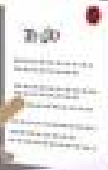
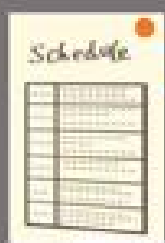
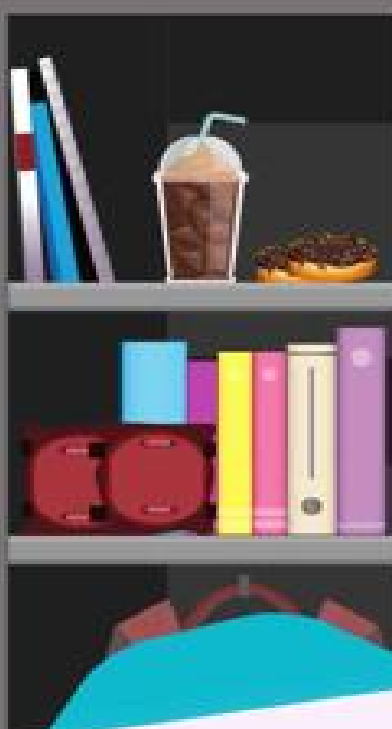
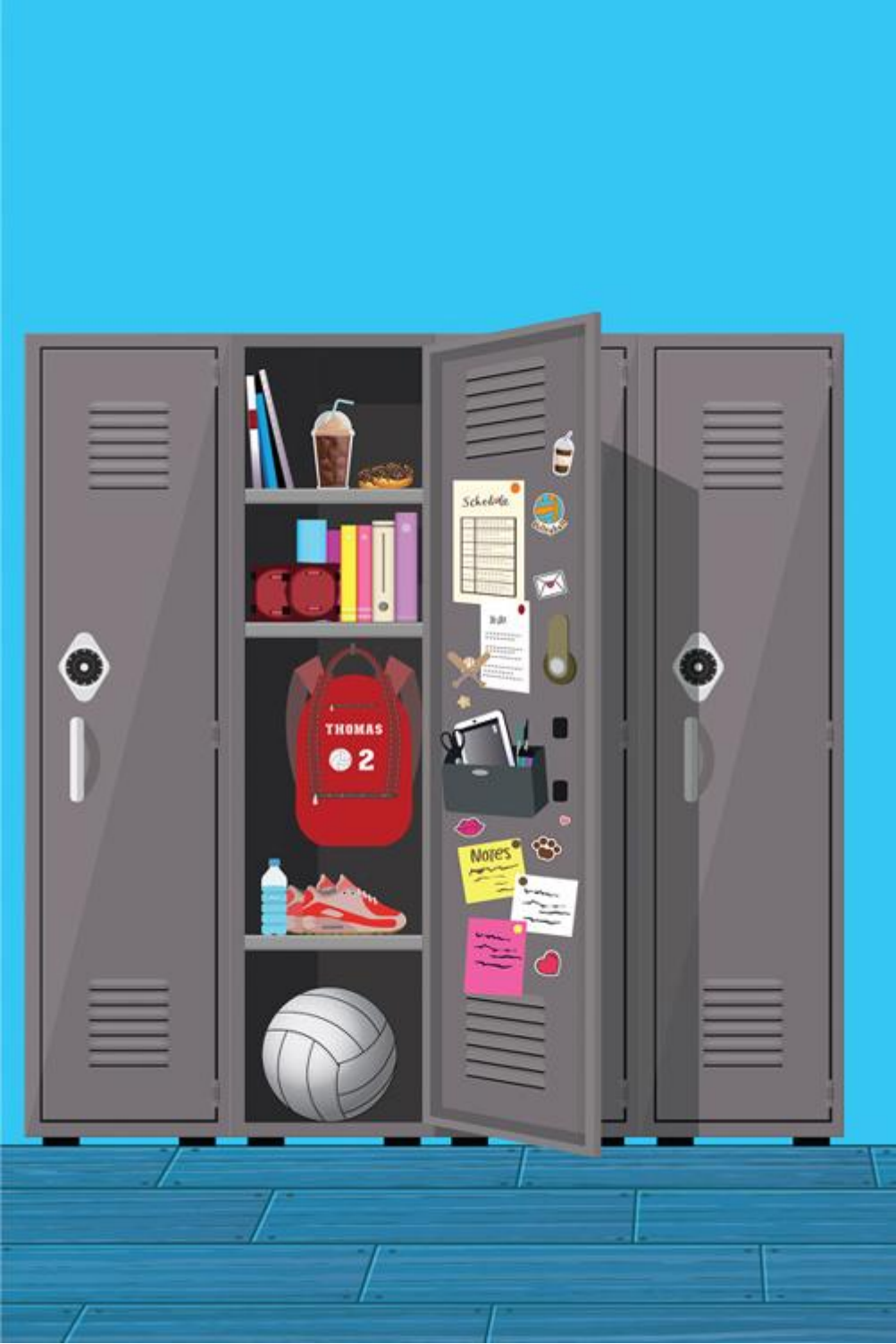


DANIELLE KEIL



Dear  
Kerri





Books, a drink, and a donut.

Books and a red bag.

THOMAS 2

Water bottle and shoes.

Volleyball.

Schedule

Notes

Notes

Notes



DANIELLE KEIL



Dear Kerri  
Love Notes Series

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*Also by Danielle Keil*

[The Parkdale Series](#)

[The Pact Series](#)

[The Ainsworth Royals: Next Gen Series](#)

[Love Notes Series](#)

*To my write or dies, the ones by my side,  
the Austin's to my Keeks, Shain and Andrea.*

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## Chapter 1

“Mom! Where are my knee pads? I can’t find them any—oh, never mind, I got them!”

Yelling up the stairs from the basement into the kitchen was quite the sin, according to my mother, but when I was running late and couldn’t find my gear, the rules had to be broken.

Thankfully, I found my kneepads on top of the dryer, waiting for me like they always were. Except I thought they were in my bag next to the backdoor, cueing the minor freakout.

Lowering my head, I made my way upstairs, halting when I saw a familiar face sitting on a bar stool at our kitchen island.

“You didn’t,” I gasped, watching my best friend lower his hand from his mouth.

“I diwnt?” he mumbled, little specks of doughnut flying from his lips. In a flash, he shoved the rest of my favorite Boston Crème donut into his mouth, using his hand to cover while he chewed.

But who needed gentlemanly manners when you were a downright *thief*?

I groaned and fell onto a stool next to him, dropping my head into my hands on the countertop. “That was the last one,” I whined.

“Kerri, don’t be dramatic. There’s two more in the pantry. Dad brought home a dozen yesterday morning and Eric only ate two. Austin may have had two in the time it took you to find the mysteriously missing knee pads, but it leaves plenty for you,” Mom admonished, whacking the back of my head with her dish towel.

The tiny ponytail I spent a whopping five minutes on came loose, making me groan again. “Mom! Do you know how hard it is to get all these little hairs to lie flat so I can get the holder in? It’s near impossible and you just ruined it!”

Mom sighed. “Austin, take this girl to school. And don’t forget her doughnut, or I fear for your own safety.”

Austin laughed, his dark brown eyes twinkling as they conspired against me. “Yes ma’am. I’m on it. Let’s go, Keeks,” he said, nudging me with his elbow.

I rolled off the counter and staggered toward the door, only stopping to pick up my gym bag and backpack. With club practice after school, it meant I had to store my gear in my locker all day, taking up all the space outside of my textbooks.

I was halfway through the garage, Austin right behind me, when Mom shouted out the door. “If you have time, get her some coffee! Use her debit card!”

That got a smile out of me for the first time this morning. After I threw my gym bag and backpack in Austin’s trunk, I folded myself into his front seat, yanked my seatbelt on, and settled my head against the window.

The thought of coffee kept me going. That, and the Boston Crème Austin practically shoved into my face before he backed down my driveway.

“You have practice tonight?” he asked once on the road. More than likely, he knew the answer, but he hated silence and made idiotic small talk to cover it up.

“You know I do. Have you guys officially started yet?”

The varsity baseball players had unofficial practices as soon as the snow melted, which was a few weeks ago. Regular season started around the first week of April, but as today was only the second day of the month, I wasn't sure what he was up to.

“We have our ridiculous meeting this afternoon. Then uniform try-on and calisthenics tomorrow, and first full practice for positioning on Wednesday. It's so dumb.”

I gave him a look, with one eyebrow raised. I could only do my left brow, and only very, very slightly, but he understood. It was the same look I had been giving him since we were seven. The one that said “count your blessings, boy.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know. I'm lucky to be on the varsity team again this year. But I hate start of season crap. I'd rather get to the actual practices and drills and games.”

