

"No." My voice came out harsher than I intended. I was trying not to appear weak, but I ended up sounding like a snob. Good work.

I turned my head towards Mr. Crones, who was still writing. To be honest, I didn't want to be near this Haynes guy, or have a reason to hang out with him. I didn't want to give him my pen.

His face, his body, his attitude, even the way he sat in his chair like a king, reminded me of all those kids who thought they had

all rights, who believed they owned the world, and ridiculed people like me at the slightest opportunity.

Maybe I was overthinking it, but it was better to be safe than sorry.

I heard a mocking laugh from beside me, and without even looking, I knew he was staring at me.

“With all that fat moving around in your body, you're right to play it safe.” His words crushed what little confidence I had built up.

I really wanted to retort, but as always, my tongue froze, and instead I glanced over. He wrote in his notebook with a pen that no one had given him.

I turned around, my fist clenched.

Asshole!

It was better to stay away from him, because in the end, no matter how much I wanted to, I couldn't fight against assholes like him.

## Chapter 2

I pushed my books into my locker and slammed it, my actions were quite forceful. Haynes' insult was still burning in my mind, putting me in a bad mood.

Cowardly as I was, it was my locker that took the brunt of my anger instead of the boy who was responsible.

"Keily!" Addison was running towards me, followed by another girl, who had introduced herself as Lola this morning.

"How is your day?" I asked when she joined me.

"So far, good."

I looked at Lola, not wanting her to feel left out.

She just shrugged. Lola didn't talk much.

"Let's go. Sadhvi must be waiting for us," Addison said, hooking her arms with mine and Lola's, and pushing us towards the cafeteria.

It was lunch time. Addison had invited me this morning to sit with her and the girls.

*What a cool cousin I have!*

"And you? No scandals yet that we cheerleaders have to gossip about?" my cousin asked.

I let out a groan. "I'll keep you posted."

"I heard you have Mr. Crones in English."

I nodded.

"He's a pretty cool guy - boring, but cool. But throughout the year, we're going to give you a lot of homework to do, so be ready."

Addison growled. "We're dealing with old Whitman, that bitter crow. You're lucky, K."

Also from my first impression, Mr. Crones was a laid back guy. He was too enthusiastic for my liking, but at least he was friendly to us,

students.

The smell of food assaulted my nose as we entered the cafeteria. The booming sounds of student chatter filled the great hall. My mood brightened, until my eyes rested on *Haynes*.

He was already looking at me. He was at the table right next to the window, sitting there like a king on his throne.

He narrowed his eyes, and I looked away. *Jerk*.

"Let me introduce you to the boys," Addison said. She waved to the guys at her table *to him*. Besides him, there were four other boys, two of whom waved back. ~No!~

"It's good. No need to bother them," I refused, but Addison had already started dragging us towards their table.

Despite my reluctance, she took me with her as if I weighed nothing, which is saying something. *What is this girl eating?!*

"You'll love them, except James. He's an idiot."

We arrived at their table. Addison exchanged a high five with a blond guy. Lola greeted them all with a simple nod. And I looked everywhere except at him, while feeling his furious gaze on me.

"Is this the cousin you were talking about?" the Blonde asked Addison.

Addison nodded. "Keily, this is Lucas. Lucas, this is Keily."

"Hi." I gave a small smile, my shyness surfacing. Lucas was a beautiful boy. He had sharp features, green eyes and heart-shaped lips. He probably had a lot of girls at his feet.

"It feels good to have a beautiful face around you," said Lucas with a very genuine smile. "I hope we will have some classes together. Addison's cousin is my... friend."

"She better stay your friend. We don't want you to go out with a cow," a voice commented. *Haynes.*

My smile disappeared. *It hurt.*

"Shut up, James." Addison glared at him. So his name was James. "You want everyone to be as unhappy as you, right?"

James Haynes rolled his eyes.

"Okay, okay," Lucas said, his eyes darting between Addison and James, who were competing fiercely with each other.



"James, you've been in a bad mood since history class. God only knows why. But you don't have to blame others."

Addison sighed, putting her arm around my shoulder. I felt like a dwarf, a grateful dwarf. She had defended me. If only I could do the same for myself.

"We're leaving," my cousin spat. "Sadhvi is waiting for us anyway."

As we started to leave, Lucas stopped us. "Hey, don't let that grump ruin your mood. Do not go. By now, Sadhvi must have found other girls."

He looked at me. "Keily, I apologize for him. He's having a bad day."

"That's no excuse," Lola muttered.

"Yes, that's no excuse." Another guy stood up. He wore glasses, which gave him a mature look. "Look, why don't you sit here with us? We all want to know Keily."

He became a hundred times more charming when he smiled. "We're the ones paying," the guy added when Addison didn't respond.

I heard James scoff, probably making a comment about my weight and the fact that I ate too much.

Addison glared at him, but gave in anyway. I had hoped she wouldn't, but we all understood that she was our boss. We did what she said.

I sat in the chair next to Lucas, hyper aware of how much space I was taking up.

It didn't help that James was right in front of me, looking like he wanted to cut my head off for sitting next to his friend.

*Am I that bad?*

The other guys introduced themselves.

Matt, the guy with glasses, Axel and Keith, the other two, went to get our lunch. They were the ones paying after all.

"So, Keily, are you having fun here?" Lucas stopped, and his face crumpled into a cute frown. "Let me rephrase that. You're not too bored, are you?"

"Not too much. The teachers here are pretty nice."

"Cool. By the way, if anyone here gives you any problems, come see me. I will take care of them."

*Take care of your friend*, I wanted to answer.

"You don't have to play the hero, Lucas. She already has me for that," Addison interjected.

"Addy, let me impress your cousin." Lucas pouted. He was so nice.

A laugh escaped me at his adorable shenanigans, but it stopped as soon as I saw James looking at me with narrowed eyes.

Matt, Keith and Axel joined us, bringing food for twenty people when there were only eight of us.

Everyone dove into it like the hungry animals that teenagers are, but I was careful not to take on too much, especially with James sitting there. I didn't want to give him more ammo.

I felt like my every move was controlled by his possible reaction.

As the food reached our mouths, the table chatter began.

I learned that Lucas was the captain of our football team. I suspected he was athletic, with all the muscles and size he had.

James was also part of the team. The two seemed to be good friends. I figured this out when I saw that Lucas kept throwing insults at James, and he received equally harsh insults in return.

According to Matt, James and Lucas were their key players. I took his word for it.

Keith and Axel were on the track team. Addison spent most of her time talking to them about their upcoming competition.

Lola quietly listened to Matt whisper in her ear. He was so close he almost sat on her lap.

"They're dating," Lucas told me when he caught me looking at them.

Lucas asked me questions about my town and my old high school. I answered all his questions, and he listened patiently. It was flattering that a guy like him was paying attention to me.

His kindness gave me the courage to ask him questions myself.

We talked about football, but when I couldn't follow him, he would change the topic of conversation to talk about the subjects he was taking. I learned that we shared math and physical education classes.

This lunch would have been the best I've had in a long time if it hadn't been for James Haynes. I tried to ignore it, but it was difficult

when he kept glaring at me.

Fortunately, he didn't make any further remarks about me. He didn't even say a word to me, just looked at me silently, like 'I wouldn't mind killing you.'

*I should have given him that stupid pen.*

\* \* \*

"Keily."

"Yes." I looked at my father. We were on the couch.

After coming home from school, eating a nice snack, and sleeping for an hour, I finished my homework.

There wasn't much to tell, since it was our first day (although I hadn't started Mr. Crones's assignment yet). It was now almost 7 p.m., and my father and I were in the living room.

I was on my phone, and he was immersed in his work, glued to his laptop.

Dad had already prepared dinner. We were just waiting for mom to come home from work.

"What is the best color?" he asked, turning the screen towards me. Two side-by-side browser pages on the Ample.com website stared back at me.

He wanted to know which theme color to choose. One of the two was a darker brown that faded into a light brown. The other was also brown, but a different shade.

I pointed to the first one.

"I like this one too." He smiled and closed the web page. My eyes were still on its screen when I noticed some unfamiliar software.

"Hold on. Why don't you use Atom? Is this your favorite tool," I asked him. He still used Atom IDE to design websites.

"The client wanted me to use this one."

"Is this new software? I never saw it."

"Yes, it was launched a year ago." He started typing on his laptop before stopping again. He looked at me, his brown eyes were shining. "Want to see its features?"

I nodded enthusiastically. I guessed I shared my father's interest in web design and coding.

"Okay, little one, don't make fun of me. I'm still learning."

"I can't promise that." I smiled.

Thanks to my father, computer science was my favorite subject. Today I was excited to attend this class. However, the excitement was gone when I saw James sitting in the computer room.

I could have handled that, but the teacher had us sit in alphabetical order, and like *K* comes after *J*~, we had to sit side by side.

For almost an hour I had to endure his judgmental stares, and when I made the mistake of looking away, I was bombarded with jokes about fat people.

My two favorite classes, English and Computer Science, had now become... less favorite. As if that wasn't enough, we were also together in math.

But Lucas was there to keep him under control, so it was bearable. Although I was grateful, I felt bad seeing Lucas argue with his friend over me. He was such a nice person.

*If only I could fight for myself.*

Our front door opened, and Mom arrived.

"Good to see you," I said before turning back to the laptop screen.

"I'll take a shower." She placed her purse on the empty chair. "And I want this laptop closed, and you both at the table before I come back." With that warning, she went upstairs.

"Yes mom. Yes, darling," Dad and I whispered together.

I prepared myself for the impending interrogation at dinner, about my first day of high school.

My mother already had a lot to do with her new role. She didn't need to hear her daughter complain about a mean teenager.

*I'll probably leave the James part out.*



## Chapter 3

"Keily," Lucas whispered, sitting right next to me.

I turned my head to look at him and raised my eyebrows and asked, "What?" » We were in math class and Mr. Penson, our teacher, was in the front, talking to us in a monotone about differentiating trigonometric functions.

After that, there was only one class left before the end of the day.

It was my fifth day and I had already managed to make some good friends, Lucas being one of them.

Being related to Addison had a lot to do with it, because I never expected to be friends with such a popular group.

Lucas slipped a little note on my table, which landed right on my textbook. I took it and unfolded it. *We go to the ice cream shop after school. You want to come ?*

The first question that came to my mind was: *Who is this "we"?*

Even though I sat with popular teenagers, I wasn't safe from critical eyes. In fact, being with them put me more in the spotlight.

I hated attention because I never received any positive one, especially since *That day*.

I didn't want to be in a crowd that would stare at me or snigger and point at me, and some of the people Lucas and Addison hung out with tended to be like that.

I looked up and my eyes unconsciously drifted to James, who was sitting on the other side of Lucas. His narrowed eyes were already trained on me, expressing displeasure at my mere existence.

Unable to bear the intensity of his gaze, I lowered my eyes, returning to the note. I knew that whoever was referred to as “we” would definitely include James.

He and Lucas were always together, and I really didn't understand how someone as nice as Lucas could be best friends with the son of Satan himself.

*I don't know. It's Addison who takes me home,* I wrote on the back of the paper before sliding it onto Lucas' table. Once again, my gaze shifted to James, and his eyes were now trained on Lucas.

The words *uncomfortable* barely describe what I felt every time I was in math class with them.

Lucas had always tried to include me in their conversations, but James' casual insults had excluded me.

Last time, Lucas asked me for help with a problem in an assignment I had already completed at home.

But the moment I picked up my pen, I became fully aware of James' eyes on us - as he leaned nonchalantly against the table directly in front of me - and all coherent thought disappeared from my mind, and I found myself staring at the sheet in complete blankness.

"You're fat and stupid," James had said with a condescending smile, "like a pig." I should call you Cochonou. » And that's how the name *Cochonou* stayed.

I wanted to tell him that he was the stupid one, because pigs are actually the smartest domestic animals.

But that wouldn't have helped matters, he would have come back with an even crueler insult. However, Lucas, being the good guy that he was, had come to my defense, but the damage was already done.

A piece of paper fell into my lap, bringing me back to reality. *Ask Addison to come too. We will have fun. Please, please, please.* I turned my head and saw Lucas giving me an exaggerated pout.

I had to bite my lip to stifle a laugh. I didn't expect our high school's big quarterback to pout like a child and look so cute.

I started to scribble on the note when the bell rang. Lucas stayed by my side as soon as Mr. Penson left. "You need to come," he said, his thumbs fiddling with the straps of his backpack.

"I am not sure." I finished packing up my things and closed my bag. I stood up and turned to Lucas. "Addison has practice after school, and I'll be in the library working on my English homework."

"If Addison isn't free, then at least you should come. It's not just us, Lola and Sadhvi are coming too."

"But my duty." I tried again to politely refuse.

"It's the beginning of the year, don't immerse yourself in studies just yet. You will have many months for this. For now, you should enjoy your senior year." Lucas didn't give in.

"So you're coming. All right?" He looked at me impatiently.

"Okay" I gave in under his big eyes.

"Meet in the parking lot after class." He smiled when I nodded.

"Pig," James said to me, getting up from his seat, "don't you have a computer class, or is flirting with Lucas more important?"

My face fell at this accusation, and a strong blush covered my cheeks. Lucas glared at him.

"Don't waste your saliva. He will never fall for a girl like you," he finished in a monotone voice.

It felt like James was on a mission to destroy everything that was good in my life, including my friendship with Lucas.

He had already reminded me countless times that I wasn't good enough for his friend, even though I wasn't interested.

I never took Lucas' kindness for anything other than friendship.

"You know what, James?" Lucas began...*Oh no...*and I saw his nostrils dilate.

"I wouldn't mind being with Keily. She's beautiful, intelligent, and above all, she's not stupid like you. In fact, I'll be lucky if she ever dates me."

I looked at him speechless and horrified. *What did he just say?!*

I looked at James and visibly flinched at the look he was giving Lucas. As if he knew I was watching him, he turned to me, a wicked smile distorting his face.

"Don't expect me to get you out of there when you're crushed under the cow," he growled, his eyes roaming my body with contempt.

"Damn it, James!" Lucas yelled, attracting the gaze of the other people who were still in the class. "You're going too far..."

"I have to go," I muttered, and stormed out of the room without looking back. The second the other students looked at us, it became too overwhelming. *I can't face this humiliation.*

I heard Lucas call to me from behind, but I was too vulnerable to face him now, and I continued at the same pace to the computer room.

I sat down at my assigned position and took a deep breath. My hands and legs were shaking, and my vision was getting a little blurry, warning me of the tears to come.

*Don't you dare cry because of that asshole. No!*

I bet James didn't realize how much words hurt, especially when you hear them over and over again. *Big, cow, pig, flask, whale, bouboule.*

There comes a point when you can no longer ignore them, and they start to stick with you, eating away at your self-esteem. And now all his insults were starting to stick.

The way he had disgraced me in front of Lucas... It was too much.

I took deep breaths, looking at the ceiling to keep the tears from falling. I wasn't going to lose my temper in the middle of the school information room with other people around.

I heard the chair next to me move, and a large body slump lazily into it. I didn't look at him, refusing to acknowledge his presence, and looked ahead.

"At least turn on the computer if you plan to stare at it." His tone was casual, as if the last few minutes hadn't happened.

My cheeks reddened when I realized I was staring at the blank screen.

*Kill me right now.*

Immediately, I pressed the power button and turned on the stupid system to avoid further embarrassment as James was feeding on it.

I felt his eyes on me, as always, trying to reduce me to a state of sweat and agitation. But there, I was too angry to give him the satisfaction of seeing me embarrassed like the other days.

Suddenly my skin tingled, and I knew the intensity of his gaze had increased a thousandfold, almost to the point where I no longer knew where to stand. I guessed it pissed him off that he didn't get a reaction from me.

*GOOD!*



"Looks like my Pig is mad at me," he said, and I could already imagine the stupid smirk on his stupid face.

"I can't say I don't like it when it makes you blush. Pink suits you, it confirms my theory that you are indeed a pig."

I blushed even more. God, I wanted to grab his head and slam it against the screen in front of him. Instead, I took the notebook out of my bag, pretending it wasn't there.

"I'm being ignored, right?" James drawled, finally getting the hint. "Well, do as you wish."

And I did as I wanted, I ignored him as if he never existed. Strangely, he decided to do the same with me. A few minutes later, our professor arrived and started her lesson on web design.

My bad mood was temporarily put aside as I listened attentively, already familiar with the HTML tags she mentioned.

I had worked with my father on several occasions, helping him design and develop websites for his clients, to kill time and lighten his workload.

Ms. Green covered the beginner level basics, and the fact that I was already light years ahead in this area flattered my ego a bit.

With fifteen minutes left, she gave us a small project to design a painting. I wrote my code in two minutes.

I thought about adding colors to the text and lines to pass the time, but decided against it, because Ms. Green hadn't covered CSS styling commands yet, and it was best not to. being too smart in front of someone who was grading your reports and tests.

"Shit!" A quiet curse came from my side, reminding me that my nemesis was still there. The absence of his glances and my concentration on our lesson had almost made me forget.

*Alas! Good times don't last.*

I couldn't help but glance at him. He stared at his computer screen, his lips pursed in concentration as his eyes moved up and down the screen.

Even though I hated him, I couldn't deny that he was beautiful. *Damage. Such a beautiful appearance ruined by a rotten personality.*

I turned my head to his screen, and slyly ran through his code. He had not written closing tags on each line entry, had used simple data tags for headings, and had not written space tags in the correct places.

I was inwardly jubilant at his blunders. Before he could catch me surprising him, I turned around, biting my cheeks to

suppressing a smirk.

*Asshole and stupid. Stupid asshole.*

"You need to work harder, James." Mrs. Green frowned, looking at James' screen. With only five minutes left, she started going to see everyone's work.

"Review in your textbook at home." James only nodded with a scowl.

"Good job, Keily," she complimented as she came to my height and looked at the web page and the notebook code, the two tabs placed side by side.

"THANKS." I smiled, savoring the small humiliation James suffered, and feeling his death stare.

She moved around to look at the work of others. Soon the bell rang and class was finally over. I immediately grabbed my bag and rushed out, not wanting another encounter with James.

After packing up and locking up my things, I sighed as I leaned my head against the locker. I didn't want to go eat ice cream with the others.

I was exhausted after the math fiasco, and I didn't want to face James again. I didn't want to see Lucas either after everything he had said.

He'd probably said all this to spite James, but his words had left a stronger impression on me than I intended.

I groaned, my temples throbbing. I just wanted to go home and sleep.

I didn't know if Lucas still intended to wait for me in the parking lot. I decided to text him that I wasn't coming, go to the library, and stay there until Addison was ready to go home.

With that, I took my cell phone out of my bag, and started walking towards the library, all the while scrolling through my contact list to find Lucas' name.

Suddenly, I was pulled backwards, nearly slipping on the hard ground. An embarrassing squeak escaped my mouth.

"Where are you going, Cochonou?" James held the top strap of my backpack. He leaned closer, his breath caressing my ears. "The parking lot is on the other side."

## Chapter 4

"Where are you going, Cochonou?" James held the top strap of my backpack. He leaned closer, his breath caressing my ears. "The parking lot is on the other side."

"W-what?" I stammered. My whole body was sweaty, and my stomach was pounding unnaturally with him being so close. It was probably the first word I had said directly to him since day one.

"You're dumber than I thought." He dropped my bag, and I stumbled before regaining my balance. "Lucas didn't invite you to join us for a meal.*ice?*»

He said "ice cream" like it was the stupidest thing.

*Do you want me to join you?* I wanted to ask him, but I was too much of a coward to confront James, so I settled for a quick, "I'm not going."

Without turning around, I took a step forward, but was pulled back by my bag again. James pulled harder this time, and I fell backwards, my backpack landing on his chest.

His arm immediately wrapped around my waist to stop me from falling further, causing my head to fall onto his shoulder.

I raised my eyes and he lowered his, our stunned gazes met.

My stomach didn't flutter, but did somersaults, and tingles came over me. I was too aware of the parts where our bodies touched.

*Isn't there an angle from which it wouldn't look perfect?* As if he had heard my thoughts, James' eyes returned to their normal size, and his lips curled into a teasing smirk.

"Are you trying to kill me, Cochonou?" he said. His fingers on my stomach wiggled, and I instantly remembered that he could smell my fat. *No.* "I'm too young to die crushed by you."

Immediately, I pulled away, and found myself facing him, my cheeks redder than a fire truck. I looked around to hide my blush from his mocking eyes.

The hallway had begun to empty, but the few people who remained were giving us curious looks, which added to my embarrassment.

"You pulled me." I grimaced in my head at how whiny I looked.

"With all that weight, you should be able to handle a few shoves." It would be the end of the world if every sentence that came out of his mouth didn't insult me.

"Let me go," I sighed, finally looking at him. His dark eyes stared at me intensely, making my knees buckle. I realized how much taller he was than me when I had to straighten my neck.

"I can't."

"For what?"

"Because I'm having fun." His smirk returned.

I looked at him speechless.

"And also, you're coming with us to the ice cream shop. I can't let Lucas be mad at me because of you when our match is in two weeks."

"Do I have any say in this?" I objected weakly. *Seriously, how much do you let yourself be walked on, Keily?*

"No," James replied simply, grabbed my hand, and started dragging me towards the school gates as if it was something commonplace. He didn't seem to see the harm in forcing a girl to follow him.

At first I followed his advice, and silently resisted by digging my shoes into the ground and using my *weight* to slow him down, all the while ignoring the warmth of his fingers wrapped around my wrist.

But my strength was no match for his. James was a football player, and his training showed as he kept walking without even seeming bothered by my frail attempts.

When we reached the parking lot, there was no sign of Lucas or his car. Nor the others who were supposed to come. They had already left. I breathed a sigh of relief, glad to not have to face Lucas, at least for a day.

"That bastard left without me," James cursed.



He was still holding my wrist, so I pulled on it to get him to let me go. Instead, his grip tightened, and he looked down on me.

"It seems like our lover doesn't care about you." He smiled, and I would have thought it sincere if it hadn't been for his eyes, which had a malevolent glint. "But I do. Let's go."

He yanked my hand, and once again he dragged me, this time toward a black Chevrolet Camaro on the other side of the parking lot.

I didn't know much about James' family, but to own this expensive piece of metal, they must have been rich. James opened the passenger door, and raised his eyebrows, gesturing for me to get in.

"You don't have to take me," I said, looking down, and squeezed the cell phone in my hand tightly.

"Don't waste time." He looked irritated, like it was all my fault.

Not having the courage to defend myself, I silently slipped into the passenger seat, and adjusted the seat belt.

James closed the door with a loud thud, almost making me jump, before walking around to sit in the driver's seat.

When the engine started, any chance of escaping James' grip was gone. So I sent Addison a quick message, asking her not to wait for me.

Even after the message was sent, I continued to check my phone, anything to avoid Satan at my side. But he didn't want to grant me this wish.

"So tell me, Cochonou," said James, "do you like him?"

"What?" My phone fell into my lap.

"Don't be stupid. You know what I mean."

I turned my head to look at him. His narrowed eyes were fixed on the road, and his hands were clenched on the steering wheel. He wasn't exactly the picture of a happy person.

"You don't have to worry," I replied, "Lucas said all that because he was angry with you. I'm sure he didn't really mean it."

"That's not the answer to my question." He stepped on the gas, and we started passing other cars on the road.

"Why does it matter that I like him?"

The speed of the car increased, and the buildings outside became blurred. *He is crazy.* I swallowed. I was too young to be killed by a crazy teenager.

"N-no," I choked out, fearing for my life. James looked at me, his eyes sharp and calculating. "I don't like it that way. Seriously, don't worry about your friend. He'll never love me anyway."

"GOOD." He pulled his head back, and gradually, the car slowed to normal speed.

I breathed a sigh of relief.

Not a word was exchanged between us after that, and an awkward tension filled the car. At least it was embarrassing for me. James didn't seem to mind.

By the time we reached Riche Glacier, I was ready to jump out of the car and run away from him.

On the way out, I spotted Lucas and Lola's cars parked not far from James's.

Fear gripped me again with every step toward the glass doors. It looked like my frayed nerves weren't going to get a break today.

When we entered, I saw Lucas, Sadhvi, Matt and Lola sitting in the third booth from the entrance, chatting and enjoying their ice creams.

Matt spotted us first, and he smiled and waved us over. I smiled awkwardly when the others turned their heads too.

Lucas was the one who seemed the most surprised by our presence, and even more so by the fact that we were together. We can't blame him, I would have been surprised too.

"Come on," James ordered, walking towards the counter. I followed him. "What do you want?" We were in front of the freezer which contained buckets of ice cream of different flavors.

"Blueberry." I felt very uncomfortable.

"And..."

"And?"

James almost rolled his eyes. "You're going to take two scoops. Do you want both to be blueberry?"

"No, I'll just have one blueberry scoop." I didn't mind having two scoops, but I also didn't want to give James another opportunity to comment on my eating habits.

"Who are you trying to fool?" James shook his head before calling to the man behind the counter. "Two chocolate balls, one with chips, the other with nuts and marshmallow, and two blueberry balls."

"Let's say blueberry and mint," I quickly corrected. James wasn't going to listen, so I might as well take what I liked.

"Tastes weird," James muttered, but I noticed a hint of a smile on his lips. When I saw him take out his wallet, I also looked for my wallet in my bag.

Today I was dressed in a knee length summer dress with no pockets, therefore my backpack held everything from my cell phone to my money.

"Do not bother. I'm the one who's enjoying it," he told me as he finished paying the waiter.

"But..."

"Just enjoy your ice cream, Cochonou." He handed me my cup, and walked over to where the others were sitting with his chocolate chip, nut and marshmallow ice cream.

"I thought you wouldn't come," Sadhvi said when we took our seats.

Her long black curls swayed over her shoulders as she moved her head, looking back and forth between James and me. She was on the high school cheerleading team with Addison.

From the few interactions I had with her, I understood that she had an extroverted and bubbly personality, completely the opposite of Lola's. Addison was friends with all kinds of people.

"Well yes," James replied, leaning back to get comfortable. I was sitting next to him, and the small movement caused our thighs to brush against each other, causing the bottom of my dress to ride up.

I blushed like a tomato. James had apparently noticed it too, because I caught him staring at my thighs, probably in disgust at how curvy I was. I shouldn't have worn that dress.

I immediately lowered it, and James looked back at Sadhvi, clearing his throat.

"Who told you we wouldn't come?" he asked, eating a spoonful of his ice cream, and turning to stare at Lucas, who was sitting opposite.

"It's me," Lucas replied with a dark look, licking the big ball of chocolate from his cone. Everyone else looked at them in silence, biting into their ice creams.

"So you decided to leave Cochonou in the lurch after begging her to join us."

Lucas' gaze softened, and he turned his head to look at me apologetically. "Keily, I'm sorry. I was embarrassed to see you again after saying all those things, and I left you abruptly."

His cheeks colored a little. "I didn't wait because I thought you wouldn't come."

"You guessed right. I wasn't going to come. I was a little embarrassed too," I answered honestly, as the weight on my chest eased. "But James insisted, so I followed him."

That wasn't entirely true. I had literally been dragged here, but I didn't want to humiliate myself further. "I hope I didn't make you uncomfortable."

"Absolutely not." He smiled, making me smile back, happy that our friendship wasn't broken.

"I'm such an asshole that I didn't even text you to tell you we were leaving. You have every right to be angry with me."

"You're an asshole," James interrupted before I could respond. "And she should be angry."

Lucas' smile turned into a grimace as he turned back to James. "And who are you to speak? It's your fault this all happened. You were fucking mistreating her!"

"What I do with her is none of your business. It's between her and me," he retorted nonchalantly, taking another bite of his chocolate ice cream.

"Can you believe this bastard?!"

*Again, no!* Wasn't James there to make up with Lucas?

"Stop, guys," Lola muttered, annoyed, stopping the two. "The girl you're fighting for seems to be scared to death of both of you."

Instantly, all eyes around the table were on me, and my face burned with all the attention. I realized that I had been watching these two fight with a terrified face.

I wasn't afraid of them, okay, maybe a little of James, but seeing them angry at each other because of *Me*, it was horrible.

As stupid as James was, he was a close friend of Lucas. And I didn't like being the cause of their argument.

"I'm sorry," Lucas sighed.



James just scoffed, looking down at me. *Yeah, a real jerk.*

Fortunately, there were no other arguments between them during the entire time we were together. But I noticed that they looked at each other from time to time.

Matt and Sadhvi took it upon themselves to bring the mood of the table back to joviality by talking about the upcoming football match. They did quite well, and James and Lucas made comments here and there.

My mint ice cream had melted into the blueberry before I noticed. Nonetheless, I gulped it down, savoring its sweet taste.

"Keily, wait," Sadhvi called behind me, as I was about to push open the ice cream parlor door. It was almost 6 p.m. when everyone decided to go home. Lucas, James and Matt were already outside.

"No, Keily. Go ahead," said Lola, who was standing next to Sadhvi. Sadhvi frowned, but she seemed unaffected.

"She's just going to ask you stupid questions about what Lucas said at school that embarrassed you. And everyone sees that you don't want to talk about it now, except her."

"Um..." She was right. I didn't want to tell Sadhvi about it. I gave him an apologetic look before walking out.

"Keily, let me drop you off at your place," Lucas offered when the girls arrived.

"She's coming with me," James interjected before I could agree. "I brought her here, and I'm dropping her off at home."

Once again, the two young men clashed until something resembling realization flashed in Lucas's eyes, and he backed away. "As you wish."

## Chapter 5

For his friend Bassanio, a real basket case, Antonio decided to sign a bond with Shylock which would oblige him to give a pound of flesh from his body if he did not repay the loan. *Really!*

This scene touched me every time. I wouldn't mind losing a few pounds from my body, but this was going a little too far.

*Shylock don't mess with you, Antonio! This man hates you, even though he has good reasons for it, and you are too arrogant to see through his schemes.*

*The Merchant of Venice* by William Shakespeare.

It was the piece I had chosen for the English homework Mr. Crones had asked us to turn in before the end of the semester.

It was Saturday, and I had nowhere to go, so I decided to finally start working on it, instead of procrastinating until a week before the deadline.

I was looking through a summary of the play on my laptop to get the plot straight in my head, rolling my eyes at the stupidity of the characters.

I already knew this play well, because in my previous high school, our teacher wanted us to read it during the summer vacation.

Being a literature enthusiast, I was one of the nerds who actually did it.

This work of Shakespeare provided a lot of political themes for me to work with, such as anti-Semitism against Shylock, power and wealth in society, the culture of masters and servants, and obviously, a bit of feminism with the heroine. , Portia.

That was enough for the five thousand words Mr. Crones wanted from us.

My phone sitting next to the laptop rang. I saw Addison's name before I answered.

"Hi."

"Keily, there's a party at Keith's house tonight. Be ready. I'll pick you up at eight," ordered my cousin on the other end of the line.

Keith was on the track team with Addison, and from what she'd told me, his parents were out of town most of the time, leaving him to have parties almost every other weekend.

"It's already six o'clock, and you tell me now!" I looked at the taskbar on the screen in front of me.

"No way you're going to screw me over again. You already went for ice cream without me," Addison protested. "I can't believe I missed the drama between Lucas and James."

She looked angry as she said her last sentence.

Sadhvi and Addison were close, and I suspected she was the one who must have told Addison about Lucas and James' spat over me at the ice cream parlor.

"There was nothing sensational. I'm sure it must be okay now." *I hope.*

The car ride home with James had gone a little better than the ride to the ice cream parlor. He looked a lot less scary. Hell, he even asked me if I liked my ice cream!

My simple "Yeah" was followed by his quip, "Of course you like to eat." Even in a good mood, I could expect James to be an asshole, but this time his remark seemed light-hearted.

I assumed his change in mood had to do with the fact that Lucas hadn't argued with him more than that about dropping me off at my place. *He really is a spoiled brat.*

"What happened between you, Lucas and James?" Addison asked.

"Nothing unusual. In math, Lucas stood up for James when he insulted me." I lowered my voice, not wanting to tell him all the details.

"But this time it got a little too bad, so they hadn't calmed down yet when we found ourselves at the ice cream parlor."

"James is such trash," she cursed, which made me chuckle as I agreed. "Sadhvi told me that you and Lucas seemed embarrassed by something..."

I groaned internally. Sadhvi made sure to explain everything in great detail to my cousin.

Addison was the type of person who listened to every little rumor, but never started one.

I trusted him, so I closed my laptop and laid down on the bed before starting to recount the whole incident from math class.

"Interesting, very interesting," Addison said when I finished, his tone feigning seriousness. "Two young men fighting to woo our fair lady." She was intentionally teasing me.

"Don't make me regret telling you," I moaned out loud.

Addison laughed. "Sorry. But I have to admit that Lucas defended you against his *best* friend. James deserved it, he's still after you. Maybe that will make him think."

This was not the case. In fact, I had a feeling it would encourage him.

"We can always hope."

"You should try hitting James. It'll probably work," Addison joked, and I heard rustling from the back.

"I have to go. Be ready for eight o'clock and dress nicely. Who knows if Lucas really has a crush on you?"

"Addison!" The line went dead before I could protest.

I put my phone down and sighed. I looked at my laptop staring at me from the other side of the bed. The editorial team had to wait another day.

\* \* \*

After rummaging through my wardrobe for at least half an hour, I finally found a dress for the party. I had tons of casual clothes, but my closet was lacking in outfits for other occasions.

It wasn't like I needed it when I was at Remington.

I spent the rest of the time taking a shower, putting on makeup, curling my hair, and finally putting on the dress. I looked at the mirror to see the final result.

My makeup was light, but the lipstick was a bright, matte pink that stood out nicely. My black hair was curled below my shoulders.

The black dress I wore came to me a few inches above the knee. It had short sleeves, and hugged my chest before transforming into a flowing skirt.

I was conscious of my slightly rounded thighs and arms that it showed, but otherwise it looked good on me. And the silver pumps my mother bought on sale last year went really well with it.

I grabbed my pouch and headed downstairs to wait for Addison. After putting in so much effort, I was pumped up for the party.

Even the idea of seeing James there didn't cool me off. It wasn't like I had to sit next to him, like at the ice cream shop.

Avoiding him in the big house full of other teenagers would be relatively easier.



"You look like you've dressed up," my father commented when I entered the living room. He was preparing dinner in the kitchen, which was open to the living room.

"What do I look like ?" I asked, smiling and making a slight spinning motion.

"You are beautiful, so beautiful that I hesitate to let you go to the party."

"Don't even think about it, Dad." My smile faded.

He made fun of me. "Just remember you have to get home before..."

"No drinking, no flirting with boys, and call me immediately if anything happens," I completed. "I know."

"And stay with Addison, she'll watch over you," he added before turning back to the stove.

I frowned. "Thank you for your trust," I muttered sarcastically.

Despite this, I decided to help him with small tasks while waiting for Addison. Ten minutes later, our doorbell rang, and I opened the front door to a smiling Sadhvi and Addison.

Sadhvi was dressed in a red deep V-neck top, tucked into denim shorts. It highlighted her petite figure nicely.

Addison wore a short, dark blue dress, which hugged her slim, muscular body. I was sure she would have to deal with a lot of boys vying for her attention tonight.

"You look great, little sister," Addison said, looking me up and down. "Looks like you took my advice."

"It's more like you. You two are so beautiful."

"We know," Sadhvi and Addison said happily together, tossing back their hair. I chuckled. Their confidence was not unjustified.

My father, an apron tied around his waist, greeted the girls. He made sure to tell Addison, over and over again, to keep an eye on me, and she nodded diligently each time.

"Let's go. We are already late," Sadhvi reminded us.

With a quick nod, I turned around and grabbed my clutch, and we hurried out of the house.

"Goodbye, uncle!"

"Goodbye, Mr. Harris!"

"Goodbye, Dad!"

The three of us shouted together before slamming the door behind us, and walking towards Addison's car.

Sadhvi let me take the front seat, and sat in the back. Addison turned on the music and started the car.

"You look like you're ready to date." Addison glanced at me, her face splitting into a grin.

"Aren't you supposed to stop me from doing this?" I asked, and saw Sadhvi in the rearview mirror, standing up after hearing us.

"The overprotectiveness of fathers towards their daughters is so stereotypical. You shouldn't let that stop you from attracting boys," Sadhvi added, adjusting her top.

"Look at me, my parents literally named me 'virtuous girl.' And let me tell you, I'm far from it."

Addison nodded with a smirk, looking at her friend in the rearview mirror. "Very far."

Sadhvi looked away and shifted in her seat. His movement reminded me of myself when I felt uncomfortable or shy.

"I'm not interested in dating anyone right now," I said, breaking the weird tension. "I just want to have fun and enjoy the party with you girlfriends."

"My God, you're a child." The bubbly Sadhvi was back. "And that's something I admire."

"Thanks, I guess."

The car headed towards an upscale neighborhood. My eyebrows rose as I looked at the beautiful homes along the road.

"This one is James's." Addison pointed to a large house on my left.

Behind its large iron gate, I could only glimpse a massive garden and an immaculate white statue in the middle of a wide path, which led to the lighted front porch.

But it was enough to know that James Haynes was loaded with cash. "I know, right? My first reaction was that too."

I closed my mouth when I realized it was wide open. "What are his parents doing?" I asked when we passed the house.

"His father runs the business that was passed down to him from his father. It's something related to the production of parts for everyday machines," Sadhvi replied.

"James' mother is a neurologist. I guess that also contributes to their huge income."

I nodded. No wonder James behaves like a king. He really was on some level.

A minute later we stopped in front of Keith's house. Although his house didn't rival James's, it fit in perfectly in this neighborhood.

Addison parked the car next to the others in the driveway. It seemed that a fairly large crowd had already gathered.

"Keith is rich too, but at least he has a better attitude about it." She came out and we did the same. The music blared before we even walked through the open door.

The party had already started.

I saw some familiar faces from our high school. They were laughing, drinking and dancing. The smell of alcohol, different perfumes and sweat hung in the air.

I bet Keith's house was spacious, but filled with so many people, it didn't seem like it.

"I'm going to get drunk this time" Sadhvi shouted looking at Addison.  
"Last time I had to drive your drunk ass home with only half a glass of alcohol in your stomach. I'll catch up."

"If you lose your temper, I'll leave you here." Addison frowned. She and Sadhvi took turns being each other's designated driver when they went to parties. Tonight it was Addison's turn.

I smiled at their joke. But he froze when I moved my head and saw James on the couch. A girl was sitting too close to him.

He took a sip from a plastic cup, and nodded to everything she said in his ear. My eyes unconsciously traveled over her figure.

He was wearing a navy blue shirt with the top three buttons undone, and black jeans. Everything was casual but expensive, no doubt, which made it look divinely beautiful.

When the girl touched his shoulder, he gave her a charming smile. I frowned. His devilish side was therefore reserved for me, while the other pretty girls were entitled to his boyish charms. *Asshole!*

I shook my head inwardly, and decided to disappear from his sight. I was happy and in no mood to let his comments get him down

crude. But before I could take a single step, his eyes had found me.

## Chapter 6

I noticed James' jaw slackened slightly as he looked at me, his gaze fiercer than ever. The pretty blonde sitting next to him continued to talk, but he no longer smiled at her or seemed to pay any attention to her. I had goosebumps all over my body as his dark eyes scanned me from head to toe, making me feel naked and insecure. It was like he was doing it on purpose, to torture me.

"Keily, let's go." Let's get drunk. » Sadhvi appeared in front of me, blocking James' view. She took my hand and started leading me through the crowd of drunk teenagers.

"I don't think that's a good idea. My parents are going crazy. »

"Let's not miss this opportunity," Addison said sulkily, following closely behind us. I felt a little bad for her. I would have offered to be their driver if I had had my license.

"I'm going to tell your parents that you're spending the night at my house. Enjoy! »

I nodded, giving in to the pressure. I didn't want to be a killjoy. And a little alcohol wasn't going to make my parents disown me anyway.

As Sadhvi led us to the kitchen, I took one last look at James. *Bad idea.*

His slanted eyes were already following me.

He was sitting on the couch, legs spread, one arm thrown casually over the back while the other still held his glass. He looked regal.

The blonde was no longer clinging to him, her interest had shifted to another guy next to her. But James didn't seem to mind.

He was more interested in me, like a predator studying its future prey. I looked away and quickened my pace, indeed feeling like prey.

" Wow. » I raised my eyebrows at the number of labeled bottles on the granite kitchen counter. "I feel bad for betraying my father's trust.  
»

" Calm down. I'm pretty sure your dad had his own crazy days. » Sadhvi mixed the contents of a few bottles into two glasses and handed one to me.



" THANKS. » My face scrunched up slightly as I took a sip. It was bitter.

Although I'm not a big drinker, I happened to steal a sip or two of whiskey from my mother's cupboard, but Sadhvi's cocktail surpassed it in bitterness and smell.

