

Keily | The Closest Thing to Best Friends

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Lola's room vaguely resembled a tarot card reader's place I'd once visited back in my hometown when I was seven.

My parents had randomly walked into the man's shop as we were returning from a family restaurant.

I didn't remember much of what he had predicted—probably some made-up stuff about my *bright* future that made my dad smile proudly.

The main wall of Lola's bedroom was painted maroon in contrast to the remaining three cream-colored walls.

The carpet and curtains were black, and the different crystals on her study desk and bedrest gave off a gothic vibe.

Her room was smaller than mine but more spacious, once again reminding me what a hoarder and messy girl I was.

Lola had invited Addison, Sadhvi, and me for a girls' night in. It was Tuesday, and even though it was a school night, we had accepted and somehow convinced our parents.

She had texted me her address, and my dad had dropped me off after dinner. Her mother was visiting some relatives with her baby brother, so the whole house was ours.

All three of us had brought our bags and clothes for the next morning to head directly to school from her house.

"Let's clear the air between us, girls," Lola announced, walking through the door with her arms full of two ice cream tubs and snacks.

"What do you mean?" Addison asked from the chair in the corner, looking up from her phone.

“It means we’re going to have a heart-to-heart and move past last Friday’s drama.”

Lola spread all the food items out across the middle of her queen-size bed, where Sadhvi was showing me photos of her and others on her cell phone, taken before I’d arrived in Bradford.

“I thought we were watching movies,” I commented. Friday’s drama had involved a certain situation between James and me, and I was still too embarrassed to discuss that night with my friends.

“Do you really think I’d invite you all for some lame movie?”

“Ooh, I have no problem with a heart-to-heart, but can you at least get a bottle of rum to get our mood going?” Sadhvi chirped.

“No drinking. It’s a school night,” Lola said as she sat on the bed with us. She patted the remaining space for Addison, who, after rolling her eyes, joined too.

The four of us formed a circle, crowding the bed, with snacks in the center.

“Now what?” Addison deadpanned.

“Now we talk about what’s going on between you and Keily.”

I looked at Lola wide-eyed as she addressed the issue so blatantly.

Things were still weird between Addison and me. We’d both cautiously sidestepped the conversation involving either James or my cousin’s sexuality during the small interactions we’d had.

The two of us weren’t as jolly as before, and some tension hung between us. Obviously, nothing went unnoticed by Lola’s sharp eyes.

“Nothing’s going on,” my cousin said.

“Don’t deny it, Addison.” Lola shook her head before she turned to me. “You, speak,” she commanded.

I snuck a glance at Addison, who was glaring at Lola, but the latter looked completely unaffected and only stared at me. When Lola raised her brows, I relented.

“She’s upset because I kissed James,” I mumbled, my eyes downcast.

“That’s it?” Sadhvi said, trying to open the tub of Ben & Jerry’s.

“No, that’s not it,” Addison groaned. She gazed at Sadhvi. “Keily found out about us. She saw us in the room at the party.”

The tub dropped from Sadhvi’s hand into her lap.

“It was only a matter of time before she knew,” Lola commented, unfazed.

“*You* know about them?” I asked, surprised and hurt. Was I the only one who was out of the loop?

Lola shrugged. I frowned at Addison. All this time, I had been beating myself up for stupidly invading her and Sadhvi’s secret.

I was a new addition in our group, but still, it pricked that my cousin had kept such a huge part of herself from me. I knew it was her choice, but still...

“Look, Keily, we’re not out yet,” Addison said, gauging my sadness. “Lola figured it out herself a few months back. Nobody knows about it except the people in this room and my mom and dad.”

“If your parents know, then why are you hiding yourself?” I questioned curiously. “You’ve always been upfront about everything. The last person I expected to be closeted was you.”

“I mean, you’re too strong and cool to be the butt of anyone’s joke, if that’s what you fear. And there are already some gay couples in school to look up to. You and Sadhvi won’t be the odd ones out.”