“I know. But everything matters, even if you don't think it does.”

We both had been a part of athletic teams our whole lives. While I eventually gravitated toward volleyball, Austin was always dead set on baseball. The moment his dad took him to the major's game in the city, he was hooked. It was all he thought about.

I checked the clock on my phone and grinned. “We have enough time to swing by Sips for some coffee,” I told him. Without a word, he swung into the right lane, turned onto Maple Street, and pulled into the drive-through.

Four cars lined up in front of us, two of which I recognized from the Ryder High parking lot. “Hope it moves fast,” I mumbled, taking the last bite of my doughnut.

Austin laughed. He knew that the key to getting me out of a morning funk was my favorite iced coffee, and I would be a grump until it was in my hands.

He ordered, and dug his hand into his wallet. Half the time I kept my debit card there, since we were together more often than not while out. That, and the fact that I had already lost it three times in the year and a half after Mom got it for me. Even she told me to let Austin keep it safe instead.

“You need help getting that to your locker?” he asked after we parked and grabbed our bags from the trunk. Since he had been practicing already, all his gear was in his gym locker. Every athlete got one to borrow during their season, assigned to them by the locker room attendants. Except for the swimmers, everyone had to vacate theirs at the end of the season.

Though I wasn't in season, I had club practice. And club rented out a portion of the lower gym right here at Ryder High. So a locker in the locker room would have been a nice perk.

“Nah, I got it,” I answered, hoisting my backpack over both shoulders and slinging my gym bag cross-body style. After both were secure, I grabbed my iced mocha and slammed the trunk.

“See you after practice, then? I'll take you home if you wait for me.”

I paused in the lobby, watching students scatter every which way like ants. There were too many perky people, especially for a Monday morning.

Sighing, I answered, “Yeah, I guess. Just don't take seven years to shower tonight, okay? I have to study for a test tomorrow.”

Austin turned and walked down the hall backwards, his eyes still on me, wrinkles appearing in the corner as he smiled. His bright white teeth sparkled against his dark skin. He took meticulous care

of them, since his mother was a dental hygienist. *My* dental hygienist, in fact.

“We’ll see, Keeks. We’ll see!” he called, sending a wink and spinning on his heel.

I grumbled under my breath, knowing I would spend too much time on the bench right here in the lobby, waiting for Austin to get out of the shower later.



## Chapter 2

The dial on my locker stuck again. I slammed my fist against the cold metal, trying to dislodge it. I dropped both of my bags to the ground, using all my focus on the combination dial. *Left 42, right 13, left 21.*

By some miracle, it popped open, and I held the door with my foot, turning and hopping to grab my stuff. I didn't need to switch out any of my books at the moment, so I just had to stuff my gear inside and get on my way.

"Success," I whispered to myself after getting the bag in the right position to stay without falling out. I was about to slam the locker shut again when something caught my eye. Something under my gear, laying on top of my chemistry book.

Bending down, I squatted in front of it, eyeing it suspiciously. It *looked* like a teal envelope.

I should have known—it was the first day of the month we were in school. Meaning a new round of the Ryder High Secret Admirer game.

Every month, one girl, or boy, got a note on his or her locker. In a teal envelope, just like this. If they accepted the invitation, their game

started, and they had one month to figure out who their secret admirer was.

It couldn't be right. Why would *I* get a teal envelope? Who would want to be *my* secret admirer? And why was the envelope in my locker instead of taped on the outside like normal?

My heart fluttered for a moment. I only had one boyfriend in my life, and we broke it off freshman year. He didn't understand my dedication to volleyball and thought I was putting a sport over him.

Which I was, but whatever.

I pinched the envelope between the stubs of my nails of my thumb and forefinger. Volleyball made it near impossible to keep them long, and forget polished.

It was definitely *the* teal envelope. It had my name written in teal ink in delicate, beautiful calligraphy. A tiny spot of the top was missing, as if ripped off.

The tape. It looked like someone had torn a piece of tape off the top. Which meant someone took it off my locker and shoved it between the vents. Maybe the tape ripped. Maybe someone accidentally grabbed it and couldn't stick it back? Either way, the seal was still glued shut, so no one had looked at it at least.

If I opened it, I would find the official invitation. The one that listed the rules, stating that the receiver could call it quits at any moment, and the phone number to text the neutral party with questions.

The whole thing ran rather smoothly, and rarely caused problems. The boys were carefully chosen, and even the teachers liked to help at parts.

I pursed my lips, still in my squat, and pried the envelope open. The color was gorgeous; the inner lining was a light lavender.

Kerri—

*The men of Ryder High invite you to become part of an exclusive club of exquisite people like yourself. Ones who are admired and revered, but from afar.*

*Acceptance of this invitation will start your month-long journey into finding out who sent you this letter. The man who craves your attention, yet strays from your spotlight. He may be someone you know, or someone you have never met.*

*But he knows you. And he chose you. In the end, it is his wish to be with you in whatever context you prefer. It's all up to you. Nothing during this month is mandatory. You can stop at any time. If you are ever uncomfortable, a neutral party can be spoken with, and alternatives can be made.*

*You are in control.*

*The secret admirers are chosen and vetted. There is no mal-intent involved with this invitation. You may choose to decline the invitation all together without any backlash. You have our guarantee that no harm will come to you in any form.*

*If you wish for more information regarding the history of the secret admirers, please text the number at the bottom. All your questions, within reason and without ruining the mystery, will be answered to the best of our ability.*

*For now, the first question is for you.*

*Do you accept?*

Sincerely—

Your Secret Admirer



Yup. The initial invitation was always the same. It wasn't until day two that the game actually began. If you wanted out, you had overnight to decline. Of course, you could stop at any time, but in order to begin, you did nothing. Just waited for the first letter from the guy himself.

"Are you gonna accept?" someone said from behind me.

Startled, I fell onto my butt ungracefully. "Oof," I grumbled.

A hand reached down, offering to help me to my feet. I accepted, rising and coming face to face with Max.

"Thanks, Max," I said, brushing my hands over my jeans. "What's up?"

He nodded toward the letter and envelope still in my hand. "That, apparently. Are you going to accept?"

His hazel eyes shone under his bright blonde hair. Austin told me last year that as soon as baseball season hit, the guys liked to buzz their hair shorter to keep it from getting caught in their caps, in their eyes, or full of sweat. They let it grow most of the rest of the time.

Max was no exception. A varsity player, the shortstop to Austin's second base, and the Laurel to his Hardy on the team. Max and Austin got into more trouble for goofing off than anyone else. But they usually got away with it, since they were harmless pranks and put a smile on everyone's faces.

Max's beaming smile and Austin's butt also won points over with the ladies. Austin had been unofficially voted "best ass" last year. It wasn't quite the superlative the school would dole out, but some girls actually printed out an award for him.

He kept it on his nightstand ever since.

"Earth to Keeks," Max said, waving a hand in front of my face. I blinked, jumping back to reality. The number of people allowed to call me Keeks was low; mainly just Austin, but sometimes Max or

Connor, too. The baseball boys were some of my closest friends as well, since they were Austin's best friends.

"I think so. I mean, why not, right? I could use some excitement in my life. Not like I have anything else going on..." I trailed off, hoping he caught onto my sarcasm.

Almost every minute of my life was planned out, usually around volleyball. If I wasn't at practice or at school, I was studying or stretching or working out at home. It was a vigorous schedule, but I didn't mind.

Slinging an arm around my shoulder, Max pulled me in tight and pretended to give me a nudge. I shrieked and ducked out of his grasp.

"Max! I already had to redo this pony once this morning. It's hard to get it just right!" I moaned, pulling the elastic out of my hair for the second time.

Max just laughed and reached down to grab my forgotten coffee cup on the floor. The main reason I got iced coffee was the fact that it took me forever to drink. Some would say I was savoring it, making it last, but really, I was just forgetful. I would leave it somewhere for an hour before wondering where it was. At least when it was iced, I didn't have to worry about it going cold.

"Sorry. But how awesome is that?" He pointed to the envelope that I was hastily trying to shove into my backpack.

I wasn't against it. I was excited. Hopefully, whoever was on the other end knew my dedication to my sport and didn't hold it against me.

"Are you going to go public with it?" Max asked as we strolled down the hallway. We were both in the same first period class.

"Not sure yet. I mean, I won't keep it a total secret. But, I can probably figure most of it out on my own, right? Heck, I've been in

school with most of you guys since kindergarten. It can't be that hard to narrow it down to one."

Max laughed again. "Can't be that hard? That sounds like a challenge. I hope whoever he is makes you work for it. Blood, sweat, and tears, baby. Make nothing easy for you!"

