

Keily Book 2: Dating My Enemy |

Unforgiving Cupid Poll

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This was a big deal. James and I were working on a science experiment together.

It was a huge chunk of our grade, so doing well was very important. I wasn't stressed about it.

I understood chemistry. We were investigating the effect of temperature on the rate of reaction between hydrogen peroxide and catalase.

As I carefully measured out the reagents and monitored the temperature of the water bath, I couldn't help but notice the fatigue etched into James's features. Dark circles hung heavily under his eyes.

He hasn't been sleeping enough, has he? I felt a pang of concern as I watched him struggle to keep up.

His movements were sluggish, his attention drifting as he fought to focus on the task at hand. "You're doing great," I told him.

"Hmm," was all he replied.

James's exhaustion got the best of him. As he attempted to add the catalase enzyme to the test tubes, his hand trembled slightly, and a drop spilled onto the lab bench.

In his haste to clean up the spill, he accidentally knocked over one of the test tubes. Crash! He sent its contents to the ground.

Panic surged through me as I watched our experiment unravel before my eyes. Hours of meticulous preparation wasted in an instant.

The disappointment was palpable, hanging heavy in the air between us as we realized the magnitude of his mistake. James's eyes widened.

His jaw visibly dropped. "It's okay!" I said quickly, knowing damn well that it wasn't.

I surveyed the damage. There was no way to salvage what was lost.

The experiment was ruined. The only thing I could do was clean. So I did.

The bell was going to ring any minute now. "I'm so sorry," James blurted.

"It's okay," I told him. I stayed kind instead of getting frustrated.

I didn't need to scold him for his mistake—he was feeling bad enough already. "It's not," he balled his fists.

"We have to do something, Keily," James urged, his voice tinged with desperation as he frantically tried to mop up the spilled solution that I hadn't gotten to yet. "Let's start over," I said.

But there really wasn't enough time. I began the experiment from the beginning, because I didn't know what else to do.

The teacher made her rounds. She checked on the progress of the different groups.

I held my breath as she approached our station, my stomach churning with nerves. The teacher's expression was grim as she surveyed the scene before her.

"What happened here?" she asked, her tone stern. James and I exchanged a guilty glance, unable to meet her gaze.

"We... we had a little accident," I admitted. Of course, I didn't point my finger at James.

I'd never throw him under the bus like that. The teacher's frown deepened, disappointment evident in her eyes.

"I expected more from you, Keily," she said, her voice tinged with reproach. My heart sank at her words, a pang of guilt washing over me.

She doesn't share the same sentiment with James. I notice his hands shake. He is clearly upset by this.

Turning to James, I could see the hurt and frustration etched into his features. "I'm sorry, James," I said. "I didn't mean for any of this to happen."

James shook his head, his expression one of disbelief. "It's not your fault, Keily. It's all mine."

The bell rang. James and I collected our things.

James walked ahead, his shoulders slumping. "Hey, James, wait up," I called after him, hurrying to catch up as he stormed out of the classroom.

He didn't slow down, his steps quickening as if he were trying to outrun his own thoughts. "Leave me alone, Keily," he muttered, his voice clipped and tense.

But I didn't listen. I caught up to him, two of my steps equaled one of his.

I grabbed his arm. "James, please, let's talk about this," I urged.

He rounded on me, his eyes blazing with anger. "Talk about what, Keily? The fact that I just ruined our chances of getting a decent grade on that assignment? That I screwed up everything?"

I winced at the bitterness in his tone, the sting of his words cutting deeper than I cared to admit. "James, it's not just your fault. We're a team, remember? We win together and we lose together," I reminded him, reaching out to offer what little comfort I could.

But James shook his head, his frustration boiling over. "That's easy for you to say, Keily. This was a huge assignment, and I just messed it up for both of us."

I felt a pang of guilt twist in my chest at his words, the weight of our failed experiment settling heavily on my shoulders. "I know, James, and I'm sorry. But we'll figure it out. We always do," I said, trying to sound more confident than I felt.

But James's expression darkened even further, a shadow passing over his features. "You don't get it, Keily. This isn't just about one assignment. My grades are dangerously low for the cutoff GPA for MIT," he confessed.

My heart plummeted at his words, a sinking feeling of dread settling in the pit of my stomach. "Oh," was all I managed.

Don't be so pathetic, Keily! Say something to make it better. He shrugged, his shoulders slumping with defeat.

"Maybe I wasn't meant to go there," he muttered. "What?" I dropped my bag.

"Nothing," he said. "I have to get to football practice."

He turned away from me and stomped off down the hallway. I watched him go. My heart felt heavy.

It was as if the ground had been pulled out from under me. My mind raced with thoughts of James, his exhaustion and frustration evident in every line of his face.

I couldn't bear to see him struggle like this, torn between his commitments to football and his studies, both demanding his time and energy in equal measure. I felt a surge of empathy for him, knowing all too well the pressure he was under to excel, to meet the expectations placed upon him by others and by himself.

What could I do to help him? How could I ease the burden that weighed so heavily on his shoulders? I didn't have the answers.

Part of me wanted to rush after James, to hug him. But another part of me hesitated.

He was upset and might push me away. I needed to give him space to cool down.

I'd go home and think about this some more. But, as I turned to leave I saw the school newspaper pinned against the board on the wall.

The headline on the front page caught my eye. CUPID POLL
SPECULATIONS ARE IN!

The letters were bold, written to draw attention. My heart skipped a beat as I scanned the article, my eyes widening in disbelief at the words that leapt off the page.

There was a buzz of gossip and speculation swirling around the school about who would be named "Cupid's favorite couple" this year, and already, the

rumors were flying fast and furious. But what caught my attention most was the mention of a certain football hunk and his “plus-sized” girlfriend.

My heart sank at the cruel words, a sharp pang of hurt slicing through me like a knife. It was clear who they were referring to—James and me.

A lump formed in my throat as I read on, the words seemed to blur together. “Plus-sized girlfriend.”

The label clung to me like a stain, branding me with a mark of otherness that set me apart from the other girls mentioned in the article. I couldn’t help but feel a surge of indignation rise within me, a burning anger at the unfairness of it all.

Why did they have to single me out? I’d been cast in a negative light while the skinnier girls had the spotlight. Despite my best efforts to brush off the hurtful words printed in the article, they lingered in the back of my mind like a persistent ache.

I told myself they were just words on paper. They were just ink spilled onto a page. And they shouldn’t hold power over me.

But they did. They hurt.

I didn’t want to be a part of the Cupid Poll. I didn’t want to be the center of attention, subjected to the prying eyes and gossiping whispers of my peers.

It felt like an invasion of privacy, a violation of my right to live my life without being scrutinized and judged by others. But even as I tried to push aside the hurt and anger, a nagging worry gnawed at the edges of my mind.

What if the rumors were true? What if James’s reputation as a star athlete was tarnished by his association with someone like me? Things weren’t looking good for me and James.

Next Chapter

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