"Keily!" » exclaimed a familiar voice.

I turned around and saw Lucas walking into the kitchen with a bright smile.

He wore a black and red checked shirt and dark brown cotton pants. Our quarterback looked better than ever, but also a little drunk. I smiled at him.

"I was wondering when you were going to arrive," he said, pouring himself a drink. "I hope we're better at throwing parties than the people at Remington. »

"Yes, plenty," I lied, taking another sip. He didn't need to know that I hadn't gone to many parties in my old town.

"And us, Lucas? » Addison asked him, pouting.

She had a cup in her hand, and I guessed it contained Pepsi, a large bottle of which was also on the counter, among the rows of different alcohols.

"You only seem interested in my cousin." Aren't you happy to see us?  
» She raised her cup to her lips and gave me a quick, teasing glance.

I responded with a little dark look.

" Well ! You go heavy on alcohol! he said, looking at her and then at Sadhvi, who was making another drink.*He's not wrong.*

"That man is telling the pure truth," Addison agreed before downing his glass.

"And you, Keily, you better not drink like the others," Lucas said, turning to me.

"These two are regulars, but you don't seem like one." It would be better for everyone if we didn't have to spend our evening fending off suitors from a beautiful, drunk girl. » He looked more serious than my father.

"Okay," I agreed meekly, having mostly remembered the word "beautiful."

I heard Addison whisper, "Well let's see...", imagining a smile on her lips behind the red cup.

"God, you're so innocent." » A teasing smile appeared on Lucas' face, making me understand that he was only teasing me.

"You don't have to worry. Have as much fun as you want. I'll take good care of you.

Even if Addison doesn't drink, it'll be a little difficult for her to deal with all these drunk people on the loose, you know..."

I took a big gulp of my drink in rebellion against Lucas, and looked at Addison, who was watching me out of the corner of his eye.

Lucas started laughing, or rather barking. The alcohol was clearly taking its toll on him.

*Did I miss something ?*

"I wasn't talking about that," he said between bursts of laughter, which made me furrow my eyebrows in confusion.

"It's my favorite song," Sadhvi exclaimed before I could ask what it was about. Maroon 5 had invaded the atmosphere.

"Addy, we need to dance to this." » She was on her third drink and was no longer paying much attention to our conversation.

Before Sadhvi dragged her onto the dance floor, Addison managed to quickly whisper in my ear, "He's after you, stupid girl." »

*All right. I really don't understand anything...*

I raised the cup to my lips and finished the rest of the alcohol in one gulp to recover from my emotions. Lucas looked at me, amused, as I placed my empty glass back on the counter.

"Do you want to Dance ? » he asked me, which immediately freaked me out. He filled our two cups without asking my opinion.

"Of course," I said, trying to sound nonchalant.

We grabbed our drinks and headed over to Addison and Sadhvi.

The girls were dancing, swaying to the rhythm, holding each other's waists and laughing at each other's jokes, completely ignoring the boys who were ogling them.

"You'll thank me later for saving you." Sooner or later, they were going to give up on you. » Lucas took my hand, and before I could understand what he had just said, everything changed.

He spun me around, spilling a few drops of my drink onto the floor.

I started giggling, and put my hand on his shoulder to steady myself.  
"Are you all making fun of me?" »

" Yes. " He smiled. "But we're among friends here, so it's not bad.  
Have fun ! »

I started giggling, and so did he.

I assumed the alcohol had finally taken effect. My nervousness diminished as the minutes passed, and dancing with Lucas no longer seemed as intimidating. It was even fun.

We swayed to the music, spinning each other around, arguing about trivial things like what kind of animal Lucas looked like, or which was better, cats or dogs, and laughing like crazy after seeing Lola and Matt kissing in the corner.

Every time our glasses were empty, we rushed to the kitchen to get more, laughing like children. Seeing me in this state, my parents would undoubtedly disown me.

After my sixth drink, and Lucas's thousandth, a break was necessary. Near the stairs, I stood next to my handsome date.

I felt my hair sticking to my face and neck, and beads of sweat running all over my body, but I didn't really care.

Lucas' t-shirt was also damp, his face had a pink tint to it, and his hair was disheveled. Leaning against the wall, we looked like complete drunks.

I was looking at the crowd in front of us when I saw James watching us with an expression that I could only describe as livid.

He was on the other side of the large room, surrounded by his friends from the football team.

While I was dancing with Lucas, I had felt his laser gaze on me once or twice.

But with my mind foggy from alcohol, and Lucas captivating me with his ridiculous dance moves, I had managed to ignore it.

"Hey," Lucas said, turning me towards him. "You want revenge on him? »

" What ? »

Lucas rolled his eyes, and I pouted. "You want revenge on James? » We both glanced at this creepy man watching us, before staring at each other.

Of course I wanted revenge on him. He was evil.

I nodded, tilting my head. *My God, I'm completely drunk.*

"Then kiss me." »

" Eh ? »

"Kiss me and watch how this motherfucker fumes." » Lucas's eyes shone with mischief.

Lucas was right. Since day one, James had always been against the idea of us being more than friends. He didn't even appreciate our friendship.

He wanted to maintain this ridiculous social hierarchy in his mind. Me kissing Lucas would definitely push him over the edge.

Lucas was a genius. A genius who was also very handsome, and who was also the mascot of our school. I didn't mind kissing such a beautiful person, this kind of opportunity rarely comes in life.

I smiled. "Okay, but without the language. »

Lucas staggered, putting a hand over his heart. I blamed this excessive behavior on alcohol. "No language. »

"I want to use my tongue when I'm sober and don't smell like a million different types of alcohol mixed together. »

"Like a real lady." I'll remember it. » Lucas nodded, trying to sound serious, to no avail. "Now come over here." »

He leaned forward, and I did the same after licking my lips. The strong smell of alcohol, mixed with his musky perfume and his deodorant, preceded the inevitable contact.

When our noses brushed, I closed my eyes. Our lips came together and...

I stumbled forward, face down. I opened my eyes and saw James' angry face. He held Lucas by the collar of his shirt.

James pulled him away from me just as we were about to kiss.

*That wasn't very nice of him. I was impatiently waiting for this kiss.*

I was about to say this to James, but the moment our eyes met, all my words vanished. He was furious and looked like a monster straight out of my nightmares... or an angel out of a beautiful dream.

*Maybe a mix of both, because he was really handsome, especially with those strands of hair falling across his forehead, but also terrifying.*



*Terrifying as hell.*

*I should have taken it easier with the alcohol.*

" Hey ! » Lucas interrupted the murderous look he was giving me. " What are you doing ?! »

" You're drunk. She's drunk," James said, clearly restraining himself from hitting Lucas. Or maybe *me* hit. It was me he hated, after all. "I don't want you to regret it in the morning." »

" Who are you ? My father ? » Lucas whispered, freeing himself from James' grip. "And anyway, why would I regret kissing Keily?" She is cute and beautiful, and she has a good heart. »

*He should have gone easier on those cocktails too.*

I blushed as both boys looked at me, Lucas with a smug smile and James with an angry look. Lucas' plan was backfiring on me.

I wanted to run away, but before I could leave, James turned his angry gaze in my direction.

"And you," he spat. "Don't you dare try to get closer to Lucas." You're not good enough for him. Stay in your place. »

"Don't talk to him like that!" » Lucas stammered. His mind was processing things slowly due to his advanced state of intoxication.

" Shut up ! » James pushed him away, and he stumbled, groaning.

Seeing him push the person who had defended me finally gave me a little courage through this fog of drunkenness.

"My place is where I want it to be, James," I said. "I don't care what you think. »

I lifted my chin but quickly realized that was a bad idea because now our faces were almost touching.

My weak courage vanished completely when I saw his nostrils flare with rage. I had managed to seriously annoy him with my words.

"Your place is in the mud, Cochonou. You're lucky we let you come into the house fully dressed. » His eyes narrowed. "What, little Pig thought that kissing Lucas would turn her into a princess?" It's not a fairy tale. »

Tears blurred my vision. I bit my lip, trying to concentrate on keeping them from leaking. If James saw me crying because of him, I would die of shame.

But James' eyes widened when he saw the tears.

*Great.*

I was ready for an onslaught of insults and taunts, but nothing. Surprisingly, his expression softened. I could still see the anger flashing in his eyes, but for once, it wasn't aimed at me.

It seemed like he was angry with himself...

"Are you doing well ? » I asked him.

*What am I talking about?! Why am I trying to comfort this bully?* I was officially crazy. Or drunk. Or both.

"Just...shut your mouth, Cochonou. If you don't want me to lose my temper," he muttered. But his words lacked the usual bite.

"I will take care of your case at school," he continued. He put his hand on the back of my neck, holding me in place so I had to look at him. My skin tingled wherever he touched it. "You're going to find Addison and go home." Understood ? Get the hell out of here or I'll throw you out myself. »

He let me go after I nodded.

"Go home, little pig. We don't want you here. »

Lucas said, "Dude, you can't..." But he couldn't finish his sentence because James pulled him by the collar.

I raised my hand to greet Lucas, but James' look made me hesitate. He treated us both like rambunctious toddlers.

Now feeling like a beaten puppy, I started looking for Addison and Sadhvi.

## Chapter 7

I opened my eyes to the sleeping person lying next to me, their hair brushing my face and neck, tickling me.

Sadhvi, still dressed in her clothes from last night's party, with her head turned towards me, was sleeping peacefully, emitting soft snores. I yawned and sat up.

I started to grimace as I felt a hell of a headache coming on, making me regret all the alcohol I had drunk the night before.

Massaging my temples, I studied my surroundings.

The sun's rays streamed through the window's half-open curtains, illuminating the light blue walls of Addison's room.

The large bed I was sitting on, which the three of us had squeezed into the night before, was in the middle of the room.

The wall clock hanging in front of me read 7:45. Next to the bed was a small stool, on which sat my earrings and

those of Sadhvi, as well as a small lamp.

On the other side, there was a wooden dressing table with a long mirror. The room was minimalist, the opposite of mine.

It's been almost a month since I've been here with Addison.

I silently got out of bed and went to the adjoining bathroom to freshen up.

At the sink, I flinched at my reflection in the mirror. Mascara had run down my cheeks, and my makeup was smeared everywhere. I had the ruined face of a zombie.

My tousled hair from the morning complemented this horrible look perfectly. Like Sadhvi, I was also still dressed in my evening dress, now wrinkled and rumpled after a night of sleeping in it.

My hangover was real. And this heaviness in my head made it completely unbearable.

*I will never drink again.*

There was a knock on the door just after I finished washing my face. I opened it and found a sweaty Addison behind the door, dressed in a tank top and yoga pants. I assumed she was coming back from her morning run.

Unlike us, she hadn't been drinking at the party, so she probably had a fresh start.

"Your father is coming to pick you up," she said, giving me a still-wrapped toothbrush. "He'll be here in an hour." And Mom wants you to have breakfast with us. »

I nodded, wondering if my aunt knew her niece had shown up drunk at her door the night before. But I didn't think much more about it, because Addison didn't seem worried.

She had more experience with the consequences of high school parties than I did.

Sadhvi was still sleeping soundly when I came out. Addison looked up from her phone and I sat next to her on the bed.

"Do you remember last night? » asked my cousin, looking at me curiously.

"I drank a little too much, but not so much that I had memory lapses. » I chuckled, but regretted it when my head started to vibrate. "Yes, I remember last night. »

"You were crying when we got home. » Addison's words captured my full attention despite my headache. "I kept asking you if something was wrong, but you were just crying, not saying anything. »

The blurry memory of the night after meeting James flashed through my mind.

His words had left a considerable impact on me.

Of course, I already knew that I didn't belong among them. I knew it was unusual for a curvy girl like me to hang out with all these beautiful and popular people.

*A slumming pig!*

After finding Addison and Sadhvi, we decided to all go to Addison's house.

Addison was having a hard time taking care of Sadhvi, who was in much worse shape than me. So it didn't take me much time to convince her to leave.

As we passed James' house, something clicked and my mind took me back to our last conversation. My brain replayed yesterday's words over and over again, and my tears began to flow on their own.

My emotions were heightened by drinking.

I remembered that, on the way back, Addison had looked at me worriedly and asked if something was wrong, or if someone



had hurt me, but I continued to cry silently, refusing to tell him about the humiliation I had suffered.

Now, seeing her worry about me again, I felt bad for being so withdrawn last night. She had already had to deal with Sadhvi, so no need for an emotionally unstable cousin to add to that.

"It's nothing," I replied. My embarrassment still prevented me from revealing anything to him. Besides, the fact that James was harassing me wasn't something new either.

She asked me if I was sure, frowning. "I left you with Lucas, thinking he would take good care of you.

I've known him since we were children. But he was drunk, and you never know with men. Does he have... "

" No ! » I interrupted her immediately. Lucas had been very kind to me.

" He did not do anything. I actually had fun with him. Maybe I was crying because we were about to kiss and someone interrupted us. »

Seeing Addison go so far as to suspect her childhood friend because of me scared me, so I made up a lie.

*Awesome !*

A teasing smile appeared on Addison's lips. " So that's it ? »

" No. »

"But you were going to kiss him?" You looked so cute together while dancing. »

*We were going to kiss just to spite James. And it was a very bad idea.*

"We were drunk, Addison," I said, wanting to end her fantasy involving Lucas and me. I shouldn't have let this information slip.

"I'm relieved nothing happened, otherwise it would have been very embarrassing for both of us." »

It was the pure truth.

"Why wouldn't he want you?" Addison asked with a frown. " What's wrong ? You are beautiful ! » She pinched my cheeks very hard. "And so cute." »

She had gotten into the habit of doing this when we were kids and had never stopped since.

" Do not do that. » I released my burning cheeks from its vice. " It hurts. »

After a goofy smile in response, she added, "It's not that surprising that Lucas likes you." Have confidence in yourself, Keily. »

"It's easy to say when you're like you." I don't meet a lot of people's standards. I am fat. » The words escaped me before I could stop myself. *Am I drunk again?*

"No, you're not fat," Addison replied immediately. "Sure, you're a little curvy, but that's a trait that makes you unique. You should be proud of that, little sister. »

I shrugged my shoulders. I was sure many people, including James, would shake their heads at this.

"So what interrupted your kiss?" »

"Um...I don't remember exactly," I lied, and immediately felt bad for doing so. Addison was so nice to me.

"Well, make sure you don't get interrupted next time." »

Before I could say there would be no next time, she stood up and hit Sadhvi hard on the back. Still asleep, she

let out a small moan before flipping his body to the other side.

"I won't get rid of her until this afternoon," Addison said with a long sigh, then turned to me. "Let's go." Mom must be waiting for us. »

Aunt Clarissa was in the kitchen, making omelets, when we arrived.

She and Addison looked a lot alike, having the same skin tone and hair color, but Addison was taller and thinner than her mother, whose figure was slightly rounder.

When she looked at us, I was surprised to find that she was smiling at me instead of staring at me sternly. Maybe my aunt didn't know I had been drinking.

"Hello Auntie," I greeted her, smiling back at her.

"Your father will be here soon," she said. "And he knows about the alcohol." Prepare yourself, try to limit the damage. »

I looked at her, horrified. My headache hit me harder. *Oh no !*

" Mom ! » Addison shouted. "Why did you tell him? He's not like you, he'll freak out and stop Keily from going to any other parties. »

*So Addison gets her down-to-earth spirit from Aunt Clarissa.*

Auntie shook her head. "Addison, you brought her under my roof, so you can't expect me to hide it from her parents." They are my family. » She moved the omelette from the pan to the plate.

"Besides, you underestimate your uncle. He's protective because he considers Keily his little girl, but I'm sure he'll also understand that she's growing up. »

She turned to me and gave me a bright smile.

I could only nod at his optimism.

"Never mind. » Addison looked up and sat down in one of the dining room chairs. "Sadhvi is still in bed. »

I sat quietly next to her.

We had breakfast, chatting about school and other things. Auntie was always so pleasant. I swallowed my whole plate and refilled it.

No wonder I'm a little stuffed, seeing as I'm stuffing myself. But the food was delicious. Aunt Clarissa cooked much better than my parents, or maybe it was just the change in taste that I liked.

My headache was also gone. Uncle Mike, my mother's brother, was on a business trip for a week, so he wasn't with us.

When Dad came in with a dark look on his face, I hid behind Addison. Fortunately, my aunt said a few words to him before sending him in my direction, which had the effect of easing his anger.

But he was still clearly irritated.

"Didn't I forbid alcohol? » he began. We were in his Honda SUV, heading home. The ride only lasted five minutes, but it was enough for my father to speak his mind.

"What else have you done that I don't know yet?" »

"I promise it was just alcohol." » I curled up, looking down at my knees.

"Are you sure ? »

I nodded.

"Keily, I'm not sure how to do this," he sighed.

"This is the first time something like this has happened. But you are eighteen and legally an adult. I think I'll let your mother take care of punishing you. »

I sighed inwardly. Mom was much gentler with punishments than Dad.

"At least tell me you enjoyed the party," he said, his voice a little more jovial, which eased the tension between us.

I looked at him shyly. The creases on his forehead had disappeared, a sign that our confrontation was over. *That's all ?*

Aunt Clarissa must have put a spell on my father, because I didn't expect to get away with it so easily.

I smiled before answering. " It was great. » *Until James...*

" GOOD. »

Now that the worst was over, I couldn't wait to get back into bed, take another long nap, and take a hot shower. I had had a long night.

*I will take care of your case at school...*

Or maybe the worst was yet to come.

James' warning before he ordered me to look for Addison came back to me. I hoped he wasn't being sincere, and that he had only said it in the heat of the moment.

I rested my head against the window, not having the energy to think about tomorrow.



## Chapter 8

Monday morning came too early for my liking. Walking into English class, I wished he hadn't arrived at all.

James was sitting next to my desk as usual, engrossed in his phone, oblivious to the fear he inspired in me. A cold shiver ran through me as I walked to my seat.

I felt his gaze fall on me the second I reached the spot next to him. Very aware of my every move, I sat down and began to take my things for class out of my bag, not daring to meet his gaze.

"Why are you so shy now, Cochonou?" » James said, making me look up at him shyly. My cheeks flushed when

our eyes met. His gaze was fierce and accusatory, and as always, he forced me into submission.

"What happened to the animal that couldn't help but put its dirty paws on Lucas the other night?" »

" Stopped. It's not... "

"Oh, it's not?" It's you trying to be something you're not. A pig in human clothes. » He cut me off, leaning on the back of his chair. His eyes traveled over my entire body, and I squirmed in embarrassment.

I wore a pink and white striped top, tucked into a plain blue denim skirt that reached just above my knees.

I never thought the outfit was ugly, but under James' scrutiny, I hoped it didn't make me look too fat.

" Look at you. » His gaze fell on me again. "No wonder you're so desperate to take advantage of my drunk friend." »

His words hit me like a punch.

"I didn't want to take advantage of anyone. It's not what you think. »

" So what is it ? »

I kept quiet. I didn't think it was a good idea to tell him what Lucas and I were planning.

James laughed at my silence. "If you're so desperate, why go see Lucas?" » He stood up, an arrogant smile on his lips, before leaning towards me.

He didn't stop until our faces were inches apart.

My body froze, and my senses heightened. The scent of cologne mixed with his own musky scent surrounded me.

I saw the pupils in his dark eyes dilate as he began to peer into my face. His smirk faded when his gaze landed on my lips, lingering there for a long time.

I noticed his pride disappearing and something else replacing it, something intense.

A damn zoo throbbed in my stomach, probably from fear. It had to be fear. My skin burned under his eyes, goosebumps appeared everywhere. I had no doubt that my face was the brightest red.

"James?" » I whispered, scared.

That single word was enough to wipe the dazed look from his face. In an instant, the mocking glint in his eyes returned, along with his smirk.

Seeing this, I finally reacted and backed away a little, but James grabbed a strand of hair from my shoulder and pulled me closer to him again. I knew something bad was going to happen.

"If my Pig wants it so badly," James began, his minty breath caressing my face. "She can come see me. I'll give her the kiss she so desires... maybe she'll even turn into a princess. »

With one last look, he let me go and sat back comfortably, pretending nothing had happened.

*Asshole!*

I wanted to slap him hard, and push his face into his desk to watch him writhe in pain. Anything to hurt him like he did to me earlier.

It was horrible, and my self-esteem took a hit. But all I managed to do was stifle my pathetic groan in response to his degrading remark. *I'm a real coward.*

Defeated, I returned to my business. I opened my textbook and kept reading the same sentence over and over again, holding back tears until Mr. Crones arrived.

I tried my best to pay attention to our teacher, and forget what James had said, but I couldn't.

This brute, as always, had managed, with his vicious methods, to stay in my mind.

And the tingles that ran through my body every time he looked at me in class didn't help either.

*I hate him so much.*

\* \* \*

Lucas told me: "You should come to the trials this afternoon. It's better than being alone in the library. And then we can see Addison shaking her pom poms. »

He gave Addison, who was on my side, a teasing smile.

My cousin glared at him. "From the way you all ogle at us on the field, I thought you noticed we weren't using pom poms this season." »

" Yes, of course ! » Lucas frowned. "But I mean... You should use them." »

Addison rolled her eyes.

Lucas joined us at lunchtime.

I hadn't seen him all morning, but that was mostly because on Mondays, the math class we shared was after lunch.

I was a little apprehensive about our reunion because of what happened at the party, but Lucas, by acting as if nothing was out of the ordinary, took all the embarrassment away.

He didn't mention the party, and neither did I. But I knew Addison was dying to talk about it, judging by the suggestive looks she was giving me.

Today after school there was soccer tryouts for anyone who wanted to be on the team.

Lucas had told me that these games took place at the start of each year and that next week's game would be a good warm-up for the new players before the season.

He insisted that I come and watch the trials. I was going to be around anyway since Addison also had her cheerleading practice after school, and she was the one driving me home.

Whenever Addison stayed late, I would wait for her in the library and, during that time, I would do my homework.

I had no problem with this arrangement, as it allowed me to save time on homework and work with Dad on his web design projects.

However, since Lucas was talking so passionately about the game, I figured I'd enjoy watching him and Addison on the football field.

But unfortunately, with them, there would also be a person I despised. I didn't want to see James' face after what happened in English.

And I had the impression that he wouldn't like to see me there either. Besides, he would surely let me know by stomping on me with his cruel insults.

I was even dreading our next math class together.

"See you at practice, Keily?" » Lucas turned to me, frowning, waiting for my response.

"Of course. » I agreed.

Even though the idea of seeing James wasn't pleasant, I didn't want to disappoint Lucas, especially since he was caring and always tried to make me feel included.

Besides, Addison would probably kill me if I refused.

He smiled, and so did Addison. *Sweet Jesus !*

When we arrived at the cafeteria, the first person who caught my eye was, of course, James. He was sitting at his table with the other boys, and his blazing eyes were already watching me.

I could almost see darkness take over his face when he spotted Lucas next to me.

I was appalled by his complacency. He had no right to throw barbs at me after what he had done, and in a sudden burst of anger, I wanted to show him.

"Lucas, why don't you sit with us today?" » I asked him with a beaming smile, feeling a certain asshole's gaze intensify.

He glanced at his usual table, where James was also sitting.

" My pleasure. I have my reputation as a quarterback to maintain, and that means I have to surround myself with beautiful girls. »

"You're such an idiot," Addison said, but her face lit up with a wide smile. She looked from him to me, not at all trying to hide the fact that she was probably imagining the name of our future baby.



"I'm not a jerk, I'm a quarterback," Lucas replied. "So, you're going to buy me lunch?" »

"Yes, I'll pay you for it," I offered. It was the least I could do after he was so nice to me.

"Thank you, my queen. » Lucas put his arm around my shoulder and tilted his head, which made me giggle.

But my laughter stopped when my eyes landed on James, who was fuming, clutching the fork in his hand tightly. I would have been lying if I said I wasn't afraid.

Lucas got his lunch and sat down with us: Addison, Sadhvi, Lola and me.

I would have rejoiced in my little victory if I had not seen my scourge, whose furious eyes promised me punishment. *I am dead.*

\* \* \*

I gulped when James walked into our math class and gave me a fierce look, as if my mere existence was a crime. Lucas, who was right behind him, gave me a smile and tilted his head.

I wanted to disappear.

"I'm really looking forward to testing," Lucas chirped as he sat down next to me. I saw James move in on the other side.

"Me too," James said, looking at me.

"You know what, Keily? Lucas looked excited, which made me look away from James.

"We just spoke to the coach, and he wants James and I to demonstrate for the new guys. It's not much, but I love tackling these newbies to the ground.

It's funny to hear their grunts of pain when they receive the first shock of their life.

"You seem terribly excited about hurting others, don't you?" I asked, trying to ignore James' piercing gaze.

"I swear I'm a good person, but when it comes to football, I'm a sadist. »

I nodded, trying to respond to his enthusiasm but failing.

"Are you still coming to see the trials? » Lucas asked.

My gaze fell on James, and I noticed a look of surprise on his face before it turned into something sinister. I had a very bad feeling.

" Yes I will be there. » I desperately wanted to shout "No!" »

"Be careful not to damage our stands, they have just been repainted," added James, as usual. *His lesson.*

I blushed and looked down at my desk, as usual.

"James, stop," I heard Lucas sigh.

Surprisingly, the rest of the class went by without incident, except for James' usual taunts whenever Lucas tried to include me in their conversation.

However, I felt deep down that it was the calm before the storm. Okay, maybe I was exaggerating, but I knew he would get revenge one way or another.

I had rebelled against James at lunch by deliberately picking on Lucas, and he had understood.

Something told me he hadn't taken it well, and that I was going to pay him.

## Chapter 9

The sun's rays warmed my exposed skin nicely, and a slight breeze blew my hair across my face as I made my way to the metal bleachers.

It was a beautiful day to be outside, a perfect mix of sun and wind. A complete contrast to the anxiety bubbling inside me.

James' dark expression in the cafeteria, when Lucas sat down with me, haunted my thoughts, and I expected him to attack me at any moment. He was unreasonably trying to keep Lucas away from me. And I had a feeling it was only going to get worse, judging by the worried expression that had crossed his face in math class, when he learned that I would be attending the tests. Maybe James would aim the football at my head and knock me out, just for being there. *Maybe I think too much, I tend to do that, especially with him.*

On the way, I saw about twenty boys gathered in the center of the football field. Only a few wore black soccer jerseys, while others were dressed in sweatpants or shorts and baggy T-shirts.

The coach of our team stood out for his bald head, his whistle around his neck and his frenzied way of yelling at the boys.

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Cheerleaders were also present on the field in one corner, most dressed the same in sweatpants and tank tops. They were stretching.

I spotted Addison among them, performing a graceful lunge. I raised my eyebrows at his flexibility. She was so impeccable and elegant that someone like me could only aspire to be in her place.

Matt and Lola were already seated at the end of the middle row when I reached the stands. Other students were also scattered across the seats, and I assumed football was big at Jenkins. Matt spoke excitedly to Lola who, as always, just listened and nodded. I was hesitant to join the couple. They seemed too engrossed in their conversation, but Lola spotted me as I came up the stairs, and waved me over.

"Lucas still managed to drag you here," Matt said, looking at me and smiling. He seemed very enthusiastic about this trial. I sat down next to Lola, taking off my bag and placing it on my lap.

"It was hard to refuse. »

"He loves football," Lola added.

"Lucas asked you to come too?" » I asked.

"He didn't need to," Lola replied, pointing at her boyfriend with her thumb. "Matt is a huge football fan, so much so that he took me along with him. We never miss our team's games. The workouts are pretty fun to watch too. »

"So why aren't you on the team?" »

"I have a heart problem," he replied. "Hypertrophic cardiomyopathy. I inherited it from my grandmother, and my cardiologist told me to avoid extreme exercise. Football involves a lot, so I didn't join the team, just to be safe. »

" Oh. I'm sorry. »

"Don't worry, I'm not dying," Matt continued laughing, probably seeing my shocked face.

"It's not that big of a deal for me. I can still do normal exercises like jogging or workouts, but not anything very intense. I've also accepted the fact that I can't play, but I can't stop watching. »

I nodded, smiling. He seemed happy with what he had.

Lola placed a small kiss on Matt's lips and leaned on him. I turned my head to look ahead, not wanting to intrude on their privacy.

Soon my eyes began to search for Lucas, and maybe James too. I didn't see either of them.

"Lucas isn't here yet," Lola said.

"Coach asked him and James to show the others a few tricks. They must still be putting on their gear in the locker room, like the lazy people they are. Coach Martin gives them a little leeway. » Matt pushed up his glasses.

"James and Lucas are our best players, and also our ticket to this season's trophy. The coach knows it, so he is lenient with them. »

"Isn't it a team sport?" Why put only two people on a pedestal? » I challenged.

"No one puts anyone on a pedestal. It's just that the coach is not on their backs, like with others. James and Lucas have been playing soccer since middle school, so they have his full trust. But you can always expect him to kick their asses if they step out of line. Martin takes this very seriously. »

"Oh yes, very seriously," added Lola. "He even tried to pit those two against each other for the quarterback position at the start of junior year, but James wasn't interested. They are both equally talented, but the game means more to Lucas. He wants to enter university on a sports scholarship, and James has no plans to make football his future. » She shook her head.



“Why would he? He has wealthy parents and a successful business waiting for him to take over. He didn't care about being quarterback or captain, so Martin ultimately had to fall back on Lucas. »

It was a long monologue from Lola, which gave me new insight into the relationship between James and Lucas.

“James has a bright future. » Matt put his arm around her shoulders, and a small smile appeared on the girl's face at this gesture.

“He may study medicine like his mother. The probability is high since it is often the children of doctors who become doctors. His older brother is already in medical school. I'm pretty sure Mr. Haynes wouldn't like his other son to go too. Who would take care of his precious business? »

I kept quiet and processed this new information about James. Even though I hated him, a big part of me was curious and wanted to know everything about him.

I had long looked for a means of pressure on him to prevent him from attacking me, but until now, I had found none. It only reinforced the idea that he was perfect, except for his tyrannical side.

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

James and Lucas were walking towards other boys. They were wearing their football gear and our team's black jersey, their helmets in their hands.

Even with heavy equipment, they managed to look nonchalant. Coach Martin talked to them for a minute.

When he let them go, Lucas looked toward the stands and waved, his teeth glinting in the distance.

I smiled and greeted him back. But my joy faded when my eyes spotted James, who was standing behind him. I could feel his penetrating gaze from across the field.

After making final arrangements and lining up candidates, the tryouts began. At the start, there was no tackling or one-on-one as I expected.

The coach blew the whistle, and they started the laps. Then he walked them around the long line of orange cones at least five times.

When these poor boys were done, they were drenched from head to toe in sweat, their shirts and pants sticking to their bodies.

"It tests their endurance, and what's better than running? » Matt commented. "Half of them are going to be rejected now. » And he had

reason: almost half of them left, panting and barely managing to walk.

"The fun part is now," Lola said when Lucas was handed a balloon. He had put on his helmet. " Let's go. »

He passed the white line while spinning the oval ball in his hand. I saw James standing near the halfway line, facing our side. I gasped when he looked at us, or *my* looked at, before putting on his helmet.

The whistle blew and everything happened in a flash. Lucas sprinted to the other side of the field before being tackled to the ground by James.

I flinched at his fall. Even with all the padding he was wearing, it must have hurt like hell. I didn't know this game was so violent.

Matt let out a "phew" and I turned my head towards him. He had a wrinkled nose and was staring straight ahead. "James didn't need to do that for the tryouts. »

" What do you mean ? » I turned back towards the field. James had his hand outstretched and Lucas used it to get up.

" Nothing. This tackle was more aggressive than necessary. Maybe James didn't do it on purpose. »

Very quickly, we had proof that Matt was wrong. James *did it on purpose*.

When the coach asked them to repeat the move, Lucas was once again tackled severely, but this idiot gave a thumbs up, ready for another assault.

By the fourth fall, he was having trouble staying upright.

"Is James mad at Lucas?" » asked Lola.

*No, it's me he wants. And it's Lucas who pays the price.* James made sure it was clear to me. His gaze raised to me each time, before tackling Lucas.

Fortunately, the coach had decided that four times would be enough for the others to learn the technique. Lucas started limping to the bench. Perhaps having seen his condition, the coach had ordered him to stay there.

I frowned. He was so excited to take on the boys who had come for the tryout, and although I didn't understand his excitement, I felt bad for him.

It was James' fault.

Anger and anxiety welled up inside me. He was so petty to pick on his friend just to punish me. I clutched my bag and looked at him.

His eyes were already trained on me, as he nodded to the coach who was standing in front of him and talking to him. My eyebrows furrowed and my gaze darkened. He responded with a smile.

*What an asshole!*

It looked like James had been tasked with tackling the others, and the boys weren't happy about that, after seeing him tackle their quarterback so brutally.

However, their fears were soon allayed. When the first player took Lucas' place, with a helmet and shoulder pads, James was gentler with him, much gentler. This pissed me off even more.

The training continued for another hour. The coach used James and another teammate to teach certain moves, such as kicking, handling and passing the ball.

Football not being my strong point, I couldn't follow everything. But despite my anger, I quickly realized that James was really talented.

His movements were quick and experienced, as if he knew his opponent's mind better than he knew himself. I couldn't take my eyes off him.

By the end of the competition, only four second-year students had made the team. They received pats on the back from their teammates during initiation.

Matt said, "Let's go see them." » The coach left, and the others began to leave the field. We all grabbed our bags and headed out onto the lawn.

I didn't want to face James, and unfortunately he was with Lucas, still sitting on the bench. Their helmets were off and they were talking.

I heard some of their dialogue as we got closer to them.

"Don't complain, tomorrow the pain will be gone," James would say, which made me wince, seeing how he treated his friend.

"I don't really care," Lucas spat.

"Don't lie, you wanted to play the big macho captain for the new guys. »

"It's better than being a jealous bastard like you..." He stopped when he saw us coming.

James followed his friend's gaze, an angry frown marring his face as he turned his head towards us.

"James is jealous?" » Matt asked once we joined them. His face lit up with mischief. "And what is he jealous of, Lucas? »

I wanted to know that too. Maybe Lucas' predicament wasn't my fault after all.

"Fuck you, Matt. » James glared at him.

Lola rolled her eyes next to me.

Lucas let out a tired sigh. " It's nothing. »

He looked at me and gave me a small smile. "Keily, you came, but I couldn't even make it. I'll make sure to remedy that when you come to watch our matches. »

"Of course," I replied, trying to smile back. "I at least saw you running today." You were fast. » Part of me felt guilty, wondering if he was really suffering from the conflict between James and me.

" And me ? » James asked, a hint of mockery in his tone. His dark eyes looked at me defiantly and were amused at my distress. "Did you like my game, Cochonou? »

*He's just an idiot!*





## Chapter 10

"I'm going to get my driving test," I announced while swallowing my spaghetti. "And I'll get it in a month." It will be easy since I already know how to drive. »

My parents looked at me from across the table. We were having dinner, spaghetti and meatballs my dad made, and it was delicious.

However, my words caused a great silence.

"She's becoming an adult," my mother commented. "First the drinking, and now the driving. »

"Let's hope you don't mix the two," my father added.

"Can you stop with this story? » I groaned, putting down my fork. "I do the dishes every night, right? »

Like Dad had said when he picked me up from Addison's, he'd let Mom decide my punishment for drinking at the party.

Luckily, she didn't make much of a fuss and just gave me the dishes to do every night. Dad and I both knew that my mother was taking some of her workload off of her.

But I couldn't complain, especially when she talked to me one-on-one about her teenage years, assuring me that it was okay to have a little fun, of course with precautions.

My drinking wasn't a problem for her. Perhaps she already expected her teenage daughter to experience it, unlike my father, who probably thought I was on my way to becoming a homeless drunk.

"You only made it last night," Mom said jokingly.

"And I'll do it tonight," I called back. "And also countless evenings to come." »

"Maybe we shouldn't let you get off so easy," Dad said, shaking his head before biting into his meatball.

I frowned.

"She's eighteen, Will. We should let her act like a young adult. » My mother stood up for me, and I felt a little relieved.

"She should start making her own decisions, and in return, I expect her to be responsible. » His tone told me not to take my new freedom for granted.

" Thank you so much. » I tilted my head mockingly. "And like any responsible eighteen-year-old girl, I want to get my driving test. »

"And soon, like an eighteen-year-old brat, you'll be asking us for an expensive car," my father said, but his tone wasn't serious.

"Buying a car just for my senior year doesn't seem like a good investment. I can totally hitchhike with Addison, she doesn't mind either.

I just want to get the permit for emergency cases. Plus, it would be nice to have it before college. »

It was a half-truth. On our drive home from school, Addison had warned me that I would be accompanying her to many parties.

I didn't want to be a burden that she and Sadhvi would always have to carry around, which is why I wanted to get my license, so I could share the responsibility of being a sober driver.

My father had already taught me to drive at Remington. But I didn't have many friends to go out with or make plans with, which made me delay getting my license.

However, now that I had a bit of a social life, I didn't want to attract the attention of Addison and her friends.

I bet James would judge me negatively for not having the license.

*Hold on. Why do I care what he thinks of me?*

"The way things are going, you're going to be bringing home a boyfriend by next week." » My mother showed a teasing smile that reminded me of Addison's. "You're so mature." »

"Don't put those ideas in his head, Karen," my father immediately replied, mouth full, chewing. "She's too young for this sort of thing." »

"Will, please tell me you're joking." »

"I'm not joking," he retorted sullenly.

Mom sighed before turning to me. "Tell me, Keily, are there any boys you're interested in at school? » His voice was deliberately high to annoy Dad.

"I'm sure a pretty girl like you must get a lot of attention from the boys." Is there someone chasing you? »

*Yeah, some asshole is after me, but definitely not in the way I want.*

"Mom, I've only been in Jenkins for a week, that's very short for a love story," I replied. "And it's not on the agenda. »

*Because I'm not the type of girl that boys like,* I thought, too tired to hear them launch into another tirade about accepting yourself as you are and not letting others bring you down.

I knew what they were saying was true, but applying those words in real life was difficult, and even more so when there were people like James reminding you of your flaws so cruelly.

" Let's stop talking about it. » I picked up my fork to return to my meal, ending this awkward conversation about my nonexistent love life.

My father nodded.

"I live with prudes," Mom muttered, shaking her head.

"If you need help with the forms, come see me. » Dad returned to the original subject. "I'll also accompany you to the driving test." »

I suspected that his sudden change of mind was linked to the fact that I had sided with him earlier.

" THANKS. »

\* \* \*

I hummed Taylor Swift's "All Too Well" as I walked through the white and blue halls of our school.

The song played on the radio as Addison drove us to school, and this masterpiece stuck in my mind.

Unlike other mornings, my cousin didn't walk with me because she had to rush to hand in her history homework, which was due yesterday. Taylor's voice in my head made up for her absence.

I stopped singing when I reached the hall where the senior students' lockers were located. James was standing next to his, smiling and talking to a pretty little brunette next to him. My jovial mood evaporated.

James looked stunning as always, dressed in a casual dark gray T-shirt, long sleeves rolled up to his elbows, black jeans and blue Air Jordans on his feet.

His brown locks were slightly messy in the front, making me realize he hadn't used any gel today, but that didn't take away from his beauty. In fact, it gave him an incredible charm.

*The devil may not be very nice, but he is very handsome.*

When he chuckled at the girl's comment, I unconsciously frowned.

It was surprising how he seemed like a pleasant and approachable person when he talked with her, and yet he was so hostile towards me.

He teased others too, but never to the point of insulting them for no reason.

*Is there something wrong with me?*

James noticed me looking at him over the brunette's head. I immediately looked away and rushed to my locker, blushing slightly from being caught staring.

A mixture of curses ran through my head as I began to put my things in my locker. It was ridiculous how easily he could make me react.

After hastily putting my things into my locker, I closed it and took a deep breath to calm myself. *Don't think about that asshole.*

I jumped when I turned around. James was standing right in front of me, looking at me amusedly and blocking my way. Much to my regret, I had to admit that he looked even more beautiful up close.

His dark eyes traveled over my entire figure, making me uncomfortable, before moving back up to my face.

It was too early in the day for that kind of attitude...

"James, I have to go," I managed to say, fighting the rush of blood to my cheeks under his intense gaze. I knew he was only there to play with me.

"Classes will start soon. Fifteen minutes is soon, right? »

"What's the hurry, Cochonou? » he said in a mocking tone. "We still have plenty of time for you to ogle me." " He smiled.

*Mess ! I'm going to kill him !*

"I don't ogle anyone, especially you," I immediately replied, this time turning red.

"Lies don't suit you. » His smile widened and he studied my face. "I was taught to give charity from time to time. If you want, my offer from yesterday still stands..."

