

Keily | Clouded with Confusion and Desire

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"You okay?" I put my hand on James's upper arm. I didn't even realize I'd become comfortable touching him until I was doing it.

He looked at me and gave a smile, but this time it didn't reach his eyes.
"Yeah. Why do you ask?"

"You don't look good." We stepped forward with the others.

"Ouch," 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've said something earlier if you didn't like it."

James sighed. "It's just a stupid fear of heights. Don't worry. I can do this."

I couldn't help but smile. Today, I was smiling a lot.

James scowled like the brat he was. "You find it funny?"

"No, it's just you've always been so scary to me. Invincible, brooding, sometimes even straight-up terrifying," I said, and his scowl eased.

"But turns out you're just an eighteen-year-old guy, who can be afraid of things just like everybody else. It makes you a lot less intimidating."

"So, this is your revenge. Way to hurt my ego, Keily." It was hard to tell he was kidding until he smiled.

"Come on, let's go. If you're not going to enjoy it, then it's not worth it." I clasped his hand to pull us away, but he stopped me.

"It's worth it if *you* are going to enjoy it."

My insides had already melted into a puddle after all the things we'd done today, and now he had to add this too. *This man*. "Don't—"

"Are you two coming?!" the operator shouted at us. We were holding up the line. I hadn't realized we'd moved this far forward and that our turn was here.

James nodded and dragged us both to the gondola waiting for us before I could object.

"You don't have to do this," I said.

"But I want to," he said.

We were sitting side by side. As the gondola rose slightly, James's fingers tightened around mine, but his dark eyes glimmered beautifully with all the colorful lights surrounding us.

"Also, I have to get my scary persona back," he said, voice a little tight now. "Can't have you thinking I have feelings, can I?"

I chuckled. "You can try." I snaked my hand around his torso and pulled him closer. He leaned into me without complaint, and as we moved up, I felt his grip tighten around my waist.

I looked down at the view of the whole carnival wrapped in bright, colored lights, with hundreds of people clustered in my field of vision.

Beyond the boundary, Bradford's lake reflected back the glimmers of the festive atmosphere. It was beautiful.

Unfortunately, James didn't see what I saw; his fear robbed him of such a wonderful sight.

"This is clearly not your scene," I said to him. "But, jokes aside, why are you here?"

His stiff attention shifted from the scene below us to me. I was glad to distract him by talking.

"Because it felt like the right thing to do," he answered.

"Right thing?"

“Since the moment we met, I’ve picked on you, not realizing the damage I was doing. I was too self-absorbed and didn’t think through my actions. I played with your insecurities, *your fears*. It’s only right that now you see my fears too.”

He scoffed, shaking his head. “I know it’s stupid, but it’s a small gesture of me repenting for my mistakes.”

My heart swelled at his confession. His acknowledging of his past behavior and trying to make up for it—though in his own twisted way—stirred something in me.

“Also, it was hard to say no when you looked more excited than my niece to get on this thing,” he added, tapping my nose playfully with his fingertip.

“You have a niece?” I asked.

“My cousin’s daughter, Lillian. She’s six.”

I scrunched my face. “I don’t know whether to be offended or flattered, being compared to a six-year-old.”

He chuckled. “If it helps, I think you looked adorable.” I flushed under his intense gaze. “And you look very adorable now too.”

His fingers came to stroke my red cheeks gently, leaving tingles wherever they touched. God, I could have purred like a cat.

Our gondola shook a little as the wheel picked up speed, breaking the moment between us. James’s hand dropped to my lap, and his breathing became shallow as his focus shifted to the ground way below us.

I immediately let go of his torso to clasp our hands together on my lap. His fingers curled around mine tightly, and his eyes were back on me. He’d never looked so vulnerable.

“Am I making a fool of myself enough for you to enjoy?” he joked.

I shook my head. “Seeing 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, I can’t seem to do anything right, huh?”

I smiled. “But I’m still stupid enough to fall for you.”

He gave me one of his beautiful face-splitting grins. The fear in his eyes was replaced by unfiltered joy. And I felt happy for being the reason behind it.

“I swear, you’re killing me, Keily Harris. You’re fucking killing me.”

Seeing him, I couldn’t stop my grin either. We stared at each other’s faces like fools.

“I so want to kiss you right now,” James said, his eyes darting to my lips and pupils dilating, “but...” He glanced at the ground again.

I smile gently at him. “It’s okay, James. There’ll be plenty of time for that later.”

His eyebrows rose, and suddenly his dark eyes were back on mine. “Really?”

My cheeks heated. “Um, well...I mean—”

Before I could finish, his lips were on mine. *Oh*. He wasted no time in picking up the pace and kissed me fiercely.

