

## Keily | Don't Look at Him

### Don't Look at Him

Jenkins High was crazy about football.

The bleachers were stuffed, not an inch of space between two people. I spotted some unfamiliar faces among the crowd too, which Matt told me were the students from Westview High School—our rival tonight.

The field was brimming with loud cheers and chatter. Many wore black T-shirts with our school's logo, and some even held banners with slogans, cheering for the team.

The atmosphere was very lively, and I got the feeling I was part of something big.

I'd never witnessed this much enthusiasm for even the most anticipated games in my previous school, much less for just a friendly preseason game like the one happening today in Jenkins.

"You look pretty," Lola said, smiling at me. She, Matt, and I were sitting on the bleachers. It was 5 p.m., and the game was about to begin. "I like the skirt. Did you buy it with Addison and Sadhvi?"

"Yeah." I nodded, blushing a little at her compliment.

I was wearing the halter-neck top and red skater skirt that I'd bought with the girls on Sunday, and had added a denim jacket over it, because the days had started to become windy.

"You look good too," I said.

She really did, dressed in all black with a Metallica T-shirt tucked inside her high-waisted jeans. It suited her mysterious persona.

After the game, we were going to huddle at James's house to party, so everyone was dressed for the occasion.

My dad had been apprehensive about letting me go to another party (after I returned so hungover from the last one), but once I mentioned it was at James's place, his complaints toned down.

Even though things had worked in my favor, I didn't like how my parents were so impressed by him.

Dad had nothing to worry about, anyway. I wouldn't drink at the party tonight, because I'd offered myself as the designated driver for Addison and Sadhvi.

I had a learner's permit, and Addison had assured me that was fine in Bradford; if I could drive well, I wouldn't get into any trouble.

Another reason I wanted to remain sober was not to let my guard down. I might have been going to the wolf's den, but that didn't mean I wanted to be eaten alive.

The last time at Keith's house had been enough.

This time, I'd keep my head straight and avoid him, instead of instigating him by doing something stupid...like kissing Lucas.

"I heard you convinced James to throw the party at his house." Lola looked at me. I noted a teasing glint in her honey-brown eyes.

"No, I didn't. It was Lucas. I just agreed when James offered to host the party at his place if I'd come," I mumbled, making sure only she heard me.

Matt was busy chatting with a boy sitting beside him; fortunately, there was too much noise around us for him to filter out my words even if he'd heard.

"That's even more interesting." Lola bit her lips to hide a smirk. "Still think my theory was wrong?"

My face flushed, and she leaned into me, probably sensing my discomfort at having this discussion when Matt was just on her other side.

"Keily, James might have a messed-up way of showing it, but I think he likes you."

"No, he doesn't," I hissed, surprising both her and myself with my strong denial.

I was tired of hearing the same thing, and the worst part was I'd started believing it. But I needed to deny her words for the sake of my sanity.

I didn't want to build castles in the air, only to see them crumble if Lola's "theory" was wrong—which, by the way, was very likely.

"He just played along with Lucas and decided to host the party, because he enjoyed my reluctance at going to his place. James only likes calling me names and causing me misery."

"And why do you think he only likes doing that to you?"

"Because I'm fat, and he's one of those assholes who loves to pick on that!" I whisper-yelled, my emotions getting the better of me.

"I've faced many people like him," I continued, "and the last thing I expect is for them to have a crush on the person they call 'piggy,' 'whale,' or whatever insult rolls off their tongue."

"Keily," Lola said softly, her eyes peering at me sympathetically, "you're not fat. Curvy, sure. But not fat. You're beautiful, and the assholes who say otherwise are stupid, including James."

Her face fell, and her brows furrowed. "Who are the other people that called you names? Were you bullied at your last school?" she asked.

"I, uh—" My mouth went dry. I didn't want to tell her how much of a loser I'd been back in Remington. I was ashamed of all the bullying I'd suffered there.

Even though I knew Lola wouldn't judge me, it was still embarrassing to let her know that I had always been a victim.

"You can always find people who have something to say about your body," I replied vaguely.

Her brows knitted further, expecting me to go on, but when I didn't, she sighed and nodded. She was very good at reading body language.

"Those people shouldn't matter," she said simply, closing the topic. "The reason I told you about James liking you is not so that you can romanticize his actions and jump into his arms."

“I want you to confront him about it and hopefully put an end to this cat-and-mouse game that you two have going.”

*Cat-and-mouse game? Is this what we look like?*

I nodded regardless of having no intention of taking her suggestion.

I absolutely didn't have it in me to confront James and accuse him of bullying me because *he liked me*.

Besides, the most likely scenario would be for him to laugh his ass off and get one more piece of ammunition against me.

He'd talk my ear off, reminding me why an overweight girl would never be worthy of him. He was sadistic like that.

Before Lola could continue, loud cheers erupted around us. Players and cheerleaders from both schools were coming onto the field.