"Are you going to stop?!" » My patience was tested when he mentioned his offer from the day before.



"Never in my life will I go with someone like you. So you can keep your charity to yourself! »

Everything he had done, from his insults to hurting Lucas, had built up inside me, and I had finally found the strength to speak, or rather to scream.

With each of his insults, I remained silent. Since day one, hoping he would lose interest in me if I didn't react. But he pushed my limits more and more.

"Watch your language, Cochonou, before it gets you into trouble. » His voice became deeper and made me shiver.

He moved closer, which made me instinctively take a step back, trapping me between him and the lockers. He leaned closer, so that our noses were almost touching. I couldn't look away from the intensity he exuded.

*Breathe, Keily.*

"You'll never love someone like me?" » he whispered.

"I...never," I stuttered. I had butterflies in my stomach.

He raised a hand to my face, trailing his finger along my jaw. His touch left a burning trail on my skin.

"Are you sure about this? » he whispered. It looked so...intimate. So sure of himself. He lifted my chin, his thumb just under my bottom lip. " Never ? »

My knees were turning to jelly.

"J-James..." I whispered.

He started leaning towards me, and my heart almost exploded.

*Oh my God. What is happening ?*

He closed the distance between us, our mouths were now inches apart. I couldn't move anymore. I was paralyzed, like a rabbit caught in the headlights of a car. Did I want this? Did I want it *him*?

He suddenly backed away, a sadistic smile on his lips.

"Oh, Cochonou... Did you really think I was going to kiss you? »

My eyes widened. My face felt like it was on fire.

*What an asshole!*

I stared at my feet, unable to look at him. I was so embarrassed that I wanted to die.

“Ah, don’t be sad, Cochonou. » He ruffled my hair, like I was a pet he owned. He really knew how to humiliate someone. “One day you will find another pig with whom you can frolic in the mud. Now go to class. You shouldn't be late. »

He stepped back, finally giving me the space I so desperately needed.

With my head down and my ego bruised, I headed towards my class, feeling his piercing gaze on my back until I disappeared around the corner of a corridor.

## Chapter 11

I rushed to the computer room, internally dreading another encounter with James. This morning, he made it very clear to me that he hated me. Well the feeling was *very* shared, and tiring too.

A significant part of my mind was devoted to finding ways to avoid him, mentally dealing with the insults he threw at me whenever we were in the same room, or simply thinking about him in my free time, even when 'he wasn't there to torment me.

It was exhausting.

When I reached the info room, I settled into my seat, and started up the computer system in front of me.

James's seat next to mine was empty, but that didn't make me feel any better, and only added to the anticipation of our next meeting. It was alarming how much he was taking over my thoughts.

I sighed at the ridiculousness of it all, before fiddling with the computer to pass the time.

The seats began to fill, but there was no sign of James. Soon the teacher arrived, and he still wasn't there. Where was he?

*Probably devouring the souls of helpless puppies.* I remembered that I should actually be relieved that he hadn't shown up.

The less interaction we had, the better.

Mrs. Green started her lesson, and my confused mind was finally able to focus on something. For the first time, I felt relaxed in this class because James wasn't breathing down my neck.

When there was only fifteen minutes left, I expected Mrs. Green to give us a small project related to the topic of the day, as usual, but instead she spoke something else.

"You are all going to design a website," our teacher began, and a low groan came from the corner of the room. She glared at the student before continuing.

"Obviously, we've only just started to broach the subject. I'll just warn you in advance.

"You will design and develop a website using the tools we study, and submit it one month before the end of the semester. To lighten the workload, you will work in pairs."

~No... ~

"And don't think you can just copy and paste the project from the internet at the last minute.

"The main theme of your site will be given by me, and every week I will check the progress of your work. So prepare your discs or your

readers.”

I moaned inside, a lot. I had no problem with work, but associating with someone gave me a huge headache.

I preferred working alone because it gave me the freedom to do things at my own pace, and the way I wanted.

Two brains were bound to have disagreements, and since I was such a doormat, I would probably let the other one do whatever they wanted.

Ms. Green then began calling two students at a time, and asked them to choose a sheet of paper from a pile that had been placed face down, hiding the text.

Website themes were written on it. When she called the third pair, I noticed that she assigned us partners based on our places.

~I can't be so unlucky. ~

Immediately, I began counting the students in front of me, desperately hoping not to be associated with James. I couldn't stand working with him for almost an entire semester. ~Nah, never. ~

However, it turned out that I was really unlucky. I recounted three times, and each time I was tied with the empty seat at

next to me.

The only consolation I could give myself was that Mrs. Green might find me another partner, since James was away.

"James and Keily," she called.

I got up and walked over to his table. "James isn't here," I said. ~Please don't put me with him. ~

She looked up. "Oh yes. James and Seth are training. Mr. Martin is going to leave early, but he didn't want the boys to miss practice, so he's with him right now."

Her voice didn't sound like she was happy with Coach Martin's decision. "Inform James of this duty. This is your partner." She gestured for me to choose a leaf.

"Can I go with someone else?" I blurted out, making Mrs. Green frown. She was already in a bad mood.

"For what?"

"Uh-" ~Because he's an asshole. ~

She sighed, as if now was not the time for me to bother her.

"Keily, almost every student before you has asked me to change pairs. I refused for everyone, and I refuse for you too.

"I understand. James isn't very good at coding, and maybe that's why you don't want him. But it will be a good opportunity for him to learn by working with you."

"Think of it as helping your classmate." It wasn't my job to teach this devil. "Don't worry about your grade. I will make sure he doesn't lower it," she added. "Satisfied?"

~No. ~

"Now choose a leaf."

Hiding my grimace, I took a paper from the pile on his table. *OUR* theme was to design a cafe's website to display the menu and place orders. Too bad.

I sank into my chair when I returned. My gaze fell on the paper clutched between my fingers. I frowned, cursing the entire universe for throwing me into the clutches of this satanic wolf.

Yes, James was a satanic wolf. And I couldn't get rid of him.



\* \* \*

"The match is next week, and we still haven't worked out our number," Sadhvi said. "Addison, this is catastrophic!"

"Don't add more." Addison took a bite of her pizza. "We just have to choreograph the last part."

"Exactly. We haven't choreographed the last part yet!"

It was lunchtime, and Lola, Addison, Sadhvi and I were sitting at our table, loudly munching on our bland cheese pizza.

Addison and Sadhvi were arguing about their cheerleading act.

Lola was silent as always, and I was too preoccupied with the computer project I had to do with James to add to their conversation.

I still hadn't seen him since the morning, so it was very likely that he didn't know that we were in pairs on this project.

I would have chosen to continue like this, and do all the work myself if Mrs. Green wasn't checking on us every week. Unfortunately, I had to let him know.

I bet he would be as devastated by the news as I was, if not more. This guy hated my mere existence.

I felt the familiar feeling of being watched, and I reflexively turned my head towards the source of that gaze. And the devil was there. James walked through the cafeteria door, his gaze fixed on me.

His hair was wet, and falling across his forehead, and I concluded that their training had not long ended, and he had just gotten out of the shower.

A few other guys from the team and Lucas were with him as well. James and Lucas separated from the others and headed to their usual table with Matt, Axel, and Keith.

Lucas spotted me and sent a small smile in my direction. I smiled back, very aware of James' penetrating eyes. The warning he had given me that morning stuck in my head.

My resolve to tell James about the project wavered when I saw his angry look. *I'll probably talk to him later.* Later was better, when he was less scary.

"Keily, why are you so quiet?" Addison said, bringing my attention back to the table. "Are you daydreaming about someone?"

She raised her eyebrows suggestively. She saw me smiling at Lucas, and teased me about him. ~Well... ~

I scoffed. "It's more like nightmares."

"What happened?" Sadhvi asked, taking a slice of her pizza.

"I'm paired with James for the computer science assignment," I replied, "and we have to work together for the whole semester."

"He doesn't know yet, because he was at training during the computer class. God knows how he will react. He can't even stand me. Working with him is definitely going to be a nightmare."

"It sucks." Addison shook her head. "James is already so upset with you. It's likely he'll pester you to do all the homework on your own."

~I would love to. ~

"Did you ask your teacher to change pairs?"

"Yes, but she doesn't want to."

"Maybe it's time I do what you should have done a long time ago." Addison clenched her fists, and glared in James' direction.

Luckily, he was too busy talking to Matt to notice my cousin was about to jump him.

"Please don't do this." I sighed, holding his ready fist, and putting it down. "Let's not make a scene. I'll take care of him."

The three looked at me with raised eyebrows, telling me they didn't believe me. It wasn't like I could blame them.

Every time James picked on me in front of others, someone else had to come to my rescue. And my friends weren't even aware of the extent of his verbal abuse. I was so pathetic.

"If you don't want Addison to hit him, you should do it yourself," Sadhvi said soberly.

"I won't hit him!" I immediately refused.

"I was joking." A teasing smile appeared on his face. She was trying to lighten the mood. "But at least you should slap him." Seeing my frown, she finally became serious again.

"Okay, okay. All joking aside, you should really stand up to him, and not let him push you around. It's frustrating for all of us to see you like this.

"If I were you, I would make him cry with all my might, mind you, without using my hands. Even if I agree with Addison, it would be sad

to bruise her pretty face."

"Aren't you afraid of him?" I asked, not digesting his words.

"Fear?" Addison made a face. "What are you talking about? Sure, he has a bad boy side, but no one is afraid of him. Keily, don't tell me you're afraid of him."

"Um..."

As I listened to the girls, I realized that they weren't intimidated by him. I remembered their interactions with him, and none of them seemed ready to run away at the sight of him, unlike me.

But then again, James had never insulted them. I was an easy target because of my body.

"You're both so stupid," Lola mumbled, her eyes darting from Addison to Sadhvi.

"You are not afraid of him because he has done nothing to make you afraid of him. He never picked on you, never harassed you. On the other hand, he does that to Keily.

"Well, if he tries to bully me, I'll knock his teeth out." Addison shoved the rest of her pizza into her mouth angrily.

Lola rolled her eyes.

"I believe you, Addison. But Keily's not like you, she's a little" - she paused, searching for an acceptable synonym for *pathetic*- "shy and fearful, perfect prey for a stalker."

Lola gave me an apologetic smile.

"James is too proud, arrogant, a big jerk, and lots of other things, but I've never heard of him bullying anyone," Sadhvi added curiously. "Usually he stays discreet."

His tray was now empty, reminding me that I had only eaten half my plate. However, I was too immersed in our conversation to care.

"I have my theory about why he's after you, Keily. As soon as you're there, he always has something to say to make you react. He kind of likes to keep you on your toes."

Lola leaned back in her chair and crossed her arms, looking at me thoughtfully. Then she uttered the most absurd sentence of the century. "He likes you."

~What?! ~

I choked on my saliva.

Addison almost threw up her food in her mouth.

Sadhvi remained unmoved.

"That doesn't make any sense," I said, my cheeks flushing. "I think your theory is completely wrong. He hates me." How she came up with this idea was beyond me.

It was crystal clear that he harbored no feelings for me other than a deep dislike. We don't insult people we like.

Besides, someone as handsome as James would never go after me. Not that I want him to.

"Last time I checked, we weren't in kindergarten," Addison said, wiping her lips with a napkin.

"Plus, he dated River before. I never heard her complain about him, until they broke up, obviously."

"River is on the cheerleading squad with us," Sadhvi told me.

She turned to Addison. "From what I know, it was River who pursued him for over a month before they started dating.

"He had plenty of opportunities to criticize her harshly, but he didn't. I mean, I would know if something like that happened."

My cousin nodded. "Now that I think about it, I know a lot of girls who fell for him. He's really very handsome." I don't disagree with it, but why discuss it?

"He also has influence through football," Sadhvi added.

"And he's loaded with cash, which makes him get even more on his high horse," Addison continued.

"I guess he has the characteristics of a stalker, and he has the means to get away with it. But these traits can also attract a girl. No need to go after someone you like."

"We should stop assuming he likes me," I interjected. "Just thinking about it is very painful." I snacked on my pizza to hide my blush as all three looked at me.

~Oh, Lola, why did you put such a ridiculous idea in their heads? ~

"It doesn't matter if he likes you or not..."

"He absolutely doesn't love me," I interrupted.



"He's a jerk, and you shouldn't put up with him," Addison finished.

Lola shrugged, showing that she agreed, and Sadhvi nodded.

"And if you need help, I'll be here, little sister."

"THANKS." My lips lifted in a grateful smile. It wouldn't be so bad if I let my cousin hit James.

Lola and Addison finished their meal. Sadhvi sucked down her juice, and started complaining again about Addison's lack of commitment to cheerleading.

My shoulders sagged with fatigue. I'd only been in Jenkins for a week, and my life was already starting to become a mess. My eyes once again went to the person responsible.

As if he knew I was watching him, his gaze shifted towards me too, fierce and menacing. I suppressed a gagging.

The others did not suffer his frightening looks. Little did they know that he could be very intimidating if he wanted to be. But I knew it.

And I had to do a stupid project with him. ~What a mess! ~

## Chapter 12

Two days had passed, and James still didn't know that we were supposed to work on this assignment together.

On Tuesday, I didn't have the chance to talk to him about it in English class, which took place after lunch, because he was too busy making fun of me, and the assignment had slipped out of my hands. mind while I suffered his insults.

The next day, I saw him in the hallway with his football friends. I decided I'd rather not be humiliated by him in front of other boys.

The same story had repeated itself in the other classes with him, including math, where Lucas was also present.

Thursday came, and we had a computer class right after lunch. So I finally decided to tell him the dreaded news in the info room.

But he didn't show up. Lucas told me that the match was next week, and that the coach was doing more training. Maybe that was the reason for his absence.

Ms. Green certainly wouldn't be happy about Coach Martin skipping class twice, but there wasn't much she could do at a high school where football was put on a pedestal.

I can catch up with James later. Or I could have, if avoiding him like the plague hadn't seemed so much more appealing.

Ok, the lack of communication was partially my fault.

Tomorrow was Friday. It was better not to delay, and to let him know before the weekend.

Right now, I was in my room drawing out the layout of our website in a notebook, already starting a project that my partner didn't even know about.

After dinner I couldn't sleep, so I decided to do some work. Designing the site was sort of calming, and kept me from thinking too much.

I was careful not to overdo the style and functionality, and to keep it simple for a high school project.

I had already looked at different restaurant and cafe websites for ideas and general color schemes.

My phone, lying next to me on the bed, beeped. I opened it and saw a message from an unknown number.

**Unknown** When were you planning to tell me about the project, Cochonou?

I read the text at least five times. There was only one person who called me Cochonou. James. ~No no no! How did he get my number?!  
~

I was almost ready to throw my phone out the window when it beeped again.

**James** Or were you planning to do it alone to get all the credit?

I didn't realize I had gotten up from my bed, and was pacing around the room. Yes, he made me nervous.

**Keily** James?

I sent a message back to get confirmation that it was really him. ~Of course it's him, Keily. ~

**James** So smart. Do you want a candy for finding the right answer?

I could imagine the furious, mocking look on his face.

**Keily** How did you get my number?

**James** I have my sources. So are you going to answer me, why didn't you tell me that we were pairs on the project?

I needed to do damage control before I panicked.

**Keily**I was going to tell you. I just didn't have the chance, that's all.

**James**You mean with all the times you've seen me, you haven't had the chance to pass on this little piece of information to me.

He was right.

I just stared at the screen, searching my head for a believable reason. Before I could type, another message from him arrived.

**James**I'll see you at school, Cochonou.

His threatening tone rang in my ear.

He didn't send me any other messages after that, but the fear of facing him tomorrow had already set in inside me.

The notebook I was drawing in was spilled on the floor. I picked it up and threw it on the desk. Even my favorite pastime could no longer calm me down.

I lay back on my bed, and started imagining a million ways James would use to torment me.

~Oh damn! What have I gotten myself into? ~

\* \* \*

As soon as I set foot in the school, my senses went into high alert. My eyes searched everywhere for any sign of James. My plan for surviving James' wrath was to avoid him as much as possible.

It wasn't a good plan since we shared the same classes, but at least it delayed my meeting with him.

Addison, as always, walked me to our lockers. She was talking about her track meet next month.

I listened to her, trying to add a few words so she wouldn't suspect that my brain was in chaos.

My cousin's enthusiastic speech stopped printing when I saw James standing in front of his locker. Our eyes met, and a strong blush covered my cheeks.

If he hadn't looked so terrifying, I probably would have admired how handsome and flawless he was.

He wore a dark gray T-shirt and navy blue jeans, both designer and expensive, accompanied by black Christian Louboutin boots.

His rich boy image was complemented by his dark brown locks, gelled to perfection.

James' eyes scanned me from head to toe, making me squirm in embarrassment. His gaze intensified when he returned to my face. Oh, he was angry.

I watched in horror as he closed his locker and started walking towards us. With a furious look.

You might as well avoid it.

~I am dead. ~

By the time he reached us, my face was already bright red, and my body was sweaty. His blazing gaze only catalyzed my nervousness.

"Someone's not having a good morning, it looks like," Addison commented.

James looked from me to her. "Well, I think today I have the right to be a little preachy," he said through gritted teeth, before turning his angry eyes on me.

"Someone kept a very important message for her that could affect my grades."

"I swear I was going to talk to you today about the project," I said immediately. I felt Addison's gaze on me, nearby.



James' eyebrows furrowed further. "You were two days old, Cochonou." He got closer. "Instead, I found out from Seth that there was a project, and that you were my partner."

"Why are you making a big deal out of this?" Addison came to my defense, but she didn't seem as energetic as usual. I assumed even she thought it was my fault.

"Don't bullshit me, Addison. If the same thing had happened to you, you'd be screaming at the top of your lungs right now."

"You know how important points and GPA are to get into college. This project represents at least twenty-five percent of our grade."

My cousin pursed her lips.

"I didn't mean to hide anything from you," I interjected. "Ms. Green is going to check on our project every week, so it's not like I'm going to pass it."

In response, I received a scolding look from James.

"Don't worry. I've already started doing it," I blurted out, and it was a mistake.

"You started without me!" James shouted, making me flinch.

"Don't talk to him like that." Once again, Addison spoke up to defend me. "You should rather be happy. You were going to make him do all the work anyway," she fumed.

"Addison, she has a mouth," James said, "and don't make any ridiculous assumptions. I don't trust her to do the whole project on her own."

Okay, that way of thinking was ridiculous when he was the one who wasn't good at coding.

I held Addison's arms, preventing her from launching another repartee. As stupid as James was, this time it was my fault, and Addison shouldn't have taken it upon himself to protect me from him.

"Look, I'm sorry, James," I started, and his creepy attitude lessened a little.

"I was wrong not to tell you sooner. I'll text you all the details of the project" – I mean, we already had each other's numbers – "and we'll do it together." No matter how much I didn't want to do it.

"You better be sorry." James gave me a nasty look, but it wasn't as sharp as before. Admitting my mistake had had the desired effect, and he no longer seemed to want to jump on me.

"I'll talk to you later, Cochonou." He took a quick look at Addison before storming off.

I breathed a sigh of relief when his back disappeared around the corner of the hallway.

"It was very tense," Addison joked. "For a second, even I was scared." We started walking.

"Well, he's scary."

"No not like this. He's always mean, but I rarely see him intense like that, maybe sometimes during matches.

"What is your point?" I frowned. "He's always like that."

"Really. Maybe he's always like that with you. I guess Lola was right that he had a thing for you." Not that, again!

"Let me guess what that 'something' might be," I said with false enthusiasm. "Disgust and hatred," I said, impassively.

"I don't blame you for thinking like that. He's acting like an idiot." She giggled.

"Be careful while working on your project *with him*. And if he continues to act like an idiot, be cute like you just did."

"It's going to melt... Okay, maybe it's not going to melt, melt. He's too much of a bastard for that. I think that in the end, you have to rely on the good old punches..."

"What do you mean you look cute like I just did?" I cut her off.

"Didn't you notice how he became a thousand times less intimidating the moment you said 'sorry'?" Addison gave an amused smile.

"I can't blame him. It was so cute, and you were so cute when you blushed, that it even touched me. Keep this tip handy, just in case."

~What is the meaning of this world now? ~

"I don't understand, I wasn't even trying to..." I choked on my words, seeing his smirk. ~Aah. Sisters are so infuriating. ~

"What are you trying to set me up with guys for?! I am very satisfied with my singlehood."

"Oh, Keily, it's my duty as a sister to keep an eye out for your potential suitors. And don't worry. I'll always set you up with Lucas." She winked at me.

I could only groan.

After teasing me some more, Addison and I finally split up and went to our respective classes. Between classes, I messaged James about the project, as promised.

The day passed little by little, but my attention during class was not at its peak. Lola's crazy theory about James and my cousin's remarks had managed to stick to my mind.

Every time I caught sight of him in the high school hallways or in the cafeteria, I felt my eyes lingering on him a little longer, and I found his dark eyes right there to meet mine.

Sometimes I had butterflies in my stomach, which I put down to fear and nervousness.

Did he really like me? This question has crossed my thoughts many times. I blamed the girls for putting this ridiculous idea in my head. It was stupid.

When I saw him in math class, I hoped my face wouldn't reveal these absurd thoughts. Lucas wasn't there yet. Directing my gaze everywhere but at him, I went to my table.

"Pig," James called to me as I passed his chair. I stopped and looked at him. The amusement dripping from his face made me

warned that he was up to no good. "You said you already started the project."

I nodded.

"What did you do?"

"I only half designed the layout of the website," I replied.

"You're fast," he taunted, his lips lifting into a barely perceptible sneer. I didn't know what I preferred, an angry devil or an asshole who was planning something dirty.

"I'm going to be very busy next week because of the match. Even the coming days are going to be busy, as the season starts next month.

"I don't think I'll be able to work much with you on the high school project."

Was he dumping all the work on me? "But I can find time after school. I decided we should work at each other's homes. It's more efficient."

~I still prefer that he pass the whole project on to me. ~

My reluctance must have shown on my face, because his amused expression only intensified.

"We should meet up tomorrow and finish this layout. So at your place or at mine?" James didn't even bother to hide his smirk at this implication.

Resigning myself to the devil, I opted for the safest choice, since it was the only thing I could say in this matter. "At my house."

## Chapter 13

I hastily folded my dirty laundry scattered on the bed, looking at the mess my room was in.

The blanket was balled up on the other corner of the bed, the top of my dresser was cluttered with old lipsticks and eyeliners borrowed from my mother and rarely used, the desk was covered with bundles of worn books ready to fall on the floor. slightest touch, and shiny wrappers of chocolates and chips, which I had gorged on last night, protruded from a small trash can under the table.

~I really had to get rid of these wrappers before James arrived. ~



Saturday afternoon, at 4:30 p.m., I woke up from my nap to find a message from James - sent almost two hours ago - saying he would be at my house around 5 p.m.

It was enough for me to jump out of bed to repair my tornado-hit room. The last thing I needed was to be judged by him for my messy lifestyle. My parents were enough for me.

I wish I could adopt Addison's minimalist lifestyle, but unfortunately, I loved hoarding things too much.

The way I was running around the room, I was sure I had lost a few pounds. By the time I finished cleaning, it was 5:10 p.m.

With a tired sigh, I sat on my bed, waiting for James to show up. It was a good thing he was late.

I had chosen to do our work at home because I felt safer with my father downstairs.

Plus, James already knew the way since he had picked me up from the ice cream shop last Friday, which saved me an awkward car ride with him.

There was no way I was going on his land without knowing how he would treat me when we were alone.

Yet I still dreaded his arrival.

"Keily!" Dad's voice boomed from downstairs, cutting me off from my thoughts. "Your friend is here." ~Speaking of the devil... ~

I immediately got up, and looked in the dresser mirror to fix my hair.

~What clothes am I wearing?! ~

I was in an oversized pink Hello Kitty top, and white and purple striped pajamas. In all this chaos, I had forgotten to take off my night clothes. I didn't want this bully to see me like that.

I was too vulnerable. But I didn't have time to change, so instead I patted my hair flat and headed toward the living room, hiding my embarrassment.

My nervousness kicked in when I saw James standing by the front door with my father.

He was wearing a camouflage jacket, with a simple white shirt underneath, and brown cotton pants, and he had a backpack on his shoulders.

Her dark curls weren't coated in gel, which made her look both graceful and messy. This guy knew how to dress.

Hearing my footsteps, James' eyes shifted from Dad to me. I blushed as they moved discreetly down my body.

Compared to him, I felt so poorly dressed, and his piercing gaze only added to my embarrassment.

"Keily," my father said, catching our attention. He was looking at me. "You didn't tell me that your project partner was Ronald Haynes' son?"

He must have felt the confusion on my face, because he continued. "Last year, I was part of the team responsible for designing their company's motor stimulation software."

I remembered this project well, because it was one of the few that I was unable to help Dad with because it was well beyond the scope of my knowledge.

"Oh," I mumbled. So his father had employed my father. ~Great! ~

"I shouldn't delay you kids." Dad turned to him, and James gave him a charming smile. My eyes almost popped out of their sockets when my father smiled, completely in love with this asshole.

He was never this friendly to strangers. "Go for it." My father patted him on the shoulder as if they hadn't known each other for a few minutes.

I bet Dad wouldn't be so friendly with James if I told him about all the insults he threw at me. I was tempted to do it, but involving adults in teenage drama wasn't always a good idea.

The last time I'd done this at my previous high school, my parents had burst into the principal's office, who hadn't even made half an effort to stop the bullying.

This only gave me a reputation as a snitch among my peers, and further alienated me from others.

Plus, I didn't want to give this demon the power to know that he scared me to the point of hiding behind my parents. ~I'm eighteen, damn it! ~

James nodded, walked in and stood in front of me. Without saying a word, I started up the stairs. He followed me.

"Leave the door open!" Dad's voice sounded behind us.

I grimaced, imagining the smug grin of the boy behind me.

"Your dad seems okay," James commented once we were out of earshot.

"Yeah," I replied nonchalantly, but inside I was brimming with nervousness. ~James Haynes is in my house! ~

When we reached the small hallway, his footsteps slowed. I turned around, and saw him looking at our family photos hanging on the walls.

I shuddered when he looked at the photos of me when I was younger. I had always been a chubby child, and since James always made me feel ashamed of my body, I felt embarrassed.

I cleared my throat to get his attention, and walked faster. Got it. I had been a fat child, but he didn't need to stare stupidly at these photos like I was an alien.

I opened my bedroom door, very aware of his presence behind me. I invited my sworn enemy into my private space.

The bedroom's lemon-yellow walls welcomed us. I had the good idea to clean my room in advance, because James' eyes were wandering around every corner, studying everything.

His gaze stopped at my desk, where there was a framed photo of me with my parents, taken at Remington Amusement Park, as well as a few of the novels I was currently reading, now stacked neatly.

"Want to see the layout of the website?" I asked, stepping in front of him and cutting his inspection short. I felt strange

unsettled by the way his curious eyes examined my room.

James looked at me and I took a step back, realizing we were too close. He smirked at my movements.

"Sure, let's see what you designed." He walked past me to my desk, threw his backpack on the floor, pulled out the chair, and sat down like he owned the place.

At least I didn't have to say "Make yourself comfortable." "Bring your notebook," he ordered, treating me like a servant who was there to do his bidding.

I walked over to him, opened the desk drawer, and hurriedly took out the pink colored notebook. I sat on the bed after handing it to him.

"You did a bad job. I don't like it," James said barely a minute later, after looking over my drawing.

I frowned. "What do you not like?"

"All." ~That asshole! ~

I had worked hard on this, so him dismissing it like a snob pissed me off. "I'm pretty sure that's better than you could have done," I muttered, annoyed.

He raised his eyebrows, but instead of being angry that I answered, he was amused. "Aww, Cochonou, did I upset you?" He smirked.

"Don't take it to heart. I was joking. Your design is not bad enough not to excite Mrs. Green."

I responded with a furtive glance, which only made him chuckle. I found myself liking his carefree laugh, even though I was annoyed.

He seemed to be in a good mood today.

James took his laptop out of his backpack, and placed it on his lap. "Let's work from what you have. We'll continue to design the rest as we code. It's more efficient."

I nodded, eager to get to work and get him to leave my house as soon as possible.

There was only one chair in the room, so we both had to sit on my bed, side by side.

This didn't bother James at all, he was even the one who asked me to push myself to make room for him on the single bed.

As James sat next to me with his legs drawn up, I became all too aware of my body, the space I was occupying, and my thighs.

sagging that brushed against his knee.

"Pig." His breath hit my ear, and I almost jumped. It was the final blow, and my entire face turned red with embarrassment.

I dared to look at him, expecting his usual jubilant smile, but I was taken aback by his piercing eyes. My blush increased a thousandfold, and his pupils dilated.

Like a domino effect, my stomach began to churn inside, and my skin buzzed with excitement. His gaze swept over my entire face, and lingered on my lips.

I realized I was doing the same, studying his dazed dark eyes, his Grecian nose, his high cheeks and slightly full lips.

*He is handsome...*

Shocked by my thought, I immediately moved away from him.

~Where did that come from, Keily?! And since when have we been so close? ~

I looked at James, who was frowning like a brat. He looked, dare I say, disappointed. My sudden movement had broken the spell that had been cast on us.



I would have been lying if I said I didn't share his feelings, but it was better than the guilt afterwards if we had continued...what we were doing.

He hated me, I remembered that to purge this disappointment.

"I haven't done anything to you yet, Pig, and you're so nervous," James said, an asshole smirk returning to his lips. "It almost makes me want to do something and see how high you can jump."

Yep, he was back.

I looked down at my knees. "Please, no." I winced at how small I sounded. "Let's not start with that."

"Yes, let's not start. Unfortunately, we have work to do." James sighed, opening the laptop. "We can have fun later," he added mischievously.

We finally started working on our project. James suggested different color schemes, and other minor changes to the website while I was coding.

To be honest, his choices were better than mine. He knew the palettes that caught customers' attention.

At one point he took the laptop from me to code, but that didn't last because he kept forgetting tags. However, his eyes never left the screen, keeping tabs on everything I did.

"You're good at coding," he once commented.

My fingers paused on the keys listening to the compliment. "Uh thank you."

"Now work," he ordered. "We need to add two more menus." So bossy. No doubt, he was the son of a businessman.

Two hours later, our home page was ready. At this point we were leaning against the backrest with our legs extended.

"I guess that's enough to show Mrs. Green next week," I said, looking at the web page.

"Yeah."

I turned to him, and saw that he was already staring at me. Not wanting a repeat of last time, I avoided his gaze and turned back to the screen.

I returned his laptop to him after saving the file and closing it. "Now you should go."

James chuckled. "Not very welcoming, huh?"

"I don't want you to be late." I got up from bed.

"You just want to get rid of me." James smiled before getting up to pack his things.

"You can't blame me for that," I mumbled under my breath, turning away from him.

A strand of my hair was pulled back, raising my head. "But I'll make sure you never get rid of me, Pig," James whispered in my ear from behind, and I stilled beside him.

"I am leaving. For the moment." At these words he backed away and left.

\* \* \*

It turned out that James had only left my room, not my house. When he came down, my mother was there, and she invited him to dinner, blaming me for not doing the same.

So there I was, sitting at the table, with chicken casserole on a plate in front of me, and James Haynes next to me.

My father had already been swept away by him as soon as he revealed that he was the son of Mr. Ronald Haynes.

And now, the way he was having such a pleasant conversation with my mother, she was going to swoon over him soon. If that wasn't already the case.

~What a charmer! ~

"Besides computer class, are there any other classes you share with Keily?" Mom asked James.

"We have English and maths together." James smiled and took a spoonful from his plate. His gestures were very elegant.

"Then you two must be friends."

He gave me a quick look. "I hope so," he said after swallowing.

I glared at him.

"Then I have to ask you to watch over Keily. She is..."

"Mom, don't do that again," I whined, interrupting her. "I don't need a babysitter. Besides, you already hired Addison for that."

"Keily, your mother only takes care of you," Dad said, in a scolding tone that ordered me to behave in front of our guest.

"Sorry." I looked down at my half-empty plate.

"Don't worry. I'll keep an eye on Co-Keily, Mrs. Harris," James said mischievously, flashing his charming smile.

~Poor bastard! ~

He looked at my father. "By the way, Mr. Harris, I need the recipe for this chicken casserole. It is delicious."

"You cook?" Mom took the words out of my mouth.

"Of course," James replied. When he noticed that the table was silent, he continued. "My parents spent most of their time working, so my brother and I learned to take care of ourselves quite early.

"No hard feelings towards them, since they earn money for us. And we also have maids and servants to do the household chores.

"But sometimes I like to meal prep to make sure I'm in shape for football games. Plus, cooking is an important life skill, and everyone should know it."

So he wasn't a complete spoiled brat.

"You're a very intelligent young man, James," my mother swooned.

"I'm glad you're Keily's partner," my father added. "She will definitely enjoy your company."

James looked at me and smiled, his eyes glinting with mischief. "I'm sure it will be beneficial for me too."

~Ugh. ~

## Chapter 14

"Oh my God, that bastard made your parents eat out of his hand," Addison laughed.

"I don't know if my parents are gullible, or if James is just that good," I huffed. My hands roamed the dozens of dresses hanging in front of us on a rack. I frowned at their small sizes.

"At least he behaved well," Sadhvi added with a smile.

Addison and Sadhvi had invited me to join them on their shopping trip. It was a girls' day out, where we would go around to different stores in different malls, and gorge ourselves on street food in between each one.

Lola couldn't come because she already had a family event planned.

By this time we were in the third store of the day, looking for evening dresses.

So far, Addison and Sadhvi had tried on a million outfits, but hadn't bought any, even though they looked fabulous in most of them.

Meanwhile, I was desperately looking for something decent in my size. No wonder I'm not a shopping enthusiast.

Finding the right clothes for me was like going in search of treasure on a distant island.

Every time I liked something, it turned out that it wasn't available in my size, and if by chance it did, the outfit lost all its beauty once I had put it on.



My mother had worked very hard to get the clothes I had, and I was grateful because they were pretty good. ~God knows how she did that. ~

~I wish I wasn't fat. Life would be a lot easier if I wasn't. ~

Even though I didn't like shopping, I was there because my closet was short on party clothes, and there was a post-game party happening on Friday. The young people in Bradford were partying a lot, that's for sure.

I didn't want to wear the same outfit again, so I decided to use my pocket money to buy something. But it looked like I wasn't going to spend much.

"You could have told your parents he was picking on you," Addison said, putting a hanger wearing open-shoulder baby blue top in front of her, and looking at herself in the mirror.

"That would have taken his charm down a notch."

I had recounted yesterday's incident involving James visiting my house, leaving out the part where he and I had acted strangely, and were about to... um... kiss?

*Argh! I don't know what we were about to do!* The girls already had their theories, and I wasn't going to add to them, especially since I couldn't understand what was happening.

"I don't know," I replied. "It seemed stupid to me to report him to my parents. I don't want to seem like a child." Besides, I didn't want James to think of me as any more of a coward than he already thought.

"I understand a little. Sometimes parents can complicate things." Addison put the top back on.

"Especially when they still treat you like a twelve-year-old," Sadhvi said. I guess she knew what she was talking about.

Sadhvi chose a dress from the rack I was rummaging through. I envied how easily she found her size.

"I'll try that one." She showed us the dress before heading off proudly to the fitting rooms.

"Did you find anything?" Addison asked me.

I shook my head. "There's nothing good about my size."

She and Sadhvi had saved some clothes for themselves from previous stores, without purchasing them yet, as they wanted to look at all the options available in other stores.

I was the only one who didn't find something good.

"Let me help you." Addison stood next to me, and searched in the same area. When she couldn't find anything, she headed to a group of clothes in another department. And then another.

After the fifth, she sighed, and glared at the model, who was dressed in a beautiful summer dress, and posing with one hand on her hip. "This place is trash."

"You don't need to curse the place. This happens all the time. It's not easy to find clothes for me," I sighed, sitting down on a leather stool.

"Don't put yourself down because of that shitty store. Even I can't find anything good here. These people fudge sizes a lot. Small, Medium, Large, it's all the same, damn it."

"How is it?" Sadhvi came out of the cabin, and stood before us in the satin tube dress that reached her mid-thigh.

The dress complemented her figure, and she looked very beautiful.

"It's pretty. You should..."

"Take it off," Addison interrupted me. "We're going to Vian's."

Sadhvi blinked, confused. "I thought you were short of money."

"Keily doesn't find anything good here, and neither do I. I'll buy one less skirt, but at least other things will be worth it."

Sadhvi nodded before turning to me. "Chez Vian is perfect for you." She smiled. "It's a little pricey, but they have a really good plus size clothing section. You will love."

With that, she headed back where she came from. A minute later we were on the road.

I tried not to get my hopes up for the Vian store, but it was hard when Addison and Sadhvi were praising it the whole way.

And once we entered the store, I understood what they were talking about.

They had more selection than all the stores we visited combined, the fabrics were also of much better quality, and best of all, they had outfits in my size.

Hell, even the atmosphere of the place was different, very different.

"I told you you'd love it," Sadhvi said cheerfully from behind me, as I looked at the red skater skirt.

"Thank you for bringing me here." I smiled. Things were definitely more expensive here, but luckily my months of savings could accommodate that.

"Why don't you try it?" Addison said, looking at the skirt in my hand.

"OK."

"Hold on. Put this on too." Sadhvi stopped me and handed me a top, then rushed me into the cabin.

Addison's eyes widened, and Sadhvi exclaimed as I came out and stood in front of them. The top Sadhvi had given me was a black halter top, with strap to tie around the neck, with intricate woven designs at the collar.

I had tucked it inside the red skirt, which reached a few centimeters above my knee. Although my arms and legs looked chunky, I still liked the way it fit me.

"You should really take it," Addison said.

"You don't need to tell me." I smiled.

We searched the whole store until 6 p.m., we were finally doing some shopping. ~

In addition to the previous outfit, I bought a navy cocktail dress, black heeled sandals, and a peach wool cardigan, just because

that he was very pretty.

Addison bought herself a pair of denim shorts and a sparkly blue crop top. My cousin wanted more things, but she was out of money because she had already shopped online last month.

Sadhvi chose a mini skirt, a burgundy ruffled shirt, a leather jacket for next winter, and pink loafers.

"I can't believe a place like this really exists," I almost shouted. We were leaving the store to get something to eat.

Walking around the store a hundred times, and going in and out of fitting rooms had left all three of us hungry. "My mother is going to throw a tantrum when I tell her about this store."

"There was nothing like Vian at Remington?" Sadhvi asked.

"They have small shops, but nothing like this. I have trouble finding things in my size in regular stores."

I hadn't had a party lifestyle in Remington, so my visits to the stores had been limited to one or two.

Most of the time I needed casual clothes, and shopping for them had been a disaster because of the small size range.

Addison unlocked her Volkswagen. "No wonder you're so concerned about your body," she muttered before going upstairs.

His remark threw me off for a second. Maybe she was right.

Perhaps the awkwardness of shopping for clothes was one of the many things I encountered at Remington that made me think my body was undesirable.

\* \* \*

I felt good, quite happy. There was a little bounce in my step as I walked to my locker after class.

This morning, as I was about to leave for high school, Dad gave me the letter that said I had passed the test for my learner's permit.

I took the written test last Thursday at the city prefecture. Five days later, I received the result along with my license, which allowed me to drive with an adult.

I knew it wasn't amazing. I only had a learner's permit, not a driving license.

However, after having such a great time on Sunday with Addison and Sadhvi, finding great outfits, and now this good news, this week things were looking good for me.

A month later, I would be a full-fledged driver, legally. ~Yeah! ~

I opened my locker and started planning my things for the next class.

“BOO!”

I jumped, hitting my hand on the inside wall of the locker.

After catching my breath, I turned around and saw Lucas with a wide smile on his face, and James behind him with a completely opposite facial expression from his friend.

"Why did you do that?" I glared at Lucas, trying to ignore James, who was glaring at me.

“You were there and I wanted to do it.” Lucas shrugged, his smile still intact. Silly.

I shook my head. “You do realize that people can die from shock like that.” I turned back to my locker to grab my



business, and also to avoid James' scowl. ~What is he doing here anyway? ~

"But you're not dead," Lucas retorted.

"For all you know, I could." I put my math book in my bag.

"There would then be one less pig in the world." James' gruff voice ended our joke. "Now hurry up. I'm not in the mood to listen to Penson's long speech about punctuality." He looked upset.

~So go ahead, no one is stopping you. ~

We had math class together in less than ten minutes.

I slammed my locker and turned around, giving Lucas a tight smile. "Let's go." I preceded them. The joyful bounding of my steps had now turned into stomping.

It was this asshole who ruined my good vibes.

I heard Lucas cursing at him before they joined me on both sides. The other students gave us stares, but I tried to ignore them.

