

Keily | A Reddening Blotch

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“Yo, Keily!” someone hollered 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 a couple of guys sitting on the back row. They were on the football team and ran in the same circles as James.

I’d never interacted with them; however, right now, the wide smiles on their faces screamed trouble, putting me on alert.

“How did our Haynes perform on Friday? Did you reach the end zone?” one of them said, and laughter echoed in the classroom.

“He’s one of our best,” another guffawed. “But then again, we can’t be sure, given that you’re such a handful.”

“Well, I can always lend him a hand,” the previous one winked at me. My skin crawled with disgust.

“That kiss was pretty hot, though,” a voice commented from somewhere else, and on cue, other students sitting around started making kissing sounds, adding to my embarrassment.

I immediately swiveled back, a strong blush coating my cheeks. I looked down, letting my hair fall to the sides in hopes of curtaining my burning face. This was what I’d feared.

As if James’s mockery wasn’t enough, his teammates had to join in too.

The snickers and hollers of others at my expense felt eerily familiar. Memories of jeering and deprecating comments from my classmates in Remington flashed before me.

I really wanted to throw a good comeback to shut up their obnoxious laughs, but right now, I couldn't think of one fast enough. I was too frazzled by the complexity of the mess I'd made.

Fortunately, I didn't have to endure any more snide remarks, because our teacher arrived, shushing the class.

My thoughts didn't calm down, though, imagining all sorts of witty things I could have said to shut those guys' mouths.

If only it were that easy.

I dragged myself to English class, mentally preparing to handle another encounter with James.

His comments to his friend this morning had really bruised my self-esteem and once again had made me ashamed of having feelings for him.

His words made me question all the amazing things I'd felt when we kissed.

Maybe the sparks and glitter had been only on my side, whereas he'd just written it off as a *desperate girl* latching onto him.

But that night, he'd been so passionate and sweet...

Humph. I was already at my wit's end with this guy.

Add on top the unwanted attention of some people—like in Physics—and the squabble between Addison and me, all because of our picture, I was reaching my breaking point.

It was all too much, and the day wasn't even close to ending. I swore if that jerk James said anything else, I'd...

I froze in my tracks when I heard the shouts. My eyes darted over the tense crowd forming just past the lockers. *What's going on?*

The sea of students parted enough for me to catch sight of Lucas first—his tall, muscular frame towering over the others. His expression was twisted in anger. Before I could wonder at what, my eyes landed on James.

He stood there, his body tense, but his hands were at his sides. His face was shadowed by a look I couldn't place, but Lucas's voice drew my attention back to him.

"You gotta stop talking about her like that, man," Lucas growled. "You think spreading lies makes you look good? Makes you feel big?"

My stomach dropped. I didn't need to hear more to know they were talking about me.

"You treat her with nothing but contempt, and now you're acting out because she rejected you. You brought this on yourself, James."

James didn't even flinch. His face remained unreadable, but I could see the tension in his jaw, his eyes narrowing slightly as Lucas's words sank in. Then, with that infuriating smirk of his, he spoke.

"Please," he sneered. "You think I care? She was just a game, man. A little fun until she got too...desperate."

The words hit me like a slap, even though I shouldn't have been surprised. He'd already said them this morning. My stomach twisted, but before I could react, Lucas was already moving.

"You piece of—"

And then Lucas swung.

His fist collided with James's jaw, making everyone gasp. My heart skipped a beat as James stumbled back, his head snapping to the side.

I didn't want this. I didn't want them fighting over me!

But what happened next shocked me more than the punch.

James didn't swing back. He didn't even raise his hand. He straightened up slowly, his cheek reddening. Something flickered in his eyes—something like regret, or maybe shame—but it vanished as quickly as it appeared.

Then James pushed through the crowd, shoving people aside as they gawked at him. My breath caught in my throat as he moved closer, the students parting for him like a wave.

And then, as he was about to pass me, he stopped.

Our eyes met.

For the first time since we kissed, James wasn't wearing that cold sneer. Theoretically, I should have been ecstatic seeing James hurt after all the things he'd said and done.

Instead, I found myself feeling concerned about him and hoping that reddening blotch on his cheek was the only injury he'd gotten.

"Take a picture; it'll last longer," James said sullenly. I realized I had been staring at him—or 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 punched.

"No need," I retorted before I could stop myself. "Unlike you, I don't rejoice in other people's misery."

He scoffed. "So, we have Mother Teresa here."

"It's better than being an asshole."

His eyes narrowed and his jaw twitched.

I expected another attack to come from his mouth; instead, after giving me the meanest look, he simply turned into the boys' bathroom. He didn't say anything.

That's a first...

"BOO!"

I jumped, my hand landing over my chest. Breathing unevenly, I turned away from my locker and found Lucas grinning at me.