I shoulder checked him, sending him stumbling a few feet. "Gee, thanks!"

The grin on his face lit up the entire building and warmed my heart.

A thought flashed through my mind as I stared at him. Could *he* be my secret admirer?

It could be awkward. But then again, I could do so much worse. Dating Max didn't sound appealing right now, but I also didn't know him in that sort of way.

"You're looking at me funny," Max whispered, leaning into me and snapping in my face.

I shook my head. "Sorry. Let's go."

We walked down the hall together, Max regaling about the party this past weekend at Connor's. I didn't go, but Austin did and told me all about it yesterday. Not that Max cared.

Besides, stories from his viewpoint were more fun to hear about, anyway. He had a flair for the dramatic that Austin lacked, making the plotline more interesting.



## Chapter 3

"I heard a rumor today at practice," Austin blurted out as we walked toward his car.

In what I considered a miracle, he actually showered and left the locker room quickly, leaving me waiting in the lobby for only about five minutes.

"Shocking," I replied in the most monotone voice I could muster. The boys of Ryder were almost worse than the girls with gossiping.

Most people thought the only thing teenage girls did was gossip and spread mean rumors, but in reality, the guys were in on it too. I didn't realize it until halfway through freshman year, when I was hanging out at Austin's with Max and Connor over too. The three of them went for *hours*, back and forth, throwing up every little piece of information they even *thought* they heard once. It was astounding.

Since then, I never looked at the boys as secret keepers again. No one was a secret keeper. Except Austin. He would never betray me if I told him something was extremely confidential.

He shoved my shoulder as we approached his silver sedan. "It was about you, Keeks."

Popping the trunk, he dropped his bag inside and turned to reach for mine. I hesitated, unsure where to take this conversation.

The rumors had to be about the invitation. About the secret admirer. Max knew first, which I assumed meant the whole school knew about it now.

Tucking my short hair behind my ears as best as possible, I shrugged, trying to play it off. “Yeah, so what’s new?”

Austin laughed, slammed the trunk shut, and went to the driver’s side. I dropped into the passenger seat, pushing the lever down so I could move it all the way back and stretch out my legs.

“Seems someone has a secret admirer.” I did not appreciate the tone of his voice in this moment. The way he said it in a mocking manner made me want to punch him.

“Seriously, Aus? You’re taking that route?”

His face fell. “Sorry, Keeks. I’m just playing. Also kinda mad you didn’t text me and tell me first. Do you know how embarrassing it was to find out from Max *on the field*? I dropped the damn ball because he blurted it out right as I caught his throw.”

I couldn’t help but smirk. Max totally did that on purpose, trying to get a rise out of Austin. The two of them lived for messing around, and it wasn’t limited to other people. The pranks they played on each other were equally as good.

“Sorry. I meant to, but Max started talking about Connor’s party, and then class and everything got in the way. I had to see Mr. Buchanan at lunch, so I didn’t get to see you. It’s been a long day.” I sighed and rested my head back against the seat, closing my eyes. I still had a ton of homework and studying to do tonight. Bedtime before midnight seemed unlikely.

Austin reached over and ruffled my hair, his way of showing some affection. It also annoyed the crap out of me, and he knew that too.

But considering we were in a car and he couldn't give me a hug, it was the next best option. Austin hugs were my favorite thing in the entire world, and he always knew when I needed one.

"So?" Austin asked once we pulled into my driveway.

In the past few minutes, I completely zoned out, forgetting about what we were talking about. My brain was usually a little foggy after practices, until I got food in me.

"So what? You coming in for dinner?" I asked, opening my door and getting out before he answered. "Pop the trunk."

I could almost hear his eye roll at me. I collected my bags, closed the trunk, and headed to punch in the garage code.

"So," he dragged out, "are you accepting?"

I glanced over at him, his hands in the pockets of the sweatpants he threw on after his shower, rocking back on his heels. He couldn't even look at me.

"I think so. Why?" I questioned, suddenly curious why my secret admirer game was making him act so weird.

He shook his head and followed me into the garage and house.

"Mom! Austin's staying for dinner! Then I'm kicking his ass out because I have to study!" I shouted, hoping it would reach her. "Shoot, sorry, I mean butt!" I added, after realizing what I said.

"You're a bad influence," I whispered to Austin as he jumped onto a bar stool. The oven was on and a delicious smell filled the kitchen.

"She's making your favorite—" I started, but the look from Austin cut me off.

"You're accepting."

I scrunched my brows and narrowed my eyes. "I already said yes. Max already told you I was. What's going on with you? Do you think I shouldn't? Do you know something I don't?"

After filling two glasses of water, I slid one to Austin and wrapped my hands around the other, taking small sips through the straw.

“No, I don’t know anything,” he said softly. “Was just wondering.”

Mom came into the kitchen then, putting our conversation on hold. “Quarter jar, please and thank you,” she said, directed at me. “Austin, I made your favorite. Glad you can stay.”

No one paid any attention to me when I groaned, rolled off the stool, and stomped my way to my room. Rummaging in my piggy bank, I came up with a quarter. Every time I swore in front of my parents, I had to put a quarter in the jar. More than one, if it was a more offensive word.

Austin was telling Mom and my little brother Eric about the varsity baseball squad this year when I returned. Besides volleyball, which she tolerated, Mom was a diehard baseball fan. After growing up in Chicago and being a White Sox fan her whole life, she loved that Austin was on the team and I was best friends with him. She came with me to all the games she could, cheering him on just as loudly as I did.

“I have exciting news too.” They both stopped talking immediately, Mom furrowing her brows in confusion and Austin frowning.

“The Ryder High Secret Admirer struck again,” I started. Eric rolled his eyes and Mom turned to take the chicken parmesan casserole out of the oven.

“It’s me this month!” I tried to put a bit of excitement in my voice, but it might have fallen a bit flat. While I was happy to have been chosen, I was a bit wary. The last time I dated didn’t go so well, and with my schedule, a boyfriend didn’t seem to fit.

Mom slid the pan on top of the stove to cool and tossed the oven mitts on the counter beside it. “Austin, sweetheart, can you throw together a quick salad?”

Her eyes stayed on me, questioning me from across the kitchen. She wanted me to explain and tell her my thoughts on the whole situation, but considering I didn't know my own thoughts yet, I couldn't. I shrugged and gave her a half smile.

It wasn't until the four of us sat at the table to eat that she brought it up again. Dad was at a retirement party and wouldn't be home until after dinner.

"So, this secret admirer thing. You got the letter today?" Mom mumbled between bites.

"Yeah. It was in my locker."

"And you're going to accept? I only know the little bits you've told me before, with your friends going through it earlier this year."

I swallowed my pasta and blotted my lips with my napkin before speaking again. Austin was being oddly quiet. But this was a girl thing now, and he probably didn't have anything to add.

"Well, yeah. I got the invite. If I don't have questions or want to opt out, a new letter should be on my locker tomorrow and the game officially starts. The secret admirer will leave me clues throughout the month as to his identity, and I have until the end of April to figure it out."

"And if you don't? What then?"

I pursed my lips and tilted my head in thought. "Ummm... I'm not sure. Everyone I know figured it out before the month ended."

"The guy will reveal himself," Austin said quietly. Mom and I both stared at him. "What, guys talk."

"I thought you said you didn't know anything?" I asked.

Austin shoveled some salad into his mouth. "Don't. Not much," he mumbled.

I eyed him suspiciously, but dropped it. Mom and I talked about it for a few more minutes, but Austin remained silent until we finished



eating and he was about to leave.

“You’re really accepting?” he said, standing in the doorway putting his coat on.

I threw my hands in the air. “Yes, I think I am really accepting. Why shouldn’t I? I swear, if you know something and you’re not telling me, I’m going to be so pissed at you.”

Austin raked his hands over his dark hair cropped close to his head. “I don’t. It’s... just weird that it’s you, that’s all. Like, I *know* you.”

My face scrunched. “You’ve known plenty of people that have been on both sides of this game. What’s the difference now?”

He sighed, looking defeated. “Nothing, I guess. Just seems different when it’s *you*. You’re my best friend.”

I quirked a brow. “And?” There was more to his worry.

The look of devastation crossing his eyes had my heart pounding. What was getting to him so badly?

With a big breath and one hand on the doorknob, like he wanted to bolt as soon as he confessed, he said, “I don’t like that I can’t make sure he’s good for you, okay?”



## Chapter 4

Austin's words kept me up all night, which wasn't a good thing, considering I had a test and practice again today. Dad dropped me off at school after Austin texted and said he had an early morning weights workout with the team.