They were inevitable, since a fat girl was walking with two of the most coveted boys in school.

But at the same time, at six feet tall, I had the impression of being a dwarf between two six-foot-something giants.

"So, you heard about the after-game party on Friday, right?" Lucas moved closer to me.

"Yeah. Addison told me about it." I knew James was watching us discreetly. His warnings about my relationship with Lucas were always on my mind when the three of us were together.

"So you come to the game and the party," Lucas said.

"And if you lose the match, there will still be a party?"

"If we lose, then we'll have to party even harder to get over it."

"That's the spirit." I smiled despite the devil on the other side.

"But there's a problem, Keily, and I need your help," Lucas said, lips moving into a fake pout.

"James here is not letting us have the party at his house. I'm trying to get him to succumb to peer pressure and accept.

"Will you be the twelfth, after the whole team, to put pressure on him to organize the party at his house?"

What made him think I would be of any help in persuading James?

"Shut up, Lucas!" James growled at his friend, but it was I who flinched at his cutting tone.

"Come on, Keily, ask him," Lucas told me, completely ignoring James.

"I'm sure he has his reasons," I replied. "You shouldn't force him." I didn't want to be part of this conversation.

"No. His mother will be at the hospital for his care, and his father leaves Friday morning for two days. He has the house all to himself.

"And Mr. and Mrs. Haynes don't care as long as we don't have a party when they're home. I understand. They need peace and quiet to rest after their long working hours.

"I wish you were here at the parties James threw last year. One was after winning the championship, and the other was on New Year's Eve.

"His house has a swimming pool, a game room, and also a mini basketball court. Oh, the bets we made on this field, it was hilarious.

"Keily, it would actually be for your own good if James would host the party at his house. You would love to be there, especially this big swimming pool."

"She won't even show up to the party if it's at my house" James growled.  
"Seth has no problem doing this at home, let him do it." He was right.

As enticing as the big house with the pool is, I wouldn't go into the devil's house just to party.

I mean, it would have been so weird to be drinking and dancing in my stalker's house.

And if, through some miraculous stupidity on my part, I showed up at James' party, he himself would throw me out before I could cross the threshold.

Lucas' face fell, but after a minute of thinking, a smug smile replaced it.

"I'm sure if you ask Keily nicely she'll come. There's no need to disappoint us all because you're so keen for her to attend the party."

"Shut your mouth, Parks," James warned, but was ignored.

Lucas stood in front of us, blocked the way and stopped us. He looked at me. "Promise him you'll come to the party if it's at his house."

"Uh..."

"I swear you won't regret it." His big eyes met mine.

I shifted my weight from one foot to the other, a blush taking over my face. At that moment, I hated Lucas so much for putting me in a difficult situation.

"What are you doing?" James asked, and I noticed curiosity in his tone instead of anger.

~No no no no. ~

"I have the impression that you don't want Keily to miss the party, that's why you don't open the doors of your heavenly house to us," Lucas replied.

I glanced at James. His eyes were already on me, and there was a smirk on his lips that warned me of trouble to come.

Of course, this asshole was taking advantage of my discomfort. He delighted in it, fed on it like a demon.

"Your impression is completely wrong," he said to Lucas, "but now that I think about it, I don't want to deprive a newcomer of the pleasure of my

holidays. It would be a shame.

"So if Cochonou promises to come, it will be a post-game party at my house."

"Of course she promises," Lucas said immediately. "Not true?" He looked at me with so much hope that my only *No* could have shattered his life.

I turned to James, who raised his eyebrows, waiting for my answer. Somehow, the peer pressure on James had turned into pressure on me, and I gave in.

"Yeah." I gave in. "I promise you." ~What's your problem, Keily?! ~

"Yes!" Lucas' fist punched the air, drawing gazes from the others.

"We have to go to class," James said casually, avoiding Lucas and walking past us.

## Chapter 15

Jenkins High School was football crazy.

The stands on our high school field were crowded, without an inch of space between two people.

I had also spotted a few unfamiliar faces in the crowd, which Matt had told me were students from Westview High School, our opponent tonight.

The field was overflowing with cheers and loud chatter. Many wore black T-shirts with our high school logo, and some even held banners with slogans to cheer on the team.

The atmosphere was very lively, and I felt like I was part of something big.

I had never seen so much enthusiasm in my previous high school, even for the most anticipated matches, much less for a simple pre-season friendly match, like the one that took place today in Jenkins.

People here took football very seriously.

"You're pretty," Lola said, smiling at me. She, Matt and I were sitting in the stands. It was 5 p.m., and the match was about to start. "I like your skirt. Did you buy it with Addison and Sadhvi?"

"Yeah." I nodded, blushing a little at his compliment.

I wore the halter top and red skater skirt I'd bought with the girls on Sunday, and I'd added a denim jacket on top because the days had started to get windy.

"THANKS. You are very beautiful, too." She really was, dressed all in black with a Metallica T-shirt tucked into her high-waisted jeans. It went well with his mysterious persona.

After the game we were going to gather at James' house to party, so everyone was dressed for the occasion.

My dad was apprehensive about letting me go to another party, but as soon as I pointed out that it was James's, his complaints calmed down.

Even though things had worked in my favor, I didn't like that my parents were so impressed with him.

Dad didn't have to worry anyway. I wouldn't be drinking at the party tonight, because I had offered myself as the designated driver for Addison and Sadhvi.

I had a learner's license, and Addison assured me that was enough in Bradford if I drove well and didn't get into trouble.

A few years ago, she herself drove across the city with just a learner's permit.



Another reason I wanted to stay sober was to not let my guard down. I could go into the wolf's den, but that didn't mean I wanted to be eaten alive.

The last time at Keith's was enough, when James spat degrading words in my face.

This time I would keep my head straight and avoid him, instead of provoking him by doing something stupid... like kissing Lucas.

"I heard you convinced James to have the party at his house." Lola looked at me. I noticed a teasing glint in his honey brown eyes.

"No. It was Lucas. I just agreed when James offered to have the party at his house if I came," I mumbled, making sure only she heard me.

Matt was busy chatting with a boy sitting next to him, and luckily there was too much noise around us for him to filter out my words, even if he heard.

"It's even more interesting." Lola bit her lips to hide a smirk. "You still think my theory was wrong?"

My face flushed, and she leaned toward me, probably sensing my discomfort at having this discussion while Matt was right on the other side.

"Keily, James may have a twisted way of showing it, but I think he likes you."

"No," I hissed, surprising her and myself in my adamant refusal.

I was tired of hearing the same thing, and the worst part was that I had started to believe it, but I had to deny his words for the sake of my sanity.

I didn't want to make movies, only to see everything fall apart if Lola's "theory" was wrong - which, by the way, was very likely.

"He just played into Lucas' hands, and decided to throw the party because he relished my reluctance to go to his house. James only likes to insult me and take advantage of my distress."

"And why do you think he likes to do this only to you?"

"Because I'm fat, and he's one of those assholes who likes to pick on that!" I whispered and screamed at the same time, my emotions taking over.

"I've faced a lot of people like him, and the last thing I expect is for them to have a crush on the person they call 'Pig,' 'whale,' or any other insult that comes out of their mouth."

"Keily," Lola said softly, her eyes looking at me with compassion, "you're not fat. Luscious, of course. But not big. You're beautiful, and the assholes who say otherwise are stupid, including James."

His face fell and his brows furrowed. "Who are the other people who insulted you? Were you bullied at your old high school? » she asked.

"I... uh..." My mouth was dry. I didn't want to tell him what a loser I was at Remington. I was ashamed of all the bullying I had suffered there.

Even though I knew Lola wouldn't judge me, it was still embarrassing to let her know that I had always been the victim.

"You can always find people who have something to say about your body," I replied vaguely.

Her eyebrows furrowed further, expecting me to continue, but when I didn't, she sighed and nodded. She was very good at reading body language.

"These people shouldn't matter," she said simply, closing the topic.

"I didn't tell you that James liked you so that you could idealize him and jump into his arms.

"I want you to confront him about this, and put an end to this cat and mouse game you two have been playing."

~The game of cat and mouse? Is this what we look like? ~

I nodded, even though I had no intention of following his suggestion.

I absolutely didn't have the strength to confront James, and accuse him of harassing me because he "liked me."

Besides, the most likely scenario would be that he laughs, and that he has one more weapon against me.

He would beat me up about why an overweight girl would never be worthy of him. He was sadistic like that.

Before Lola could continue, loud cheers broke out around us. Players and cheerleaders from both high schools took the field.

She squeezed my hand in my lap and smiled, letting me know that we would continue this conversation another time.

Our team wore black, while the guests wore light blue jerseys. The cheerleading squad uniforms matched their respective teams.

When the guest team cheerleaders took to the center of the field, I noticed that they had three boys, which was refreshing. I was used to only seeing girls as cheerleaders.

"Addison wants boys on our cheerleading squad too," Lola commented. "It's a bit sad that none of the boys want to join us. They still consider it a girl thing."

"Don't do that again," Matt growled. When the teams arrived, his attention turned to us to tell us which players were difficult among our opponents.

What I understood was that their quarterback, Ryan, and their running back, Collin, were good.

Lola and I looked at each other. She rolled her eyes, and I held back a chuckle.

"They want to protect their male egos." I agreed with her, and ganged up on Matt, who shook his head.

My gaze wandered over the players on their benches. Lucas had drilled it into my head that his jersey number was nine, so I could always look for him during the match.

He also let it slip that James' number was thirteen. And somehow, while looking for Lucas, my eyes landed on

James. He was talking with one of his teammates.

My twisted brain couldn't help but admire him in his football gear, which accentuated his toughness and dominance.

His hair was disheveled, with a few strands falling across his forehead, his dark eyes were filled with determination, and his lips were pursed in concentration as he listened to his interlocutor.

It was unfair how handsome he was.

Before I knew it, James was staring at me. I blushed  
- for the thousandth time that evening - to have been caught watching him.

Although we were seated near the field, it was unsettling how easily he spotted me among the hundreds of other people in the crowd.

Familiar tingles spread through me as his gaze slid down my body.

I was a little more confident today in my choice of clothing, but his fiery eyes were enough to make me feel like I was naked. ~Asshole. ~

I was as red as a tomato when he looked up at my face.

I would have looked away already, but his eyes had been staring into mine, until he was the first to break eye contact, when the guy he was talking to tapped him on the shoulder.

*He hates you, Keily,* I chanted in my head to stop the butterflies in my stomach, to stop myself from having feelings for him.

Matt's laugh broke me out of my thoughts. I looked to the side and saw that he and Lola were leaning towards each other, whispering and giggling to each other.

They were really cute, so much so that I was almost jealous. Despite their opposing personalities, they looked great together.

They took care of each other, gave each other space and communicated so well. Having known them for three weeks, it was hard to dismiss their relationship as just another high school fling.

It was here to stay. I wanted to have a relationship like that too, with so much trust and love.

But instead, I was sitting there ogling my tormentor, and on the verge of developing Stockholm syndrome.

~I'm a wreck! ~

I turned my head towards the field, not wanting to slip into the couple's privacy.

The speakers blared, and another round of cheers exploded from the audience.

The Westview cheerleaders, center, began their performance. Their performance was impressive.

With all the flips and jumps they were doing, I was afraid of the injuries they might get if someone fell. The boys on their team helped them by adding more breathtaking stunts.

At the end, everyone applauded, even though they were our opponents tonight.

Then it was our daughters' turn. An unconscious smile spread across my face when I saw Addison and Sadhvi in the middle. They looked so pretty in their cheerleading outfits and high ponytails.

We screamed and clapped throughout their performance. I understood why Addison wanted boys on the team. Their act lacked the muscles to do somersaults and stunts.

However, the little pyramid at the end was good. The cheers for them were louder because they were the home team.



Then our principal, Ms. Benson, took to the podium and wished the teams good luck. The coin was tossed, and Westview won the toss, getting the first attack.

Players from both teams began to position themselves on the field. I deliberately avoided looking at James, and looked for Lucas.

I found him with a big nine on his jersey. Everyone had their helmets on, so I couldn't see their faces.

"Lucas will be a central defender," Matt muttered. "James will be a tackle." Lola nodded. I had no knowledge of football, so his words passed me by.

"The central defender takes the call and organizes everyone to stop the attack," Lola explained. "And the tackler tackles, as his name suggests."

"Oh."

"James also plays cornerback sometimes, but Ryan usually doesn't throw far..." Matt continued as we watched the players take their positions.

I had no idea what he was talking about, but apparently James was important. Well, I already knew that.

The game started, and I struggled to keep up with all the passes, tackles and runs. But Matt's comments gave me an idea of what was happening on the ground.

He loved talking about football, and a novice like me learned things here and there from that. When it came time for our team's offense, Lucas threw the ball to Drake, our running back.

James played as a left tackle. His job was to protect the pitcher, which was Lucas. Now I knew where he used his big muscular body.

We had our first touchdown before the end of the half. He was scored by Seth, who was playing wide receiver. The noise we made the second he reached the end zone was deafening.

Throughout the match, my attention was unconsciously focused on James. His agility, speed and strength were incredible. It was hard not to look at him.

And when the buzzer sounded, announcing that our team had won, the big smile that split his sweaty face was captivating. I had never seen him so carefree. He was magnificent. ~Wait. What is this mess?!

~

# Chapter 16

*So you're a tough guy*

*Like it really rough guy*

*Just can't get enough guy*

Billie Eilish's "Bad Guy" was playing loudly on the radio, and Addison and Sadhvi were swaying to the beat in the backseat while putting on their makeup. I drove Addison's Volkswagen to James's house.

After the match, they met me in the school parking lot, showered and well dressed. But they had decided to put on makeup on the way, since most of the others had already left for the party.

Addison wore a bright yellow crop top and matching cotton pants. Unlike the other times, she opted for a cute look, and it worked.

Sadhvi wore a body-hugging, knee-length dress that showed off her petite, toned body.

Matt and Lola had left earlier with Lucas, James and other boys to prepare the house before the others arrived.

"I'm the bad guy, duh!" Addison and Sadhvi screamed along with Billie on the radio. I chuckled. The euphoria of our team's victory had not yet subsided.

"What time do you want me to drag you into the car and take you home?" I asked, looking in the rearview mirror and seeing the two of them putting on mascara.

I needed to know the curfew time. I had already told my parents that I would be spending the night at Addison's house, Sadhvi too.

Last time we left the party early, so I wasn't sure how long Aunt Clarissa would allow us to stay out.

"We're going to party all night, darling," Sadhvi said cheerfully.

"We have to be home by one," Addison said. My aunt was really generous.

I bowed in a salute before looking at the clock on the dashboard. It was after eight o'clock.

"Tonight we're both going to be drunk, Addy," Sadhvi protested. "It's been so long since we've done this. And it's James' house! Let's make the most of the evening."

"My mom will cut me into pieces if we're a minute late."

"She won't know. She will be asleep before midnight."

"Somehow that woman always knows everything," Addison huffed.

"Look, I don't want to take any risks. She's already started pestering me about college and my future.

"And if that wasn't enough, Dad subtly scolds me for 'wasting too much precious time with my friends'," she said, imitating my uncle's voice.

I glanced in the rearview mirror, and saw Sadhvi pouting.

"I need to get back into their good graces."

"I thought your parents were cool, unlike mine," Sadhvi whined.

"But they're still my parents. They can only be cool for so long."

"I think one in the morning gives us a good bit of time," I added, sending a smile into the retro to lighten the mood.

"We will have fun. And it's not like you want to crash at James' house for the night. He will throw us out or make us sleep in the garden if he is generous."

"As much as I don't like James, his parties are awesome. They're so much fun." Sadhvi opened the cap of something.

"He has a big house. I'm sure he can reserve a room for his friends, like last time. Besides, I wouldn't mind sleeping in his beautiful garden."

"I don't understand. We don't like James, but we're his friends too?"

"I guess we're his friend-enemies," Addison said thoughtfully. "I mean, I don't want him to die. Maybe sometimes, but I don't really think so."

"That pretty much sums it up," Sadhvi said.

I chuckled, although that didn't sum up my feelings for James. I wish it was that simple for me. Now that I thought about it, it was at first.

Hating him wasn't hard when he was acting like such an ass. He hadn't changed at all, but something inside me was changing. And seeing him today at the match made me realize it.

Addison and Sadhvi went back to their makeup, bobbing to the songs and arguing about random stuff in between, and left me to my own thoughts.

The plethora of James-related emotions that I had discovered an hour ago and had been trying to ignore finally surged into my mind.

My feelings were scattered all over the place when I thought about him. I despised him.

However, all those stolen glances, his intense eyes, and that big, genuine smile he gave me across the field when we won tonight struck me.

He looked at me, and when I stood and applauded with the others, something flashed in his face, as if my approval mattered. As if I mattered.

This moment between us seemed special, until I realized what a mess I had gotten myself into.

I liked him. There you go, I admitted it to myself.

*I like James Haynes.*

And I hated myself for it. I didn't know I was complacent enough to melt at a smile. Damn, what had me

caught falling in love with a guy who brutalized me?!

A guy who, every chance he got, made me feel ashamed of my body, reminding me how I wasn't good enough?

Had Lola's stupid words made me believe that James was attracted to me, and I shared his feelings?

Or maybe I was so desperate that I jumped on any boy who gave me attention, even in his sick, twisted way. Or did I have some kind of perverse humiliation deep in my subconscious?

I mentally rolled my eyes. At this point, I wouldn't have been surprised. But even with perversions, I would have preferred to satisfy them with someone I trusted and with whom I was consenting.

Not some asshole demeaning and disrespecting me when I clearly didn't ask for anything.

*I hate it. I hate this bastard!*

I released my grip on the steering wheel when I noticed I was gripping it too hard.

*Stay in control, Keily.*



I didn't want to see James now, after sorting out my feelings, and dealing with all this jumble of emotions, but unluckily, I was going to his house. *At his party.*

\* \* \*

My mouth hung open as I drove through large metal doors.

Before, I had only had a glimpse of James' lavish home from the outside, and now that I stepped inside, it felt like I was entering a modern castle.

The white statue of an angel with wide wings in the middle of the alley was actually part of a large fountain.

A well-lit lawn surrounded the cobblestone path, and the cream-colored house—no, the palace—stood proudly at the end.

Suddenly I felt embarrassed for letting James visit my little house for the project. My house was far below his.

My family wasn't poor, far from it, but damn, James was rich, damn rich.

*Maybe the status difference should be another thing to remind me why I shouldn't have feelings for him.*

I parked the car with the others crowding into the driveway. We went out, and the music inside the house sounded.

"They've already started, huh?" Sadhvi commented, as we reached the steps leading to the open front door. Loud shouts, chatter and laughter could be heard over the music as we went up.

Less than an hour ago, all the young people were at school, but now the party was in full swing as if it had been going on for hours.

When I walked in, my eyes widened with admiration, and ran in every direction to take in every detail. There were two sets of stairs ahead, leading to opposite corners of the upstairs hallway.

The living room furniture was old and expensive. The vases, paintings, and sculptures that decorated the large room seemed too expensive to touch. Everything exuded luxury and money.

People were evenly distributed, drinks in hand, and came and went in multiple adjoining rooms.

"Lucas and the others must be in the playroom," Addison said, and started walking towards one of the side rooms. Sadhvi and I followed.

"Or they could be taking a dip in the pool in their underwear," Sadhvi joked.

"Nah, it's too early for that."

"Are you guys doing this?" I asked, hiding my nervousness. Bad memories from my past resurfaced. Lucas had talked about the pool, but no one had told me that it could turn into a pool party.

"Sometimes, especially when we're completely drunk." Addison smiled, unaware of my anxiety.

"Which is the case most of the time," Sadhvi added.

My throat tightened. Thank goodness I wasn't drinking tonight.

I didn't have to worry about my drunk body swimming naked in James' pool under peer pressure, and showing everyone my ugly fat so they would comment on what a bitch I was. whale.

Just one time was enough to scar me for life.

We reached the games room, and I was amazed once again by the amount of wealth these people possessed.

There was table football, billiards, ping-pong and lots of other things that I didn't even know about.

A fifty-inch plasma TV screen hung on the opposite wall, and a guy and a girl were playing a shooter game on it, sitting in the recliner in front of it.

It was a perfect man cave. I walked behind Addison carefully as the lights were dimmed to match the mood.

"You girls took your time." Lucas appeared in a black shirt and blue jeans, with a drink in his hand. He looked at me. "James was worried you were screwing us over."

There was a slight teasing in his tone, or maybe I imagined it.

"To crash? Not even in a dream!", replied Sadhvi.

"And like he cares," Addison said, rolling her eyes.

"Of course he cares." Lucas took a sip from his cup. "You are friends. He's just not very vocal about it."

"Maybe he should be," my cousin retorted. "He would be surprised what good communication can do." She gave me a quick look.

"Congratulations on your victory," I said to Lucas, changing the subject. "You were very good today."

"THANKS." His eyes sparkled and he smiled. "Did you see my throw for the touchdown? It was great!"

"Yeah, you were great" I chuckled at his enthusiasm.

He continued to talk about tonight's game over and over again, while we all settled into the leather couch in the corner. In the meantime, Addison and Sadhvi left us to go get drinks.

I got up to join them, but Addison stopped me, reminding me that I was their driver tonight.

I hadn't planned on drinking alcohol, just a soda, but before I could say it, Addison leaned in and whispered, "You better finish this kiss."

Then she left with Sadhvi, leaving me distraught.

Now I was there, alone with Lucas on the couch, making conversation. I had to admit that over time, I had started to feel comfortable around him, and to consider him a close friend.

Lucas had always been very attentive to me, apart from the stunt he pulled on Tuesday to convince James to throw this party.

Suddenly, I felt the familiar feeling of being watched. I looked around until I found James coming through the door, walking in our direction. My stomach flipped at how gorgeous he looked.

He was wearing black jeans, a long-sleeved white T-shirt that clung deliciously to his body, and gray sneakers. His face was impassive, but his fiery eyes on me were those of a predator and an accuser.

I noticed a brunette walking with him. I never saw her in high school. She was tall, slim and beautiful, the complete opposite of me.

Jealousy ignited within me as I looked at her next to James, complementing him perfectly.

*Don't be pathetic,* I scolded myself.

I moved away from Lucas when they joined us. I had a feeling of déjà vu compared to the last evening.

"What are you doing here?" Lucas said, almost out of breath. He stared at the girl as if he had seen a ghost.

"James invited me," the girl replied.

James' eyebrows furrowed and he looked at her. "Don't lie, Myra. You invited yourself." He lazily sat next to me, leaving very little space between us. My heart fluttered as we got closer.

"She texted me to say she was there. I tried to make her leave.

I wanted to spare you some drama tonight, but I forgot that she can be annoying as hell, especially when it comes to you," James explained in a monotone to Lucas, who was staring at him.

He didn't seem too concerned, just slightly irritated.

"It's been less than two months," Myra said, "and you've already found yourself a new girlfriend, Lucas." His green eyes scanned my form with contempt.

"You don't hang around. And I thought I was the infidel."

Obviously, she and Lucas had had a history, and I was drawn into their argument.

"We're just friends..."

"I am a free man." I was interrupted by Lucas. He stood up and glared at Myra, who seemed unfazed by his anger.

"Damn, you showed it when I spent my entire school vacation trying to talk to you!"

"You deserved it!"

"Why don't you go have your lovers' quarrel somewhere private?" James interrupted, amused. "And relieve the pressure accumulated over the last few months."

I could make out the grin on his lips, but I didn't dare look.

Myra gave him the finger, and Lucas muttered a loud "Fuck you" before the two stormed away from us.

*OK...?*

"By the end of the night, they'll be sleeping together," James said, his breath hitting my ear. I finally turned to him, and I gasped for a moment at the intensity with which he was looking at me.

My face must have been red as coal.

"They've been together since they were fifteen, and this argument between them isn't going to last long. I warned you not to go after Lucas. You have nothing to do with him."



His dark eyes studied me haughtily. "He's Myra's. Try not to be jealous of her."

*I was when I thought she was with you,* I thought, then cursed my ridiculous feelings.

"I'm not jealous of anyone," I whispered. "I never considered Lucas more than a friend."

"GOOD." The anger in his eyes lessened, but his gaze remained as piercing as ever. "Like I said, you have nothing to do with him, Cochonou."

*Cochonou.* I was reminded once again why I wasn't made for Lucas, or James, or anyone else, damn it! I was ashamed of myself for loving this demon. He was such a jerk!

And staying near him didn't do me any good.

I stood up, ready to walk away from him, but someone grabbed my wrist.

"Where are you going?" There was urgency in his tone.

"Far from you."

His grip tightened. "No."

## Chapter 17

I looked at him, perplexed, trying to ignore the cloudy feeling in my chest at his touch.

My confusion must have amused him, because his fierce gaze softened, and an all-too-familiar smugness appeared on his face.

"If you are far from me, how am I going to show you around my house?" He stood up, towering over me to his full height.

"This party, after all, is for you. It wouldn't be fair for the host to leave his special guest sulking in a secluded corner." That smug smile was infuriating.

I frowned. So he wanted to show himself. "I'm not going to sulk in a corner. I'm going to find Addison. You don't have to worry about your *special guest*.»

"I saw Addison and Sadhvi getting drunk somewhere, and they were having too much fun to remember you," James retorted.

"Matt and Lola are frolicking in the garden. And our friend Lucas has probably already stuck his tongue in Myra's mouth." There was a glimmer of triumph in his eyes when he talked about Lucas.

He really hated the idea of Lucas and I being together. "I'm the only company you have left. Why not accept it?" He was right, and I didn't like it.

"Besides, I promised your parents I'd watch over you."

His last remark earned him a glare from me, but that only made his smirk widen. "You just want to spend your time making fun of me," I muttered, my gaze drifting to his chest. *Why do I like him?!*

"I'm glad you know me so well."

"You wanted me to come, I came. Now leave me alone. It's your birthday, James. All your friends and the whole team are there. I'm sure you'll enjoy it better with them."

"I can't have fun with them when my favorite toy is right there."

I looked at him, dismayed. His wolfish smile made me even more furious.

*Toy.* Of course, I was just a toy for his entertainment.

"I'm not your toy!" I hissed, and pulled my arm away. To my surprise, he let go. James' words had been humiliating before, but they had never stung so hard.

I felt like it was the result of my newfound feelings for him.

Oh god, I hoped that wasn't how it was going to be from now on. Everything was upside down.

My pain must have been obvious, because his smile faded, and his eyes softened. Since when did he care about hurting me? Wasn't that all he wanted?

Well, I wasn't going to wait for the answers with bated breath. My desperation would lead me to draw dangerous conclusions. And I already had a lot of emotions to deal with.

I turned my back on him and ran out of the room.

"Keily," James called me. I stopped. He never called me by my name, except in front of teachers and my parents. A part of me,

sick, loved the sound of her deep voice when she said it. *Ugh...*

I felt a big hand on my shoulder, and I turned to push it away. His touch was overwhelming. Just like his dark eyes, which looked at me attentively to understand me, and made me feel exposed.

"You're really touchy tonight," he said, and a realization crossed his face. "It's Lucas, isn't it?" His jaw clenched, and darkness took over his features.

"You're still hanging on to our quarterback. You like him."

*Oh my God.*

"You deny it, but you want it. You dressed to impress him, *him*, to get his attention, ~him~." His eyes roamed my body.

"But what is he doing? He leaves you hanging to fuck his ex. You can't get over it..."

"I'm hung up on you, asshole!" I snapped. I was tired of hearing his baseless accusations over and over again.

His eyes widened. For a second, I was just happy to shut him up, but then I realized what I'd been babbling. Fear and anxiety crept inside me.

*No!*

That's why I didn't want to be around that jerk. It made me unstable.

Especially now.

"That's not what i meant." It took me almost a minute to find my voice, and break the tense silence between us.

"So what did you mean?" James stepped forward, his big eyes looking at me as if I held the secret to world peace.

"I mean... Nothing," I managed to choke out, backing away from his inquisitive gaze. My face was burning. Damn, my whole body was burning.

"You mean nothing?"

I nodded.

"So are you or aren't you addicted to me?"

"I mean I don't like Lucas. And I can dress however I want," I cut him off.

"If a girl dresses well, it doesn't always mean she wants to impress guys. Most of the time she just wants to feel good. I want to feel good. Guys give themselves too much importance."

James grabbed my hand, stopping my rambling of words.

"Got it." He wrapped his fingers around mine. They felt warm against my cold, sweaty fingers, even though my body was on fire. "You don't like Lucas, and you want to feel good."

I should have walked away, it was the right thing to do, but one small smile from him - a real one, without hidden malice or teasing - and my mind became a blank slate.

*I am in trouble.*

James began to lead us through the crowd. And it took a while before I came to my senses.

"Where are you taking me?"

"Push you off the cliff."

I stopped. He turned around, pressing his lips together, probably to suppress a laugh.

"I'm kidding. There are no cliffs in Bradford. I'm going to have to drown you in the lake." His asshole side was back. I tried to pull my hand away, but he held on. "I'm showing you around my house."

"I didn't say you could."

"You don't have anyone to hang out with. Be with me," he suggested.

"So you can insult me and have a good laugh." My words came out full of bitterness.

He sighed. "How about I try to behave tonight? It's OK?" I was surprised he was trying to be decent.

I looked at our intertwined hands. James was nice. It was almost surreal. I was fully aware that this could all turn sour.

But suddenly something inside me was willing to take the risk despite all the promises I had made to myself to stay away from him.

"Alright. Let's go." Plus, I really didn't have anyone else to hang out with.

\* \* \*



My eyebrows rose as we entered the kitchen. It had been over two hours since I entered James's castle, and I should have gotten used to the luxury of the Haynes. But I wasn't.

Their kitchen was huge, set up with equipment I had never seen before. The granite countertops looked too expensive to accidentally slide something on them, *and they cooked there.*

I really liked the chandeliers hanging above the central counter, as well as the pretty white stools, and the flower pot in the center. Everything was remarkable.

James let go of my hand, missing his warmth, and walked towards the corner where the alcohol was stored. I followed him silently, studying my surroundings.

"I'm not drinking tonight," I said when I saw him have some vodka. "I have to drive Addison and Sadhvi home."

"I found it strange that they were both drinking together." He put the bottle down before turning to the fridge, and starting to rummage through it.

"They lured you to be their designated driver."

"I offered myself. I didn't want to get drunk."

"Why not? At Keith's, you were having the best time of your life drinking with Lucas." I noticed the abruptness in his tone.

I glanced at his back. "Yeah, I was having the time of my life until someone decided to ruin it."

He paused for a second. "You two shouldn't kiss while drunk. Even though they were arguing, Lucas was already with Myra. He hasn't been with another girl since.

"I wanted to spare him the guilt the next morning."

"Is that why you're so opposed to Lucas and I dating?" I asked cautiously.

"Yes." The refrigerator door closed with a thud, and I inwardly grimaced at the brutal way of handling such expensive items. "Hold."

He handed me a cold can of Mountain Dew, keeping the other for himself.

I suspected there was something else in his response, but I didn't try to find out. We were on a delicate ridge, and I didn't want to be the one to break our temporary truce.

Once I opened my can, my hand was in his again. It was scary how easily I felt comfortable around him.

James guided me through the main floor of the house. Everywhere we went there were people.

Boys were playing on the indoor basketball court, the living room was lively because it was at the entrance, and the garden was crowded.

I also spotted Matt and Lola sitting on a loveseat on the patio, kissing. I wondered where all these people came from. Perhaps some students from Westview High School had decided to join in as well.

James and I didn't say much to each other during this time. I just told her how beautiful her house was, and pointed out the things I liked.

He too just hummed and nodded. I guessed he too had no idea how to hold a conversation with someone he was used to insulting with every sentence.

But fortunately, it wasn't embarrassing. The silence between us was comfortable. Our cans were half finished.

I discovered that the pool at the back of the mansion was the main attraction of the party when we reached it.

It was as big as my house, and people didn't hesitate to take full advantage of it. Some were sitting on the edge with their legs dipped in the water, and many were in the water in their underwear.

Almost everyone had a drink in their hands.

"Your house is so big," I said, glancing at his profile. "It's like a little island." We were standing by the pool.

"Yeah." James nodded. "But sometimes it seems a little too much. Too big for a family of four. My brother doesn't even live here anymore." I felt his thumb rubbing the back of my hand.

"My parents really like making money, and showing off how much they make...

They have the right to do so, because they work really hard for it. Sometimes they even forget that they have a son waiting for them at home."

He had the tone of someone talking about the weather, not his unfulfilling family life.

"I'm sure your parents love you," I added. "They might not be very good at showing it." As much as I felt flattered that he shared something personal with me, I didn't like that he was sad.

I knew I shouldn't have compassion for the devil, but he was stronger than me.

He looked at me and gave a lopsided smile. "You're here to have fun, not to give a sad rich boy a therapy session."

"A sad rich boy?" I frowned.

He shrugged.

"It looks pretty good on you, to be honest," I chuckled.

"It's true?" The malicious twinkle in his eyes returned, raising my guard. "I thought that *asshole* suited me better. Isn't that what you said?"

My face burned. The relaxed atmosphere between us was gone. I had been stupid to think he would forget my stupid confession in the playroom.

"I-uh-" His burning gaze wasn't helping me find coherent words. "I-"

*Kill me right now.*

Something hit me in the back, and I lost my balance, my heels tripping on the smooth tile floor. My fingers separated from James's.

I could see the clear water getting closer, and I prepared myself to fall head first into the pool. But that didn't happen. I was pulled upwards, and hit a hard surface.

James pressed me against him, his arms around my waist. I heard a soft "Sorry" come from somewhere, but I didn't dare to look away from the pair of black eyes.

They were fierce and hungry. My whole body felt tense. I felt tingling. The smell of expensive cologne mixed with his own musky scent enveloped me, awakening a new desire. The desire for him.

James tightened his grip, closing the remaining gap between our bodies.

*He's so close.*

"Are you doing well?" His lips moved, and my eyes immediately went to them. Before I could think, I was kissing him.



## Chapter 18

He was still. Too still for my taste. *Maybe it was a mistake...*

Before the panic of what I was doing could set in and make me tear my lips from his, a hand grabbed the back of my head, ending my attempt at escape.

It was like a switch had flipped in James. One second he wasn't responding, and the next he was devouring my mouth like there was no tomorrow.

All sane thought had disappeared from my mind, leaving behind only fireworks of pleasure. My being buzzed.

When his tongue swirled across my lips, seeking entrance, I was in no state to refuse. And once she entered, a moan escaped me.

Apparently that was enough for him to let go of all restraint and plunder my mouth savagely.



My hand went to the back of his neck to feel his smooth hair, while the other held onto his shoulders to keep me from falling. It was too good. He was too good.

I had trouble keeping up with him, but his moans told me he didn't mind at all.

Finally, after what seemed like an hour of intense sensations, but was only a few minutes, he pulled away, gently pulling on my lower lip with his teeth, and allowing us both to resume. our breath.

His hands rested on my waist, without tightening.

I had never been kissed so well before.

*It was incredible.~*

The dazed look on James' handsome face kept me from blinking, afraid he would disappear. Slowly, a small smile crept onto his lips, full of happiness, no matter how small it was.

If only he knew how deadly her real smiles were...

"You want me," he said, the euphoric haze not yet clearing his dark eyes.

~I want it. I want James. ~

As these words looped through my mind, their weight weighed on my consciousness, and the fuzziness in my head began to dissipate.

I wanted James Haynes, my stalker, the guy who told me every day how fat and ugly I was.

And I had just kissed him.

I had kissed the asshole! The devil!

~What have I done?! ~

Immediately I pulled my arms away from him, the previously dormant panic and shock increased. "I'm sorry," I mumbled, remembering that I was the one who initiated the kiss. "I should not have done that."

Without waiting for his response, I stormed off, not caring about the direction I was taking.

I breathed in short puffs as I rushed past the others. The last few minutes flashed through my head, and my trembling legs moved faster, afraid of falling if I stopped.

~I kissed James. ~

~Oh my God! ~

I was stunned by my actions. Tonight I was a ball of surprise, wasn't I?

First, finding out I loved my stalker, then walking around his mansion holding his hand like we were a couple, and now kissing him.

Guilt was surfacing inside me because I couldn't bring myself to despise this kiss. I had loved, no, I had loved every millisecond of that kiss.

His lips had been magical, and maybe it was my crazy brain making things up, but I had felt a longing in the way they had captured mine.

His body pressed against mine was so right, so natural, and his arms holding me were possessive...

*I hope he wasn't disgusted by my fat.~*

My fists clenched in anger from my toxic thinking. It shouldn't matter whether I disgust him or not. It shouldn't matter if he likes kissing me or not. It was James.

But a small part of me still wished he had liked it.

I was pathetic. It seemed like I had finally lost whatever dignity I had left because of him.

~I hate myself. ~

\* \* \*

I found myself in the living room when my feet slowed down, suffering from walking too fast in heels. I was blushing and having trouble breathing, probably because of my panic.

A large vintage clock hanging on the wall appeared in my field of vision. It was midnight fifteen.

I had to get Sadhvi and Addison home before one in the morning. It was time to go.

To be honest, I was more than happy to get out of here. I was too emotionally broken to enjoy the party, or to face James again.

Now all I had to do was stop thinking about him for a minute and find the girls, before I could curl up peacefully in my aunt's spare room.

I remembered the last time I saw Addison and Sadhvi, they were heading upstairs when James was showing me downstairs.

No one was allowed upstairs other than people who were close to James. It was an unwritten rule, and everyone followed it, or at least that's what Addison told me in the car.

The fact that Addison and Sadhvi were able to ride confirmed that James considered them close friends. *Or close friends.*~

Without missing a beat, I climbed the stairs. When showing me around, James had mentioned that he would show me the library and gymnasium that were upstairs, so I didn't hesitate much.

Maybe, for one night, we became close too...until I ruined everything by kissing him.

The hallway had rows of rooms on either side. I went left because I remembered Addison and Sadhvi taking the left staircase.

I left the first door, which was a little open, hearing the laughter of several males coming from inside. I still took a look, just to make sure the girls weren't there.

The next door was closed, letting no sound through. I wouldn't have been surprised if the rooms were designed to be soundproof in this mansion.

So I turned the handle and opened it slightly, welcoming the most unexpected sight.

*Oh.*

Eyes wide, I closed the door quietly before anyone could see me. I walked away, trying to make sense of what I had seen.

~This evening just keeps getting better. ~

I never thought Addison and Sadhvi were...

I shook my head. What they were was none of my business. And they certainly didn't intend to reveal it to me. It hurt me, but I understood...

Or perhaps I misunderstood the situation. They were both drunk, and with their bold personalities, they were just experiencing something different.

And who was I to say anything?! I wasn't even drunk, and look what I had done. I had drooled over the devil.

Barging into the room and making things awkward for the three of us didn't seem like a good idea. So I decided to call Addison to tell her we had to go home.

Cursing myself for not having done it sooner, and not wanting to infringe on the privacy of others, I rushed towards the stairs.

I bumped into someone, and a familiar smell surrounded me. *No*. I looked up to find the dark eyes I was avoiding.

I must have looked like a deer caught in car headlights.

"Who knew you could move those little legs so fast?" James said, and his eyes sparkled with mischief. I noticed that his hair was disheveled, and I blushed, knowing that it was me who was responsible.

"You can't just kiss and run away, Keily." His hands wrapped around my waist, and I felt like captured prey.

My heart fluttered hearing him say my name so affectionately. I fought against myself not to lose control again.

"I'm sorry." I avoided his gaze, embarrassed at having run away from him.

"Your excuses won't be enough." I could practically hear his smirk.  
"You kissed me, now you have to face the consequences, Keily Harris."

"I should not have done that. I'm sorry."

"But you did it, and I don't want you to feel sorry for it." He got closer.

I looked up, a few centimeters separated our faces. "So what do you want me to feel?"

Before I could blink, I was pressed against the wall, with James hovering over me, his hands planted firmly on my hips, and his eyes following my face longingly.

My breath hitched, anticipating his next move.

However, in the fog, a small voice was screaming inside me, warning me to stop, not to slip again.

"I want you to feel that." James leaned in, but I turned my head at the last second, and his lips rested on my right cheek.

I felt his lips curl into a smile, and peck my cheek gently, without being disappointed by my refusal. "Don't be shy," he cajoled, nuzzling the side of my face playfully.

My toes curled. Who could have guessed that he was capable of being so gentle and kind?



*Don't fall into his trap.* My conscience tickled me.

I had to reach deep inside myself to push him away. When a confused frown marred his handsome features, I was tempted to pull him back and kiss him. But I held on.

"We shouldn't do this, James," I said, trying to meet his gaze.

"You started it."

I nodded. "And I apologize for that."

"Do not apologize."

