

Keily | A Hard Chest

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My eyebrows raised as we stepped into the kitchen. It had been over two hours since I walked into James's castle, and I should've been used to the Haynes's luxury. But I wasn't.

Their kitchen was huge, installed with equipment I'd never seen before. The granite countertops looked too expensive to spill anything on them—and *James cooked here.*

I really liked the chandelier above the middle counter, as well as the cute white stools and the flowerpot in the center. Everything was outstanding.

James let go of my hand, making me miss its warmth, and walked to the corner where alcohol was stored. I followed silently, studying my surroundings.

"I'm not drinking tonight," I said when I saw him grabbing vodka. "I have to drive Addison and Sadhvi home."

"I did find it strange that they were both drinking together." He put the bottle back before turning to the fridge and rummaging inside it. "They've baited you into being their designated driver?"

"I offered. I didn't feel like getting intoxicated."

"Why not? At Keith's house, you were having the time of your life drinking with Lucas." I noted brusqueness in his tone.

I glared at his back. "Yeah, I was having the time of my life—until *someone* decided to ruin it."

He paused for a second. "Lucas shouldn't have been kissing anyone. Even though they're fighting, Lucas has Myra. He hasn't been with any other girl since. I wanted to save him the guilt the next morning."

"Is that why you're so against Lucas and me dating?" I asked gingerly.

“Yes.” The door of the fridge closed with a thud, and I internally winced at the rough handling of such expensive things. “Here.”

He handed me a chilled can of Mountain Dew, keeping the other one for himself.

I had a suspicion that there was more to his answer, but I didn’t pry. We were on a delicate line, and I didn’t want to be the one to break our temporary truce.

Once my can was open, my free hand was again in his. It was scary how easily I was getting comfortable with it.

James guided me through the house’s main floor. Everywhere we went, there were people.

Guys were playing in the indoor basketball court, the living area at the entrance was bustling, and the garden was crowded.

I also spotted Matt and Lola sitting on a loveseat on the patio, kissing. I had to wonder where all these people had come from. Maybe students from Westview High had also decided to join us.

James and I didn’t say much to each other throughout. I just told him his house was beautiful and pointed out things I liked.

He also only 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 awkward. The silence between us felt comfortable. Our cans were halfway finished.

I discovered that the swimming pool at the back of the mansion was the main attraction of the party when we reached it.

It was as wide as my house, and people were showing no hesitation in making full use of it. Some were sitting on its edge with their legs dipped in the water, and many were inside in their underwear.

Almost everyone had some kind of drink in their hand.

While we were standing at the poolside, raised voices—well, more raised than the drunken laughter—drew our attention.

I recognized Drake and Seth first, a couple of James's teammates. They were standing on the back patio with a couple of other guys who were completely unfamiliar. Clearly, nobody was happy.

The taller of the two had broad shoulders and a defined jawline, his arms crossed over his thick chest as if trying to assert dominance. Beside him, the second boy was slightly shorter but equally fit, his muscular frame obvious under his tight T-shirt.

"You seriously getting worked up over that?" the tall guy said. "Come on, Drake, don't tell me you pansies can't handle some harmless banter."

"Maybe you think you're hot shit on the field, but around here? Show some respect or get the hell out. James invited you as a gesture. Don't push your luck."

The shorter guy laughed. "Respect? That's rich. If you can't handle a few words, that's on you. Maybe you should learn how to take a hit—oh, wait, we already know you can't."

I glanced at James beside me and saw his posture stiffen. His laid-back demeanor was gone, replaced by a cold focus as he watched the argument.

"Who are they?" I whispered.

"Ryan and Collin. They play for Westview." His dark eyes were locked on them, and though he hadn't entered the conversation, he didn't need to; the warning in his expression was clear enough.

The tall guy's grin faltered when he noticed James watching. The shorter one must've caught it too, because his smirk faded, and the two of them exchanged a glance that wasn't dripping with arrogance.

"All right, fine. No need to get all serious. We were just messing around." Tall Guy shrugged. "We'll catch you guys on the field."

Short Guy's gaze flickered back to James, and he gave a nonchalant wave before muttering under his breath, "Party's a drag anyway."

Without waiting for a response, the two of them turned and walked back inside the mansion, hopefully to the door.

James didn't say a word, but the look on his face as he watched them leave told me everything I needed to know. If Ryan and Collin had stuck around much longer, things would have gotten ugly.

Hoping to clear the air with a change of subject, I peeked at his profile and said, "Your house is so big. It's like a little island."

"Yeah." James nodded, finally turning back to the pool. "But sometimes it seems a bit much. Too big for just a family of four. My brother isn't even living here anymore. My parents really love making money and showing off how much they make..."

I felt his thumb rubbing the back of my hand. I struggled to focus past it.

He continued, "I guess, they have a right to, because they sure do work hard for it. Sometimes, they even forget they have a son waiting for them back home."

He sounded as though we were discussing the weather, not his unfulfilling home 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'd shared something personal with me, I didn't like him being sad.

I knew I shouldn't sympathize with the devil, but I couldn't help it.

He looked at me and gave a crooked smile. "You're here to have a good time, not to give therapy to a sad rich boy."

I quirked my brows. "Sad rich boy?"

He shrugged.

I chuckled. "To be honest, that kind of suits you."

"Is that so?" The mischievous twinkle in his eyes reappeared, making my guard go up. "I thought *asshole* suited me better. Wasn't that what you said?"

My face went aflame. The easygoing air between us vanished. I'd been stupid to think he'd let go of my stupid confession back in the game room.

"I...uh..." His heated gaze wasn't helping me come up with coherent words.
"I..."

Just kill me right now.

Something hit my back, and I lost my balance, my heels tripping on the smooth tiled floor. My fingers slipped away from James's.

I saw the clear water getting closer and prepared myself for falling headfirst into the pool.

But the splash didn't come. I was pulled back up and collided with a hard chest.

James had me pressed against him, his arms wrapped around my waist. I heard a faint "Sorry" from somewhere, but I didn't dare tear my gaze away from the pair of pitch-black eyes holding mine.

They were fierce and hungry. My whole body felt charged. It tingled. The smell of expensive cologne mixed with his own musky scent enveloped me, awakening new desire.

Desire for him.

James tightened his hold, closing the remaining gap between our bodies.

He's so close.

"Are you okay?" His lips moved, and my eyes immediately darted to them.

Before I could think, I kissed him.

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