"Thanks, Dad. See you tonight?"

"Sorry, honey, I'll be flying out to San Diego for a day or two this afternoon."

I tilted my head, unsure how I completely missed that fact. Dad laughed at my confusion.

"You're a teenage girl with teenage girl worries. You don't need to pay attention to my schedule. I'll bring you back something, though, okay?" With a nod, he blew me a kiss and drove off.

I used to always know exactly when Dad traveled for business, especially since he did it so often. But lately, other things had gotten in the way. Guilt traveled through me, hating the fact that I got so wrapped up in my own life that I didn't pay attention to him as much.

Walking through the front doors with my head down, I didn't realize there was a crowd in the lobby until I almost bumped into them.

“Kerri! The rumors are true! It’s you!” my friend and teammate Stephanie shouted, followed by cheers all around them.

I lifted my head, staring at the mass of people surrounding me. My teammates, some of the baseball boys, friends from class, and random people who got swept up in the excitement, all waited for me to say something.

Another familiar face appeared before me. “I’m sorry. But I got excited when I saw this, ripped it off your locker, and was looking at it in my hands before I realized what I did. I tried to tape it back up, but it didn’t stick...” Mya’s cheeks were flushed, her bottom lip stuck in between her teeth. Her straight blonde bob swept across her face, hiding her as she handed me the teal envelope formerly on my locker.

Same thing happened yesterday. I didn’t suspect Mya was behind yesterday’s mishap, but it seemed odd that people were helping themselves to my envelopes. I had yet to experience the rush of excitement that came from seeing the teal color taped to the outside of my locker.

“No sweat, My. I’m excited too!” She was rather shy, but one of the sweetest people ever. I’ve paired up with her on many projects throughout the years, and she’s always the best partner ever. We were friends, but it mainly school friends. We hung out in different social circles outside of school, with me in volleyball and her in theater.

“Y’all! I can’t open it if everyone is breathing down my neck. A little space, please?” I questioned, looking over at Connor and Owen, hoping they could help with crowd control. I wasn’t counting on Owen, as he always looked so sullen and as if helping was a strain on his life. But he would help if Connor asked. They were best friends, and Connor was one of the few people he spoke to.

Owen and Connor spread their arms out, herding people away from me. I looked around, hoping to find Austin in the crowd, but he wasn't there. Neither was Max.

"Dear Kerri," I read out loud. "Thank you for accepting the invitation for this month. I'm excited to get to play with you, and I think we're both going to have a good time."

I smiled as some girls around me sighed.

Clearing my throat, I continued. Part of me wanted to read it in silence, but I also loved to be the center of attention at times.

"I've heard through the grapevine that you like a good scavenger hunt, so get ready to go on an adventure with every clue. It'll make more sense at the end, so don't try to figure it out too early."

My eyes widened with excitement. I *loved* scavenger hunts. And puzzles and mysteries, and all of it.

"Finish it!" Stephanie squeaked over my shoulder before everyone else hushed her. I raised a hand, quieting the crowd.

"Don't give these clues to anyone else," I read. Moans and groans punctuated my sentence. I didn't even skim the bottom before folding it up and shoving it in the back pocket of my jeans.

"Well, you heard the man. Er, the paper. Either way, hightail it outta here! Bell's going to ring soon!" I couldn't help but grin at the number of slumped shoulders and sighs that accompanied my over-the-top comment. Most people left, moping away and chatting with their friends.

"Seriously, Keeks? You really going to keep it all a secret?" Connor asked.

I waved bye to Mya and Stephanie, and stepped up to Connor, who turned as we started walking down the hallway. Owen stayed a step or two behind, not contributing to the conversation.

“Just the clues part, I guess. Whatever the guy wants me to keep secret, I will. I mean...” I gave him a once over, to which he just laughed.

“Fair enough,” he declared. “I’ll see you at lunch?”

I nodded, deciding to sit with the boys today. Though they were Austin’s teammates, they were also my friends. I split my time evenly between them and my girl friends. Occasionally we got tables next to each other and could all talk.

“Hey!” I called after Connor when a thought popped into my head. “Where’s Aus?”

Connor shrugged. “I left him in the locker room. Guess he’s taking his hour-long shower. He better move it if he wants to get to class on time, though,” Connor added, glancing at the clock on his phone.

“Do me a favor?”

He tipped his chin up in agreement. “What’s up?”

“Don’t... don’t mention this to him?” I pulled the envelope out of my pocket and waved it in the air. “Or at least don’t tell him I read it out loud without him, okay?”

I wasn’t sure why I asked Connor to keep it a secret. Something about the way Austin looked last night when he realized I was accepting and he wasn’t a part of it made me not want to bring it up around him.

I also didn’t want him to know I read the first letter to everyone *but* him. It wasn’t like I purposefully left him out; he was the one who didn’t show when everyone else did.

“I gotcha. No worries. See you later,” Connor called. Owen had split by then, going who knows where. While he was nice, and showed up when he was needed, he still confused the hell out of me.

“Thanks!” I shouted down the hallway. Connor lifted a hand over his shoulder but continued on, a group of girls jumping and following

him as he walked.

I laughed, knowing full well Connor wanted nothing to do with them. He was head over heels for his own girlfriend.

As I headed to my locker, I noticed a few people giving me the side eye. Was this what it would be like for the entire month? People looking at me wherever I went?

Every other month, when another girl was chosen, I joined in the initial excitement, helped if it was someone I knew, but otherwise... I left it alone. It wasn't worth my time to obsess over someone else's game and I never understood why so many girls made it a huge deal when it wasn't even for them.

The only person I wanted to share this with was Austin, but... it seemed awkward. I could count on my teammates and some other friends to get me through.

I never thought a boyfriend or girlfriend would get between Austin and me, but then again, neither of us had dated enough to find out.

There was a first time for everything, though. But deep down, it scared me.



## Chapter 5

“Did you read it?” Max asked the second my butt hit the bench. Connor, Austin, Owen, Davis, and some other guys glanced my way, but it was Max who really wanted to know.

The kid was like a Golden Retriever sometimes. Always excitable, always willing to do whatever, and a massive people pleaser. He was also nosy.

“Max, you’re nosier than shit,” I said, opening my bag of apple slices and munching down in an exaggerated motion, just to annoy him. “And don’t puppy dog eye me. That hasn’t worked since freshman year.”

“Yeah, the same time we all stopped taking you seriously in any manner,” Owen piped up from down the table.

I almost dropped my apple at hearing his voice. He so rarely spoke that when he did, it was a surprise. Not as much to the boys, of course, but to many other people, myself included. Over the years, the hundreds of times I sat with them during lunch, I could count on two hands the number of times I heard him speak.

He was more forthcoming in private, such as team parties at Austin's, or just hangout sessions that I sometimes crashed. But here at school? Unheard of.

Max threw a French fry at him, but the smile on his face gave him away.

"So, did you?" Austin asked. He had been quiet since I sat down, barely looking at me. I knew word had spread about this morning and by lunch, he already knew. Chalk it up to another time I messed up by not texting him first. Maybe one day I would learn. Today was not that day.

"I didn't," I answered, taking a sip from my water bottle.

Davis's brows furrowed. "What if it's a time sensitive thing? Shouldn't you read it soon?"

I stared at him. "Do you know something I don't?"

He laughed. "Not at all. Everything is top secret, remember? Even if I did, I wouldn't be able to tell you."

"No one knows anything until the girl identifies the guy. That's the rules. You can't even tell your closest friends," Austin muttered, staring down at his cheeseburger. During season, the guys ate almost double the normal amount of food they normally did, which was a lot. Today, Austin had a cheeseburger, a side of apples like me, a bowl of soup, a bag of chips, and a brownie piled on his plate. The other plates on the table looked similar too, with only mine seeming relatively normal.

"Whatever," I answered, ignoring Austin's odd behavior. Something must have gone wrong at practice this morning for him to be in such a mood. It was best if I ignored it, because he hated when I nitpicked his life. "I'll read it after lunch."

That got a cheer. Why, I had no idea. Usually, the girls of Ryder were more into the secret admirers, but recently I noticed the boys



getting hyped up about it too. Or maybe it's because I was friends with *these* boys and they now had connections with the game.

Who actually knew? I stopped trying to make sense of them long ago.

Looking around, Connor and Owen struck up a conversation about something, whispering between the two of them. Austin was showing Max a video on his phone. And I caught Davis staring straight at me. His blue eyes locked onto mine for half a second before he winked and turned to the guy next to him, one of the junior varsity players.

A few minutes later, after I finished eating, I stood, untangling my legs from under the table and grabbing my tray. "See you guys later. Austin, am I catching a ride?"