"I should not have done that. It was a mistake."

"A mistake." His brows furrowed, and I felt his mood darken as he let go of me.

I nodded.

"So why did you kiss me, Keily?" he asked, as if I had committed a crime.

"I don't know," I said, looking down.

"You don't fucking know." He was angry. "You made me walk for nothing!"

"I didn't make you walk!" I glared at him. "I disgust you, remember?"

The tone of his accusation had triggered something in me too. He had no right to yell at me when it was his fault, his harassment that was the reason for my conflicting emotions.

If he hadn't been a jerk from the start, then maybe things could have been different.

"Where did that come from?" James asked, surprised.

I gave him a harder look for having the nerve to ask that.

"Where is that from?!" I spat.

"After all the comments you made about my body, after all the insults you threw at me, and the body shame you made me feel constantly, to remind me how fat and ugly, you ask me why I think I disgust you!"

I struggled to keep the tears at bay. "I am your Pig, your whale, your cow, your *big slut*—»My voice broke. "Do you want me to continue?"

"Don't tell me you took all this seriously?" He ran his hand through his hair in frustration.

"I was just j—" He shook his head, interrupting himself. "Don't be a baby, Keily. It wasn't serious," he added casually.

His nonchalance hurt me. I had hoped he would apologize, and say sweet words to bring me back into his arms. Not that I would have forgiven him so easily.

But his lack of remorse hurt me and widened the gap between us.

It hurt. So bad.

"I hate you, James." I almost tasted venom on my tongue. "Kissing you was the biggest mistake." And I thought so, even though I really liked it. "I hate you."

His face fell as if he had been slapped, before contorting into a most odious grimace. "Okay." His icy tone sent shivers down my spine. "You hate me." He nodded, then turned and stomped away.

I sighed as his back disappeared, rounding the long hallway. Suddenly I lost all my energy, and I felt empty.

After calling Addison, she and Sadhvi, both very drunk, stumbled onto the porch to join me. Their amusing gibberish during the car ride failed to lift my mood like the other times.

And when I finally found the comfort of solitude in Addison's guest room, I let go and cried myself to sleep.

## Chapter 19

My Saturday afternoons were usually reserved for lazing around and shaking off the fatigue from the entire week.

However, today, rest couldn't come easily when my mind was a whirlwind of thoughts, not wanting to calm down for a second. The reason for all this was, lo and behold, James.

I couldn't help but think back to the passionate kiss we'd shared last night, and the heartbreaking exchange we'd had afterwards.

My stomach is still churning, thinking about the delicious feeling of his lips against mine.

I didn't have much experience, having only been kissed twice, but they definitely paled in comparison to James' skill.

Deep down, I felt that no one would ever stand a chance against him, which was devastating news to me, because we would never kiss again.

The heated words we had exchanged had made the small possibility we had of starting over disappear. I hated the fact that he didn't apologize for all the insults he had thrown at me.

For him, these degrading remarks were not *serious*.

It seemed that targeting me on my body was just harmless fun for him, but for me, each of his dismissive comments was a knife that chipped away at my self-esteem little by little, leaving me in a state of insecurity.

I never wanted to become so sensitive, but after dealing with body shame throughout my teenage years, I kind of had to. So his insults hit where it hurt the most.

It was amazing that I fell in love with James.

I got home from Addison's around 9am. The rest of the morning passed in a blur: I showered, ate breakfast, and did my usual tasks.

I had cried enough last night to stop feeling depressed, but I was still reeling from the evening's events.

To keep my brain from going crazy from overthinking, I immersed myself in my homework, even though it was around 2 p.m., the time I should have taken my nap, especially considering the restless night I had spent.

However, this strategy of keeping my head occupied apparently wasn't working, because every couple of minutes my thoughts drifted to James.

~I so need a break from him. ~

My phone, lying next to me on the bed, beeped. I turned it on, and I saw a message from Addison.

**Addison:**Don't tell me that's what I think!

My eyes widened when, below, I saw a screenshot of a photo taken from Instagram.

It was a photo of James and I kissing by the pool. I blushed at how intimate we looked, our bodies molded into each other and our lips pressed so feverishly.

For the first time, an inner voice didn't criticize me for looking fat in a photo, because her tall frame matched mine so well. ~We were perfect. ~

**Addison:**You kissed James!!!!

Another text from Addison brought me back to reality.

**Keily:**I did not do it on purpose.

Anxiety filled me when I thought that the whole school must have seen this photo. Sure, we'd kissed in public, but I didn't expect anyone to take a photo of that.

*Why don't people mind their own business?!~*

I opened Instagram, scrolling through the different groups where students from our high school were posting. Meanwhile, my phone beeped with incoming messages from Addison.

**Addison:**Were you drunk? I thought you didn't drink.

**Keily:**I didn't touch alcohol.

**Addison:**So why are you making fun of James!!!!?

**Keily:**It happened like that.

I finally found the photo. It was posted online two hours ago. My mouth went dry when I saw how many likes and comments she had received in such a short time. I tapped to read the comments.

~Our tackler got his heart tackled :x ~

*Who knew James craved fresh meat? :P~*

~She's cute and chubby and James likes that... ~

*No! James is taken :() ~*

~She's fat. ~

~I never thought James would fall for her... ~

~My heart sinks... ~



~Haynes likes them big. ~

~Both have to train hard at the gym. One lifts the weights, the other lifts herself.LOL. ~

~Does James like big girls? ~

~She's the new girl, right? ~

~This is Keily Harris. She is in my class. ~

~I wish someone would kiss me like that~

~Live, the show was much sexier! ~

The stream of comments continued, which was to be expected since James was very popular in high school. My cheeks reddened with each comment.

From calling us the new star couple to ridiculing me, all opinions were there. I felt embarrassed that so many comments were about my body, whether positive or negative, or just objective.

People were really direct in their thoughts online.

By the time I finished reading them, the magic of our photo had faded. As always, the negativity outweighed the positivity.

As I looked at the image further, I began to notice my flabby arms and stubby legs compared to James' muscular, trained body.

The usual doubts and hang-ups about my weight resurfaced, and I felt stupid for even fantasizing about it. It was way beyond my means.

Last night had been a big mistake.

My phone kept ringing, reporting messages from my cousin. She was furious, wanting to know every detail of how I ended up kissing my nemesis.

After enduring the judgments of strangers, I didn't want to face Addison's, so I texted her to say I'd talk to her later, closed my phone, and sprawled out. bed, preparing myself for an afternoon full of self-loathing, over-analyzing every little thing in my tiny life, and insanity.

\* \* \*

"You haven't responded to my messages," Addison said, her narrowed eyes warning me that one wrong response, and she was going to explode.

"I told you I'd talk to you later," I muttered, getting into the passenger seat and closing the door.

"I thought later meant a few hours, not two days." She started the engine, and we were on our way to school.

The dreadful Monday morning was here, and all I wanted to do was curl up in the comfort of my blankets, instead of facing James or my classmates.

I knew I had attracted attention when the photo of me kissing James circulated on social media. So I expected crazy stares and rumors in the hallways and classrooms for the days to come.

I hated the idea of people gossiping about me, especially about James.

Since he was very handsome, it wouldn't take long for others to comment on my appearance, and soon they would be criticizing and making fun of me.

I had already had a taste of their jokes *very funny* on the Internet.

It was no surprise, since I was so shy and cowardly, that I was nervous about going to school today. And Addison's surly attitude didn't help.

"I'm sorry" I sighed. "This Instagram post really disgusted me."

"Oh, that picture where you and James were eating each other's faces."

That's why I didn't want to talk to Addison. I didn't want to be scolded by her, when I was already tired of self-flagellation.

My cousin was impulsive and never held back her opinion, admirable qualities, but not right now. From her texts, I understood that she absolutely did not appreciate me being intimate with James.

"I already regret it," I lied. Kissing James had been a mistake, but it felt so good that regretting it was a mistake.

"I'm really mad at you." She took a deep breath, looking at the road ahead of her. "When James kissed you, you should have taken the opportunity to hit him for attacking you, not to respond to his advances."

"Actually, I was the one who kissed him first," I mumbled shyly, looking down at my lap.

"What is this mess?!" Addison looked at me, horrified.

"You're driving," I reminded him when his eyes stayed on me longer than necessary.

She put her head upright, and cursed under her breath, clenching and unclenching her fist on the steering wheel.

Okay, she was even more melodramatic than me after I kissed James. His over-investment in my story was a bit strange.

"Don't worry, he still hates me," I said trying to appease him. A minute passed in silence. "Say something."

"What do you want me to say?!" my cousin yelled. "I thought I asked you to kiss Lucas, not that bastard."

"Are you going to stop with Lucas?!" I hissed. "I told you he was just a friend. Plus, I found out he had a girlfriend, Myra. Were you really trying to hook me up with a guy who's with someone else?"

"What are you saying? He and Myra broke up months ago. He's not with anyone."

"That's not what it looked like when she showed up at the party, and Lucas was looking at her like she was his holy grail.

"They've been together for years, and Lucas hasn't looked at any other girl. He's always into her."

"Who told you that?"

"James."

"So instead you decided to snog that bastard." Addison's eyes narrowed into small slits, still focused on the road.

"I don't understand girls like you, Keily, who fall for any jerk. He may have a crush on you, but he also harassed and insulted you.

"It's toxic," she continued, and my fist clenched at all the reminders, as if I hadn't already spent two days mulling over them.

"What do you like about him, huh? His good looks, his influence, his wealth, his popularity..."

"Or maybe I don't control my feelings like any other human being!" I shouted. She had crossed the line.

"You should know that. After all, you were also busy getting naked under the sheets with Sadhvi."

The fight left his eyes, and his face fell into shock. Whatever was going on between her and Sadhvi, it was a touchy subject. I almost regretted getting angry with my cousin, but she was the one who started it.

"How are you..."

"I saw you in a bedroom upstairs when I was looking for you to come home."

Addison nodded, and her expression returned to an angry grimace. "You have no idea what's going on between Sadhvi and me."

"And you have no idea what's going on between James and me."

For the rest of the ride, neither of us said a word. The silence between us was heavy, and disarray radiated around us in waves. We never spoke to each other like that.

I hadn't even set foot in the school when my day had already degenerated, with Addison angry at me.

What was happening to me? I made everyone hate me: first James, now her.

When we got to school, Addison didn't walk me to our lockers like usual, claiming she had something to take care of. I knew she just wanted to be away from me to calm down.

I, too, needed to calm down. But as I walked the halls of Jenkins, I missed her.

As expected, I was stared at, pointed at and whispered about as I passed. Some students even greeted me and smiled, while others openly ogled at me. I blushed and made myself look small under all these stares.

Within three weeks, I had grown accustomed to living in Addison's shadow, so this new attention was overwhelming.

I only hoped that the rumors would die down soon, and that this spotlight on me would be removed.

My nervousness reached new heights when I found James, near his locker with one of his teammates, his back turned to me.

As soon as he saw me, his behavior became icy, as if I was his worst enemy. A sudden sadness spread through me when I saw his cold demeanor. But what else could I expect?

I walked towards my locker, trying to make myself as invisible as possible, which was difficult because I felt that *his* eyes followed me.

"I saw Myra with Lucas at your house," I heard the guy say to James, as I searched my locker. He spoke very loudly, so it was impossible not to hear him. "Are they back together or something?"

I let go of all shame about indulging my curiosity, and concentrated on listening to their conversation.



"I don't know," James replied.

"Yeah, how would you know? You were too busy dating the new girl." The guy chuckled, not knowing I was behind him.

"You were all over that poor girl. Is she still alive, or did you suck out all her breath by sticking your tongue in her mouth?"

My cheeks colored at the callous way he described our kiss. "I can't blame you, she's sexy..."

"Shut up!" James cut him off. My body shivered as I felt his gaze harden on me. I glanced behind the locker door, and flinched at the hardness in his eyes.

"It was she who made advances towards me." He leaned his shoulder against the locker, smiling cruelly. He knew I was listening.

"I was just being nice, and it turned out that was all he needed to throw himself at me. How can a girl be so desperate? But then again, what can you expect from a whale like her."

My vision blurred. I hid behind my locker door before letting my tears flow.

~He's mean. ~

## Chapter 20

“Yo, Keily!” Someone yelled from the back. I was in the middle row. Our physics class was about to start.

I looked up from my cell phone, and turned around. I recognized two or three guys sitting in the chairs behind. They were on the football team, and hung in the same circles as James.

I had never had any exchanges with them. However, at this moment, the wide smile on their faces announced trouble, and put me on alert.

“How did our Haynes do on Friday? Did you reach the end zone?” one of them said, and laughter echoed through the class.

“He’s one of our best,” laughed another. “But then again, we can’t be sure, since you’re so difficult to handle.”

“Well, I can always give him a hand.” The previous one winked at me. My skin trembled with disgust.

“That kiss was pretty hot, though,” a voice commented from nowhere, and just in time, other students sitting around started to

making kissing noises, adding to my embarrassment.

I immediately turned around, a strong blush covering my cheeks. I looked down, letting my hair fall to the sides in hopes of hiding my burning face. This was what I feared.

As if James wasn't enough, his teammates were getting in on the action too.

The sneers and shouts of others at my expense were eerily familiar to me. Memories of the taunts and derogatory comments from my classmates at Remington flashed before me.

I really wanted to say a good retort to silence their obnoxious laughter, but because of my cowardice, coupled with the superpower of my brain to freeze during confrontations, I couldn't.

I didn't say anything then, and I didn't say anything now. I wanted to stop being such a docile person.

Fortunately, I didn't have to endure any more derogatory remarks, because our teacher arrived and silenced the class.

However, my thoughts didn't calm down, imagining all sorts of witty things I could have said to shut these guys' mouths.

~If only it were this easy to do in reality. ~

~\*\*\*~

I dragged myself to English class, mentally preparing myself for another encounter with James.

Him belittling me in front of his friend this morning had really hurt my self-esteem, and once again I was ashamed of having feelings for him.

His words had made me question all the amazing things I'd felt when we'd kissed.

Maybe the sparkles and glitter had only been on my side, while he had just thought it was a *desperate girl* who clung to him... But that evening, he had been so passionate and so gentle... ~Humph. ~

I was already at the end of my rope with this guy.

Add to that the unwanted attention from certain people, like in physics class, and the argument between Addison and I, all because of our photo, and I had reached my breaking point.

It was too much, and the day wasn't about to end. I swore to myself that if that asshole James said anything else, I would rip his tongue out...

Okay, who am I kidding? I would probably end up breaking down and bawling like a child.

When I reached the doorway, I found said asshole quietly sitting on his table, watching something on his phone.

Seeing him, skipping class seemed like a more attractive option than staying near him.

However, Mr. Crones and my parents wouldn't have liked that, so I forced myself to my chair, which was right next to his.

I wish some of the tables were still vacant like the first day so I wouldn't have to sit right next to him, but they had all been occupied when other students arrived.

Tunned like clockwork, I felt James' gaze turn to me as I approached him, and sat down at my table. Unable to resist, I glanced back. My eyes widened when I saw a purple bruise on his left cheek.

Someone had hit him. The mark was fresh, and from what I could see, the blow must have hurt a lot.

So I wasn't the only one having a bad day.

I didn't understand who dared to hit James Haynes.

I hadn't yet heard of any fights in Jenkins involving James, but with all the muscles he was showing off, it was easier to conclude that he wasn't to be taken lightly.

He was like a giant cannon, not to be trifled with. I was curious to know who chose to fight with him.

*Let's hope it's not Addison,* I groaned internally.

Theoretically, I should have been over the moon to see James hurt, after all the things he had said and done.

Instead, I found myself worrying about him, and hoping that that purple spot on his cheek was his only injury.

"You want my picture?" James said sullenly. I realized that I had been staring at him - or rather at his bruise - longer than necessary. I blushed under his penetrating gaze.

"I'm sure you're itching to frame my face right now. Go ahead."

On second thought, he absolutely deserved to get hit.

"No need. Unlike you, I don't rejoice in the misery of others," I retorted before I could stop myself.

"So we have Mother Teresa here," he scoffed.

"It's better than being an asshole." His eyes narrowed, and his jaw clenched.

I expected another attack to come out of his mouth. Instead, after giving me the nastiest look, he simply turned back to his cell phone, it had given me a cold shoulder. He said nothing.

~This is a first... ~

I also took care of my notes. I wasn't in the mood to be insulted by him either. But as always, we couldn't help but give each other furtive glances, no, this time, dark glances.

\* \* \*

"BOO!"

I jumped, my hand went to my chest. Breathing raggedly, I turned away from my locker, and found Lucas smiling at me.

"You need to stop doing this." I glared at him.

"I can't. It's so funny." His smile widened.

"Not for me." I shook my head, and turned around to put my bag in my locker.

"Consider it our special way of saying hello. You will eventually learn to love it."

"I doubt." I closed my locker and faced him, a small smile playing on my lips. Interacting with Lucas brought some normalcy back to this very bad day.

We left together towards the cafeteria. It was lunch. I was a little nervous about seeing Addison after our morning spat.

I wanted us to reconcile quickly, and not prolong this tension between us.

"Everything is fine?" Lucas asked, his lips forming into a thin line as he looked at me.

"Is someone causing you trouble? People here are crazy, and you're becoming famous after this..." he drawled, letting me fill in the blank.

I nodded in understanding, heat rising to my face. He was trying to avoid the subject for my sake. But I was wondering what



what he had to say about the kiss between James and me.

"So, is there anyone I need to take care of?" Lucas raised his fist jokingly.

I stopped in my tracks when I noticed red spots on his knuckles. He stopped too, and immediately lowered his fist when he saw me staring at him. It didn't take me long to make the connection.

"You fought with James," I said. Any other day, I would have laughed at how funny Lucas looked, with his big eyes, like a child caught stealing cookies. Right now, I felt anything but amused.

"I didn't fight with him." He looked down, fiddling with his fingers. "I just punched him."

"Are you doing well?" I examined him more closely, looking for signs of injury, and I shuddered inwardly at the thought of a scuffle between these two giants.

"Yes I'm doing well. Don't worry, Keily." He gave a sheepish smile to reassure me. "James didn't fight back. I just punched that motherfucker."

He seemed bitter about James, even though he hadn't hit him.

I ignored the relief that flooded my body at the news that James wasn't as horribly injured as my crazy brain had imagined.

"What happened?"

"He was stupid, it happened," Lucas muttered, rolling his eyes. We started walking again.

"How was he stupid?" I asked. I was really curious to know what could have made Lucas hit James. They were very close friends.

Lucas looked at me with a frown. "He just said things that I found very offensive," he replied vaguely, which piqued my curiosity. He dodged the subject.

"Would I be indiscreet if I wanted to know what he said?" I bit my tongue, hoping I wasn't going too far.

"Somehow," he chuckled. "I'm not trying to keep a secret. I just don't want to put you in a bad mood, when I can see you're already having a bad day."

"James said something about me, didn't he?"

Lucas nodded.

We entered the cafeteria, and my eyes, without permission, moved to look for the devil. He was at his usual table with other boys, staring at me.

His eyes studied Lucas and me in a calculated manner.

"I'm sitting with you girls today," Lucas said, leading me to tear my gaze away from James. "I don't want to be near this *son of a bitch*.»

I glanced at my table and found only Sadhvi, who greeted me with an enthusiastic wave. I waved back, internally dreading going near her.

This girl wouldn't rest until she made me spill everything about Friday night.

I could only wish Addison or Lola would arrive before I reached our table, so they could rein her in a bit.

"You are always welcome at our table." I smiled at Lucas, and walked towards the food counter with him. "So what did James say about me?" I asked quietly as we waited in line.

At this point, I was literally asking to be tortured. Obviously, this devil had said something malicious and hurtful.

Lucas exhaled heavily. "The things he usually says to get to you. Don't worry too much."

"So what made you hit him?"

"Keily, I never liked the way he harassed you." He shook his head in exasperation.

"But I didn't expect the same attitude from him after your kiss. He was very bitter. And I kind of freaked out seeing how stupid he was."

My face flushed with embarrassment. "You must think I'm stupid for kissing him when he treats me like that." I took a quick glance at James as we walked forward.

He was talking to Keith, but his eyes were there to meet mine.

"No, I don't think like that." Lucas gave a small smile.

"Haynes is sending very mixed signals, like the moody diva he is. I'm on the sidelines, and it's becoming very painful for me. I can only imagine what it must be like for you.

"I'd be shocked if the next punch to his face wasn't delivered by you." I was so relieved that he didn't judge me.

"So prepare to be shocked. I'm absolutely not going to hit someone unless they hit me first." I gave him a slight look, showing that I wasn't serious.

"You should abide by this code too. You were wrong to hit him." I meant my last words seriously, though.

"Oh come on, you should be thanking me, not lecturing me." He pouted. "Don't tell me you care about him?"

The color in my cheeks returned, eliciting a teasing smile from him.

"I care about you," I said. "And I don't want you and James to fight because of me. You two are good friends, and you shouldn't let a girl come between you." I playfully elbowed him in the ribs.

"Believe me, it's his stupidity that comes between us."

I chuckled, shaking my head. "Speaking of friends, right now Addison is also mad at me. I'll buy him lunch to make peace."

"What happened?"

"She's not really happy that I kissed James, and I understand that." I shrugged my shoulders. I wasn't going to tell him everything, given Addison's reaction in the car.

It wasn't my place to tell him anyway.

"Of course. It's Addison." Lucas growled.

We waited in line for a few more minutes before getting our food.

I also paid for Lola's lunch. I couldn't deprive her of a grilled cheese sandwich when she had been so nice to me. Sadhvi already had her meal tray.

Addison murmured "Thank you" when I gave her the sandwich. We weren't as close as before, but the atmosphere between us had definitely relaxed.

I could tell she felt guilty too, because she had chosen to sit next to me in silence, her way of apologizing.

Sadhvi, as expected, tried to get me to talk about the party, but Lucas and Lola were there to save me.

Several times, I caught my gaze drifting towards James, especially when I felt him looking at me.

Despite a rough start, the lunch break wasn't bad, maybe slightly awkward.

# Chapter 21

Lola's room vaguely resembled a tarot parlor I had visited in my hometown when I was seven.

My parents had walked into this man's shop by chance as we were returning from a family meal at a restaurant.

I don't really remember what he predicted, probably some imaginary stuff about my future *bright* which had proudly made my father smile.

The main wall of Lola's room was painted burgundy, and contrasted with the other three cream-colored walls.

The carpet and curtains were black, and the various crystals on his desk and nightstand gave a gothic vibe.

Her room was smaller than mine, but more spacious, reminding me once again what a hoarder and messy girl I was.

Lola had invited Addison, Sadhvi and me for a girls' night. It was Tuesday, and even though it was a weekday evening, we agreed, and we managed to convince our parents.



She texted me her address, and my dad dropped me off after dinner. His mother was visiting relatives with her little brother, so the whole house was ours.

The three of us brought our bags and clothes for the next morning, so we could go straight to school from her house.

"Let's clear things up between us, girls," Lola announced as she walked through the door, her arms loaded with two tubs of ice cream and snacks.

"What do you mean?" Addison asked from the chair in the corner, looking up from her phone.

"That means we're going to talk to each other with open hearts, and move past last Friday's story."

Lola spread out all the food items in the middle of her large bed, where Sadhvi was showing me photos of her and others on her mobile phone, taken before I arrived in Bradford.

"I thought we were going to watch movies," I commented. Friday's drama had led to a peculiar situation between James and I, and I was still too embarrassed to discuss that evening with my friends.

"You really think I'd invite you all over for a lame movie?"

"Ooo, I have no problem with a heart-to-heart, but can you at least bring a bottle of rum to get us in the mood?" Sadhvi said cheerfully.

"No alcohol. It's a weeknight." Lola sat on the bed with us. She patted the remaining space for Addison to come, who, after rolling her eyes, sat down too.

The four of us formed a circle, hugging the bed, with the snacks in the middle.

"And now?" Addison was impassive.

"Now we're talking about what's going on between you and Keily."

I looked at Lola with wide eyes as I saw how abruptly she was broaching the subject. Things were still weird between Addison and me.

We had both carefully avoided talking about James' sexuality or that of my cousin during the small discussions we had.

We weren't as cheerful as before, and there was a certain tension between us. Obviously, nothing had gone unnoticed by Lola's sharp eyes.

"Nothing happens."

"Don't deny it, Addison." Lola shook her head before turning to me. "You, speak," she ordered.

I glanced at Addison, who was glaring at Lola, but Lola wasn't affected at all, just staring at me. When Lola raised her eyebrows, I relented.

"She's upset because I kissed James," I muttered, eyes downcast.

"That's all?" Sadhvi said, trying to open the tub of Ben & Jerry's ice cream.

"No, it's not," Addison groaned. She looked at Sadhvi. "Keily found out for us. She saw us in the room at the party." The tub of ice cream fell from Sadhvi's hands onto her lap.

"It was only a matter of time before she found out," Lola commented, unfazed.

"Do you know about them?" I asked, surprised and hurt. Was I the only one left out?

She shrugged. I frowned as I looked at Addison. All this time, I blamed myself for stupidly discovering his secret.

and that of Sadhvi.

I was a newcomer to our group, but it still stung that my cousin had hidden so much of herself from me. I knew it was his choice, but still...

"Look, Keily, it's not official yet," Addison said, sensing my sadness. "Lola discovered it herself a few months ago. No one knows except the people in this room, and my parents."

"If your parents know, then why are you hiding?" I asked curiously.

"You have always been honest about everything. The last person I expected to see hiding was you. I mean, you're too strong and too cool to be the butt of jokes, if that's what you fear.

"And there are already gay couples in high school who can be looked up to. You and Sadhvi won't be the only ones."

"I'm not afraid of anyone, little sister. I will knock out the teeth of any homophobes who try anything against us."

"They're still hiding because of me," Sadhvi whispered, nervously twirling a lock of her long hair.

"Addison's parents are cool, but my parents are pretty conventional.

"They would freak out if I dared say I had a boyfriend, so you can only imagine what will happen when they find out their daughter is a lesbian.

"My family is very traditional. My parents moved here from India when I was three, so they kept a lot of their values from home.

Since childhood, they instilled in me the obligation to obtain an A+ in all subjects, and to never associate with "white people".

"I was always told to never bring shame to the family, and to behave like a good girl.

"I don't want to tear my parents down. They are good and honest people.

"They have also changed enormously to fit into the new culture, but you cannot ask a person to turn their back on values that have been ingrained in their mind for almost half their life.

"This is why, almost every day, there is some sort of spat between my parents and me over my most fundamental life choices. I had an argument with them a few hours ago about spending the night with you."

She sniffed. "I don't plan on coming out until I'm in college. It's not a good idea to bring such a fiasco into my house until I'm away from it.

"I can only hope that once I'm out of their sight, they won't be so intrusive, and that maybe they'll accept me for who I am."

"I want to say who I am, and be proud of it, with her," Addison added, taking Sadhvi's hand in hers.

"We plan to apply to universities in New York. There, we will be completely free to be ourselves, without being bothered by his family."

"Thanks for doing this with me, Addy." Sadhvi smiled shyly at him, placing their joined hands on her lap, right next to the tub of Ben & Jerry's ice cream.

"You guys are so adorable," I commented, marveling at their cuteness. "Who wouldn't want you two to be together?"

"Apparently some people," Lola mumbled, picking up a bag of tortilla chips, and snapping it open.

"Keily, yesterday on the way to school I overreacted," Addison said.

"I'm sorry. Sadhvi's mother had called mine on Sunday to complain about us. After that, mom gave me a big lecture, and even threatened to deprive me of going out. She never does that.

"I guess Ms. Bajpai's words had touched her. It pissed me off, and I took my frustrations out on you." She exhaled deeply. "I am very sorry."

"Your mother probably wanted to yell at me. My parents can be difficult too." Sadhvi gave him a shoulder push.

"It's good." I smiled at both. When Addison smiled back, I felt like the heaviness between us was gone.

"Now it's Keily's turn," Lola said mischievously, putting chips in her mouth, and breaking our moment of affection with her noisy munching.

"What do you mean?"

"Don't think people don't notice your lack of self-esteem." She handed me her bag of chips. "It's time you opened up to us."

"Lola is right. You have issues with your body," Addison said, opening the tub of ice cream in Sadhvi's lap. "We are listening to you."

"Come on, let it go," Sadhvi also insisted, looking at me expectantly as I hesitated.

Before moving to Bradford, I had no close friends, just a few acquaintances who I said the obligatory hello to, and with whom I

talked about homework or tests.

I wasn't used to people my age being interested in me other than to make fun of me. I never had a best friend to share stuff with, just my parents sometimes.

However, in this moment, these girls in front of me were the closest to being the best friends I had always wanted. So I gave in under these three pairs of eyes.

"I'm fat," I said, my mouth suddenly dry. "I wish I wasn't. I want to have a body like yours, girls." God, I looked so whiny. Saying his complexes out loud was difficult.

"I hate the attention these extra pounds bring me," I continued, staring at my knees. "I remember a friend of my mother telling her to watch my weight, in front of me. I was nine years old at the time.

"His words had an impact on me. From that point on, I started noticing other adults making comments about my weight.

"Suddenly, I started seeing new flaws in my chubby body, every time I stood in front of a mirror.

"Things took a turn for the worse a year later. I was out with my classmates and teachers. We went to a water park. I was so excited.



"I had no idea it was going to be the worst day of my life."

I paused, my lips were trembling, I was reliving that day. "I wore the swimsuit my dad bought me last minute. He got the size wrong, so it was a little tight.

"As I was leaving the locker room, my foot slipped on something and I fell. I didn't realize the other kids were looking at me until they all started laughing and pointing at me.

"The back of my jersey was torn. One boy called me "big whale," and the others laughed even harder. I had never been so ashamed in my life.

"It was the first time I was the laughing stock of others, and the legacy continued for years.

"After that day, my classmates took the liberty of making fun of me, and verbally harassing me, to the point that I got used to it.

"At first I was annoyed by my parents' sudden decision to move to Bradford, but now I'm happy to be here with you. Far from these people."

I finally looked up to give the girls a small smile.

"These kids are assholes," Addison said mischievously. "Your parents' friends are assholes too. What kind of adult shames a nine-year-old?"

I shrugged my shoulders. "So many people feel the need to say something about my figure, whether it's good or bad. Since I'm a big girl, this falls on me automatically. It's like I'm a public spectacle to comment on.

"Countless times I have been made fun of and leered at while eating a pizza or a hamburger.

"My relatives and cousins told me to cut down on carbs, or advised me to go on crazy diets, as if I hadn't already. Nothing works-" I shook my head, cutting off my words. I was really going to throw a tantrum.

"Okay, some things worked. A few years ago I got sick from a crash diet I was on.

"Sometimes I wouldn't eat for hours, and other times I would give in and binge on junk like there was no tomorrow. At first, Mom and Dad were angry, but later they took matters into their own hands, and changed my eating habits.

"They added more vegetables, fruits and healthy meats to our family meals, and encouraged me to be more active. I've lost weight gradually over the years... But not enough.

"People keep bothering me about it." I had always been a chubby child, but I never paid attention to it back then.

However, when I hit puberty, and other kids started teasing me, I developed massive anxiety about my appearance. To cope with the situation, I went on different diets, which only made things worse.

I was grateful to my parents for coming to the rescue.

"I'm nowhere near the look I want to have. I have stretch marks on my stomach, lower back, butt, upper arms and... everywhere. I'm afraid of seeing myself naked.

"Finding the right clothes for me has always been a struggle too. I don't like my arms to wobble every time I wear sleeveless clothes. I can't wear tight dresses because of my big belly.

"My thighs are so big that I think a thousand times before wearing tight jeans or shorts. The choices for me are very limited, not just in clothes, but it seems like that is the case with everything." I sighed.

"And the most annoying thing is that I am aware that there are many people who are much worse than me. But despite everything, I can't help but want to be thin, and compare my body to that of other girls.

I finished, and felt much lighter. ~Talking about your problems really helps~

After a very long moment of silence, Addison suddenly hugged me. I patted his back, resting my chin on his shoulder. This cuddling moment was nice. "Keily, you look beautiful."

I chuckled. "THANKS."

She pulled away, and met my eyes seriously. "No, I really mean it. You're very beautiful. You have nice curves. Accept them. It's this shitty society that sets ridiculous standards.

"As long as you're healthy, your weight is no one's business." His compliment meant a lot.

She glared at me. "And if anyone gives you trouble, speak up, Keily. These kids aren't making fun of you because you're overweight.

"They make fun of you because you don't fight back. You shouldn't let anyone walk all over you."

I frowned because she made more sense than the nagging voices in my head. "You're right." She was right. "I promise that from now on I won't let anyone make fun of me." ~Including James. ~

I was tired of being put down, or of letting others save me. It was high time I stood up for myself.

"GOOD."

"Body complexes are like a rite of passage that most teenage girls go through," Sadhvi said, her mouth full of ice cream.

"I also didn't like my brown complexion growing up. My problems weren't as bad as yours, but it bothered me for a while."

"Your skin is so beautiful," I said, surprised that someone as perfect as Sadhvi had gone through similar ordeals.

"I know that now."

"Luckily my mother never let me be *not very proud* of my black origins," Addison exclaimed. "I like being half black."

"How right you are," added Lola, a shy smile on her lips.

"It's so hard to be a girl in this shitty world. Oof."

"I'm sure boys must have their own challenges."

"Yeah, especially when they don't have the support of awesome girlfriends like us." Sadhvi looked at us all with pride, before her face broke into a wide smile.

"I want a group hug." She held out her hands, and we all complied, laughing.

~These girls are no closer to being my best friends. They are my best friends. ~

## Chapter 22

"Don't forget your project," Ms. Green said, picking up her books and binders from her desk. "I'll go through them tomorrow, and you better be moving forward."

With a warning look, she stormed out of the computer room, unaware of the evil she had left behind.

I glanced at James, who was sitting next to me, frowning at me. This time, I shared the reason for his annoyance: we had to work together.

In recent days, we avoided each other, or rather, he no longer harassed me, and no longer targeted me.

He seemed content to pepper my body with his blazing gaze from afar, but I too was guilty of stealing glances from him. It had been like this since Monday, and today was Thursday.

Maybe his change in attitude had something to do with our kiss, or maybe the punch Lucas had given him.

I didn't know the reason, but I was totally okay with this new arrangement between us, hoping it would last forever.

However, a small, tiny part of me was stupidly irritated by James' sudden mood to ignore me.

It made me feel rejected, like I didn't deserve his attention now, even if his attention meant name-calling and insults. As I mentioned, it was a very stupid part of me. ~

I was still struggling with my feelings for this asshole.

"James," I called carefully when I saw him packing his things. He stopped and turned his sullen face towards me. I blushed nervously under his fiery eyes.

"We haven't worked on our website this week. What are we going to show Mrs. Green tomorrow?"

Working on the IT project with James was the last thing on my mind after everything that had happened, so I had been putting off talking to him about it, even though he wasn't in a hurry. neither.

We had barely exchanged a few words this week. But now we had to put aside our history for these precious notes.



Also, last week, Ms. Green praised our website's home page, and I didn't want to disappoint her. I was something of a fool.

"I have practice," James said. His features relaxed a little, making him less frightening. "Can you wait for me for an hour after class?"

I nodded. I was already waiting for Addison almost every day.

"Then we'll go to my house and work there," he said, his sharp tone leaving no room for objection. Still so authoritarian. "Later I'll drop you off at your place."

He stood up, carrying his bag on his shoulder, and looked down at me. After my weak "Okay," he walked away.

My eyes followed his broad back until he disappeared through the door.

A strange dizziness swirled within me at the idea of working with him in his house, *where we kissed*. I didn't know if it was fear or excitement. Or both.

\* \* \*

My phone beeped, causing my eyes to drag from the notebook I was writing my English essay in.

It was a text from James, telling me he'd be in the parking lot in five minutes. After sending him a message saying "I'll be there," I gathered my things and left the library.

Classes had ended for almost an hour, and as usual, I sat in the library with my homework to wait for James to finish his training.

I had texted Addison earlier to tell him I was going to his house. She hadn't been as grumpy as I thought. I assumed everyone had noticed James' change in behavior towards me.

My cousin only reminded me that this time, if this bastard tried anything, I would have to take action.

I had already promised myself that I wouldn't let James verbally abuse me like he wanted, and Addison's message only encouraged me to do so.

Every step toward the back gate of the school felt heavy. Despite my new resolve, I was still nervous about it.

Also, my lower abdomen felt weird since lunch.

When I reached the parking lot, I saw James leaning back in his black Camaro, divinely handsome as always, arms crossed across his chest, his biceps straining his long-sleeved T-shirt.

Her hair was wet, and a few strands covered her forehead. He had just gotten out of the shower.

James straightened up as soon as he saw me. His piercing gaze made me aware of my body. After almost a month, I still couldn't control my body's reaction to his presence.

It didn't help that I couldn't decipher if his eyes held strong hatred or something else. After Friday evening, the situation between us became more confusing.

"Let's go," he said when I joined him. He opened the car door for me. I got in, and he closed the door before walking around the car to get in the driver's seat.

"Where are the others?" I asked, putting on the seat belt. There were still many cars in the parking lot, and there was no sign of his teammates or the cheerleaders.

"I left early," he replied curtly, backing up and pulling out of the parking space.

"Oh."

We were on the road, and the awkward silence stretched between us. I didn't have the will to make conversation with him, even though he seemed on the verge of breaking down.

I didn't know how long his courtesy would last. So I just took out my phone, and mindlessly scrolled through Instagram, very aware of the devil driving next to me.

As we passed the city market street near his neighborhood, a piercing pain erupted in my stomach. She was followed by several others, and I had to double over to stop myself from moaning.

This was my body's ritual before I was about to...

~Oh...No...~

*I can't be so unlucky!~*

A minute later, along with the pain came the feeling I was dreading in my panties. I was dripping. Down.

~Of course. I have no chance. ~

"Don't tell me it's time to eat," I heard James say. *And now this asshole decides to speak up.* I turned to him, and found a cocky smile on his face.

I immediately removed my hand from my stomach when I saw him looking at it.

I shook my head, even though he didn't see it. His attention was back on the road.

"What do you want to eat?" he asked, or rather scoffed. "I can't leave you on an empty stomach. I'm sure you're not used to it."

"I don't want anything from you." I slowly sat up, clenching my fist as another wave of contractions from my uterus shook me.

"Whatever you want, but don't whine afterwards."

I didn't respond, focusing my energy on stopping the flow by squeezing my thighs. ~Yeah, it'll work. ~

Luckily, James didn't say anything else either.

I didn't have any tampons with me. They were in my locker in high school.

I would like to be one of those girls whose first days of periods are gentle and gradual. But mine were heavy and very painful from the start.

And the icing on the cake, I wore white cotton pants.

And now here I was, getting my period in James Haynes' overpriced Chevrolet Camaro. God forbid if I tried his

leather seat. He would never let me survive this.

I could already hear the insults and taunts coming out of his mouth. He would make sure to shame me for the rest of my school life.

I had to get out of here.

However, before I could come up with an excuse for James to drop me off at my house, he was already pulling into the garage of his mansion.

I missed my chance. And my dignity. And my life.

When James got out of the car, I made sure to go behind him and sneakily check that there were no stains on the passenger seat. To my great relief, there were none.

The family garage housed three other vehicles besides his own, a Jaguar, a Range Rover and a Mercedes-Benz.

I wasn't in the mood to admire them in my current situation, but it seemed that James was very humble when it came to cars.

He opened the back door by punching the code into the number pad on the side. We entered the large living room, and went up the stairs. Unlike Friday night, the house looked eerie, with no people there.

However, I heard some clicking noises coming from the kitchen. James didn't seem bothered, maybe it was the cleaning ladies.

I made sure to stay behind him. I tried to use my bag to cover my back in case someone else showed up, but it barely reached my waist, and was too small to cover my butt.

However, my cramps calmed down a little from walking, or maybe I was too nervous to pay attention to them.

We reached the upstairs hallway, and memories of the party flooded back. The last time I was there was when James and I had a fight. When I told him I hated him. It had been a bad evening.

*And today is a bad day.* I swore this house was cursed to me.

The wetness between my legs increased with each step. My hands and legs were sweaty. I silently panicked.

We went through three doors before entering his room. It was large, neat, and bright with the sunlight streaming through the large windows. There was also a balcony.

There was a bedside lamp on either side of his king-sized bed, and a large LED TV was directly opposite on the wall.

The computer desk was next to his bed, with a gaming console, and a gaming chair that was common among gamers these days.

The walls of the room were white, except for one, which was black and had framed photos on it.

Most of the photos were of him with his school friends - Lucas was in almost every photo - and only one showed him with his parents and brother, taken when he was probably no more than eleven.