I glared at him. "You have to stop doing that."

"I can't. It's too much fun." His grin widened.

"It's not for me." I shook my head, spinning back to put my bag in my locker.

"Consider it our special greeting. You'll eventually learn to love it."

"I doubt that." I shut my locker and faced him, my lips pressed into a thin line.

We started walking together to the cafeteria in silence. It was lunch.

"Everything all right?" Lucas asked as he looked at me. "Is anyone giving you trouble? People here are crazy, and you're kind of getting famous after that..." He left me to fill in the blank.

I didn't.

"So, is there anyone I have to take care of?" Lucas flexed his fist jokingly.

I sighed and stopped in my tracks; as I did, I noticed the red spots on his knuckles. He stopped too and immediately put his fist down when he saw me staring.

"You fought with James," I stated.

"I didn't fight with him." He looked down, fiddling with his fingers. "I just punched him."

"What happened?" I asked, though I already knew.

"He was being stupid. *That* happened," Lucas muttered, rolling his eyes. "I couldn't stand how he was talking about you after...you know."

I nodded understandingly. "Thanks for standing up for me, Lucas, but you really shouldn't have punched him."

"Asshole deserved it."

"He did..." I said. "But not from you. I don't want either of you getting into trouble because of me. It's only going to make everything worse. I'd rather let everyone forget about it and move on."

He sighed. "That makes sense. I'm sorry, Keily."

I patted his thick shoulder. "It's okay. But I promise I'll call you if I ever want someone taken care of."

“Yes, ma’am.” Lucas grinned.

We stepped inside the cafeteria, and my eyes, without permission, moved to look for the devil. He was at his regular table with the other guys, eyes assessing Lucas and me calculatingly.

“I’m sitting with you girls today,” Lucas said, making me tear my gaze away from James. “I don’t want to be near that stupid *motherfucker*.”

I glanced at my table and found only Sadhvi there, who waved at me excitedly. I waved back, internally dreading going near her.

The girl wouldn’t rest until she made me spill everything about Friday night.

I could only wish for Addison or Lola to turn up before I reached our table so that they could rein her in a little. Although, I was a little nervous about seeing Addison after our spat in the morning.

I wanted us to make up already and not prolong the tension between us.

“You’re always welcome at our table.” I smiled at Lucas and headed toward the food counter with him. “So, what rumors has James been spreading about me?” I asked quietly as we stood in line.

At this point, I was literally asking to torture myself.

Lucas exhaled heavily. “I think you’ve heard them. I never liked how he picked on you.”

“Then, what was different this time? What triggered you punching him?”

He shook his head exasperatedly. “I didn’t expect the same attitude from him after you two kissed. He was very bitter. And I kind of...lost it.”

My face flushed with embarrassment. “How stupid you must think I am to kiss him when he treats me like that.” I cast a quick look at James as we stepped forward. He was talking to Keith, but his eyes were right there to meet mine.

“No, I don’t think like that at all.” Lucas gave a small smile. “Haynes has been sending very mixed signals, like the moody diva he is. I’m only on the sidelines, and it’s getting excruciating. I’d be shocked if the next punch isn’t delivered by you.”

I was so relieved to not be judged by him.

I laughed. “Then, prepare to be shocked. I absolutely won’t hit anyone—unless they hit me first.” I threw him a light glare. “You should abide by that code too.”

He pouted. “Don’t tell me you care about him?”

Color on my cheeks returned.

“I care about you.” I nudged his side playfully. “And I don’t want you and James having fights because of me. You two are good friends and shouldn’t let a girl come between you.”

“Believe me when I tell you it’s his stupidity that’s coming between us.”

I chuckled, shaking my head. “Speaking of friends, right now, Addison isn’t happy with me either. I’m going to buy her lunch as a peace offering.”

“What happened?”

“She’s not exactly thrilled that I kissed James, and I get that.” I shrugged. I wasn’t going to tell him the whole thing, considering how Addison had reacted in the car.

It wasn’t my place to tell him, anyway.

Lucas snorted. “Of course. It’s Addison.”

We waited in line for a few more minutes before getting our food.

I bought lunch for Lola too. I couldn’t deprive her of a grilled cheese sandwich when she’d been so good to me. Sadhvi already had her lunch tray.

Addison muttered, “Thank you,” when I gave her the sandwich. We weren’t exactly chummy like before, but the air between us eased significantly.

I could see she was feeling guilty, too, because she chose to sit next to me quietly, her way of saying sorry.

Sadhvi, as predicted, tried to get me to talk about the party; however, Lucas and Lola were there to save me.

Despite the rough start, lunch break wasn't bad, just slightly awkward. But many times, I still had to stop my eyes from wavering to James.

Especially when I could feel him looking at me.

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