Max snorted. "Hell, he took a long enough shower this morning to last him a week. He can't possibly take another tonight."

Austin elbowed him, causing Max to spill some of his milk. "Shut up," he directed toward his friend. To me, he said, "Yeah, sure. Wait for me. I won't be long."

But the fact that he didn't look at me the entire time he spoke said more than his words did.



I settled in my desk in pre-calc, nestled into the back corner of the room, away from prying eyes. No one else was here yet, but the door had been unlocked and I let myself in. Mr. Eugene would show soon, but he didn't care if we waited inside, as long as we didn't cause problems.

And since I was most likely the *least* problematic kid around, he didn't have to worry about me. The threat of not being able to play volleyball was more than enough to keep me in line. My coaches, both varsity and club, always stated how classwork and school came

first, volleyball came second. They wouldn't hesitate to bench us if we messed around in class or bombed a grade. I had yet to find that out for myself, but saw it a handful of times with teammates before.

Taking one last glance to make sure I was alone, I opened the teal envelope with my name in beautiful calligraphy on the front and slid out the piece of paper inside.

*Dear Kerri,*

I read again. I forced myself to skip to the good part instead of re-reading the whole note.

*The clues will be given to you at strategic times throughout the month. It'll be your job to figure out the location I am hinting at, getting there, and finding the envelope. Sometimes it might be with a person. Sometimes it'll be hidden in a spot you need to find.*

*Each location will have something for you. Once you find the first one, more specific instructions will be listed.*

*I hope you enjoy the adventure as much as I have had making it for you. And.... I hope you're not disappointed when you figure out who I am. This game has been the only way I could think of to tell you my feelings for you. I'm nervous you won't feel the same...*

*—Your Secret Admirer*

*Clue 1: The envelope with your name on it is located at the place where you are the only person to order this flavor of chilly treat...*

That was it. There was nothing else written below or on the back of the paper.

Chilly treat? Only person to order this flavor?

My instincts jumped straight to ice cream. Most people voiced their disgust when I chose my favorite ice cream flavor, Jamocha Almond Fudge. More than once, the person scooping it mentioned how it was probably their least scooped flavor, and those that did order it were old.

I wasn't sure why, though. It deliciously combined a mocha-y chocolate flavor with the hint of almonds. Smooth and nutty, with a bit of a crunch. There was nothing better.

I leaned back in my chair, holding the letter in my hands while Mr. Eugene and some students filed through the door.

The ice cream shop. Seemed simple enough. The Dairy Bar was a staple in town, and I had been going there for my entire life. My parents went there when they were in high school together, too. It was now run by the son of the original owners, but the older couple still came by most nights in the summer to sit and chat with customers. They were like the town's grandparents and we all loved them.

The hard part would be how to get to The Dairy Bar tonight. The lack of my own car presented a problem with this whole scavenger hunt thing.

All that was also dependent on time. They closed early in the off season. If I couldn't get there before 4:30, I was out of luck.

It was only Tuesday. Would I have to wait until Saturday to get there? I had practice most of the rest of the week, plus waiting on Aus for a ride home meant not getting home until late. I didn't want to wait for the weekend. What if it pushed back my other notes somehow? Would I screw everything up if I couldn't do things in a timely manner?

Suddenly, this entire game led me into a panicked spiral.



## Chapter 6

Using Austin as a method of transportation to the Dairy Bar was officially out. Coach moved him to the outfield to try a new position, which threw him out of whack, which then caused him to almost completely shut down.

Personally, I was used to it, but it stung. He drove me home the past few days, but we didn't talk much. I was worried about him, but knew if he wanted to tell me, he would.

So, like the best friend I was, I dropped it. If Austin was a girl, with girl friends, I most certainly would have gone to those friends to see what was up and what he wasn't telling me.

However, having Max, Connor, and the other baseball boys as his other closest friends, it didn't fare well in my favor. They would state the position change was the issue, because boys didn't talk about their feelings the way girls did. At least, I never saw them talk about feelings.

The other reason I didn't go to them was because of bro code. I was the best friend, which gave me certain privileges, but it only extended so far. Bro code let Austin have secrets with the boys that I

wasn't allowed to know. It sucked sometimes, but I learned to live with it.

But times like now are when I wished bro code didn't exist. I missed my best friend.

"You alright?" Mya asked as she slipped into the seat in pre-calc next to me.

I nodded, lowering my head into my hands. "I need to get to the ice cream parlor. Tonight, preferably."

Mya cocked her head, her short, blonde bob sweeping the top of her shoulders. It was just slightly shorter than mine—at least I could sometimes get mine into a ponytail, whereas hers wouldn't.

"Well, that's kind of odd. Might I ask why..." she drew out, wiggling her eyebrows at the same time. The smile on her face faltered when I rolled my eyes, looking her way.

"Yes, fine, alright, it's for the game. The scavenger hunt..."

Her eyes grew wide. "That's so exciting! Is the first clue at the Dairy Bar?"

Rolling my head back into my arms, I tried to shrug, but my position forbade it. Sighing, I straightened up, rubbing my face with my hands to get some life into me.

"No," I replied, pausing. Mya took the pause to try to jump in and question me, but I stopped her by holding my hand up. I didn't really want the twenty questions, especially because I didn't think I was supposed to be talking about this in the first place.

I could trust Mya to keep it a secret if I asked, but the less I said, the easier it would be.

"I figured out the location to be the ice cream parlor, but haven't been able to get there yet. It only said something would be there, and more instructions to follow."

Mya's smile turned sympathetic. "I bet it's been killing you," she whispered, just as the teacher walked in.

I nodded in reply, but couldn't talk anymore as class started. Two minutes later, out of the corner of my eye, I saw Mya rip a piece of paper out of her notebook and crumple it up. Instead of being obvious, she leaned to the side, and slipped it into the outer pocket of her backpack, then coughed into her arm.

The sly glance at me confirmed my suspicions that the note was for me. After checking to see that the teacher's back was still to us while he wrote equations on the board, I elbowed my pencil off my desk, praying it would land next to Mya's backpack.

The plan went off without a hitch, and a moment later, I had both my pencil and the note in my hands. Flattening the paper, I sped-read her note.

*Meet me in the lobby after school. I'll take you.*

My heart skipped a beat, then started pounding. Excitement flooded through my body at the thought. I loved having Mya as a friend, even if we weren't the friendliest outside of classes usually.

I looked at her, mouthed a thank you, and grinned. The rest of the class was completely lost on me, and I could only hope I could catch up with the homework.



"Ready, Freddy?" Mya said, skipping toward me. It worked out that I didn't have club practices on Fridays, and Mya was in between theater gigs at the moment. The winter musical was a smash hit last month, but the end-of-year play didn't start rehearsals until the end of this month.

“So ready. Super ready. More ready than I’ll ever be!” I exclaimed, giggling at my own ridiculousness.

Mya laughed along with me. “You sure are something else. This whole thing has you practically giddy!”

I paused and cocked my head. “You know what, it does, doesn’t it?”

“I’m just over there,” Mya said when we got to the parking lot, pointing to the right side front row. Her white Jeep stood out among the sedans parked next to it, including Austin’s, a handful of cars down.

“So, tell me everything!”

I blushed, biting my bottom lip. “Umm...” I stammered, unsure what to do. She was taking me to find the answer to the first clue, so I really couldn’t hold back too much. “Okay. Well, the first note the other day gave me a clue and makes me believe it’ll be at the ice cream shop.”

“You told me that already. And I heard the part you announced in the lobby. What I mean is, what do you think is waiting for you? Do you have any ideas on who it is? I want the gossip, not the details.” Her melodic laughter wafted through the Jeep as we sped down the main road.

“I got nothin’,” I moaned. “I mean, okay, it’s the first clue. But honestly, there was nothing about *him*. Just about the location.”

“Hmm...” she drew out, tapping her lip in thought. “My first guess is always those that are closest to the chosen girl. So, do you think it could be Austin?”

I blinked. Then blinked again. “Um... no. He’s my best friend. He wouldn’t go through all of this if he felt that way, he would just tell me.”



Mya pursed her lips. “Well, what about one of the other baseball boys?”

An exasperated sigh escapes my lips. “Ugh. I mean, maybe? They are my friends. And I guess if it’s one of them, Austin could help them. But then again, he said he doesn’t know who it is either. So... gah! It’s only the first clue and things are already so confusing!”

Mya frowned as she turned her blinker on. “Well, like you said, it’s only the first one. And maybe whatever is here has a clue on him?”

“I hope so.”

We parked and made our way into the ice cream parlor, the bell above the door jingling. The room was empty, the only person around being a teenage boy employee. He looked vaguely familiar, but I didn’t know his name.