Young James was quite cute, with his wide smile, his ice cream in his hand and London's Big Ben behind him. He looked like a sweet child in this photo, the complete opposite of what he was now.

The other photos showed him at his soccer championships, and on outings with other people.

James placed his bag on the chair, took his laptop out of his desk drawer, and threw himself onto the bed.

"You're welcome to join me, if that's the invitation you're waiting for," he said when I didn't move. He had already settled comfortably on his bed, legs apart, and the laptop on his thighs.

I was standing by the door. My underwear was soaked now. I had no doubt that my pants were stained too. How embarrassing! "Um, I...I need to go to the bathroom."



I had to see the damage, and use toilet paper.

He pointed to his left, without looking up from the screen. To go to the bathroom, I had to place my bottom in James' line of sight.

- I mean, I could have walked backwards, but that would have been weird.

Since he was busy on his laptop, him seeing me wouldn't be a problem if I rushed inside, right?

*Please keep my pants in good condition*, I prayed, placing my bag on the ground - It was of no use anyway. I rushed to the bathroom. My fingers were about to grab the handle when...

"What is this mess?!"

## Chapter 23

I immediately turned around, putting my butt out of his sight.

James stared at me, eyes wide and mouth open. He had seen it.

~Damn! ~

I could guarantee that my face must have been bright red. But no redder than my pants, according to James's look. My hands and feet were cold despite my hot body, and not in a good way.

The level of embarrassment I felt right now could easily rival the day my swimsuit tore at the water park when I was ten.

~He will destroy me. ~

When I saw James's eyes drift to my crotch, I snapped out of my stunned state, and groped for the door handle behind me.

"You..."

Before he could say anything, I opened the bathroom door, stumbled back in, and slammed it.

I leaned my back against the door to catch my breath, which was coming out in puffs, but I quickly moved away, remembering my problem downstairs.

I didn't want to dirty such a clean and nice bathroom. My lips were trembling, and I was on the verge of crying.

I felt so ashamed and disgusting, and thinking that James would have a field day with this story made me even more nervous.

~It's not a good time to cry, Keily. ~

After several minutes of hyperventilating, I finally calmed down. I dragged my legs over to the mirror, and checked my ass.

~No! ~

My white pants were ruined. It had leaked. The area around my crotch was stained red. Those bloodstains weren't going to go away for ten years.

I rushed to the toilet seat, and began frantically unrolling toilet paper to soak up the blood from my pants and underwear. It didn't work, but I continued anyway. I had no idea what else to do.

And James, my stalker and first-hand witness to my horribly embarrassing situation, was right outside the door. *Damn it~*

As I struggled with the toilet paper, my vision blurred, and I heard myself sniffing.

*Do not Cry.* A tear fell. ~Please no~. Another followed.

~Great! ~

Now I was sobbing while rubbing paper on my soaked clothes.

There was a knock on the other side of the door, interrupting my movements. "Keily." James. I must have been inside for a while. He knocked again when I didn't answer.

"Keily, are you okay in there?" His voice was soft, which surprised me. He wasn't going to make fun of me?

"Yes," I responded reflexively. I had the voice of a little girl.

"Are you sure?" he asked again. "You need something?"

~Yes, a drill to dig a hole and sink into it. ~

"Do you have your sanitary napkins, or whatever other stuff you use?" he continued. "I can lend you my pants too, if you want to change yours."

*Is this guy really James?* I looked at the door, confused. He was not at all in his role, or at least not as I expected, ~like at the party~.

My eyes looked down to inspect my mess. Whatever his intentions, I couldn't afford the luxury of thinking about it in my current state.

So I got up, and adjusted my pants to find the only help I had at the moment.

"I can drop you off at your place..."

I opened the door just enough to peek outside.

James was two steps away, no hint of disgust or mockery on his face, only a strange gentleness as he stared at me, once again defying the horrible image I had of him.

"Were you crying?" he asked, his eyebrows furrowed.

I shook my head, avoiding his eyes, and feeling like a five year old lying. *I should have rinsed my face before seeing him.*

"You're not a good liar." James sighed. "Why were you crying, huh? Are the cramps that painful? he asked seriously.

His eyes narrowed as if trying to understand something. "Wait, this is your first time having your period-"

"No!" I blushed at this assumption. "No to everything. "It's just that my pants are ruined, and you saw..." I shifted on my feet, and looked down uncomfortably.

"Keily, it's just rules," he said.

"We were taught this shit at twelve years old, in sex ed class.

"Besides, my mother is a doctor, so I learned about human anatomy way before other kids, and let me tell you, periods weren't something I was afraid of." He gave a little amused laugh. "Don't be embarrassed."

"But you looked at me..."

"I was a little surprised, that's all. Your pants were... are really ruined," he explained, clearing his throat. "Like I said, you can borrow my pants."

"I'll stain it too." I said, sniffing.

"Then we can wash it." He imitated my whiny voice. He chuckled when I frowned. *This man handles the situation much more maturely than me.* "What else do you need?"

"I...I don't have any tampons on me, and..." – my blush returned – "and my underwear is dirty too. I need it. So don't lend me

not your clothes, they will be dirty. And it's not like I can fit in your pants..."

"That's all?" he cut me off.

"Uh-yeah."

"Give me a minute." James took out his cell phone. "I'll get your things." He stepped back, and put his phone to his ear.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm calling my mother," he responded hurriedly as he walked away, "because she's a woman too, you know."

"But..." Before I could continue, he stormed out of the room, leaving me disoriented and alone.

After a while, I was about to close the bathroom door when James came back.

He had two tampons in his hand. Instead of coming towards me, he made a beeline for another door, which led to what I assumed was his closet.

He went out. "Hold." He handed me a folded navy blue cloth, and dropped the tampons on it. "Change and put this on."

"But..."

"It'll suit you. Stop being a baby." I was reprimanded.

I looked down. "Okay, but my underwear..."

"These are tampons, you won't need them. And if you want, I can ask someone to run the machine to wash your clothes."

"No," I said immediately, the blush on my cheeks intact. I was still surprised at how casually he talked about this sort of thing. "I can wash my clothes. There's no need to bother anyone else."

James stared at me long enough for me to cower again, then he sighed. "As you wish... Just a tip, use liquid hand soap to remove blood stains. It will make them leave."

I nodded and closed the door, and I could finally breathe again. Receiving so much generosity from him had stopped my brain from functioning. I had to breathe a little.

James' sweatpants weren't exactly tight, but they fit snugly around my butt, and they were also really long, so I had to tuck them down over my ankles. In short, I wasn't too big to wear it.



But I felt weird wearing it without panties. He was right about the liquid soap too, it worked like clockwork to remove the blood stains from my pants and underwear.

When I came out of the bathroom, James looked up from his phone.

When his eyes landed on my figure, I felt a thousand times more embarrassed wearing his pants than I did in the bathroom.

Add to that the fact that we both knew I wasn't wearing anything underneath.

"THANKS." I stood awkwardly in front of him. He was sitting on the bed. "Thanks for your pants and... the rest." I was still very embarrassed.

He shrugged. "Do you want to go home or work?"

"I can work." My cramps had already subsided, so right now I wasn't on death's doorstep.

Plus, I didn't feel good about letting James down after he'd helped me, although crawling around my room and remembering that humiliating situation was very appealing.

He shifted, freeing half of the bed. "Come here," he ordered, patting the empty space when he saw me hesitating to join him on the bed.

I was afraid of leaving a stain on the bed because, well, because I didn't have any panties on. I used to always wear them during my period.

I sat next to him, stretching my legs, copying his position but squeezing my thighs together.

James settled the laptop on his lap again. He moved closer, and my heartbeat increased as our thighs brushed against each other.

"We need to start by filling out the drop-down menus." He cleared his throat and looked at me.

"OK." I nodded.

Before we could begin, there was a knock at the door. A middle-aged lady in an apron came in, she was carrying a tray.

"Thank you, Charlie," James told him. "Put it on the bed."

Charlie placed the tray in front of us. "Tell me if you need anything else." Her eyes moved to me and she smiled.

I tried to smile back as best I could, while she assessed me and my current state of clothing. I wanted to hide.

" Okay madam." James nodded and she left.

On the tray were two cups of tea and croissants. "I asked him to make ginger tea, it's good for cramps," James told me. I was melting inside.

"You didn't have to do that." ~This guy isn't James. ~

"But I did it. So eat. I'm hungry too, it's almost five o'clock." He picked up a croissant and took a bite.

"Why are you so nice?" I couldn't help but ask him. Just Monday, this guy called me a "whale."

The movement of his jaws stopped. "Because I can do it," he said after swallowing his mouthful. "It's not very nice to have a girl crying in your bathroom. I am not a monster."

"But you acted like one to me."

"That's why you hate me."

"I can't hate you, even if I want to." My mouth moved without my permission. James' eyes sharpened.

Mine got bigger because of my misstep. It was becoming a habit. I often lost my filter in the presence of this demon. A long silence followed, as we stared at each other.

My cheeks heated under his burning gaze.

"Then you don't hate me. It's strange."

"Don't forget the 'even if I want to' part."

"So maybe I should step up my game." He smirked, and my heart skipped a beat. ~James is back. ~

"So you're going to start harassing me again? This time, I won't be an easy target." I glared at him, trying to follow Addison's advice. But I knew I had failed when his lips just pursed further.

"Oh, I have something better in mind." He gave a devilish grin, and my throat tightened. He was amused by my apprehension. "Drink your tea, Keily, before it gets cold."

He pulled away, making me realize that our faces had gotten closer, and took another bite of his croissant.

## Chapter 24

"James is such a sweetheart," my mother said, handing me the folded navy sweatpants. James' pants. She had taken it from the hanger outside.

I had washed his pants by hand last night.

It was expensive, and the middle-class girl that I was wouldn't allow it to be put in a washing machine and abused, no matter how little it meant to James.

"You should invite him to dinner. Your father likes it too."

I grunted without wanting to engage, and put the pants in my bag. I returned to my breakfast, hard-boiled eggs and vegetables, with Mom's praise of James in the background.

Since my parents found me in men's pants when I came home last night, I had to tell them about my embarrassing period incident at James' house - or rather my mother, because once I said "rules", Dad awkwardly excused himself, and left the living room.

*Not every man can be James.* Unfortunately, I was more like my father, and the way I'd been ashamed of my period in front of James was a sign of that. Mom rightly called us "prudes."

Last night, James and I worked on our website until 7 p.m., before he took me home.

He had behaved surprisingly well while we worked, even after he had creepily threatened me to return to his old ways.

Add to that the things he had done for me, instead of kicking me out of his house for almost destroying the seats in his car. I was wary of him and his behavior which went from hot to cold.

~What a confusing guy! ~

Addison's Volkswagen honked right on time, five minutes after I finished my breakfast.

Dad was still sleeping, as usual, so I said goodbye to Mom, and rushed out the front door, eager to escape her talk about what a good boy James was.

In return, I received an "Invite- *THE* to dinner one of these days." ~Argh. ~

"Girl, you hate going to class even more than me, huh?" Addison smiled at my sullen face as I sat in the passenger seat.

I shook my head. "Not that I don't hate going to class, but that's not it." I put on my seat belt, and my cousin drove off

engine.

"Keep on going."

"Have you ever had your mother gushing about the boy who made your life a total mess?"

Addison's eyes, which had been staring at the road, narrowed. "What did James do again?"

"Nothing," I replied immediately. "I mean nothing bad. In fact, he helped me..."

Once again, I told the clean version of what happened yesterday, cutting out the part where I was crying and acting like a child.

After Tuesday's party, I felt closer to the girls, and talking to her about things like that was easier than talking to my parents.

"He was strangely nice," my cousin commented when I finished. "Especially towards you, it was quite unexpected."

"I would rather be the object of his kindness than be humiliated for staining my pants."

"Don't think too much about it. Almost all the girls have been there. Periods suck."



"Yeah, that's right," I admitted, feeling a slight pain in my stomach. Usually, my menstrual cramps would only appear for the first few days, but when I felt anxious or tense, they would persist longer.

And right now, I was anxious about James.

"So where are you two right now?" Addison asked, glancing to the side.

*Amenemies*, I growled.

Addison chuckled. "Welcome to the club."

I shook my head. "I have no idea where we are."

"Maybe that kiss finally brought him to his senses. He probably thinks he has a chance with you now."

I blushed. "I do not believe." I remembered his cruel words from Monday morning, calling me a "desperate whale" for kissing him.

Helping me yesterday had just been a casual act of kindness, which I shouldn't mistake for anything else, because he was reverting to his old ways, and was apparently going to ~step up his game.~

But now, I wasn't going to let his insults fool me.

Addison looked at me and raised her eyebrows. "I like that you're mad at him." I realized I was scowling, and I corrected my expression.

"Put him through hell, and make him pine for it. It will be fun to watch."

I blushed even more. "No one longs for anyone, and he's the one who likes to make me go through hell."

"Then change that. Make sure he's the one who suffers."

"Calm down. I'm just starting to feel confident in myself," I said, looking at his mischievous smile. "But I promise I'll do my best if he keeps up his bullshit."

\* \* \*

I found James at his locker with a girl before the first class started. I had already seen her several times with him. She was very pretty.

James' shoulder was leaning against his locker, and a lazy smile played on his lips.

The girl giggled at something he said, and jealousy ignited within me at seeing them so close, followed by anger at myself for being so pathetic.

When it came to him, my brain lost its basic reasoning abilities... because my reactions weren't very reasonable.

I had to give him his pants back. I wanted to wait for the girl to leave before approaching James, but he spotted me, so I decided to go.

His eyes lit up with amusement - and also mischief - as he saw me coming towards him. He stood up when I joined them, his eyes scanning me from head to toe.

I pushed back the blush ready to spill over onto my cheeks. Even if I turned over a new leaf, the old habit of distrusting him wasn't going to disappear overnight.

"Hey," the girl said, and I looked away from James. She gave me a tight smile that was meant to be friendly but wasn't. "You're Keily, right?" His bright eyes stared at me.

"Hi." I smiled back, faker than her, and nodded. I didn't know his name. We didn't have classes in common. She probably learned my name after last Friday's party.

"My name is Anne, by the way." Anne chuckled awkwardly, releasing some of the tension. His eyes moved from James to me. "So, are you together?" She didn't look too happy, despite her big smile.

I knew his assumption came from our leaked photo on Instagram.

She looked at me. "I hope James isn't hiding from you. It would be cruel of this scoundrel to keep the hopes of many girls alive." She punched him lightly in the arm.

"We are not ..."

"Since when is my relationship status the whole school's business?" James taunted, moving closer to me.

"Besides, I don't think I'm the subject of the hopes of *many girls*, but if that's the case, then they were showered a while ago."

Shocked, I turned my head to look at him. A small smirk appeared on his lips. He should have contradicted his assumptions about us instead of encouraging them.

Anne's smile faded. "So you're together," she said, a little grimly.

"No," I replied immediately, "we're not together. I was just there to give him back his..." Somehow, I felt that talking about his pants wasn't going to help the situation.

"Oh yes, you have my pants," said James, who understood, and his smile widened, looking at Anne then at me, "the ones I lent you yesterday at *Me*". He almost applauded.

~Okay, he's trying to do something. ~

"Oh." Anne's smile had completely disappeared. I felt a little bad for her. She liked James, and he was there, making it clear to her that there was something between us.

I didn't feel comfortable telling my awkward period story, to counter the narrative he was constructing. I wasn't good at making up lies either.

"Were you comfortable in it, Keily?" James asked me in a cooing voice.

I was left speechless. This guy was impossible.

"I think I'll go," Anne said, smiling awkwardly. "Thanks for the notes, James." She waved the binder in her hand, I hadn't noticed she had it, and walked away.

"What was that?" I asked James once she was out of sight. I moved away from him.

"What was that?"

"Stop playing. You were trying to make it seem like there was something going on between us."

He sighed. "Anne is a nice girl, but a little stupid sometimes, or maybe she's stubborn. She didn't understand that I wasn't interested in her."

I'm not going to lie, I felt good knowing he wasn't interested in her.

"And you arrived just then. It was easier to play on her assumptions about us so she wouldn't be on my back anymore. Consider it a repayment for your favor yesterday."

"You can't use me like that." I glared at him.

"Use you?" James mocked. "Really?"

"Any rumor about you spreads like wildfire here. You shouldn't drag me into this."

He shook his head, glaring at me. "People already have a lot to say about us after your kiss at the party. Don't worry, it'll barely scratch your image."

My cheeks ended up reddening. He was right, but I didn't want to back down. "I thought you didn't want to be associated with me."

"Then maybe you should think more."

"With all your mood swings, it's hard to know what you want."

That silenced him. We stared at each other, and I realized we had gotten closer. I took a step back, and my blush deepened. I took my bag off my shoulders, and opened it to take out his pants.

"Hold." I handed it to him. "Thanks for your help yesterday," I said dryly, and turned to go to class.

"Keily," James called me softly, giving me chills just hearing my name. I stopped and faced him. I was surprised by his determined face.

His eyes were hard and his lips were pursed, in contrast to the softness of his voice.

"What?"

"Since my mood swings are confusing you, then let me tell you clearly what I want." He took a step forward and didn't stop until our bodies were inches apart. "I want you."

I blinked, twice. He wanted me.

His eyes followed my face and stopped on my lips. I looked at his face too. The air around us grew heavy, and my skin vibrated with sensitivity. I was starting to get comfortable with this thing between us.

~He wants me. He. Wanna. Me. ~

"Are you...are you kidding me?" I asked, trying to keep a cool head. It was too good.

His lips curled. Unlike the other times, it looked pretty cute. ~No, don't think he's cute. He is evil. ~

"You had to step up your game, right?" I said, feeling vulnerable and insecure. I didn't trust James. For all I knew, it might have been another tasteless joke for a few laughs.

"Don't tell me I screwed up so much?" he moaned.

I created some space between us, and looked away from him. I spotted a few students looking at us, and I blushed again,



feeling uncomfortable. I didn't want to repeat what happened at his party.

"I've got to go." I still haven't met his gaze. In the end, I still lost to him, despite all of Addison's teachings.

"Okay," James said, probably sensing my discomfort. But before I could leave, he held my wrist, preventing me from running away. His hand was warm.

"Just remember I'm serious. I want you." He moved closer, and his lips brushed my ears. "And this time, I'll do whatever it takes to get you." I couldn't tell if his voice was scary or sexy...

He released me, and I stormed out of the hallway, blushing and scared for my life. ~Why does this devil keep playing with me? ~

## Chapter 25

~James. James. James. ~

He was all that was teeming in my mind, bordering on obsession. Was it healthy to think of a person every five minutes? Probably not. But I couldn't help it.

The bomb he had dropped on me this morning had made me restless and horny.

~I want you. ~

~He wants me. ~

Every time I replayed his confession in my head, butterflies flew from my chest to my stomach. I felt like I was on a cloud...

But then his insults and cruel words broke in to bring me back to harsh reality, and I remembered how complicated our situation was. I couldn't just shut up and forget about his horrible behavior.

He had dishonored me, hurt me. And a part of me, not so small, was skeptical about him and ~this thing between us. ~

“Coach is eating our brains about the season,” Lucas grumbled. “I know this guy lives for football, but damn, he needs to relax.”

Lucas had passed me on the way to math class, while I was daydreaming about his friend. Now we were walking towards the classroom together. I was both excited and scared to see James there.

I nodded at Lucas' words. “There’s already so much pressure on you to win.”

Football season was only a few weeks away, and given that the sport was a religion here, I could imagine the weight of everyone's expectations on the team, especially Lucas, since he was the captain .

But then again, the coach could also take his share of the burden to lead the team.

I wondered what James thought of all this. After Lucas, he was the one everyone admired.

“And this time it’s even more shitty, because the recruiters are going to come see us. My university scholarship depends on this season.” Lucas exhaled heavily.

"Martin throws it at me every time, as if it doesn't stop me from sleeping already."

"It's okay to be nervous, but try not to stress out," I said, trying to calm our quarterback down. "Coach is most likely losing sleep over you too. You're his favorite."

He smiled before fiddling with his fingers, a habit, I had learned, when he was agitated. "I'm just scared. It's my future that's at stake."

I did not know how to respond. It was already unsettling playing with so many eyes on you, and having your future decided by how you performed under all that pressure could definitely be excruciating.

I had been part of the crowd, and I was aware of the expectations that I, a person who didn't care in the least for wild play, had placed on our team during Friday's game.

"I don't want to screw it up. A football scholarship is my only ticket to a higher education." Lucas looked at me, anxiety and uncertainty in his eyes.

"It's the only thing I'm good at. I can't imagine doing anything else. If I don't succeed, I have no other plans."

It was the first time I saw Lucas so vulnerable. I didn't realize we had become so close that he shared her lack of trust. He had always acted so charming and friendly.

This recruiter thing was really getting on his nerves.

College was a big deal for me too, so I could at least sympathize with him on that.

"You can't control the outcome, but you can control your actions," I said.

"Just focus on your training and matches. I know it's easier said than done, but don't let yourself worry. It'll take your energy away."

I felt so hypocritical saying that when I myself was a big oozing ball of anxiety and overthinking. Someone rightly said it: do as I say, not as I do.

"I tell you this from experience. The more you make a big deal out of something, the more overwhelming it becomes," I added, implying that I was no saint.

"You're right, but..."

"But it's not easy to do," I finished with a groan. He chuckled.

"I'm sorry I'm not much help. But if my non-professional opinion counts, I think you're very good at soccer. You are going to make it."

"THANKS. Your unprofessional opinion means a lot to me." He beamed proudly, and I felt good that I made him feel just a little bit better.

"And you help me by letting me empty my bag. When I'm stressed, that's what I need." I nodded. He didn't need advice, just an ear to listen.

"Guys are too stupid to take my problems seriously. James is pretty good in that regard.

"Usually, he's the one I annoy, but here you play the role of fictional therapist very well too." He gave me a playful shoulder nudge as we approached our classroom.

My stomach turned when he mentioned James.

"Thank you for doing me the honor of considering me a therapist, I am not capable of it." I gave Lucas a mocking look.

"But from what you tell me, I'm James' replacement. When are you going to end this argument?" I had noticed the tension between the two of them since Monday.

"We're not arguing per say, we're just not on speaking terms." he whispered.

I sighed. "I don't want any problems between you because of me." I felt terrible being the reason for Lucas's resentment towards his friend, especially now that I found out how close they were.

"Don't act like a fool, Keily. Let him suffer a little."

"What about you?" We entered the classroom, and my heart raced to find James in his place. His burning gaze landed on mine, took my breath away and made the temperature rise.

"Don't worry about me, I already have you." Lucas put his arm around my shoulders, and pulled me into a side hug, and I saw James' eyes darken.

The way those narrow slits focused on us, I finally discovered the meaning behind them.

*Jealousy.*

My complexes and his taunts had previously prevented me from concluding that he could be jealous of someone else touching me. But now I had more context.

*I want you.* If I trusted his words, of course.

I was happy, scared, excited, bitter, wanting him, hating him all at once, not knowing which option to choose. ~He is jealous for me. Kill me right now. ~

Lucas' arm didn't stay on me for more than a minute before he took it off, and we headed to our tables. I noticed a triumphant smirk on his lips when I managed to tear my gaze away from James.

I realized that Lucas had deliberately been tactile with me in front of James to provoke him. I didn't know whether to slap this idiot, or thank him for exacting my revenge.

"Thank God there's no practice today," Lucas said as we settled into our chairs. "Tomorrow Martin is going to kill us with training, but for now I can't wait to get home."

He yawned and stretched his limbs before looking at me with a mischievous smile. "You should come to my house with me sometimes, Keily. I would love to introduce you to my mother."

"Although she's usually at work at this time, we can have fun until she gets back." His suggestive statement was said loud enough for a certain person to hear.



Without blinking, my eyes moved to James, who was staring at his table. His jaws were clenched, and his fingers dug painfully into the wood.

Whatever Lucas had wanted to do, he had succeeded. And I, shamefully, enjoyed it.

\* \* \*

"Your website looks good." Ms. Green was browsing the site on the computer James and I were working on.

Our USB drive was attached to James' station, and he stood to let it sit.

"Well, I'm impressed," she commented once she was finished, which brought a smile to my face. She stood up and, before leaving, remarked casually, "You two make a good team."

"Yes, it's true." James slumped into his chair. I noticed that her lips rose slightly before falling back down.

He'd had a scowl on his face the entire class, and I suspected it was because Lucas had teased him in math class. I wasn't innocent either, because I didn't stop him.

When the bell rang, I jumped out of my seat and stormed out of the briefing room. Spending time around this demon was crushing my already half-functional brain.

"Keily." My steps stopped when I heard my name called. We were in the hallway.

I turned around when I saw James striding towards me. His frown was intact. My guts shook with fear.

When James reached me, my defenses strengthened, I found his "old self" in his threatening posture, and his furious look.

"Come with me," he asked – no, demanded. I stared at his hardened face, afraid to say anything.

I didn't want to go anywhere with him when he looked like that, but his dark eyes made me think that if I said no, he would have no problem throwing me over his shoulder and carrying me out of here.

I shouldn't have let Lucas bother her in math. It only backfired on me.

James sighed, his features softening slightly as he studied my face.

"Please," he said, a single word taking on all its force, "I want to talk." I'm willing to do it here, but I thought you didn't like other people poking their noses into our business."

I looked around at the other students, they were casting curious looks at us. He was right.

"OK." I didn't have the heart to refuse when he said please. I was a worry to him.

I followed him into an empty classroom, and doubted my decision when he stood in front of me, staring at me with blazing eyes.

Sunlight streamed through the windows behind him, illuminating half of his face.

He was divine.

"What do you want?"

"Lucas is making fun of you," he announced. "He's flirting with you to get a reaction from me. Don't get drawn into this." He looked jealous.

"It's not all about you, James." I frowned, even though deep down I knew he was right.

"I know, but right now it's about you. I don't want you to get hurt."

*He doesn't want me to get hurt.* My eyebrows furrowed. "That's funny, coming from the guy who hurts me every day."

"That's not what I'm doing!" James defended himself, before taking a deep breath to compose himself.

"I'm trying to make things right, and I don't want anyone to make them worse. Don't be naive and think that Lucas likes you."

~Naive! ~

I glared at him. "I'm not naive. I know what he does. And I also know that you're not worried about me, just jealous."

"I'm worried about you," James said, then his gaze sharpened.

"But you're not as innocent as you look, are you? You know what he's doing, and you won't stop him. So Lucas is not the only one who wants to provoke a reaction from me.

My cheeks colored, and he smirked.

"You're right, I'm jealous too. I'm damn jealous when Lucas touches you. I don't want anyone other than me to touch you."

"You have no right." My voice was tiny. He was so close that I could feel the heat of our bodies intertwining.

"I know. But it's not easy to reason like that when Lucas has his arm around you, and I want to..." He paused, his eyebrows furrowed angrily.

"Do you want some?" I insisted.

His gaze landed on my lips, and before I knew it, they were crushed against his.

He kissed me aggressively, as if he had been deprived of it. My fingers wrapped around his soft hair, trying to keep up with his pace.

His hand slipped around my waist to push me further against him, while the other directed my neck to deepen the kiss, and let him plunge his tongue into me. He devoured me without scruples.

When he let me go, I was red, out of breath, and staring at him in a daze.

James looked at me. "Fuck," he moaned, and once again my lips were captured by his. This time he was slow, gentle, savoring

our taste together.

We continued as long as we could without losing our breath.

Afterwards, James was beaming, and I was done for. He twirled a messy lock of my hair around his finger.

"I want to tear you away from him and kiss you to death to show everyone that you belong with me."

~Wait, what?... Oh. ~

He kissed my cheeks, sparing my swollen lips. "Kissing you in real life is much better than I imagined." *He imagined himself kissing me.* He placed another kiss along my jaw.

"I swear, after that night, it was so hard to control myself once I got a taste of you. It was torture to see you strutting around every day without being able to kiss you."

His nose brushed against my ear as he kissed my neck.

I moaned, leaning into him.

"Whore." I felt his grip on my waist tighten. "You're tearing me down, Keily Harris." He pulled away reluctantly, but kept me in his arms and

looked at with envy.

Slowly, nagging voices in my head were heard, telling me this was wrong. I was weak to give in like that. I had to maintain a little dignity.

Then came the complexes about my body *that he was touching*. I felt fat, and I imagined the fat covering me.

I became aware of the rolls on my stomach, where James' fingers were drawing circles. His insults – Pig, whale, fat, whore – attacked my mind.

I pulled away from him, tears stinging my eyes. I didn't want to see his disgusted face when he changed his mind about me, and decided I was too ugly for him.

Guilt followed my self-hating thoughts, and tears streamed down my cheeks. ~I was pathetic. ~

"Shit!" James swore. "What did I do there?" I would have laughed at his frightened face and his wide eyes if I hadn't been in this state.

He placed his hands on my shoulders, looking pained to see me crying. "Keily, I'm sorry." He didn't know why he was sorry.

I shook my head, trying to control my sobs.

"I'm sorry."

I sobbed harder. ~Can he stop being so nice?! ~

"I shouldn't have gone so hard. I'm sorry."

"N-no," I finally said, finding my voice. "It's just that we shouldn't be like that. It's bad."

"Please don't say it's a mistake." There was fear and pain in his tone.

"Otherwise you're going to throw me aside and call me a 'desperate whale,'" I snorted. I sent all my pain back to him.

Guilt covered his features. "I did not mean it. You are none of these things. I was stupid. I'm sorry." He leaned down and cupped my cheeks in his hands. "You are beautiful."

I wanted to believe him, but I couldn't. I didn't trust him not to fall back into his old habits.

His sweet words made me melt, but they weren't enough. My complexes prevailed. They were overwhelming.



James let go of my face. He realized he couldn't make me understand right now. "I promise I'll make everything right." He rubbed his fingers over his eyes. *Awesome! I made him cry too.* "I promise you."

We both sniffed, our noses red. I wish our flirting sessions didn't end in tears.

"Let me drop you off at your place," he offered, when our eyes grew dry.

I nodded. I wanted nothing more than to snuggle in my blankets.

## Chapter 26

An online article I read a week ago said that fruit juice could be as unhealthy as soda when it comes to sugar and calories. ~Really! ~

And just when I thought I was making the right choices with fruit juice, the Internet had to slam me.

With a sigh of defeat, I moved from the large section containing various colorful brands of different fruit juices - touted as healthy - to the fruit and vegetable section.*costs.*

Someone should sue these companies for their half-true, sometimes even false claims. According to the article, I also needed fiber, not just liquid fructose, to get the full benefits.

On the way, I placed two cans of soda from the refrigerator in my shopping cart. I wasn't a fan of it, but if I gave up four liters of juice in a month, my body could afford two small cans of soda.

*The balance*, that's what my parents drilled into my head when I fell ill at sixteen due to draconian diets.

*Balance your meals, don't deprive yourself of the foods you love. ~Just limit them if they are unhealthy. ~*

It was a lazy Sunday morning when Mom dragged me out of bed to go shopping. She gave me her card and a shopping list before waving goodbye at the door after breakfast.

I wasn't in a great mood after being woken up before 8 a.m. on a Sunday, but at least getting my groceries was better than pestering my mom for the right cereal.

~I can be so childish sometimes. ~

As I was gathering apples into a paper bag, I saw a familiar tall brunette in the aisle, with one of the store's small baskets in her hand. ~Myra. Lucas' girlfriend... or ex-girlfriend? ~

Before I could decide whether to say hello or pretend not to know her, her eyes had already found me.

She frowned, indicating that she recognized me, and it didn't take long before she started walking towards me.

I couldn't help but notice that she was perfectly put together, unlike me who was wearing a worn sweatshirt and sweatpants. His Latino features stood out beautifully against his green eyes.

"Hey," she said, her smile strangely sweet, "are you the girl at the party?"

"Keily," I replied, gripping the shopping cart handle tightly.

"My name is Myra."

"I know."

She nodded, her eyes assessing me up and down. "I heard that you and Lucas were from *good friends*." His tone implied something else.

I felt challenged, and the height difference between us only added to my apprehension.

"We are just friends."

"Of course." She giggled, but there was no humor in it. "Walking the halls together, having his arm around you, kissing you at Keith's party. You really seem like friends."

"Are you spying on him?" I asked, not knowing how to refute his claims. Lucas treated me like Addison and the other girls, but he was touchy with me around James, to annoy him.

At first I thought it was just to annoy his friend, but now I realized he was trying to make James jealous.

It was also my fault, I never stopped him. I liked pissing off James too, because he'd been an ass to me.

"I don't spy. I have better things to do." Myra rolled her eyes. "I'm just saying other people at your school are watching. There is always some truth in rumors. And according to your face, there are."

I should have considered Lucas' popularity before playing this game with him. Of course, other people had noticed, and rumors were rife in Westview.

"I also saw this post where you kiss James," she added, making me blush. "So are you cheating on them?"

"You...you came here to insult me?" I choked up, taken aback by the fact that she had blatantly disrespected me.

"I say it like that." She shrugged, trying to appear distant but failing. She was 200% jealous. She and Lucas had their history, and in a way, I found myself in between.

~Who knew Bradford had so much drama to offer me? ~

"I'm not fooling anyone," I said. "I'm Lucas' friend, as is Addison. And just so you know, I never kissed Lucas at Keith's party, or anywhere else."

We were about to do it, but we had our reasons, which weren't romantic. As it turned out, James hadn't let us kiss, so technically we hadn't kissed.

Myra's eyes followed my body, and a crooked smile stretched across her lips. "I guess I should believe you. No matter how stupid he is, Lucas' taste can't be that bad."

"Watch out!" I said sharply, probably catching the eyes of the others, and I glared at her. I was tired of being put down because of my body, first my old classmates, then James, and now her.

Was there "Doormat" written across my forehead?

"You have your problems with Lucas, don't get me involved. He and I are good friends, which I appreciate. If you don't like it, talk to him instead of taking it out on me.

"Calling me fat isn't going to solve your relationship problems."

His smirk fell, and his features softened, giving him a look of regret.  
~Good! ~

As she didn't say anything, I passed her to continue my shopping. I felt proud for standing up for myself, and not letting her trample on me.

"Hold on!" Myra called. I stopped, and she was in front of me again.  
"Sorry. I crossed the line there. I got a little carried away."

I agreed with his apology. I knew she had strong feelings for Lucas despite their argument.

"Honestly, I shouldn't have told you that kind of thing, even if you were dating. You're right, I have a problem with Lucas, not with you." She sighed. "Do you know why we broke up?"

I shook my head. Lucas never talked about her, and I didn't insist, not wanting to make him uncomfortable. He had never pushed my limits, and I wanted to return the favor.

"Well, three months ago he dumped me claiming I was cheating on him. He didn't even let me explain. He was too stubborn.

"It's true that we were going through a bad time at the time, with other problems too. So the communication was not very good.

"It turned out that this idiot saw me with my cousin, who was visiting our family. He suspected me of cheating on him with this boy." She rolled her eyes. "One thing led to another, and that's it."

"Did he try to make amends when he found out?" I asked.

"Yeah, he did, but he didn't take the easy way out." His lips twisted into a grimace.

"The shit he said and the way he acted when I tried to reach him was hurtful. Now I'm paying him back."

"Why are you telling me all this?"

"If you're a good friend of Lucas's, you should know that." Myra shrugged. "Since he didn't tell you, I did."

I shook my head, pursing my lips to hide a smile. "You're just trying to keep me away from him. You claim your right to Lucas."

"Uh-" Her fair, olive skin hid her blush. "I am..."

"It's good. I'm not interested in him that way anyway," I reassured her. "By the way, I thought you two got back together at James's?" I asked curiously.

"No," she said simply, indicating that was all she was going to tell me.

"OK."

"So you didn't kiss Lucas, but you did kiss James. So are you together?" Myra asked.

My face heated up. "It is complicated."

His eyebrows rose. "Relationships are complicated," she muttered.



"If there's anything I can say about James, it's that he's a good guy, sometimes a little tough on the people he's close to, but a good guy nonetheless. The rest is up to you."

I nodded. Yes, James had been very hard on me.

"I think I'll go." She looked at her watch. "I have to go somewhere. Once again, sorry for everything that happened earlier."

I smiled. "Carefree."

I watched Myra drop some vegetables into her basket and rush to the counter, and went back to pick out my fruit.

\* \* \*

Someone must have jinxed my Mondays. Every time I came back to school after the weekends, something was on my mind... And it was always linked to James, one way or another. ~Maybe he's the one who brings bad luck. ~

Today I was embarrassed by what happened the last time I was with him.

It was English class, and Mr. Crones was talking about "The Crucible", one of the plays we were going to read this year.

James was next to me. We hadn't spoken since he brought me home last Friday. I was embarrassed that I cried in front of him after our kiss.

But there was at least one consolation, namely that we were in the same boat, because he had shed a few tears, too.

I glanced toward the source of my racing thoughts. His brows were furrowed and his lips were pressed together, he was focused, staring at the board where Mr. Crones was writing.

He was magnificent. I could have watched it all day.

Suddenly, James' dark eyes looked back at me. My cheeks reddened from being surprised. I looked away when he smiled.

I got goosebumps, and I blushed even more when I felt his eyes on me.  
~Whatever happens, he will always remain so presumptuous. ~

Something hit my neck from behind, and a crumpled message fell into my lap. I unfolded it.

*Our boy is a fighter. He's not going down without a fight. If you want him, kiss him like you did at the party.*

I frowned and turned around, and saw a few guys in the back of the room giggling among themselves, looking at me. They were in

the football team with James.

The note was snatched from my hands. James was reading it, gripping the edges tightly. He turned around and glared menacingly at the guys, until their snickering stopped.

They looked surprised. Apparently, they didn't expect that James wouldn't join them in their prank.

"You bastards," I heard him mutter when he turned around. He looked at me. "If anyone else gives you trouble, come see me."

"I can handle it on my own," I whispered, even though I felt reassured knowing he wanted to watch over me. But I had to stop relying on others.

"And no one here can match you when it comes to causing me trouble."

"Good," he said, amused. "No one should equal me. I'm the only one who has the right to bother you. I won't let anyone else do it."

I frowned.

He leaned forward and smiled. "I'm the only one who can annoy you, disrupt you, and possess you. You're mine, Keily."

My body lit up, my cheeks definitely looked like ripe tomatoes. "And... what if I don't want to be yours?"

"Then I will force you." He smiled, his white canines gleaming like those of a predator. He teased me so much. And he liked it. ~We can't get the stalker out of this guy. ~

"But something tells me you don't mind being mine."

I glared at him, ignoring the damn zoo churning in my stomach. We both knew my angry facade wasn't working. "There's no one worse than you," I grunted, looking away.

*Asshole*, I grumbled to myself. He was such an asshole, playing with me like that.

"I know you like to call me that, but maybe you should start looking for a more affectionate nickname."

"You're going to need this," he teased, and leaned back in his chair when Mr. Crones narrowed his eyes at us.

~And why not Trouduc?! ~



## Chapter 27

“BOO!”

Lucas jumped, his head hitting the locker door. “Oww!”

I started laughing as he turned to stare at me.

“It hurts!” He rubbed the side of his head.

“Not very nice to be sneak attacked, eh?” I teased.

“Since when are you the Punisher?” Lucas grumbled, and turned around to close his locker.

“Since I know revenge is so sweet.”

“Addison is bad company for you.” He looked at me with a frown, like a school principal scolding.

“And it’s you who says that?”

A smile played on his lips, threatening to break his serious appearance. "Okay, you got me." I chuckled, and he finally smiled.

"Let's go. I can't wait to gorge on the delicious food in our cafeteria," he said sarcastically.

"Hold on." I stopped him. "I want to talk to you." It was lunch, and my stomach was also roaring with the desire to fill itself with the *delicious high school food*. But he had to wait a bit. I was on a mission.

These days, Lucas was sitting at our table with the girls, but I wanted to talk to him in private, so I took the longer route, and looked for him.

Lucas nodded and stared at me to get started.

"It's about James."

"What did that bastard do again?!" I noticed his fist clenching. I didn't like his angry reaction to the mention of James' name. ~It shouldn't be like this. ~

"He didn't do anything, at least nothing wrong." Oh, he'd done a lot of things, but it wasn't bad at all.

I tried to keep my cheeks from blushing, thinking of the way James had helped me at his house, or when he had kissed me that day at the

high school.

"I meant about you and James. You are ridiculous for continuing to fight."

I wanted Lucas to make things right with James. They had dragged out their argument for too long.

Although it wasn't my place to interfere, I felt responsible, because ultimately I was *-somehow-*the reason for their argument.

I didn't want to play the role of their mother, but maybe I could push Lucas a little to let go of his hostility. The two were childhood friends.

I saw Lucas struggling with not having James by his side. Sure, he had a lot of friends, but James was his friend.

Football season was also approaching. I didn't know if the two boys could leave their animosity off the field, but it would certainly help if they didn't have animosity.

