Hide and Seek

I avoided James. I didn't feel like I belonged with him. I felt like I was holding him back.

As I stood amidst the crowd, watching James from a distance, a sense of resignation washed over me. Maybe it was best if I admired him from afar.

But then our eyes met. They locked in an intense gaze that sent a jolt of electricity coursing through me. Before I could react, he began to make his way toward me.

Panic seized me. I disappeared into the sea of people, hoping to escape his pursuit.

For a fleeting moment, I thought I had succeeded. I stood between many swaying bodies. I looked around and didn't see him… until I did.

Our eyes met again. There were several people, several obstacles, between us but James pushed through them all. He was coming.

With a sinking heart, I turned to run. My short legs didn't move very fast, but I pushed myself anyway. I ducked into the next room and hid behind the door.

My breath caught in my throat as I listened for any sign of his approach. But there were so many people moving about, it was impossible to tell where he was just by listening.

Maybe he'd given up. Maybe he'd gone back to our friends.

Seconds stretched into eternity as I waited. My heart pounded in my chest like a drumbeat. It was louder and faster than the beat of the music.

Calm down.

And then, he walked through the door. I caught a glimpse of him. He was so determined, he didn't even look back. If he had, he would have seen me hiding.

He strode to the other door, most likely thinking that was the way I'd gone. Just as suddenly as he had appeared, James was gone.

As the adrenaline slowly began to ebb away, I let out a shaky breath, relief flooding through me at the realization that I had finally lost him.

I stepped out from behind the door, ready to return to the dancing room. But before I could take another step, someone intercepted me.

Addison.

She appeared before me, her expression a mixture of concern and determination.

"Keily, what's wrong?" she asked, her voice soft but insistent.

"Nothing," I said quickly.

"Are you sure?" she asked.

I nodded. But from the way her lip twisted, I knew she didn't believe me.

"Everyone's been looking for you."

"There was no need to look. I wasn't missing," I said.

She ignored that and said, "James is looking for you."

I forced a smile, trying to play off my earlier disappearance as nothing more than a momentary distraction.

"Oh, I'm sure he'll find me," I replied. *Oh, I hoped he didn't find me.*

"I was just mingling around the party, you know how it is," I said.

But Addison wasn't convinced, her eyes searching mine for any sign of the truth. She knew I didn't mingle. I wasn't nearly as social or confident as she was. The only reason I had friends here was because she introduced me to all of them.

"Keily, I know something's bothering you," she insisted, her tone gentle but firm. "You can talk to me, you know."

"I know," I said.

Addison had always been there for me. She was always ready to listen without judgment or hesitation. But now the weight of my insecurities threatened to suffocate me. I found myself unable to confide in her.

It wasn't that I didn't trust Addison—I knew she would support me unconditionally. But the thought of burdening her with my fears and doubts felt like too much to bear. I didn't want to drag her down with me, like I dragged James down.

And then there was the matter of what I'd overheard in the bathroom. Telling Addison would only make her angry. She'd want to find out who the girls were. She'd want to fearlessly confront them. She'd stir up a hornet's nest of drama that I wasn't sure I was ready to face.

I knew she would side with me, of course, but that wouldn't change the opinions of those girls in the bathroom. So instead, I kept my mouth shut. Maybe it was selfish of me to keep my feelings bottled up inside, but for now, it felt like the only option.

"James has been looking everywhere for you," she repeated, accepting that I wasn't going to tell her what was going on. "He's determined to find you, Keily. You can't just disappear like that."

A surge of guilt washed over me at the mention of abandoning James at the party. But I pushed it aside, making a quick excuse to escape from Addison's probing gaze.

"I'll... I'll go find him, then," I stammered, edging past her and slipping away before she could press me any further.

I didn't want to be around my gorgeous cousin or my gorgeous friends or my gorgeous boyfriend right now. I didn't want to make them look bad by being present. I didn't want to hurt James' reputation more than I already had.

As I navigated through the crowded room, a sense of overwhelming self-consciousness washed over me. It amplified every flaw and imperfection. Surrounded by beautiful people, I couldn't help but feel like a glaring outlier in their midst.

My cheeks burned with a flush of embarrassment. My double chin seemed to multiply under the harsh glare of the lights. Beads of sweat dotted my forehead, my palms clammy with nervousness as I tried to conceal the trembling in my hands.

With each passing moment, my awareness of my own shortcomings grew more acute. My arms felt heavy and flabby at my sides, my stomach churning with the sickening sensation of self-loathing. I could feel the cellulite in my thighs jiggling with every step.

I pulled out my phone and checked the time. It was almost midnight.

There were several messages from James. I must not have heard them delivered over the music.

James
Is everything okay? You're taking a long time in the washroom.
James
Do you want me to join you in there? ;)
James
Keily?