“Josh! I didn’t know you worked here!” Mya exclaimed, walking up to the counter with a broad grin on her face.

Josh had on a backwards baseball cap with the name of the shop embroidered on it, pieces of his shaggy blonde hair poking out the sides. The apron over his street clothes was also embroidered. But his smile grew, matching that of Mya’s when he recognized her.

He opened his mouth to say something, but then he saw me. As soon as we locked eyes for a moment, his smile fell and his lips clamped shut.

“Josh? Is something wrong?” Mya asked while glancing between him and I. I shrugged when her attention turned toward me.

“Kerri Thomas?” Josh muttered, tucking his lips in as if he wasn’t supposed to have asked.

“Yes?”

He cleared his throat and brushed his hands on his pants. “What’s your favorite ice cream?”

Now I looked at Mya. I had no idea what was going on, or why Josh was acting so odd. I assumed I would either just ask for whatever was waiting for me, or have to find it in the shop somewhere. I wasn't beneath looking under tables and chairs for another envelope taped to it.

But that didn't seem to be the case here. Josh acted as if he were in trouble for something.

"Um, Jamocha Almond Fudge?" I phrased as a question, even though it was the right answer.

"Really? I honestly have like, never heard of that," Mya stared at me oddly. I shrugged. It wasn't the first time I heard that.

"Correct. Hold on," Josh said. In a flash, he was out from behind the counter and through the heavy plastic panels that separated the back of the shop from the front.

"Okay, is this super weird, or is it just me?" I asked Mya.

She raised her eyebrows and plopped down into an empty chair nearest her. I joined her, resting my elbows on the table and my head on my fists.

"It's definitely weird. If this is part of the game, then your secret admirer needs to have a talk with his minions..." she replied, trailing off as a rustling noise came from behind her.

Josh appeared in front of the counter this time, holding a teal envelope in his hands. "This is for you." Without waiting for a reply, he bolted back behind the counter and started grabbing supplies. "And this!" he shouted toward us. "Mya, what's your favorite?"

Mya and I just stared at each other with wild eyes. Without breaking eye contact, she said softly, "Mint chocolate chip."

The two of us stayed silent as Josh worked, scooping ice cream and pouring the hot fudge on top. Within a few minutes, we both had

our favorite flavors sitting in large bowls, perfect sundaes ready to eat.

“It’s on the house. Well, no, that’s a lie. It’s from your secret admirer. Man, that was stressful,” Josh admitted, falling into a seat next to us.

Mya burst out into laughter, but I didn’t join her. *What* was that all about?

I voiced my thoughts to Josh, who just closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. After a moment, he swiped the cap off his head, shaking out his hair and readjusting the hat again.

“Your secret admirer—scratch that, he said he was ‘the neutral party’, came in earlier this week. He gave me that envelope,” Josh pointed to the forgotten envelope on the table, “and pre-paid for two sundaes. He said you would most likely be here with someone else, but that it was a gift for you.”

“What’s the stressful part?”

“Man, I’ve been here every night thinking you were going to show up! Not only did you not show, but I had a heart attack almost every time that damn bell jingled! What if I screwed it up? What if I mentioned the name of the dude that came in? What if you interrogated me for information and I cracked?” Josh’s voice grew with each sentence, until both Mya and I could practically feel his terror.

Mya laughed as she wiped her lips. “Josh, you should seriously consider trying out for theater. Your inflection is amazing.”

He sighed and leaned back in his chair. “Enjoy the sundaes. I’m just glad it’s all over. Thank you for not interrogating me. Can you please open the envelope, though? I’ve been dying to know what’s inside.”

All of our eyes shifted over to the object in question shoved to the side of the table.

I shrugged, moving my half-eaten sundae out of the way and sliding the envelope toward me. My heart pounded in my chest as I broke the seal.

I expected there to be another letter, a piece of paper, or some sort of clue. I was only partially right.

“Is that... a piece of a puzzle?” Mya questioned, staring at the small item that fell out of the envelope and onto the stainless-steel table top.

“I... think so?” I answered, leaning down to inspect it. It was shaped like a puzzle piece, but I couldn’t tell what the picture should have been. The background was tan, and there were black dotted lines on it. That was all.

“You missed something!” Josh exclaimed. He turned the envelope over and shook it, a slip of paper fluttering to the table.

“Dear Kerri—yes, it’s a puzzle piece. I know how much you love puzzles. Each location you go to will have a piece. I’ll tell you when to put them all together. Now that you’ve found this, another clue will be on your locker soon.”

My face fell. I had hoped that there would be another clue at this location, that I would play through, in sequence.

“Well, if you did that, you could essentially do the entire game in one day, right?” Josh said. I didn’t realize I spoke my thoughts out loud after finishing reading the note.

“I guess so. Makes sense.”

“What do you think it’ll end up being?” Mya asked, turning the piece over in her hand, examining it.

“No idea...” I answered, taking my sundae back and digging in. “Everything is even more confusing now...”



## Chapter 7

School was abuzz with the news on Monday about what happened in the ice cream parlor. For as nervous as Josh had been while we were there, it didn't seem to stop him from telling people about the whole situation.

"A puzzle? That's adorable!" someone shouted as I walked into the lobby.

I plastered a fake smile on my face and waved. A few others called out similar greetings, and I responded in the same manner.

There was only one goal on my mind, and that was getting to my locker. I had high hopes another envelope would be on it, and even higher hopes that the note inside would lead me to more clues about who my secret admirer was, instead of just a location.

I spent all weekend going over the first note and the puzzle piece. It annoyed me that he said I couldn't put the pieces together until he said so. What kind of person gave someone a puzzle and said *not* to put it together? A monster, that's who.

"Keeks?"

I whirled around, finding Austin standing behind me. I hadn't seen or spoken to him all weekend, which was almost a record. But

between trying to read between the lines of my first clue, two practices, and studying for tests I had yet to crack open a book for, the weekend flew by.

“Aus! Where have you been?” I threw my arms around him, pulling him in for a hug. He squeezed me, his hand lingering on my back for a moment, but it wasn’t with the same enthusiasm as normal. “Are you still freaked over the field change?”

It had been almost a week since his coach dropped the news on him. While Austin didn’t do well with change, he should have adjusted by now.

“Actually, he’s switching me back.”

That news alone should have warranted the tense jaw to give away, but it didn’t.

“And?” I asked, glancing over my shoulder. My locker was in the next hallway. I didn’t want to be rude, but I also wanted to get there.

Austin shuffled his feet. “And nothing. Just... wanna hang out tonight? I could use a movie night.” His voice was soft, hitting me right in the gut.

I totally missed cues from my best friend in the entire world that something was wrong. I didn’t know what, but if he was requesting a movie night, it had to be weighing on him.

The last time *he* called one was after the team lost the championship last year. The game where he missed a grounder, allowing the other team to score a run.

They lost by one that day. No one blamed him, but he blamed himself for months.

I gave him all my attention then. “Absolutely. I’ll text Mom and have her stock up.”

The smile on his face looked more familiar than the frown. “Thanks. I’ll see you after practice?”

I shoved his shoulder. “Just don’t make me wait for a decade this time,” I replied, joking.

“Nah, I’ll make it quick,” he replied, turning to head in the opposite direction.

I grinned and started down the hall.

“Oh, Keeks?” Austin called behind me. I spun around again, looking at him in question. “We have an inter-squad game this weekend. You’ll be there, right?”

My smile grew wider. “Never miss, Aus. Never miss.”

The tension in him finally washed away, his shoulders relaxing and the smile seeming more genuine. He shoved his hands in his letterman’s jacket and walked away, calling out to friends ahead of him.

Feeling a bit less guilty now, I bolted for my locker, desperate to see if an envelope was waiting for me.

There was.

Sprinting down the hall at top speed, my bags slapping at my side, I skidded to a stop in front of my locker, slightly out of breath, and ripped the envelope down. The giddiness of actually seeing it *on* my locker for the first time drew butterflies in my stomach.

I didn’t even bother to drop my stuff before ripping the top open and taking out the letter. The envelope fluttered to the ground, forgotten.

*Dear Kerri,*

*Congratulations on figuring out the first clue. It may have been too easy for you, so I’ll try harder this time. I appreciate your patience with the puzzle. It’s probably killing you that you can’t put it together, but I promise, it’ll make more sense at the end.*

*Word has it that you're upset there wasn't a clue on who I am. That was on purpose. You see, there are little tidbits here and there that maybe you'll catch on to. Maybe you won't. If you don't, that's alright. At the end of the hunt, the lightbulb will go off. Think things through carefully, but don't stress about it. Who cares if it's the end of the month when you get to figure it out? The game will be fun along the way.*

*Clue 2: The next envelope is at a place full of adventure and imagination. Where you can be a pirate, fly to the moon, or be a monkey swinging tree to tree.*

*Good luck—*

*Your Secret Admirer*

Um. *What?* Pirates? Moon? Monkeys?