Plus, victories and defeats were much more enjoyable to experience with friends.

Another reason - which it took me a while to admit to myself - why I wanted them to reconcile was because ~James touched me. ~



I knew he must feel lonely without Lucas, too. I didn't like the idea of him suffering.

~I'm crazy about this boy! ~

"Oh, come on, Keily. Do not do that. He deserves it, considering how he mistreats you."

"We both know he's stopped now," I argued.

"I really appreciate what you did for me, even if I don't approve of your actions, but don't blame me, because if you're dragging out this argument, it's because of your egos stupid."

"Maybe." Lucas huffed, crossing his arms and leaning his shoulder against the locker. "But I won't be the one to make the first move. He's the one who will have to apologize."

He looked above my head, at something behind me. My back tingled, experiencing the familiar sensation of a certain someone's eyes.

I turned around, and saw James with Axel and Keith near the back door. *When he arrived?* Keith's locker was in the same hallway as Lucas's, so it was probably there for him.

The boys were talking among themselves, but James' eyes were there, on us.

I furrowed my brows in confusion when James narrowed his eyes. I glanced at Lucas, and saw him glaring as he moved closer to me. I sighed. They both acted like giant toddlers.

"To be honest, you were the one who punched him. He didn't even fight back," I said, getting Lucas' attention, and ending his murderous glare.

"He really deserved that punch!"

"What's the problem with you athletes and the use of violence?" I shook my head. "Maybe so, but it's not right to hit someone..."

"Why are you on his side?" Lucas scowled. "You're not supposed to defend him. You're supposed to hit him with me."

"I... um..." He would be right if we disregarded what had happened in the last few days. I found myself looking at James, and I blushed. "He's been good to me lately."

"It's true?" Lucas leaned in with a smirk, deliberately bringing our faces closer.

"Do not do that." I took a step back. I didn't feel right continuing to do this. Myra hadn't liked it. James definitely didn't like it. Now it was me who didn't like it anymore.

Lucas pouted. "Don't do what?" He feigned innocence.

"Don't be stupid. You know what I mean. I ran into Myra yesterday at the grocery store.

She thought we had a history together. People here are talking about us, and it has reached his ears too. It was so awkward between us."

"What did she say?" he asked curiously. His demeanor changed when I mentioned Myra.

"Not much. She just gave a very short version of why you two broke up. You wrongly accused her of cheating on you."

"Of course, I'm the bad guy," he commented bitterly, before leaning in, his green eyes sparkling.

"What did she think of you and me? Was she jealous or something? He really tried to look like he didn't care.

"Somehow." I shrugged, hiding my smile. "But I don't want to speak for her."

"Are you two planning to skip lunch?" someone said behind me.

I turned around. James, Keith and Axel were there. Keith and Axel had amused smiles on their faces, while James frowned. My face heated under his accusatory gaze.

"We were about to go," Lucas told Axel. "Thanks for caring."

Axel rolled his eyes. "Stop being an idiot, Lucas, and come sit with us. Now it's getting boring."

"Yeah, are you two going to stop this?" Keith added, looking at James and Lucas.

"We'll stop when we want." Lucas got angry. "Come on, Keily. Here we go."

"Keily, will you sit with us today?" Keith asked before we could move.

"No, she doesn't," Lucas replied immediately.

"Let her talk," James said. He turned his sullen face towards me.

My blush returned under all these pairs of eyes.

"Yes, join us. We have one less friend, we can take another," insisted Axel, making fun of Lucas. We invite you to lunch."

"I'm going to buy him lunch," Lucas announced.

"Or maybe we can skip this crappy food, and I can drive us to the local pizza place," James suggested, his scowl intact, and not at all engaging. "It's me who's having fun."

"You won't be back in time."

"So what?" He shrugged.

"It does not matter. I'm not going to leave her with you."

"Last time I checked, you weren't his father."

"Oh, I'm not his father, that's for sure." Lucas smiled. "I am something better." *What?*

James' jaw clenched. He seemed ready to kill. "You think I don't know what you're doing? Your shitty comedy isn't working. You are nothing to her. She's already mine..."

"Hey, stop!" I interjected, my face red with anger and embarrassment. These two were talking as if I wasn't there. ~They are not ashamed. ~

"You two suck. Why did I try? You know what? Hit your heads like buffoons, I don't care. You deserve

to be unhappy without each other. I'm tired of feeling guilty."

After that, I turned and stomped away. I hated the attention my crisis attracted.

"Stop staring at her, man." I heard Lucas mumble.

"Shut your mouth, Parks," James warned. *Oh my God!* I thought my face couldn't burn any more. I was wrong.

By the time I got to the cafeteria, lunch was half finished. Addison, Lola, and Sadhvi raised their eyebrows at my sour face. But I wasn't in the mood to say anything.

They would know another way anyway. People here loved gossip.

Oh, and Lucas didn't come to our table. He returned to his usual table.

\* \* \*

I wiped the steam off the mirror, and looked at my reflection, wrapped in a towel.

I had a normal face for a white teenage girl, except for my chubby cheeks and double chin...or maybe they were good too.

But I wish I had smooth skin, without the red spots and acne on my cheeks and forehead. I envied those who didn't have to deal with this stage of growing up.

Next came my body, with which I had a complicated relationship. I hated my big belly, my big thighs, my trembling arms and especially the awful stretch marks that covered them, gifted by puberty.

However, there were times, although rare, when I admired my breasts and shapely hips. ~I felt pretty. ~

Until the opinions, *hard*, others, which I had heard for most of my life, bombard my mind.

I knew it wasn't a good life strategy to let others define me, but it was hard not to draw your values from the people around you. Their words imprinted themselves on your mind, consciously or unconsciously.

So in the end, their harsh opinions mattered.

I was working on self-love. I ate well, I didn't go on a crash diet, and I also tried to stay active. I had read books and blogs and watched YouTube videos advocating body positivity.

I got some benefits from it. But in the end, the pleasant company of Addison, Lola, Sadhvi and even Lucas worked wonders.

Mom and Dad were great too, but acceptance from your peers had a different value. Friends were what I missed at Remington. My classmates there hadn't been so nice.

I thanked my lucky stars that I had moved away from this toxic place.

I untied the towel, and put on my night clothes. I usually didn't wash in the evening, but tonight I wanted to take a hot shower before sleeping.

I walked out of the bathroom and into my bedroom, threw myself onto the bed, and grabbed my phone from next to my pillow.

My heart fluttered to see that there was a recent message from James. I opened it.

**James:** Hey, I just want to apologize for today. I was angry with Lucas. I didn't mean to be so cheeky. I'm sorry for getting you involved in this.

I smiled. I was amazed when I saw his caring side.

Truth be told, I was more confused than angry when James and Lucas had a fight. Their frankness had caught me off guard, and the fact that Keith and Axel were there too didn't help matters.



I had ignored James and Lucas in math class, so it was natural for them to think I was angry.

I scrolled through the messages, and compared this one to our last texts, when James had threatened me during our computer homework. There was so much contrast. When had he become so...different?

**Keily:**Apologies accepted. At least you and Lucas made up.

Less than a minute later, he was back online.

**James:**Only because he was too afraid to see you. Honestly, I was a little scared too.

I smiled.

**Keily:**Who knew I could be so scary? We thought it was your department.

**James:**Be careful before I challenge you. I really liked that you left though. We deserved it, because of our stupidity.

My smile widened, but I didn't want to let him off the hook so easily.

**Keily:** If I remember correctly, when I tried to pick on you in the past, you didn't take it with such modesty.

**James:** You're right, it's true. I didn't want you to stand up to me.

My smile faded.

**Keily:** For what?

**James:** It might sound evil, but I liked having power over you. It allowed me to keep you.

**Keily:** Keep me? I'm not your pet.

I frowned.

**James:** I know it's twisted. I'm not proud of it.

**Keily:** So what has changed?

**James:** I realized my mistake.

**Keily:** Thank you for that.

**James:**Besides, there are other ways to keep you. Not as a pet ;)

Oh my God. I blushed at his insinuation. I didn't know what to say, and I stared at the screen. A minute later he sent me another text.

**James:**It's late. Good night and sleep well. I don't mind if you have a dream or two about me.

My face colored more. It was surreal seeing James flirting with me. It was so new. So much better than before.

**Keily:**Good night.

I threw my phone on the bed when it disconnected.

His “good night” didn’t mean anything because I wasn’t going to sleep tonight. I could not. Thanks to him.

I wouldn't dream about James, but I would think about him until morning.

## Chapter 28

The whole week had passed in a fog, and Saturday was here.

At the moment, we girls were driving to the outskirts of town for the fall fair, which was set up on the grounds by the lake. It was organized every year, and lasted approximately three weeks.

It was certain that my social life had taken a big boost in Bradford. There was always something new to do on the weekend.

The fair had only started a few days ago, and we planned to get there as soon as possible, before all the good stuff was sold.

Today I was in my skinny jeans and denim jacket, with a yellow tshirt underneath.

When I looked in the mirror at home, my mind immediately stopped at how wide my thighs looked in the jeans I had avoided wearing.

But this time, I silenced my complexes, and I left the house with these jeans. The girls who complimented me on my outfit also helped me.

Addison wore a summer dress, and added a light brown cardigan over it. Sadhvi wore jeans and a black jacket, and Lola had an orange sweater and a denim skirt that hit mid-thigh.

They were all beautiful and well dressed.

"Cell phone coverage is not good in this area, so try not to stray too far from the group," Addison said.

She was driving her Volkswagen. Sadhvi was in the front seat, and Lola and I were in the back.

"Yes, the last time we were here with the group," Sadhvi said, "Cindy and Emma had separated from us. It took us hours to find them. We got home late that night, and my mom was really angry."

"How about this time we hold hands like good girls?" Lola looked up from her phone, and smiled teasingly. "I'm sure you wouldn't mind."

"Oh, there are some who will hold hands, but we won't be in this, Lola, too bad," I added, smiling at Sadhvi's modest face in the face of our suggestive remarks. It was fun to tease them sometimes.

Addison rolled her eyes. "No wonder gays are afraid to come out."

"All couples have to deal with their friends' obnoxious jokes," Lola muttered, her eyes glued to her cell phone, her fingers typing.

"I remember each of you making fun of Matt and me. So don't put this down to gay oppression."

"I'm going to chalk it up to what I want. Go bother your nerd boyfriend." I saw Addison stick her tongue out in the rearview mirror, and I chuckled. Lola didn't even look up, too busy staring at the screen.

"Now that we're talking about love..." Sadhvi drawled, turning to look at me. "Keily, what's going on between you and James?"

My cheeks colored slightly as I felt the attention shift to me. Lola's fingers stopped, Addison's eyes looked at me in the rearview mirror, and Sadhvi just stared at me curiously.

I hadn't talked much about James with them. It wasn't that I didn't want to, but I was a little afraid to do it. I was afraid of their judgment.

James hadn't been very nice to me at first, so the girls could be expected to criticize what was going on between us.

I already had a taste last week when Addison got mad at me after I kissed James at the party.

It was true that she was dealing with her own issues, and she had lost her temper, but the judgment was still there.

Another reason was that I didn't know what was going on between James and me. I knew he was trying to *seduce*, or something like that.

I also knew that I was already seduced, he didn't need to make much effort. However, I was afraid to move forward. I was still skeptical of him, and of everything that happened between us.

"We're sort of friends," I replied.

"Friends?" Addison repeated, her eyebrows raised in the mirror.

"Yeah, I guess," I muttered, unsure. "His behavior has changed a lot in recent days. He admitted he was wrong, and apologized. So I don't see the point in being resentful."

"It's about time he apologized to you for being a jerk."

"I agree," Sadhvi added, "but to be honest, we all saw it coming. Everyone can see that he is *mad* of you."

"But don't stop being resentful, Keily. Make him repent even more." added Addison.

"It's hard to be resentful when he's so nice," I said, blushing. I was relieved that they weren't too hard on James or me. "He can be really sweet and caring when he wants to be."

"Gentle? Kind? Attentive? Are we really using these adjectives to talk about this bastard?"

Sadhvi shook her head. "Come on, he's not that bad."

"I agree," Lola finally said. "If he was such a bad person, he wouldn't be friends with Matt and other guys like that. He must have intrinsic qualities for boys to stay with him."

"Yeah, yeah," Addison murmured sullenly. "It is awesome!"

"You're hard to please, Addy." Sadhvi sighed before looking at me.

"Don't think I haven't noticed that you and James are making eyes at each other. We already knew he liked you, and it seems like you notice a lot too. You are definitely more than friends."

I blushed. She was right. James and I were more than friends. Over the past few days, we'd been texting each other here and there, and the messages were pretty flirty.

This Wednesday, James also came to my house to work on our website. Nothing exceptional had happened, he had kept his distance, and so had I.

Although I can't deny the scorching tension between us whenever we were near each other, we were both careful not to



act according to our impulses, due to our fragile situation.

"I don't know what we are," I replied honestly, "but we're not boyfriend and girlfriend, if that's what you're suggesting."

"Do you want to be boyfriend and girlfriend?" Lola asked.

I watched the long line of trees outside pass by. "I don't know." I caught my breath.

"I mean, I like him, and he kind of admitted that he likes me too. But I don't want to give in too easily."

"I don't want to give him the impression that if he insults me or disrespects me, I will let it happen without thinking."

"Well done," Addison applauded.

"So for now, are you taking it easy?" Lola asked.

"Or maybe we're at a standstill." I shrugged, and gave him a half-smile.

"It's not serious. People have their own rhythm when it comes to relationships."

"I don't know if we'll ever get to the point where we have a relationship." Saying that out loud really hurt.

Maybe it was my teenage hormones, but I didn't like the image of my future without James. ~Sometimes I'm frightened by the strength of this attraction. ~

"But it is good. The fact that he went from insulting me to treating me like a real person, who has feelings, is enough for now." It was just enough, but I wanted more, and it seemed he did too.

Lola smiled before glancing at her cell phone when it beeped. Her smile fell, and she looked up.

"So you don't mind if I tell you Matt invited him and the other boys to join us at the fair?" Is not it?"

My jaw went slack. ~Ugh... ~

Sadhvi chuckled. "It will be funny."

\* \* \*

Colorful stalls, different attractions and a large crowd of people greeted us as we entered the city's autumn fair. It occupied a fairly large space.

Celebration and joy surrounded us, which was enough to lift anyone's spirits.

Children and adults alike walked with stuffed animals or large candies in their hands, loud cheers echoed in the rides, and the smell of hot food hung in the air.

"Matt said to wait for them near the main entrance," Lola told us as we moved to the side to avoid bumping into other people entering. We found ourselves near a hot dog stand.

"We drove for an hour," Addison said, looking at the menu displayed on the stall. "I only had breakfast this morning. I skipped lunch because I had to rush to pick you up."

"Stop justifying yourself, just buy what you want to eat." Sadhvi rolled her eyes. "And get something for me too."

Addison bought hot dogs for Sadhvi and herself. The seller had a lot of customers, so it took Addison a while to get them. I was already full from my lunch, so I didn't ask for anything, and neither did Lola.

"These hot dogs aren't as delicious as last time," Sadhvi complained as she took another big bite of her bun.

"I can give you a better hot dog, baby," someone commented. A group of four guys were ogling us, standing in front of the booth. They looked like they were around thirty years old.

"It even tastes better," the blond among them said, while pointing at his crotch. His friends laughed like hyenas.

"Come with us, we promise you a good time," added another. "You're all going to be asking for more." I got goosebumps seeing their lustful gazes running over our bodies. These guys were disgusting.

"How about I promise you a knee in your little dicks if you don't leave right away?!" Addison barked, glaring at them.

"Or maybe a good night in jail for soliciting sexual favors from minors," Lola threatened, pointing her chin at the cops patrolling outside. Lola and Sadhvi were not yet eighteen.

People had started looking at us because of Addison's loud voice.

The men realized the attention they were receiving, so with glares – which reflected their wounded masculinity – they left without making any further fuss.

"Those shits ruined everything for me." Sadhvi wrinkled her face as she looked at her hot dog. She walked away to throw it in the trash.

I finally came out of my state of shock. I hated being petrified during such confrontations.

Sure, now I could stand up to James, but it was another thing to face strangers who you had no idea what they were capable of. ~Sexual harassment sucks. ~

If Addison and the girls hadn't been there, I probably wouldn't have criticized them, and would have looked for an easy way out.

"I want to stab these knuckleheads!" Addison was chewing her hot dog aggressively.

"Let's not ruin our good mood because of them," Lola soothed. "We're here to have fun."

Sadhvi returned with a frown on her face. I gave him a shoulder push, and promised to treat him to cotton candy later. She laughed, and said it would only remind her of pubic hair.

~Oh my God! She ruined everything for me too. ~

Our friends ended up arriving ten minutes later.

My eyes instantly found James among them. He wore a black undershirt and black jeans, complemented by a dark brown leather jacket, and he looked like a sinner from heaven.

I became aware of the clothes I was wearing and my thick thighs when he looked at me.

"You guys took your time," Lola said when they joined us. Matt came with James, Lucas, Keith and Axel.

"Sorry to have made you wait." Matt threw his arm around his girlfriend's shoulder, and kissed her.

"You know something crazy happened to us. Little jerks..." Addison started recounting the whole incident that happened with the perverts. The nine of us took a large part of the way by walking.

James came up beside me, and our fingers brushed as we moved forward. A light blush covered my cheeks as I wondered if I could just hold his hand.

He was so close. I could feel the warmth of his body enveloping the side of my body.

"Why didn't you hit them, Addison?" Keith asked once Addison and Sadhvi had finished their story. "You pack quite a punch." He didn't seem to be joking.

"I would have, but they left before I could. They were wimps."

"Those poor guys had a narrow escape," Lucas said.

We chuckled. He was right.

"Are you doing well?" James asked me calmly. His breath caressed my cheeks, and I felt butterflies in my stomach. "They didn't say or do anything else, did they?"

"No. And I'm fine," I whispered back. Inside, I melted at his concern for me.

I looked at him, and saw that he was already looking at me. He was breathtaking. Sparks flew between us, and I let go of the bridle that was holding me back.

I didn't hold back from reaching out my hand to take his. Our fingers intertwined. My whole body shivered at his mere touch.

The others quickly noticed. Addison rolled her eyes. Sadhvi was delighted. Lola smiled. Lucas smirked. Keith, Axel, and Matt looked amused. But that didn't matter.

We continued to hold hands, and we walked through the crowd.





## Chapter 29

"You want to ditch them and go somewhere else?" James asked me.

We were all crowded around the marquee jewelry and craft stalls, which were next to an alley.

Addison and Lucas were busy arguing over a wooden sculpture next to us. Lola was with Matt, looking at the jewelry in the display a little further away, and the others were wandering around in other tents.

I looked at James, and saw that his eyes were staring at me intently. "It's not very nice to let your friends down."

"Well, I'm not very nice," he replied. "You should know that by now."

I couldn't hold back a smile. "But I do."

"Maybe you shouldn't. You're missing out on a lot of good things." His hand grabbed mine, and pulled me towards him. "So, what do you say? You want to leave?"

I looked away from him to glance at the others. I knew the girls wouldn't mind us leaving.

They themselves had let me down twice at parties. No hard feelings. Now that I was in their place, I understood. "But if we get separated, it will be difficult to find them later."

"I have a solution for that." He smiled, and took my breath away. We couldn't say no to this face. So I acquiesced.

He called Lucas. "Keily and I will meet you all in the parking lot at eight," he told her, and we drove off to nowhere.

"So what do you want to do now?" I asked him. Our hands were clasped together as we walked. To anyone else, we looked like a couple. Maybe we were, *somehow*.

"And that?" He tilted his chin toward the bumper car arena.

"Let's go." We bought the tickets, and we got into the cars too. James' car was red, mine was yellow. The operator turned on the power, and the fun began.

I avoided bumping into the others, rather unsuccessfully, and was moving slowly when I was violently pushed against the wall.

I glared at James, who had crashed his car into mine, and had a devilish grin on his face.

"I thought you were done abusing me," I lectured, and his lips only stretched further.

"It's hard to completely change when I get such cute reactions from you." At his remark, my eyes narrowed into slits to compensate for my burning cheeks.

James backed up, only to crash my car again, a minute later. And once again. The fourth time, I was dying for revenge.

After a few minutes I had a better handle on the controls, so I got ready when I saw him coming towards me.

I spun my car at the last second, missing his car by an inch, and causing him to crash into the wall. I pushed him even further as I got into his car.

I smiled. "Are you surrendering now?"

"I never surrender." He glared at me, barely suppressing a smile. His red car pushed against mine, and moved us both. I pressed the accelerator to push it back, and caused a stop.

"You're getting mean," he commented.

"Someone told me not to be so nice." I chuckled, and turned my steering wheel 180 degrees to reverse. And then we started again, chasing each other, and running into others.

"That was fun," I said once we left the arena.

James nodded. "Do you want to do it again?"

"Let's try some other rides," I suggested, and he agreed, pulling me through the crowd.

We first went on the rocking pirate ship, and I was glad I didn't eat a heavy meal at home. Otherwise, I definitely would have vomited. Next we went to the Wipeout, then the Twister.

When the people sitting around us were screaming and screaming, I couldn't help myself either.

It was exhilarating to scream, and to feel like a child again. Hearing James' genuine laughter was also a big plus.

James sat next to me in the Twister. Once the seats started to turn, his arm came sneakily to wrap around

my shoulders. My heart raced and goosebumps filled my body.

I looked at him, and saw a small smile gracing his lips. When the Twister reached its maximum speed, my body was thrown towards it. He held me tight against him the whole time.

~It was the best ride ever. ~

"I think I'm going to pass out," was my first sentence when I got out of the Twister. Everything was spinning, and my legs were trembling. I held on to James' arm for support.

"Now, no more rides," he concluded. I didn't fail to notice him slowly pulling me towards him. If he thought it was discreet, then he was wrong. The good thing was that it didn't bother me.

"Hey, we didn't go on the Ferris wheel," I reminded him. "It's the thing not to be missed at a funfair or a fair."

"Let's go eat something first. I'm hungry." He led us to a candy stand. I didn't object, I was hungry too.

I stood idly by his side while James bought us candy.

It was almost 6 p.m., and the sun had almost set. The colorful lights of the stalls, stands and rides were on, and they

lit up the whole place with a thousand lights.

A crowd was also bigger now.

I caught a boy and a girl standing nearby at a popcorn stand looking at me.

They were whispering among themselves and giggling, pointing at me and James, who had his back to us. I looked down, the happiness of the whole afternoon fading away.

If it was James and me, I already knew what they were saying. They compared us. They found it astonishing - and funny - that an overweight girl could be with someone like him.

Suddenly, I felt embarrassed to be there, in front of a *candy shop*, and waiting for James to bring me some ~sugar-filled~ treats.

"And There you go." A large piece of cotton candy blocked my view of the muddy ground. James handed it to me. He had another one for himself. I thanked him and took the cotton candy.

"I have something else for you too," he said, reaching into his pocket to pull out a small cube, covered in shiny wrapping.

"What is this?"

"Take it." He gave me his cotton candy, and opened the package to present me with a cube of chocolate covered half in green.

"Mint chocolate." I smiled.

"I thought you liked mint, and I like chocolate. Why not mix the two?"

"Remember I like mint?" It came out as a question.

"And blueberries," he added. "It's hard to forget such a weird taste."

"It's better than having an all-purpose taste. Chocolate chips and marshmallow nuts. Seriously? You're one step away from vanilla."

I scoffed, but inside. I was happy to see that he had paid attention to my choice, and had remembered it.

His face lit up, as if his day was perfect. "Careful, Keily. Your stalker tendencies are showing."

I blushed. "You're the one who says it." Ok, I remembered his favorite ice cream flavor too. But my brain had remembered it involuntarily.  
~Totally unintentionally. ~

"I didn't know what it was going to taste like, so I just had one. Take a bite."

He held it in front of my face intending to give it to me, but I handed him our cotton candy, and took the chocolate cube from his hand. I almost chuckled at his disappointed face.

"Do you mind?" I asked before putting half of the chocolate in my mouth. He shook his head and I took a bite. That was delicious. Minty, sweet and chocolatey. Perfect.

"How is it?"

"Delicious," I replied. "Hold." I brought the rest of the chocolate to his mouth. His eyes lit up.

He eagerly moved forward with his mouth open, but I pushed the chocolate away, making him bite into space. I chuckled. He gave an adorable frown.

"I'm sorry. Hold." I raised my hand, and gave him a look that indicated I was serious this time. But I wasn't. I moved the chocolate away again. I laughed at his sullen face. ~He is so easy to get along with. ~

Before I knew it, warm fingers dug into my wrist, rocking my body forward, bringing my hand closer to the culprit's mouth.



James looked me in the eyes, while his lips grabbed the chocolate, along with my index finger and thumb. I stopped breathing.

His tongue swirled around my fingers, and every fiber of me snapped to attention. He deliberately took his time getting my fingers wet, then slowly released them with a lustful gurgling noise.

"Tasty." He smiled, releasing my hand.

I was upside down, hot, blushing, and blissful. I was on the verge of squealing like crazy. The way his eyes scanned me up and down possessively, burning me like a hot iron, didn't help.

"Here's your cotton candy." James gave me back my cotton candy. That annoying smile turned into a teasing smile. ~He's evil. ~

We headed towards the Ferris wheel. I took a quick glance at the couple who had pointed at James and me before following James. They were now eating their popcorn, and were busy with their conversation.

Apparently James and I had only entertained them for a few minutes. ~And I let these people decide what I was worth. ~

It was quite a ride, and by the time we got to the Ferris wheel, we had finished our cotton candy. I bought the tickets for both of us. We alternated, we paid at different counters.

James objected to this, but I objected to the idea of letting him pay for everything. Finally, I won.

The queue to get in was quite long. I almost jumped to my feet as the line shortened, excited to see the whole fair from above.

Every time I went to a fair or funfair, this part was the highlight of my visit.

I looked at James to share my excitement, but my smile faltered when I saw his thin lips and the lines on his forehead as he stared at the giant wheel.

"Are you doing well?" I placed my hand on his upper arm. I finally felt comfortable touching him.

He looked at me and gave a hint of a smile, but this time it didn't reach his eyes. "Yeah. Why are you asking that?"

"You do not look well." We took a step forward with the others.

"It hurts. Are you taking revenge, Keily?" he joked with a serious face.

I shook my head. "If you don't want to go on the wheel, we don't have to."

"What makes you say that?"

"Your face. You should have said it sooner if you didn't like it."

James sighed. "It's just a stupid fear of heights. Don't worry. I can do it."

I couldn't help but smile. Today I smiled a lot.

James scowled like the brat he was. "Do you think that's funny?"

"No, it's just that you've always been so scary to me. Invincible, menacing, sometimes even downright terrifying," I said, and his scowl lessened.

"But it turns out you're just a young man of eighteen, who can be afraid of certain things, like everyone else. It makes you a lot less intimidating."

*"Then you take revenge. You hurt my ego, Keily."* It was hard to tell he was joking, until he smiled.

"Come on, let's go. If you're not enjoying it, then it's not worth it." I grabbed his hand to pull us away, but he stopped me.

"It's worth it if you enjoy it."

My guts had already melted into a puddle after everything we'd done today, and now he had to add that on top of that. *This guy.* "Born..."

"Are you two coming?!" The operator shouted at us. We were blocking the line. I didn't realize that we had progressed so far, and that our turn had arrived.

James nodded, and dragged us both towards the waiting pod, before I could object.

"You don't have to," I said. We were sitting side by side. We moved slightly to get into the next pod, making James' fingers tighten around mine.

"But I want to." His dark eyes shone beautifully with all the colorful lights around us. "Plus, I need to get my scary persona back. I can't let you think I have feelings, can I?"

I chuckled. "You can try." I slipped my hand around his chest, and pulled him closer to me. He leaned over me without complaint. When the wheel started to turn, I hugged him.

## Chapter 30

James was uncomfortable. When we got in, I felt his grip around my waist.

I looked down to see the entire fair shrouded in bright, colorful lights, and hundreds of people crowded together in my field of vision.

Beyond the boundary, I saw Bradford Lake reflecting the glow of this festive atmosphere. It was wonderful.

Unfortunately, James didn't see what I saw, his fear depriving him of such a wonderful sight.

"It's clearly not your thing. All joking aside, why are you here?" I asked him. His attention shifted from the scene below us to me.

I was happy to distract him by talking.

"Because it seemed like the right thing to do," James replied.

"The right thing to do?"

"Since we met, I have harassed you, without realizing the harm I was doing. I was too self-centered and didn't think about my actions."

"I played with your complexes, *your fears*. It's okay that now you see my fears too." He scoffed, and shook his head.

"I know it's stupid, but it's a small gesture on my part to repent for my mistakes."

My heart swelled upon hearing his confession. Him acknowledging his past behavior and trying to make amends – even if it was in his own twisted way – stirred something in me.

"Besides, it was hard to say no when you seemed more excited than my niece about getting on that thing," he added, nudging me playfully.

"Do you have a niece?" I asked.

"My cousin's daughter, Lillian. She's six years old."

I wrinkled my face. "I don't know whether to be offended or flattered to be compared to a six-year-old."

He chuckled. "If it helps, I thought you were adorable." I blushed under his intense gaze. "And you look totally adorable now too."

His fingers came up to gently caress my flushed cheeks, leaving tingles wherever they touched them. God, I could have purred like a cat at his touch.

Our pod shook a little as the wheel picked up speed, breaking the moment between us.

James' hand rested on my lap, and his breathing became shallow as his attention shifted to the ground far below us. We were going up.

I immediately let go of his chest to clasp our hands together in my lap. His fingers curled around mine, and his eyes returned to me. He had never looked so vulnerable.

"Am I making a fool of myself enough for you to enjoy it?" he joked.

I shook my head. "Watching you suffer is not my idea of fun, James. Your way of repenting is stupid. I don't want you to punish yourself."

"When it comes to you, it seems like I'm up to no good, huh?"

I smiled. "But I'm still stupid enough to fall in love with you."

He gave me one of his magnificent, face-splitting smiles. The fear in his eyes gave way to unfiltered joy. And I felt happy to be the reason.

"I swear, you're killing me, Keily Harris. You're fucking killing me."

Seeing him, I couldn't help but smile either. We looked at each other face to face like idiots.

"I want to kiss you so bad right now," James said, his eyes moved to my lips, and his pupils dilated, "but I'm scared. Our past experiences have not been very good."

"Maybe we should try again and see how it goes this time..."

Before I could finish, his lips were on mine. Oh~. He wasted no time in picking up the pace, and kissed me passionately, making up for all the lost time.

It tasted like the cotton candy and mint chocolate we had eaten before. One of his hands remained intertwined with mine,



while the other on my waist drew me even more towards him, if that was possible.

When our basket shook and the Ferris wheel spun at maximum speed, he didn't let go, and only kissed me harder, making me a red, moaning wreck at his mercy. .

He slowly backed away as the wheel slowed, and we were both out of breath.

"Are we still good?" James asked, his dark eyes piercing me to the very soul. There were so many emotions overflowing: envy, desire, possession, fear and a strange sweetness that I didn't dare to name.

I nodded, and looked up to give myself a break from all the feelings his fiery gaze evoked in me.

When the nagging voices of doubt and hatred didn't come through, I smiled. I smiled broadly at the night sky and the twinkling stars.

James rested his head on my shoulder. "Looking up is much better than looking down." Her soft curls tickled my neck, and I loved it.

"Why didn't we think of doing this before, instead of me cuddling you?" I chuckled.

"It's not like you don't like hugging me," he said, and I had to admit. I was more than enjoying holding him.

The Ferris wheel stopped, and I saw James visibly relax as we got off. He put his arm around mine as we walked. It was amazing how much we had started to act *in a relationship within* a single evening.

My image of him had started to change in the last few days, but today he was really there to convince me. James wasn't just a big, domineering giant who had harassed and scared me before.

He was also an immature teenager, who sometimes didn't know what to do. And there was so much softness beneath that hard shell.

"Let's get out of this crowd," James said.

"And why this?" I raised my eyebrows.

"So I can kiss you again in peace," he replied with a wolfish smile, and my face colored once again.

"I loved sitting on that thing with you, but I also lost my mind there. I don't want to stay on the Ferris wheel, to have you all to myself.

"Now that I have your green light, there is no time to lose."

"You're not really shy, are you?" I scolded, biting my lip to suppress a smile.

"It's not worth it. You're shy enough for both of us."

"So where are you going to take us?" I asked. I looked at my watch. We still had almost an hour before we had to meet up with the others.

"Near the lake. It must be quiet there." He pulled us both in the direction of the lake when I nodded.

"I hope you don't intend to drown me," I said, narrowing my eyes at him playfully.

I saw him smirk. "You saw through my plan. Now what are you going to do, Keily? I already have you in my clutches."

I chuckled and lightly punched his shoulder. "That's it."

As James had predicted, the lakeside was much quieter. There were only a few people scattered among the trees. We found a secluded spot and sat down on the grass.

The trees and bushes that surrounded us ensured our privacy. I could still hear the music and the noises of the fair behind us.

James wrapped his arm around my shoulder, making me lean into him. The warmth of his body warmed me against the gusts of cold air.

The lake in front of us was still, and its opposite banks reflected the lights of the party behind us.

"James," I said, he was ready to listen to me. "I want to know something." We both stared at the lake in front of us.

"Ask me."

"You said you weren't serious when you insulted me. So why did you do that?" I felt him stiffen. I didn't want to spoil the mood, but I needed to know.

He admitted to being wrong, but never said the reasons why he did and said all these things.

"I'm pretty sure I've never done anything bad to you. I even tried to stay away from you, to avoid you. So why were you so... horrible to me?"

"Why, in your opinion?"

"Lola told me you liked me, and you didn't know how to show it." I chuckled.

"It's plausible... But sometimes I think you thought I was really fat and ugly, and just didn't want me hanging out with your group of perfect friends, especially Lucas."

"You're not fat or ugly, Keily. You are beautiful," he said firmly. "Maybe Lola was right."

I frowned and moved away from him. "So you threw all these insults at me because you couldn't just say 'I like you.'"

"Do you have any idea how horrible I felt every time you made fun of me for my appearance?" I glared at him.

I expected this response from him, but it hurt to hear that I had to deal with all these insults because *someone* was not capable of showing maturity in his feelings.

"I'm sorry." James pulled me back, closing the gap between our bodies, and trapped me in his large arms.

"I'm so sorry you had to bear the brunt of the shit I was going through. You absolutely didn't deserve it, and I'm ashamed to have put you through this."

"What do you mean?"

He looked at me. "I don't want to scare you away."

"The way you're holding me, it'll be hard to run away."

"I'll catch you if you try." He smiled before placing a kiss on my forehead. I had to find all the resources in me not to melt in his arms.

"Today was like a dream. I still can't believe I have you here with me like this. I could hold you like this for days if you let me."

"Now don't change the subject with your sweet words," I scolded, trying to keep calm.

James sighed then nodded, knowing I needed answers to move on.

"Do you remember the first time I saw you?"

~How could I forget? He was the first stranger in Jenkins to call me fat to my face. ~

"Yes, we met in Mr. Crones's class, and you were very rude to me." *And it only escalated from there.*~

"I didn't leave you with a very good first impression, huh?" His eyes followed my face, warming me with their fervor.

"This is going to sound very blue to you, but the first time I saw you, I was literally swept away. You were sitting there, all shy and adorable, trying to look at me discreetly.

"Then our eyes met, and I felt like something was hitting my chest. That feeling was too strong, it still is, and I've never felt anything like that before."

"You looked away, blushing. It was the cutest thing ever.

"You got me then, Keily. I was confused, intrigued, and more than that, I felt an irresistible need to have you. I tried to keep a calm appearance, but inside I was anything but calm.

"I know it's not ideal or realistic to fall in love with someone you haven't said a single word to, but unfortunately or fortunately, that's how I felt.

"And then you were so cold to me. Maybe I wasn't used to rejection..." He shook his head. "No, I was angry because I was there, feeling this ton of stuff, and you didn't even look back-"

"You were intimidating me," I added, having trouble keeping my head clear with everything he was saying.

"Of course. I was trying to be charming, but I had no idea what I was doing. Looking back, I can't blame you for being scared."

He chuckled. "I had no idea what was happening to me, I only knew one thing: you were responsible. I didn't like the fact that you ignored me.

"It hurt me, so I said the first thing that hurt you, in reaction, without thinking.

"Later, I blamed myself all morning for that. Lunch has arrived. You were in the cafeteria with Addison. I thought I'd apologize.

"As luck would have it, you came to our table and treated me like I wasn't there. It's normal. I was stupid to you.

"But then I saw how nice and friendly you were with Lucas. It pushed me over the edge. I had never been jealous of Lucas in my life, until that moment.

"In short, I thought I was entitled to your attention, and you gave it to him. I was beyond annoyed. I saw you first. You were mine. There wasn't even a competition.

"Lucas wasn't even interested in you, at least not as much as I was.



"Instead of apologizing, I lashed out at you because obviously it was your fault that I was jealous, obsessed, and so many things I'd never felt before." He smiled.

"I was stupid. And then I got even dumber."

"If you won't look at me, then I'll make you do it," I thought, and I had already learned how to do it. I got reactions from you when I bothered you.

"It was a fitting punishment for you too, for turning my life upside down like that."

"So you called me cow, fat, whale and other things like that, when deep down, you were attracted to me?" I accused him more than I questioned him.

My eyes stung, and I had to look away to stop the waterfalls. "Of all the things you could have done, you chose to make fun of my body, the thing I trust the least."

"Don't you understand, Keily? I'm beyond attracted to you," James said, burying his nose in my cheek, but I pushed him away.

He sighed. "As for your body, it just seemed like an easy target to me, even though it's one of the most beautiful things about you."

"As I said before, I was too absorbed in my mission to stop and consider your feelings. Damn, I didn't even consider my feelings. I only knew this hunger to keep you close to me, one way or another.

"It was twisted and selfish. I realize now how shitty I was to you, and how many times I crossed the line. You shouldn't have had to put up with all that because of a crazy boy."

"But I did it," I snapped. "What has changed to make you come to this conclusion?"

"Lucas' punch, and the fact that he exploded after losing his girlfriend to something stupid. He revealed everything to me." His thumb rubbed my shoulder, trying to soothe me.

"Our kiss at the party also left deep marks. I was also a little angry at the time that you gave me so much hope only to take it away with a big "I hate you." I guess I was still mad at you.

"After my friend's speech, I decided to take a break from my quest for you. It helped me think about my actions.

"There wasn't a single second I didn't want you, but watching you like some poor guy across the hall doing your thing was nice too.

"Actually, it was better than harassing you... You know the rest.

"I can't say I'm a completely changed man now. I get jealous when I see you getting closer to other boys. Damn, I'm still jealous of Lucas, and how close you two are.

"If only I had had that kind of relationship instead of stalking you. I don't know what happened to me at that moment.

"Maybe I was afraid of all these new emotions, and I let my worst instincts control me, and I ended up hurting you."

I turned my head to face him. I noticed that his eyes were full of tears, like mine. This big revelation hurt me more than I thought. She hurt him, too.

"Can you forgive me for all my bullshit, Keily Harris?" His voice cracked a little.

"What do we have here?" someone said, as I was about to speak. Multiple footsteps followed, entering the private bubble James and I had surrounded ourselves with.

We turned around, and found four strangely familiar men behind us.

~Oh no. ~

## Chapter 31

It took me more than a few seconds to recognize the four men standing in front of us. These were the guys the girls and I had met at the entrance, when we were waiting for the others.

Right now, they were looking at James and me, amused, as if they had found a hiding place. I felt extremely uncomfortable under their gaze.

"What are you kids doing here?" one of them asked, his white teeth gleaming in the darkness. "It's not safe here at night."

James stood up and shielded me from their gazes. "We are well. We don't need you to worry," he said dryly. The message to leave us alone was clear in his tone.

I wasn't the only one who didn't like this new company.

"What are you trying to hide, boy?" another laughed. "Your girlfriend is not that easy to hide. Although it doesn't bother me. I see why you're doing this."

"Yeah," his friend added, licking his lip. "With all the meat she's carrying around, I bet she tastes good."

"And there's enough for us all to share." They all laughed like hyenas, which gave me goosebumps, I was so disgusted. ~This is so humiliating. ~

I immediately stood up, and held James' arm as he moved towards them. His fists and jaw were clenched as he glared at the men. He was furious.

If I hadn't reacted quickly, I knew he would have destroyed those perverts. I could have even let him, but there were four of them.

As heavily built as James was compared to all these men, he couldn't take on four guys at once.

"Leave before we call the cops," I said, glaring at them.