He tasted of candy and mint chocolate. His one hand remained entwined with mine while the other one on my waist pulled me closer to him—if that was even possible.

When our gondola shook again, he didn’t let go and only kissed harder, leaving me a red whimpering mess at his mercy.

He gently pulled away as the wheel slowed down, and we were both out of breath.

“Are we still good?” James asked, his dark eyes piercing into my soul. There were so many emotions brimming in them: want, lust, possessiveness, fear, and a strange softness that I didn’t dare name.

I nodded and looked up to give myself a break from all the sensations his fiery gaze evoked in me. The bubbling heat in my core that the kiss had awoken in me again, just like on Wednesday.

When the nagging voices of self-doubt and hate didn’t show up, I smiled. I smiled widely at the night sky and the stars twinkling in it.

James rested his head on my shoulder. "Looking up is way better than looking down." His soft curls tickled my neck, and I loved it.

"Now, why didn't we think of that before?" I chuckled.

"It's not like you aren't enjoying holding me," he threw back, and I had to agree. I more than enjoyed holding him.

The Ferris wheel brought us back to the ground, and I saw James visibly relax when we got off.

He looped his arm around waist as we walked. It was astonishing how *couple-*y we had started to act in just one evening.

My impression of him had started changing for the last few days, but today, he was really out to get me. James wasn't just a big dominating giant who had bullied me, scared me before.

He was also an immature teenager who sometimes didn't know any better. And there was so much softness under that hard shell.

"Let's get out of this crowd," James said.

"And why is that?" I raised my brows.

"So I can kiss you again in peace," he answered with a wolfish grin, and my face colored once again.

"As much as I loved sitting on that thing with you, I also lost my shit over there. I don't want to be on the Ferris wheel to have you alone."

"You're not really shy, are you?" I scolded him, biting my lips to stop a smile.

"No need. You have enough shyness for both of us."

"So, where are you gonna take us?" I asked. I looked at my watch. We still had almost an hour before we had to meet the others.

"Near the lake. It must be quiet out there." He pulled both of us in the direction of the lake when I nodded.

"I hope you're not planning on drowning me," I said, narrowing my eyes at him playfully.

I saw him smirk. “You saw right through my fine plan. Now what are you going to do, Keily? I already have you in my clutches.”

I giggled and hit his shoulder lightly. “You do.”

As James had predicted, the lakeside was a lot quieter. There were only a few people scattered among the trees. We found ourselves an isolated spot and settled down on the grass.

Trees and bushes around us provided privacy. I could still hear the music and the noises of the carnival behind us.

James wrapped his arm around my shoulder, making me lean into him. His body heat gave me warmth against the cold gusts of air.

The lake in front of us was still, the water’s far edges reflecting the lights of the merriment behind us.

I stared at the water, watching the soft ripples, but I could feel James’s gaze burning into me. His dark eyes seemed to be taking in every little move I made, every breath.

His hand was resting on my upper thigh, the warmth of his touch spreading through the denim. I could feel him shifting closer to me, his breath just a whisper away from my ear. “Keily,” he murmured.

I turned toward him, meeting his eyes just as his fingers on my thigh reached higher, teasing the edge of my hip.

Before I could say anything, his lips crashed into mine, and everything else faded. His tongue parted my lips, and I let him in, tasting him, losing myself in the way he kissed me, deep and unhurried.

His arm wrapped around my back, guiding us down onto the ground. I felt the cool grass beneath me as he leaned over me, his body hovering close but not crushing.

He kissed me again, his tongue sliding against mine. His other hand slipped under my T-shirt, fingers brushing against my bare skin, inching higher, so close but stopping just short of going further.

The teasing touch made me gasp into his mouth. The warmth of his hand, the way his fingers lingered just below my breasts—it sent heat rushing through me, pooling low in my belly.

He broke the kiss, his lips now trailing down my jaw, moving to my neck where his warm breath made my skin tingle.

Each soft press of his mouth on my throat made me moan quietly, a sound I couldn't hold back even if I wanted to. My head fell to the side, giving him more access as his kisses traveled lower.

But in the middle of all the heat and the need, something tugged at the back of my mind. That little voice reminding me where this all started. James—this same James—had been my nemesis, my bully. The one who made me feel small, insecure.

Things had changed between us, sure, but not everything was completely clear yet. I knew I wanted more of him, but I didn't know if I was ready to give him more of myself.

Not until I'd said what I needed to say. Heard what I needed to hear.

"James," I said, and he hummed against my skin.

His lips were still working their way down my neck, but I placed a hand on his chest, gently pushing him back. He stopped, looking at me, his breathing heavy and his eyes clouded with confusion and desire.

"I want to know something," I said.

Next Chapter

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