“I don’t fear anyone, coz. I’ll sock the teeth out of any homophobe who tries anything with us.”

“We’re not out yet because of me,” Sadhvi muttered, twirling a strand of her long hair nervously. “Addison’s parents are cool, but my folks are pretty orthodox.

“They lose their shit if I dare mention that I have a guy friend, so one can only imagine what will happen once they know their daughter is a lesbian.

"My family is very traditional. My mum and dad moved here from India when I was three, so they still carry many values from back home.

"Since childhood, they've drilled into me to get an A-plus in every subject and to never get involved with 'white guys.' I'm always told to never bring shame to the family and behave like a good girl.

"I'm not trying to trash my parents. They're good and honest people. They've changed themselves tremendously, too, to integrate into the new culture, but you can't expect a person to turn their back on values that have been ingrained in their minds for almost half of their life.

"That's why, almost every day, there's some sort of tussle between my parents and me on my very basic life choices. I just fought them a few hours ago to spend the night with you guys."

She snorted. "I'm not planning on coming out until I'm in college. Not a good idea to bring such a fiasco into my home until I'm far away from it.

"I can only hope that once I'm out of their sight, they won't be so naggy and maybe will accept me for who I am."

"I want to be out and proud with her," Addison added, taking Sadhvi's hand in hers. "We're planning on applying to universities in New York. There, we'll be completely free to be ourselves, without any hassle from her people."

"Thank you for doing this with me, Addy." Sadhvi smiled at her shyly, putting their joined hands over her lap, right next to the Ben & Jerry's.

"You guys are so adorable," I commented, gushing at their cuteness. "Who wouldn't want you guys to be together?"

"Apparently some people," Lola muttered, grabbing a bag of Doritos and tearing it open.

"Keily, yesterday, when we were driving to school, I overreacted," Addison said. "Sadhvi's mother called mine on Sunday to complain about us. After that, Mom gave me a huge lecture and even threatened to ground me. She never does that.

"I guess Mrs. Bajpai's words got to her. I was worked up about that and took out my frustrations on you." She exhaled heavily. "I'm really sorry."

"Your mom probably wanted to yell at me. My parents can be difficult." Sadhvi nudged my shoulder.

"It's all right." I grinned at the two. When Addison smiled back, it felt like the remaining heaviness between us was lifted.

"Now it's Keily's turn," Lola quipped, putting Doritos in her mouth and breaking our endearing moment with her loud munching.

"What do you mean?"

"Don't think that we don't notice how low your self-esteem is." She handed me her bag of chips. "It's time you open up to us."

"Lola's right. You have body issues," said Addison, opening the ice cream tub on Sadhvi's lap. "Let's hear them."

"Come on, let it out," Sadhvi urged too, looking at me eagerly as I hesitated.

Before moving to Bradford, I hadn't had any close friends, just some acquaintances to whom I said an obligatory hello and talked with about assignments or tests.

I wasn't used to people my age ever being interested in me other than to poke fun at me. I'd never even had a best friend to share stuff with, just my parents sometimes.

However, right now, these girls were the closest thing to best friends I'd ever had. So, I caved under all three pairs of eyes.

"I'm fat," I said, my mouth suddenly feeling dry. "I wish I wasn't. I want to have a body like you guys." God, I sounded so whiny. Saying your insecurities aloud was difficult.

"I hate the attention these extra pounds bring me," I continued, staring at my lap. "I remember one of my mom's friends warning her to watch my weight right in front of me. I was nine then.

"Her words left quite an impression on me. From then on, I started noticing other adults who made remarks about my weight. Suddenly, I began to see new flaws with my chubby body whenever I stood in front of a mirror.

“Things turned bad a year later. I was on an excursion with my classmates and teachers. We went to a water park. I was so excited about it. Little did I know it was going to be the worst day of my life.”

I paused, my lips quivering, reliving that day. “I was wearing the swimsuit that my dad had gotten me at the last minute. He had messed up with the size, so it was a little tight.