"Hold on. Isn't that one of the girls we saw earlier?" The one who liked to lick his lips recognized me. My threat had no effect on him or the others.

"Well, they sure like cops." Another one with black hair sneered, his eyes scanning me up and down.

"Honey, you won't call the cops until we're done with you," the blond taunted. I noticed that they had all moved closer, and were cornering us.

"Don't call her honey!" James growled, pushing me behind him. "And you won't do anything with her." He shifted stance, ready to attack.

This was all escalating too quickly, and I knew it wasn't going to end well for us. I discreetly slipped my phone out of my jeans pocket. There was no network. *No!~*

"A boy wants to protect the honor of his princess. Let's see what you're worth." ~Oh, my God! ~

What I saw next was James in the middle of four older men, resisting them. It all happened too quickly.

He tried to hold on, dodge their attacks and fight back whenever he could, but he was alone. These monsters had no qualms about beating up a high school student.

I screamed for help. I yelled at them to stop. I screamed as loud as I could, but no one came to help me. My face was soaked. I was crying. They hurt him.

Somewhere between the grunts of pain, I heard James yelling at me to run. But I couldn't leave him like that. In the clutches of these monsters.

I looked around, and found a large stone. I picked it up, and as expected, it was heavy. Heavy enough to be a weapon. James kept the men busy so they wouldn't notice me rushing towards them.

As I approached, I brought the rock down on the nearest guy's head with all the force I could muster. It was the blond one, and he fell to the ground with a curse seconds after I hit him.

When he didn't get up, I prayed that the man had just passed out. I wasn't ready to have blood on my hands.

My little stunt did not go unnoticed by others. Before I could recover from the shock of what I had done, I was lying on the floor,

stomach throbbing with pain.

"You want to fight, darling?!" He hit me in the face, and I went black for a second. I tasted blood in my mouth.

It was going to hurt a lot if we made it out alive.

"Let her go!" James shouted from somewhere.

"I don't know. I like this position," the Lip Licker taunted, rubbing against me. I felt nauseous.

My hand groped all around, digging into the ground and scooping up mud. When the Lip Licker turned towards me, I closed my eyes and threw the mud in his face.

"Slut!" he shouted, releasing his grip on me to rub his eyes. I took the opportunity to push him away. He fell backwards. I kneed him in the groin before he could recover.

At that moment, my every move was dictated by the adrenaline rushing through me. I felt like a spectator in my own body.

I hit the Liplicker's family jewels again, making him groan, then straddled him. I strangled his neck as he tried to hit me.



Because of the pain, his movements were less precise, so when he managed to hit my chest, it wasn't enough to get rid of me.

I put all the pressure on my thumb, and choked him even harder, driving his head into the ground. His fingers dug into my wrists to push my hands away. His hold was painful, but I didn't give up.

His body squirmed beneath me until he passed out. I didn't let go until I was sure he wouldn't get up.

I sighed in relief when I felt my unconscious attacker breathing beneath me. ~Good. He is not dead. ~

Trembling, I got up and looked for James. He took care of the two who remained much better than before.

He was holding one by the back of the head, and Black Hair was moaning behind him, holding his nose.

James' football skills and intensive training showed. Although it wasn't in very good condition.

He no longer had his leather jacket on, I spotted a little blood running down his forehead, and bruises that had started to appear on his face.

James kneed the guy he was holding in the abdomen, and knocked him to the ground, leaving the man groaning in pain. Looks like these perverts weren't so formidable when we isolated them.

"Alright, you and your girl know how to fight," said Black Hair, carefully stepping around James, who was looking at him with a dark, menacing eye.

If I'd thought James looked scary when he was roughing me, I'd never been so wrong. Right now he looked mortal. And when he looked at me, his bloody face turned downright murderous.

A shiver ran down my spine. I hoped I'd never see him like that again.

"You're dead," James growled, throwing himself at Blackhair.

Before James could reach it, Black Hair pulled something out of his pocket. Its tip glowed in the darkness. ~No! ~

"He has a knife, James!" I shouted. But it was too late, because he was already on the guy.

James punched Black Hair, hard enough to knock him off balance. However, he did not fall alone, and took James with him.

Before James could get up, before I could run towards them, a hand with a knife came up, and stabbed James in the side.

James didn't realize it right away, and he continued to beat the man mercilessly. He had no awareness of the knife stuck in his side, nor of the blood that was flowing and gradually staining his shirt.

He didn't stop until I got to him and pulled him away from the man. Black Hair was stunned and beaten to a pulp.

"Oh my God!" I shouted, looking at the blood flowing from his wound. I made him sit against the tree.

"Shit!" James growled when he touched the knife. It was buried deep inside him. "The bastard." He stared at the lifeless Black Hair.

I noticed that underneath all the red angry marks and dried blood, his face had started to turn pale.

"It hurts?" I sobbed, rubbing my eyes to clear my vision, but my tears didn't seem to stop. I was shaking so much.

"It hurts," James said, his face scrunching up into what was supposed to be a reassuring smile. "And you?" His hand came up to caress my face gently, and it stung.

When I flinched, he immediately pulled his hand away. I saw blood on his fingers. Fury flashed in James' eyes, but it disappeared as quickly as it came.

"It's nothing compared to you." I rubbed my eyes again, because I couldn't stop crying. My face throbbed at this simple gesture. The adrenaline was wearing off.

"You saved my day, Keily," he said proudly. "Who knew my girlfriend could destroy two guys?"

I sniffed. "I haven't agreed to be your girlfriend yet, so calm down."

"You're the."

I shook my head and sniffed. "We have to get out of here." I looked at the men lying around us. It wouldn't be long before they regained consciousness.

One of them was already awake and moaning, but thanks to James he was still.

James nodded. He looked extremely tired.

I took off my jacket and pressed it carefully around the knife. He flinched under the sudden pressure. "I'm sorry."

"It's not serious." His voice was weak, it didn't sound like him at all.

"You can get up?" I asked, gently stroking his hair across his forehead. They were wet with sweat, and probably blood.

"Yeah." He could not. I helped him up, and we slowly headed back the way we came.

The more we walked, the more James' steps slowed. At first he was reluctant to put his weight on me, but ten steps later he relented. I glanced at him.

Her lips had turned purple, and her skin had lost all color. I felt my jacket over his wound getting wet.

I was on the verge of falling under his weight, and crying all the tears in my body. Even though my tears were already falling silently.

*James, please hold on. Please.*~I didn't say the words out loud, knowing I would end up breaking down if I did.

James didn't say anything either. He could not. He was barely hanging on to stay conscious. I saw him try to keep his eyes open, and stumble down the path with me. I was losing it.

"Help!" I shouted as we reached the edge of the fair. "Help!" I yelled, putting all my energy into shouting as loud as possible. "Please, help!" I was breaking down, but I didn't stop screaming for help.

Finally, I fell, taking James with me. He didn't react. He had lost consciousness. The black obscured my vision too. Every muscle in my body ached. I was in so much pain.

I kept my blood-soaked jacket pressed against his wound, and I screamed for help. I screamed so loud my throat hurt.

My voice cracked, but I continued to scream against the annoying music playing in the background.

~Someone please help me! ~

"Holy shit!" *Finally!* The figure of a man approached us cautiously. "Are you doing well?"

"No," I said. "Help us, please."

## Chapter 32

Everything that happened after the man found us is a blur. A crowd gathered around us, the wails of sirens followed, and then we were carried to the ambulance. I had a hard time understanding all of this.

But I remember pointing to the edge of the lake, and telling the cops about our attackers, who were probably still lying there, and also in need of medical attention, although what I wanted most for these monsters was that they were behind bars.

Paramedics quickly treated James.

They wrapped his torso in bandages to stop the bleeding, laid him unconscious on the bed in the ambulance, and attached countless wires to his body, breaking the silence inside the ambulance. by beeps.

I was happy that each sound drowned out my breathing heavy with anxiety.

One of them also asked me a few questions, while shining a light in my eyes to check that I didn't have a concussion.

I was exhausted. Still, I couldn't look away from James' pale face, or the monitor recording his heartbeat. I had

afraid to look away, afraid it would escape if I did.

"Your boyfriend is going to be okay," the other paramedic sitting next to me said. "Don't worry."

I didn't want to tell him that James wasn't *Again* my boyfriend. I just nodded, but kept my eyes focused on him.

~It's okay. James will be fine. He's going to get through this. ~

\* \* \*

"He passed out due to low blood pressure and trauma. The knife almost reached his intestines, and the blood loss was quite significant," the doctor explained to me.

We were in the emergency room. James was on a bed behind the white curtains that separated him from the others.

"Luckily he won't need a transfusion. He is young and healthy, so he will recover in a few weeks. I will advise him to spend the night in the hospital."

I nodded, listening to him attentively.

"He will also need follow-up, as there is always a risk of infection, and his dressing needs to be changed. Her stitches will be removed in



a week," he continued.

"I prescribed him antibiotics and painkillers. For the next week, he will need complete rest."

"Thank you Doctor."

He shook his head slightly. "Your name is Keily, right?"

"Yes."

"Kelly, James is fine. Don't worry about him, keep a little worry for yourself too." He frowned as he looked at my face.

I knew I wasn't really looking my best. I had caught my reflection when the nurse was treating me, and it wasn't pretty.

My left cheek was marred with a purple bruise, and my forehead had a cut, which was now bandaged. In fact, my stomach had also started to bruise from the Lip Licker's punch.

"Have you called your parents and his?"

"I did it." After the nurse examined me, the first thing she had me do was call my parents.

They exploded on the phone when I told them I was in the emergency room.

I only told them the basics of what happened, emphasizing over and over that James and I were fine. But I didn't think it would make them less panicked.

They were on their way.

Then I called James' mother, using her phone. The nurses gave me his cell phone, wallet and other things before taking him in.

Mrs. Haynes was much calmer than my parents. Maybe because she was a doctor, and used to hospitals. Whatever the reason, I still reassured her that James was fine, and gave her the name of the hospital.

I tried calling Addison, then Sadhvi and others, but no calls went through. It looked like they were still at the fair, probably looking for James and me.

Finally, I decided to text them about the situation, hoping they would see it as soon as they had network.

"Good," said the doctor. "The police told me they caught these guys. You two played a dirty trick on them."

"Well, they played a dirty trick on us too."

"For now, these men are receiving medical treatment."

"They are in this hospital?" I asked. I didn't like the idea of these wretches being here.

"No. They are not here. Don't worry," he assured me.

"They will be arrested. Hopper needs both of your statements to press charges, but they won't get away with it. Two of them have already been to prison for felony and domestic violence."

I nodded. I never wanted to see these criminals again.

"Don't worry about it, Keily. Stay calm for now. Your parents have to arrive, let them take care of that."

"All right." I smiled at him. "Thanks again for everything."

"Don't worry about that. It's my job." He smiled back at me. "You can go see James now." With that, he left.

I slipped behind the curtain, and found a scowling James. His eyes cleared when he saw me, but the brat kept his scowl.

Even though the doctor assured me that he was fine, I still felt a little relieved to find him awake.

Color had begun to return to his previously ash-colored face. He also had minor injuries and small cuts.

"Hey," I said, taking the chair next to his bed, "the hospital gown looks great on you. Blue suits you well."

His lips curled slightly. "I can wear this home if you like." Just get me out of here."

"If you were awake, you heard what the doctor said. They're keeping you here for the night."

"I have two doctors in my family. I learned enough to get by on my own," he grumbled sullenly.

"You're not one of those doctors, so you haven't learned enough," I retorted, shaking my head as he huffed. "Lucas is right. You are truly a diva."

"THANKS. I got that from my mother."

I chuckled. "Speaking of your mother, I informed her of our... situation. I think she's on her way. My parents too."

He nodded. "What about Lucas, Matt, and the others?" he asked. " They know?"

"I tried to contact them, but I think they are still at the fair. I sent them a message. Hopefully, they'll see it."

James sighed. "How could the best night of my life turn out so shitty?" I thought the same.~ He took my hand that was resting on the bed, and gently stroked it with his thumb.

This simple contact made me feel at home. I saw bruises and redness on his knuckles. "Are you doing well? It hurts?" He looked at my purple cheek.

"It hurts when I touch it. Other than that, it's okay, I guess. But my whole body is so sore," I answered frankly.

"I'm going to make sure these bastards pay tenfold for every degrading word they said, and every hurt they caused you." His features darkened, and I knew these men weren't going to make it.

"Don't think about them right now," I said, gently brushing the hair from his forehead. Her brown curls were so soft and so long that they always found a way to fall on her forehead. I loved the feeling they gave.

And it seemed like I wasn't the only one who liked being touched. James calmed down instantly, letting me pet him.

"Keily," he said after a moment, and I was ready to listen. "You did not answer."

"Answered to what?"

"You forgive me?"

I stopped my caresses and met his dark gaze. It was going to take time.

"When we were walking in the woods, you were barely conscious. You were losing so much blood, and I was so scared. For a minute I thought I was going to lose you tonight.

"That thought was so horrible. It felt like someone had dug into my chest and ripped my heart out. It hurt me so much that compared to my physical pain, there was no picture.

"When we fell and I was screaming for help, I was also imagining a life without you. It was empty, as empty as death. I would have given anything to have you come back.

"Your stupid bullying or my weight issues didn't matter at that time. All that mattered was that you were there. Envy. With me.

"I may have lashed out, and I may have thought too much, but it allowed me to realize things that I refused to do, because of my fears and my complexes." I sniffed and rubbed my eyes.

I was surprised I wasn't dehydrated yet, since it was the thousandth time I cried tonight. "You see, this incident made me face my biggest fear. Losing someone I love."

James' lips parted in shock. I saw tears falling from his eyes too. ~Oh my God. We're both crybabies. ~

"So James, I think I like you. No, I know I love you... Yes, I love you." I nodded to confirm my words.

"Maybe it's too early, but that's how I feel. And I'm not going to let your stupid actions make me deny my feelings. I'm not going to be immature about them, like you.

"The last thing I want to do is repeat this cycle of stupidity.

"That doesn't mean I'm going to let you treat me like trash again. The words you said to get a reaction from me served their purpose, but you should know that that reaction was to hate you.

"I hated you every time you picked on me. So, I'll have no problem hating you if you start having that attitude again.

"You know, the moment I realized I had a crush on you was when you gave me your big smile right after your team won the game against Westview...

"My God, you look so beautiful when you smile... I think that really shows what approach you should have taken if you wanted to seduce me.

"You could have just smiled, and I would have lain at your feet." I paused to take a breath, and rub the tears from my cheeks. I was in an emotional mess at the moment.

James nodded sincerely. He was about to say something, but I stopped him.

"So what I mean is, I forgive you. I forgive you for all your bullshit, James. And if you stay like this, I will continue to love you, like I do now... I love you."

A minute of silence followed as we stared at each other. "Okay, now I'm done," I said when he didn't speak.

"Yeah." He cleared his throat and blinked away the tears.

"I love you too. I loved you from the moment I saw you. I'm sorry for all the stupid things I said, because I was so fucking desperate. I love you, Keily, and this time I'm going to show it properly."



"GOOD." I chuckled, breaking the gravity between us. The confessions were tense.

"You beat me to saying the A-word, and I thought I was going to scare you away." James smiled widely. Now that this demon knew my weakness, he used his charm.

"You saved my ass, and you took down two of those assholes... You have a lot more strength than you let people see, Keily. I can't believe you let me get away with all the bullshit I put out.

"You are so strong, amazing, beautiful. And all mine."

"And you? You're mine?"

"It's not even a question. I was yours the moment we met." The conviction in his voice made me react. ~He's mine. ~

Another round of tears followed. "Can I stop crying?" I complained, trying to clear my eyes.

"You need to stop, Keily, because you're making me cry too." He laughed, and I loved the sound of his laughter.

"What do you mean?"

"It's stupid actually," he said, "I'm not a big cryer, but I can't stop every time I see tears in your eyes. The fact that you're crying makes me cry too."

He shook his head. "What did you do to me, Keily?"

~It's so cute. ~

"I wish I had known this sooner. I would have cried my eyes out the very first time you made fun of me. That way, you wouldn't have been so formidable. It would have saved us problems."

"I guess." James smiled, and I couldn't stop caressing his beautiful face. We looked at each other like crazy lovesick people.

"Kiss me," he asked, and I did so willingly. I leaned down and captured his lips.

This kiss stung a little because of our bruises, but it did nothing to diminish our desire. He was gentle, me too. My body was buzzing, and wanting to synchronize with him.

I always thought first kisses were supposed to be special, but with him, the magic never faded.

I felt like I could kiss him for the millionth time, and the next kiss would still be like the first. ~I love it. ~

When we pulled away, I was, as always, blushing and euphoric.

"We sealed it with a kiss." His finger played with my strands of hair. "Now you're all mine, Keily Harris." He smiled when my blush darkened. "Finally."

The curtains that provided our privacy opened, making me immediately move away from James.

"James." A tall woman stood in front of us. She had dark brown hair in a neat bun, dark eyes, and familiar features. James' mother.

If the lady was middle-aged, she certainly didn't look it. She looked much younger, and beautiful. ~Good genes run in the family. ~

"Mom." James got serious, but he didn't let go of my hand. Mrs. Haynes noticed it too.

She cleared her throat and smiled at me. It wasn't the same smile as James's.

"Keily, thank you for standing by my son, especially when you are not well either. I am grateful to you. You were very kind."

"It's normal." I smiled back, trying to get James to let go of my hand. Let's thank our lucky stars that his mother didn't have us

surprised while we kissed.

"I spoke to the police on the phone, and James' father is on his way. He and I are going to make these thugs pay for what they did to you and my son."

I nodded and stood up. "I'll leave you two alone." I looked at James, and finally, with a sigh, he released his fingers from mine.

I went through the curtains, but before I left I heard some of their words.

"Is there something between you-"

"She's my girlfriend," James announced unapologetically.

~He's so cheeky! ~

I rushed out of the room, blood was rushing to my cheeks. Spying on them wasn't something I would do, even if I really wanted to know his mother's opinion of me.

I hoped I had made a good first impression, with my bruised face and tattered clothes.

After a minute of sitting on a bench, I saw my parents rushing to the emergency room from across the hall. Their eyes widened when they saw me.

I braced myself for the onslaught of questions that would follow.

It had been a long night, and by the look on my parents' faces, it wasn't about to end.

~But at least I gained a boyfriend. And I love her. ~

## Chapter 33

"I don't like the photo," I whined, looking at my driver's license. The photo on it was so ugly.

My eyes looked tired, my double chin was wider than Lake Michigan, and my hair was all tangled.

I could have sworn they deliberately used bad lighting to make our photos as unflattering as possible.

"It's okay," James said, glancing at the license in my hand. He was driving. We were in his car and on the way to the high school for the football game.

Today was the second game of the season for our high school. The football season had started two weeks ago, and our team had lost the first game.

The boys were good, but unfortunately James' sudden departure from the team had put them at a disadvantage. Our opponent was Pinewood Private High School, Jenkins' longtime nemesis.

James was our best tackler, so making up for his absence in a short period of time had been a difficult task.

Coach Martin had to come up with new game plans in less than a week, and as expected, they didn't stick.

Three weeks had passed since the incident at the fair. James had recovered well, but was advised not to exert himself too much so as not to hinder complete recovery.

He therefore had to give up the football championship. I was devastated for him, as it was our last year of high school, and his last event to play with his teammates.

Even though James didn't want to pursue a career as a football player, I knew he loved playing it. However, he insisted it wasn't a big deal.

He told me he wouldn't be done with football after high school, he could take it up as another hobby to stay in shape.

"This photo really dampened my enthusiasm about getting the driver's license," I said, putting the license back in my bag.

I had taken the driving test five days ago, and the license had been delivered to the house today. Finally, I was a legally driver. ~Yeaah! But a big boo for the photo. ~

"Don't let this poorly taken photo dampen your mood. You are beautiful." James smiled, his hand moved from the gear lever to my thigh.

His long fingers lifted my dress slightly, and brushed my exposed skin, giving me pleasant tingles.

I blushed and slapped her bold hand to push her away. "I know." I tossed my hair back exaggeratedly, and watched him smile.

James and I had started dating, and I couldn't have been happier. Things between us were moving forward.

Unlike me, James never hesitated to take the initiative in intimate contacts and caresses which disturbed me. His hands always found their way onto my body when we were close.

At first I was hesitant, afraid he would smell the extra fat on my body and be disgusted.

His past actions and my complexes were not completely erased, they were still hiding in certain corners of my mind.

But his tenacity and respect for my limits helped me overcome many obstacles.

I was now learning to feel good about myself, and to let my boyfriend have his share of the pie. The experience was liberating, and a little scary too.



"You look very handsome too," I complimented James. ~He is still very handsome. ~

I had on my knee-length summer dress, and I matched it with a peach-colored cardigan that I had bought with the girls.

James was wearing a brown plaid sweater and dark jeans. He was breathtaking, as always.

"I know, *kitten*." He pursed his lips to stifle his laughter when I stared at him.

"Stop calling me that!"

"It fits you well." James shrugged. He called me Kitten a few days ago as a joke. My reaction to the lame nickname had prompted him to tease me with it.

"No that's not true." I whispered, the color returning to my face. If I thought his intentions to bother me would one day stop, I was wrong. This guy liked to play on my nerves, one way or another.

"You can't stop giving me nicknames, can you? First Cochonou, and now this." I shook my head. "You know what? I prefer Cochonou to Chaton."

James burst out laughing. "Pig. What was I thinking?"

"Kitten. What are you thinking about *NOW*?!"

"You look a bit like a kitten. Very cute and ready to purr under my caresses. ~This guy! ~

I was redder than a fire truck. "Stop or I'll leave you," I threatened, even though we both knew I wasn't serious.

"Okay, okay. I'm sorry." His hand came back to hold mine. He hooked our fingers together, brought the back of my hand to his lips, and kissed it gently.

"You will not leave me. Never," he said with a smile, but we both knew he was serious. Was it wrong that I adored his possessiveness?

"Then don't call me Kitten." I almost pouted.

"OK, *Cha*»He smirked, as my eyes narrowed. "Keily."

I couldn't keep a straight face for long, and I chuckled. "You're such an asshole."

"So you're allowed to call me an asshole, but I'm not allowed to call you pet names."

"If Kitten is the best you can find, then no, you don't."

"I see. My girlfriend wants me to be more creative."

"Or maybe she's happy with you calling her Keily, her real name," I retorted.

His lips were reduced to a thin line, as if he was thinking about something. "What if I called you *Ma Keily*? Because you, Keily Harris, are all mine."

*Ma Keily*. It was probably cheesier and cheesier than Chaton, it didn't even have a rhythm, but damn, I melted on the spot. ~I'm going crazy. ~

"So original," I scoffed, my smile otherwise showing how much I loved it.

He looked at me, happy with my reaction. "THANKS, *Ma Keily*." He gave me his beautiful smile in return, before turning back towards the road.

If there was a part of me that still wasn't healed, it wouldn't stay that way for long. James was surely on the right track for us

fix.

He made me feel desired, wanted, and most importantly, loved. My journey to loving myself just got a lot easier.

And as for the man himself, he already had my heart.

\* \* \*

I was sitting on the stands right next to Lola. Matt was on the other side, his arm on his girlfriend's shoulders. The other seat next to me was empty, waiting to be taken by my boyfriend.

The match was about to start.

Today our opponents were once again Westview. The stakes were high this time. If our school lost, we would be eliminated from the season.

Westview was not going to give us an easy victory. They had already lost a match against our team, so this time they were surely going to give their all. Our team also had to give the best of itself.

The cheerleaders had just finished their performance, and once again, I was captivated by their flexibility and grace.

I really enjoyed seeing my friends perform on stage. Addison and Sadhvi were so cool.

My eyes drifted to James on the benches, where the players were grouped together. He was standing with Lucas, the coach and another of his teammates, and he was talking with them.

He had gone there to wish his team good luck. As much as James tried to act cool, he was just as nervous as his teammates, even though he wasn't playing.

He had also spent most of the day talking to Lucas on the phone. Lucas was very anxious about today's match, because scouts were coming to watch him play.

I watched how James was so patient and understanding with him.

I learned that beneath all the intimidating roughness, James was a gentle boy.

Sure, he had his moments of arrogance and insolence, leading to him being labeled as a curmudgeon, but once you got past that, you could see why his friends stuck with him.

*Why I stayed with him.* He was protective, caring and  
~surprisingly~ sensitive to the people he considered his own.

"Look who's here," Lola said, making me look away from James. She was looking at a small crowd of unfamiliar faces a few rows above us.

However, there was one face I recognized. Myra. "Is she here to cheer on Lucas or her high school?"

"Maybe both. Or none." I chuckled. "I hope she and Lucas bury the hatchet and get back together, or move on."

"Not everyone is like you and James," Lola commented. "Lucas and Myra are both stubborn. None of them are going to give in easily."

"But everyone can see that they are so in love with each other."

"Now you understand my frustration when I was looking at you and James," Lola said, smiling.

I groaned, a blush covering my cheeks. "Don't remind me."

"I also had a feeling there was something going on between you and James," Matt added, making my blush deepen. ~Are we both so transparent?! ~

Myra realized we were looking at her. I smiled and waved at her, which she waved back. We had some difficult initial exchanges, but there was no point in showing hostility.

We had added each other on Instagram, and had also chatted a few times. We weren't close, but so far she had been nice.

"Are you two friends?" Lola asked, surprised.

I shrugged my shoulders. "We talked online. She is cool."

"Who's cool?" James asked, settling into his seat. His arm came to wrap around my waist, and he kissed my cheek. My face reddened again as he openly displayed our affection.

I couldn't say I didn't like it, but it took some getting used to, for sure. Like I said, he was very cheeky. ~And without complexes. ~

"Myra," I replied. "She's there." I pointed my chin at her.

He scoffed. "No wonder Lucas looks so happy."

"I hope they end their argument soon," I said, very aware of James' cold fingers slipping under my vest.

"Maybe you can push Lucas to make up with her. Myra is mad at him, but she still wants him." I tried to keep my face impassive as his thumb gently stroked my waist, giving me goosebumps.

"I think I'll try. I don't want him to hold the candle to us anyway. He can be a pain in the ass."

"You really are a horrible friend." I shook my head, giggling. I knew he was joking, but not completely.

Ever since we started dating, Lucas had deliberately found ways to intrude on us to annoy James.

Sometimes it annoyed me too, but most of the time it was fun watching Lucas push James to the limit.

Lucas had told me once that it was his way of punishing James for all the times he'd been an ass to me. But I suspected it was mostly for his own pleasure.

James shrugged and pulled me closer to him. "This guy is lucky I don't kick his ass for trying to flirt with you in front of me."

"Maybe he wants to keep some spice in your relationship," Lola interjected, and Matt laughed. I thought they weren't listening to us.



"I don't need him to spice up our relationship. I can do it myself," James said, his hand under my cardigan sliding upwards.

My breath hitched and my body heated as his fingers almost reached my... chest. I looked at James, and found a wicked smile on his face as he stared ahead.

I waited for his hand to come up to feel my *breasts*, But he did not do it. His fingers remained glued just below my chest, tapping lightly as if waiting for me to lose my patience.

"Good for you, then. Let Lucas know," Matt added.

James nodded. Lola and Matt were absorbed in their conversation, not at all aware of my current situation that the devil was provoking next to me, and which he was enjoying.

"So tell me, what spices do you like, honey?" James whispered in my ear, and I shivered when his breath hit the soft spot on my neck.

I furrowed my eyebrows to glare at him. He took so much pleasure in exciting me and putting me in an awkward situation. He loved it. "Those who burn you, *YouAlso*."

He smiled, and I was gone. He leaned down and kissed me hard, not caring about the people around us.

I couldn't deprive myself of tasting him either, nor of the thrill that each of his kisses gave me. I kissed him harder back.

"Just looking at you makes me burn, *Ma Keily*", he said cheekily at the end of our kiss, when we were both out of breath. His eyes lit up and stared at me possessively.

I was even more excited and embarrassed now. His kiss had succeeded in heating me up a hundredfold. ~It's a devil who tempts me so well. ~

"The match begins," Matt said, bursting the bubble where only James and I existed. "Are you finished?" he teased us. I turned red, realizing that our friends had just witnessed our languorous kiss.

~It shouldn't take long for me to get used to the way we behave in public, because maybe I'm just as shameless as James. ~

"Shut up," James growled.

The game started a few minutes ago. Our high school led the first attack. I was watching our team play, Lucas playing, and I wanted him to be recruited by the best university.

But my attention was only half on the field. The rest was about the man sitting next to me, and his hand on my body which excited and calmed me at the same time.

I found James' loud swearing and quiet encouragement more interesting than the game itself. I felt his grip tighten on me every time one of our players closed the distance between him and the touchdown.

His eyes lit up when we scored, and went dark when our opponents scored. He was so interesting to watch. So beautiful.

~I'm so excited. ~

## Chapter 34

We won. Our team won the match. It was not an easy victory. The Westview team was good, really good, but our players gave it their all, and won by nothing.

Throughout the game, everyone was on the edge of their seats, and when our player scored the final field goal, the spectators erupted into loud cheers.

Lucas was superb tonight. His training and commitment to the game showed how he carried the team as captain.

I was sure he had impressed the recruiters and gotten the athletic scholarship to college.

"This one is good," Sadhvi said, looking at her cell phone. We had just finished taking selfies and photos, as she requested. It was a ritual for her to post online after each victory.

She wasn't the only one though, almost everyone around us was taking pictures with the players or cheerleaders.

When the game was over, Matt, Lola, James and I went down to where the players and cheerleaders were celebrating.

For now, James and Matt were with the team on the benches, while Lola and I were with Addison, Sadhvi, and other cheerleaders.

"I so want to have a mega party," Addison said cheerfully, her arms draped over Sadhvi and me. "Dude, if only Coach didn't give us a hard time about the parties."

"You're leaving tomorrow night for another game," Lola scolded.

"Rest tonight. And slow down with the holidays, we don't want you to destroy your liver." She looked at Addison and Sadhvi.

I chuckled when Sadhvi pouted.

"I'm going to ask Keily to throw me a party at James's with lots and lots and lots of expensive alcohol." Addison stuck her tongue out at Lola, before blinking at me. "You're going to do it, right?"

I shook my head. "I don't own James' house or his money for him to spend on alcohol that will rot my cousin's liver." I smiled at her impassive expression as she let go of me, feeling betrayed. Lola snickered too.

"But you own his heart, miss," my cousin said, looking at me. "The way he makes eyes at you, he would jump off a cliff if you asked him."

My cheeks flushed as I followed his gaze. James was looking at us, looking at me, while chatting with his teammates.

It was funny like before, I wanted to disappear from his sight, but now I relished the attention he gave me.

He wasn't the only one, though. My eyes had locked with his dark ones many times in the short time I had been with the girls here.

"My little protégés have come a long way." Addison sighed.

I tore my gaze from James to raise my eyebrows at her. "Your protégés? From what I remember, you were the one most opposed to us being together."

"Rightly so," she said. "But opinions change. And above all, James has changed."

"I can't say otherwise." I also wouldn't have been in favor of dating James if he had continued to misbehave.

"Then make him throw the party, and buy me some drinks."

I chuckled, shaking my head. "We'll see when you win your track meet, and the guys bring us that trophy."

"I'm not worried about Addison," Sadhvi said. "But it will be quite difficult for our football team to win this season without James."

"He and Lucas are our best players. With one of the two less, it will be difficult to win."

"Then we won't win. Big deal." Lola shrugged. "It's just high school."

I nodded. Winning was nice, but ultimately it was the enjoyment of the game that counted.

"And as for parties, I'm sure you'll find other reasons to have them." I nudged Addison.

An arm slipped around my shoulders, and a familiar smell surrounded me. "Ready to go home?" James asked. Lucas, Matt, Keith and Axel were there too.

I smiled at him and nodded.

"Not until I get my winner's kiss, Keily," Lucas said cheerfully, and stepped forward.

James pulled me into his arms, and glared at Lucas. "That's my girl, you moron," he growled, looking up at the stands. "Yours is up there. Ask him for a kiss. Don't come near my girlfriend."

Lucas' cheeks colored when he too looked at Myra, who was chatting with her classmates. He returned.

"Keily, you should find yourself another guy," he said to me, pointing to James. "This one is a curmudgeon, and he gets jealous easily. She is also a very demanding diva. I'm not sure you can handle all that."

I chuckled as I saw our quarterback trying to get revenge on his friend. "That's well said, but I'll keep it for now."

James frowned.

"It's not like you can give it back easily," Addison added. "The prince shed his blood for you. Now he expects nothing less than your lifelong allegiance." She was referring to the incident at the fair.

The first few days, everyone was very concerned about James and me, and visited us regularly.

Now our tragedy had become something of a joke in our circle of friends, and James and I accepted it. Laughing about it eased the trauma.

Everyone laughed except James, who frowned. I stood on tiptoe and gave him a kiss on the cheek to soothe him. My face colored as our friends started making fun of me. *God, I hate them.*

"We're leaving," James announced, annoyed. I congratulated Lucas before my boyfriend dragged me away.



\* \* \*

"The guy who replaced you was really good too," I said, as James and I walked towards his car in the parking lot. Our hands were joined.  
"What is his name?"

"Mark," James replied gruffly. His black Chevrolet Camaro was a few steps away.

"Yeah, Mark played really well. I think our team has a good chance this season. Everyone works hard. Maybe we can beat Pinewood High next time.

Last game you weren't prepared, but now with a good game..." I yelped, before I was suddenly slammed against the door of the Camaro by a strong grip on my waist.

"James, what are you doing?" I glared at the smiling culprit.

"I know you've been watching me all evening," he said thickly. He leaned in, and our noses brushed. My heart raced, and my stomach buzzed with butterflies.

"So what?" I asked, out of breath. His proximity and his ardent gaze did not help me calm the lack of him that I felt this evening. And this demon understood it.

"So" – he placed a little kiss on my lips, without letting me extend it – "your starry eyes are making it hard for me to let you go tonight. I want to take you home." Another kiss.

"Take you to my bed." His eyes searched my face, and lit up at what they saw. "Do you want to come with me?" He smiled. He. Smiled.

I was already in it, there was no need to use my weakness against me. *This guy is unscrupulous.*

I nodded, captivated by his tricks. A long, deep, breathless kiss was my reward, plunging me further into confusion caused by James.

He opened the door for me, and even put on my seat belt before walking quickly to the driver's side. He was impatient. He left the parking lot, and we were on the road.

On the way to his house, I tried to make small talk by talking about today's game, but it was clear neither of us were interested in that.

We were so interested in something else, and we couldn't help but smile at the idea.

I texted Addison to cover for me tonight, and she responded with a wink, and a "thirsty" emoji. I didn't like lying to my

parents, but I certainly wasn't ready to have this awkward conversation.

They both liked James, and approved of our relationship. However, sex was a whole other dimension to cover, at least for Dad. They would eventually find out.

We got out of the car as soon as it reached James' garage. He wrapped his fingers around my wrist, and started dragging me into his house.

He walked too fast, and my little legs had trouble keeping up with his long strides. I didn't know why, but my panties were dampening at his impatience.

"Aah." I tripped on the stairs because of the gap between our steps. James turned towards me, and before I knew it, my world turned upside down and I found myself clinging to his shoulder like a big sack.

"James!" I screamed, holding on to the back of his shirt and his hair. "James, put me down! Right away!" I yelled, but the idiot didn't listen, and he ran up the stairs with me clinging to him.

"You are going to hurt yourself! Rest me! You're still recovering."

"Shh. I'm fine, so don't shout," he scolded me, as if I was the one being unruly there.

"Why no shouting?" My eyes opened wide, as I thought. "Wait, are your parents home?" I asked, fear in my stomach.

His mother worked night shifts at the hospital on Fridays, and most days his father left on weekends to join their company's other branch in Hemingway City.

But that didn't guarantee they were never home on Fridays.

"No, they're not at home. I just want you to save your screaming for later."

My body heated from head to toe at his cheeky remark. "You...you... uh...you're not ashamed," I stammered pathetically, staring at his moving feet.

"And you have enough for both of us." I knew he was smiling.

"I can walk..." A slap sounded, and a second later my butt was burning. "Did you just spank me?"

"Yes," he replied simply, as his hand returned to massage my ass over my dress. My panties were a mess now.

"It's one of the things I've always wanted to do to you. Do you have any objection?" His tone was teasing, but I knew he was giving me a door

Release.

"Pervert," I muttered, but didn't stop him. I guess I liked getting spanked from his big hand. Another slap landed on my other buttock, and made me cry out.

"What did you say?"

"James," I moaned, and he chuckled, rubbing my sore spot apologetically. I still couldn't believe that James Haynes, my old nemesis, was fondling my butt.

We reached his room, and he dropped me onto his box spring bed. My shoes fell to the floor. Our eyes met and my throat closed.

The hungry look he was giving me made me want to run away, and get him at the same time. I moved back on the bed, and he smiled, looking at me like trapped prey.

He enjoyed seeing me lying on his bed, and at his mercy.

"Tonight I'll make you mine in every sense of the word, Keily," James said as he took off his sweater.

I couldn't look away from his bare torso. He was all curves and muscles underneath. He had abs and a V-line to die for.

On his side, I saw the scar he had made three weeks ago, and it didn't tarnish his beauty at all, it only enhanced it. He was perfect.

*He is perfect.*

*But not me.* The demeaning thoughts cruelly resurfaced after so many days, and at the worst time. ~No, no, no. Don't ruin everything, Keily. ~I thought I forgot them. He had to.

*He loves you.*

*But what if that's not the case after seeing you in full? All the lumps and excess fat in your body.* ~Your stretch marks on your chubby stomach.~ ~Will he always want you?~

The bed tilted, and James was on top of me. "I will never let you go." He kissed me, taking my vest off my shoulders.

His lips moved down to my neck and bit me, making me moan. He said some bad words, and continued up to my shoulder, wetting and biting me all the way, and most likely leaving marks.

I was a moaning, red wreck beneath him.

I didn't realize when my vest was taken off, and I was left in my summer dress. When his fingers slid up to my

thigh and pulled up my dress, all the negative stood out.

I pushed his hand and pushed him away, gasping for air.

"What's the matter?" James asked, still hovering over me. The desire had not yet disappeared from his eyes.

"I'm a virgin," I blurted out without thinking.

His gaze softened and he smiled. "We've already talked about it." Yes, it was true, a few days ago, when we told each other about our previous relationships. He had two, I had none.

"I'm sorry for jumping on you like that. It was selfish. I'm going to take it slowly. Tell me right away if you don't like something."

His fingers brushed my calf lightly, making goosebumps crawl all over my skin.

When James leaned down, I pushed him again. "I'm sorry."

"You don't want to do it." He really tried to hide his disappointment.

I shook my head. "I want to do it, but I'm scared."

"Afraid of what?"

"I have never done that. No one has ever seen me naked." At least not since I grew up. I blinked the tears away. I didn't want us to cry right now.

"You are perfect. Not me." I looked down. "I'm so sorry for dragging you into sharing my burden. You shouldn't have to deal with my problems and hang-ups."

"Too late for that, darling," he said.

"You are mine now, with all the burden you carry. Maybe I don't have the best way to show it, but I knew you were the one for me from the moment I laid eyes on you.

"Your mind, your face and *your~bodies~* are for me."

"I don't know how much I contributed to these nagging thoughts that are dragging you down, but if you let me, I'll show you how much I wanted you while I was bullshit on you. I want you so much now."

"Stop blaming yourself, James. What I feel is the product of years of my small and big experiences. Your months of stupid teasing and harassment cannot be compared."

"So believe me, and let me show you how beautiful you are."



I looked at the sincerity in his eyes, and nodded. He placed a kiss on my lips, while his hands moved to my back, and undid my dress.

I was on the verge of pushing him away again, but before I knew it, the entire dress had left my body. *He is fast.*

James pinned my hands above my head with one hand, when they instinctively came to shield me from his ravenous eyes. There was no sign of disgust, only wild voluptuousness on his face.

Shortly after, my bra was removed. *Oh my God!* I feared for my life as I saw my body blush under his burning gaze.

James laughed at me, his finger drawing circles on my heavy breasts. "You little idiot, are you ashamed of this?" I moaned as he pinched my nipple. "Well, it's time you learned not to be ashamed."

His dark eyes met mine, and I nodded, which was enough for him to let go.

He showed me again and again how beautiful I was, all night long. When we finished, I was sore, my muscles ached, and every part of my body was marked with purple bites.

He couldn't keep his promise to take it easy, and I didn't want him to keep it.

Despite all the pain in my body, there was satisfaction in my heart while I was in his arms. There was so much happiness.

I was beautiful. And every time I forgot, my man would be there to remind me. The mission was to never forget it.

"I love you," James said, caressing my pink cheeks.

"I love you." I smiled...*I love him so much.*

END