She squeezed my hand in my lap and smiled, letting me know we'd continue this conversation some other time.

Our team was in black, whereas the guests wore light-blue jerseys. The uniforms of the cheerleading squads matched their respective teams.

When the guest team's cheerleaders were arranging themselves at the center of the field, I noticed they had three guys, which was refreshing; I was used to seeing only girls as cheerleaders.

“Addison wants guys on our cheerleading team too,” Lola commented. “It's kind of sad none of the boys are willing to join. They still consider it a girl's job.”

Matt snorted. “Don't start with that again.” But when the teams approached the benches, his attention shifted back to point out who the difficult players were among our rivals.

What I found out was that their quarterback, Ryan, and running back, Collin, were good.

My gaze wandered to the players at their benches. Lucas had drilled into my head that his uniform number was nine so that I could always look out for him in the game.

He had also let it slip that James's number was thirteen. And somehow, while looking for Lucas, my eyes landed on James. He was talking with one of his teammates.

My messed-up brain couldn't help but admire him in his football gear, which accentuated his ruggedness and dominance.

His hair was tousled, with a few strands falling on his forehead. His dark eyes were filled with determination, and his lips pursed in concentration as he listened to the other guy.

It was unfair how good looking he was.

Before I knew it, James was staring back at me. I blushed—for the thousandth time this evening—at being caught checking him out.

Although we were seated close to the ground, it was unsettling how easily he had located me among hundreds of others in the crowd.

Familiar tingles spread through me as his gaze slid down to my body.

I felt a little more confident today with my clothing choice, but his smoldering eyes were enough to make me feel as if I was naked.

*Asshole.*

I turned as red as a tomato when he looked back up at my face.

I would have looked away by now, but his eyes pinned mine to his until he was the one to break our eye contact when the guy he was talking to patted his shoulder.

*He hates you, Keily,* I chanted in my head to stop the fluttering in my stomach, to stop myself from developing feelings for him.

Matt's laugh brought me out of my thoughts. I looked sideways to find him and Lola leaning into each other, whispering and giggling between themselves.

They looked really cute, so much that I almost felt jealous of them. Despite having opposite personalities, they fit together.

They took care of each other, gave each other space, and communicated so well. After knowing them for three weeks, it was hard to dismiss their relationship as a high-school fling. They were in it for the long haul.

I wanted to have a relationship like that too, with so much trust and love.

But instead, I was sitting here, ogling my tormentor and on the verge of developing Stockholm syndrome.

*I am a mess!*

I turned my head back to the field, not wanting to creep on the couple.

Loudspeakers blared, and another round of cheers exploded from the audience.

The cheerleaders from Westview, at the center, started their routine. Their performance was impressive.

With all the flips and jumps that they were doing, I was scared of the injuries they'd suffer if anyone fell. The guys in their squad helped them by adding more thrilling stunts.

When they finished, everyone applauded, even though they were our rivals tonight.

Then it was our girls' turn. An unconscious grin spread across my face as I saw Addison and Sadhvi in the middle. They looked so pretty in their cheerleading outfits and high ponytails.

We hooted and whooped throughout their performance. I understood why Addison wanted guys in the squad; their routine lacked the muscles to do overhead jumps and stunts.

However, the small pyramid in the end was good. The applause for them was louder because they were the home team.

Next, our principal, Mrs. Benson, came to the podium and wished good luck to the teams. A coin was tossed, and Westview won it, getting the first offense.

Players from both sides started positioning themselves on the field. I purposely avoided looking at James and instead searched for Lucas.

I found him with a big nine on his jersey. Everyone had their helmets on now, so I couldn't see his face.

"Lucas will be the middle linebacker," Matt muttered. "James is going to be the tackle."

Lola nodded. I had zero knowledge of football, so his words went over my head.

"The middle linebacker takes the call and arranges everyone to stop the offense," Lola explained. "And the tackle does exactly what it sounds like."

"Oh."

"James also plays cornerback sometimes, but Ryan usually doesn't throw far...", Matt continued as we watched the players taking their positions.

I had no idea what he was going on about, but it sounded like James was important.

Well, I already knew that.

The game began, and I had a hard time keeping up with all the passes, tackling, and running. But Matt's commentary gave me some idea about what was going on, on the field.

He loved talking about football, and a noob like me learned things here and there from that. When the time came for our team's offense, Lucas threw the ball to Drake, our running back.

James was playing left tackle. His job was to guard the thrower, aka Lucas. Now I knew where he used his big, muscular physique.

We had our first touchdown before the end of halftime. It was scored by Seth, who was playing wide receiver. The uproar that we let out the second he reached the end zone was deafening.

Throughout the game, my focus unconsciously went to James. His agility, speed, and strength were amazing. It was hard not to look at him.

And when the buzzer echoed, announcing our team had won, the big grin splitting his sweaty face as he tore off his helmet was enthralling. I'd never seen him this carefree.

He was beautiful.

*Wait. What the heck?!*