“As I came out of the changing room, my foot slipped on something, and I fell. I didn’t realize the other kids were looking until all of them started laughing and pointing at me. The backside of my suit was torn.

“I’d never felt so ashamed in my life. After that day, my classmates took liberty to make fun of me and bully me verbally to the point I became used to it.

“Initially, I was annoyed by my parents’ sudden decision to move to Bradford, but now I’m glad I’m here with you guys. Away from those people.” I finally moved my head up to give a small smile to the girls.

“Those kids are jerks,” Addison quipped. “Your parents’ friends are jerks too. What kind of adult fucking body shames a nine-year-old?!”

I shrugged. “So many people feel the need to say something about my figure, be it good or bad. Being a big girl, it automatically comes at me. It’s like I’m a public spectacle to be commented upon.

“Countless times, I’ve been mocked and leered at while eating pizza or a hamburger. My relatives and cousins told me to cut carbs or advised me to go on crazy diets—like I already haven’t done that. Nothing works—”

I shook my head, cutting off my words before I could go off on a rant.

“Okay, some things did work. A couple of years back, I fell sick because of a crash diet I was on. First Mom and Dad were angry, but later they took charge and changed my eating habits.

“More vegetables, fruits, and healthy meats were added to our family meals, and they encouraged me to be more active. I did lose some weight gradually over the years...but not enough.

“I’m not even close to how I want to look. I have stretch marks on my stomach, lower back, butt, upper arms—everywhere. I’m afraid to see myself naked.

“Finding the right clothes for me has always been a struggle too. I don’t like it when my arms jiggle every time I go sleeveless. I can’t wear body-hugging dresses because of the big belly I’ve got.

“My thighs are so big that I think a thousand times before wearing skinny jeans or shorts. Choices for me are so limited, not just in clothes but it seems like in everything.” I sighed.

“And the most annoying part is I’m aware that there are many people who have it way worse than me. But still, I can’t help myself from wanting to be thin and comparing my body to other girls.” I finished, feeling so much lighter.

Ranting about your problems does help.

After a very big moment of silence, Addison suddenly hugged me. I patted her back, resting my chin on her shoulder. Hugs were nice.

“Keily, you’re beautiful.”

I chuckled. “Thanks.”

She pulled away and met my eyes seriously. “No, I mean it. You’re beautiful. You’ve got pretty curves. Embrace them. It’s this fucked-up society that sets ridiculous standards. As long as you’re healthy, it is not anyone’s business how much you weigh.”

Her compliment meant a lot.

She glared at me. “And if anyone gives you trouble, speak up, Keily. Those kids are not making fun of you because you’re overweight. They’re making fun of you because you’re not retaliating. You should not let anyone walk over you.”

I frowned as she made more sense than the nagging voices inside my mind. “You’re right.” She was right. “I promise from now on, I won’t let anyone make fun of me.”

Including James.

I was tired of being put down, of letting others save me. It was high time I stood up for myself.

“Good.”

“Insecurities about your body are like a rite of passage that most teen girls go through,” Sadhvi said, her mouth full of ice cream. “I also didn’t like my brown skin growing up. My issues weren’t as serious as yours, but it did bug me for a while.”

“Your skin is so beautiful,” I said, surprised that someone as perfect as Sadhvi had gone through similar stuff.

“I know that now.”

“Thankfully, my mom never let me be *unproud* of my Black heritage,” Addison chirped. “I love half-Black me.”

“As you should,” Lola added, a shy smile on her lips.

“It’s so difficult being a girl in this shitty world. Oof!” Addison said.

“I’m sure boys must have their own challenges,” I said.

“Yeah, especially when they don’t have awesome girlfriends’ support like us.” Sadhvi looked at all of us with pride before her face split in a wide grin.

“I want a group hug.” She stretched out her hands, and we all happily complied, giggling.

These girls were not closest to being my best friends.

They *were* my best friends.

Next Chapter

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