I let out a frustrated breath and pursed my lips. He really was going to make me work for this, wasn't he? The last one was rather easy to figure out, but this one? What did I know about pirates or monkeys?

After hastily shoving the letter back inside the envelope, I spun the dial on my locker and popped it open. I had two tests to focus on today, and practice after school. And with Austin coming over for dinner and a movie... well, my mind would be pulled in a lot of directions today.

He also said that there was a chance I wouldn't figure it out until the very end. So maybe I should just put it aside for now and concentrate on figuring it out tomorrow.

I laid the letter on the top shelf of my locker and gathered up what I needed for the day.



The last thing I did was shove my gym bag in, using my hip to push it the last few inches so I could get the locker door shut.

The letter would be on my mind for the rest of the day, but I had to force it aside and concentrate on things that mattered. I missed realizing Austin was hurting. I missed knowing Dad was going out of town last week.

What else have I been missing simply because I was being too focused on myself instead of those I loved?



## Chapter 8

I thought that if I tried to keep my mind off of the clue and concentrated on something else, *anything* else, that I wouldn't go crazy.

That lasted until lunch.

"Did you get your second clue?"

"Yeah, what was it? The first one was so cute!"

"A scavenger hunt? Puzzles? I would cry, but it's like, super adorbs for you."

A crowd of girls I didn't know bombarded me as I made my way through the doors to the cafeteria and into the lunch line.

"Um, hi. Yeah, it's fun. I like puzzles..." I mumbled, ducking my head and hunching my shoulders, trying to use my backpack as a shield around me.

"Yeah, but like, it's so not me."

"Stop being a bitch, of course it's not for you. It's for *her*."

"What does the second clue say? Sandra told Cami, who texted Laurileigh and I that there definitely was another envelope on your locker this morning."

My head spun. I couldn't keep up with the constant beratement. Lifting my eyes, I scanned the now growing crowd, seeking out the best way to get out of there and quick.

"Guys, thanks, but—"

"Do you know who it is?"

"Oh my God, yes, do you have any idea?"

"I wonder if it's—"

"Shut up, Callie, you have no idea. She hasn't said a word about clues on who it is."

I held up my hands, trying to get them all to stop, but it was useless. Either someone was arguing with another about something, or I was being pestered with questions. They closed in, surrounding me.

My anxiety spiked, my heart pounding. While I loved being the center of attention, it usually was limited to the volleyball court. Being in the middle of the craziness where I wasn't in my element was embarrassing and terrifying.

"Come on," a soft voice whispered in my ear. A heavy arm draped over my shoulder, pulling me away from the crowd, sheltering me from the mass of people surrounding us.

"Shit, Keeks, are you okay?" Austin's voice reached my ears a moment later, the first comfortable sound I heard this period.

Sucking in a breath, I nodded, straightening up. The arm fell from my shoulders, reminding me of my savior.

"Thanks—" I started, cutting myself off as my eyes went wide when I saw who it was. "Owen?"

"Yeah, thanks, man. For getting her out of there," Austin added, standing and reaching over the table to slap hands with his friend. Owen returned the gesture while climbing over the bench to sit, leaving me standing there, jaw dropped.

“Whatever,” he said as he sat. He opened his lunch as if nothing had happened.

Owen St. Cloud just willingly helped me. Not only that, but he touched me and spoke to me. It was only two words, but the action meant more.

“Thanks,” I mumbled, unsure what to do next. Austin elbowed Davis sitting next to him, jutting his chin toward Owen. Davis groaned, but moved, shifting his food across the table and leaving his seat vacant for me.

“For you,” Davis said as he rounded the table, sending me a wink. It was the second time he had winked at me in a week. He was being friendlier than normal lately.

Realizing a problem, I started, “I don’t—”

Before I could finish, Austin slid his tray over, placing it between the two of us, silently offering to share. I wasn’t able to grab food because of the crowd and Owen taking me away. But with the way these boys ate during season, there was plenty for both of us. Plus, I knew Aus kept extra protein bars in his sports locker.

We ate in silence. I, too stunned at what just happened to speak. Why the boys were quiet, I wasn’t sure.

“Where’s Connor?” I finally asked a few minutes later. It wasn’t like him to miss an opportunity for food.

Austin shrugged. “No idea. Haven’t seen him in a bit.”

“This day is weird,” I mumbled to myself, flipping over a pretzel on the tray. “I’m gonna head out. Aus, I’ll see you after practice?”

He nodded, but didn’t answer. The vibe around the table was odd, and it was getting to me. I needed clarity, somewhere to clear my mind and shake this feeling off.

Owen looked up just as I stood, untangling my legs from the bench and grabbing my backpack. We locked eyes for a moment, until I

blinked. I nodded my head at him silently. He tipped his chin ever-so-slightly, his gray eyes staring hard at me.

Practically sprinting out of the cafeteria, I weighed my options. I could go sit outside my next class, waiting in the hallway like a nerd, or I could see if the courtyard was open today. The weather was nice, and it hadn't rained in a few days, so the benches would be dry.

Courtyard won easily. As soon as I settled into a bench, my mind jumped back and forth between what happened in the cafeteria and the letter.

The letter that I somehow momentarily forgot about in all the hubbub of chaos.

The clue that I had yet to figure out.

Sighing, I leaned back and crossed my legs at my ankles, stretching them out in front of me. I had a long afternoon ahead, and if I couldn't figure out this clue, my brain would be worthless. And an unfocused mind during volleyball practice meant mistakes. Mistakes that could cause injuries. And injuries meant no playing.

Pirates. Moon. Monkeys. What did those three things have in common? Adventures and imagination... were all three things supposed to be make believe? Where would someone concoct something about pirates, the moon, and monkeys together?

It seemed... childish. Like something a small kid would ramble on about.

"Childish..." I whispered to myself.

"What's childish?" someone close by asked. I jumped, flinging my arms out to the side, my legs kicking in the air like a donkey.

"Owww," the person groaned. I looked up, finding my teammate, Stephanie, moaning while clutching her shin.

"Oh crap, I'm so sorry, Steph! You scared me. I didn't know you were there!" I reached forward, grabbing her arm and helping her

twist and sit on the bench next to me. “Crap, did I get you really bad? I’m sorry!”

“Nah, it’ll be okay. Just the initial sting of it. Good thing you’re not a soccer player.”

I glared at her while she grinned. It was all for show, and I should have known. She loved the dramatics. Every dive to save the ball on the court ended up in a little bit of entertainment factor. The girl took bruises like a medal of honor and showed them off every chance she got.

If I had grown up with four older brothers, I probably would have acted the same too. But the closest I had to a brother was Austin, who had absolutely no flair for the dramatic.

“Ugh, Stephanie,” I replied, rolling my eyes and returning to my original position. I crossed my arms over my chest, my lips pursed, my mind still running.

“You love me and you know it,” she answered, shoulder checking me. She was right; Stephanie was the closest friend I had outside of Austin. We’d played together almost all year round for the past four years. She joined my volleyball club in eighth grade, and we’ve been on the same teams ever since. When you spend that much time around someone, they’re bound to become your closest friend.

“So, what’s childish?” she repeated.

I let out a small growl, remembering my frustration. “My clue.”

Her blue eyes lit up with excitement. For someone sports oriented, she was also huge on gossip in the dating world. She loved everything and anything to do with the secret admirers each month.

“Oh, do tell!” she squealed, her hands clasped in her lap. I looked down at her hands, then to mine. They were identical in the fact that we both had polish-less nails, ones that were kept as short as

possible so we didn't scratch ourselves or our teammates while playing.

The only reason I resigned to tell her is because of how stuck I was, and how soon the bell was going to ring.

"I don't have it on me," I started. She gasped, and I rolled my eyes again. "Oh, shut it. Anyway, it's a clue toward a location. A place full of adventure and imagination. Then it said..." I tried to remember the exact wording, but I couldn't. "It mentioned how you could be like a pirate, you could go to the moon, or you could see monkeys. Or something. I don't know."

"Huh," Stephanie huffed, chewing on her bottom lip, deep in thought. "You know my little cousin, the one I babysit?"

I nodded, remembering the adorable toddler videos she showed me on her phone between matches.

"Well, when I take him to the park sometimes, the one off of Canal Street, by the bridge?" A thought sparked in my mind, but I let her continue, wondering if we were on the same page. "That one has the steering wheel at the top of the tower. Sometimes he says he likes to be—"

"A pirate," we both said at the same time. She looked at me, brows furrowed. "I used to pretend to be a pirate captain up there when I was little."

Steph smiled. "That's cute. But yeah, that's exactly what he does too. So... the pirate part makes sense. I'm not sure about seeing monkeys or going to the moon, but maybe the playground on Canal is at least part of it?"

I nodded slowly, going through the process in my head. Pirate. Monkeys... "Oh! It wasn't *seeing* monkeys. It was *being* a monkey, swinging around..."

“Monkey bars!” we both shouted at the same time again. We glanced at each other and burst out laughing.

“Oh my gosh, it’s so the playground! How cute is that!” Stephanie gasped between laughs.

It felt like a weight lifted from my shoulders. The rest of the day could go on now that I figured it out.

Well, sort of anyway. “There’s no person at the playground to give me the puzzle piece, though. That means he had to have hidden it.”

“So?” Steph shrugged and shook her head. “Just go there and start tearing up the place. It can’t be that hard.”

I glared at her again. “Yeah, but what if someone else found it and took it?”

The lightbulb went off. “Oh. That. Well... the only way to find out is to go there, right? Go after practice tonight.”

My face fell. “I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“I promised Austin I would have a movie night with him, and he’s driving us back to my house.”

“Tell him to stop at the park. It’s on the way anyway, right?”

I sucked in a deep breath. “Yes, but...”

Stephanie waited for me to continue, lifting an eyebrow.

“I don’t know. He just doesn’t seem interested in the whole game. I mean, I get it. He’s a dude, and he’s my friend. Seeing me on a wild goose chase after someone he has no control over isn’t ideal.”

“No control over? What is he, your father?” Stephanie growled. Feminism was a big theme in her life, especially with the older brothers.

“No, that’s not what I meant. He just... said it was odd that he couldn’t make sure the guy was a good one, you know? Think about how your brothers would feel if someone chose you for the game.”



She grimaced. “Yeah, that’s one reason I’m glad I haven’t been chosen, actually. That would be a hard sell.”

“Exactly. So, as much as it kind of hurts, I think I’m going to leave Austin out of it.”

Her sad smile greeted me, matching mine. “I understand. Well, you have me if you need me. I’ll gossip and squeal with you any—”

The bell rang, cutting her off. We both jumped to our feet and headed toward the door to the hallway.

“Good luck on your quest!” she called when we parted ways.

I waved, a sinking feeling settling in my chest.

What if I didn’t get to the envelope in time?



## Chapter 9

“What are we watching?” I asked as I launched myself onto the couch, my legs flopping down after me.

Austin had the bowl of popcorn Mom popped for us, even though we were both stuffed from dinner. He placed it on the coffee table, grabbed the remotes, and joined me on the couch.

“Action, humor, or sappy?” he asked, clicking into a streaming service.

“Umm... you choose. I’m too tired to pick.”

Without a word, he scrolled through the options, ultimately landing on an action movie. Dad watched it a few nights ago while I sat in the living room doing homework. Occasionally, I would glance up and find some hot guy blowing something up, but other than that, I had no idea what the movie was about.

“You haven’t seen this?” I asked Austin. He shook his head and reached for the popcorn. How he had room in his stomach after the spaghetti, meatballs, garlic bread, and salad Mom made for dinner was beyond me. I was so full I could barely move.

“Dad saw it. He said he liked it.”

Austin's brow furrowed. "He watched it without me?"

I huffed out a laugh and snuggled down into the couch. It was one and a half cushions deep, larger than a normal couch, and was perfect to curl up in. "Sorry, friend. He was too excited that it finally came to streaming that he couldn't wait. If you want to turn it off, I bet he'll watch it again with you."

Austin spread his arms around the back of the couch and shrugged. "Nah, it's fine." He pressed play and tossed the remote on the cushion next to him.

I stretched out, ready for a night of things I didn't understand. But Aus and I had an agreement that we didn't get to critique each other's choice of movie. There were hard limits—mine cut off at creepy kid scary movies—but other than that, we had to attempt to watch.

My knees cracked when I extended them, letting them flop on Austin's lap. He reached down with one arm and patted my feet, pulling the blanket next to him to cover us both.

Thirty minutes in, and I couldn't get comfortable. My muscles ached from practice and every position I sat in annoyed me.

"Move over," I whispered to Austin. He was sitting more in the middle of the couch, and I wanted to stretch all the way out. Besides, he was tall enough to sit at the end and put his feet on the coffee table. With the extra length of the cushions, I couldn't reach.

He rolled his eyes and shushed me, but scooted over anyway. Instead of giving him my feet again, I flipped over and laid my head on his lap.

Automatically, his arm dropped on top of mine, his fingers brushing my hip. I grabbed the blanket, threw it over me, and snuggled in.

Between the pure exhaustion of the day and the lazy circles Austin drew over my arm, I was asleep in no time.

“You snore,” he whispered once I woke up. The TV was off, and his phone was in his other hand.

Wanting to be obnoxious in retaliation for his remark, I stretched my arms overhead, knocking his phone out of his hand.

“Hey!” he gasped, staring at me with his jaw dropped. The worry lines that seemed permanently affixed to his forehead these days lessened as he grinned down at me.

The arm once casually around my waist tightened, pinning me to the couch. His grin turned wicked, mischief gleaming in his dark eyes.

“Oh, you asked for it,” he whispered, licking his lips before biting down on the bottom one.

My smile dropped. I wiggled, trying to get out of his grip, but he was too strong. I knew what was coming, and I couldn't stop him now.

In a flash, Austin's left hand darted for my arm while his right hand splayed over my stomach. If I had been in sound mind and not panicked, I could have used that half second to roll off the couch and bolt for the door.

But I didn't. I was stuck.

“Stop! Oh my God, Austin, stop!” I screeched between giggles. With one hand tickling my armpit and the other digging into my side, I was powerless against him.

I gasped, trying to get air into my lungs, but another laughter fit took over me. “Austin, I'm going to pee in my pants! Stop!”

Nothing I did stopped him. I tried ripping his arms off, but it was no use. I was useless in my weakened state.

“Austin!” I squealed one last time. His smile brightened the room. If it took torturing me to get it back, then I'd take it.

Finally, after what seemed like hours, he threw his hands up in surrender. “Okay, okay, I’m done!”

Between pursed lips, I sucked in a breath, restoring the balance in my body. Before I did anything else, I jumped to my feet and sprinted to the bathroom, letting my bladder get some relief.

“Feel better?” Austin asked when I returned to the couch, his eyes narrow and one brow raised.

I didn’t answer. Instead, with lightning speed, I grabbed the nearest throw pillow and whacked him with it.

“Hey!” he exclaimed. I knew better than to let my guard down. Within half a second, he snatched one too and started back at me.

We danced around the room, throwing pillows and yelping when we got hit. It felt like we were ten years old again, with no other care in the world.

After a while, we were both spent, fallen to the floor in mutual defeat.

Austin reached to the side, grabbing the closest pillow and shoving it under his head. A moment later, he sat up, leaned over me, his hard, muscular chest brushing over my stomach, and lifted up another pillow.

“Up,” he demanded. I craned my neck, allowing him to place it under my head. Once we were both settled, we laid back down, side by side, staring at the ceiling.

“Everything okay?” I whispered, tapping his arm with the back of my hand.

“Yeah... yeah,” he responded, just as softly. “It’s okay.”

“Okay.”

We laid on the floor in silence for a while, until Mom called down and said it was time for Austin to go home.



## Chapter 10

"I need a ride."

"Oh, hello, good morning to you too, sunshine. I had an excellent evening. Thank you so much for asking," Max replied, shutting his locker. He turned, leaned back against the cold metal, and propped one foot up.

I sneered at him, debating if I wanted to stick my tongue out for good measure. "I need a ride," I repeated.

The hesitant look on his face made me cringe. He wasn't going to let me get away without an explanation.

"My envelope. The second clue. I need a ride to the Canal Street Park, and as soon as possible."

Max drew his brows together in thought. I wanted to smack him, but I also needed to stay on his good side.

"And if I take you to this park... what's in it for me?" he asked. I rolled my eyes at him as he pushed off the locker and draped an arm around my shoulders. We made our way down the hall toward class.

"Nothing. Absolutely nothing except the ability to brag to everyone that you got to help with a clue."

Max gasped. “Me? You think little old me would *brag* about such a thing?” The hand he placed on his chest cracked me up.

“Yup. You. One hundred percent you.”

He paused, threw a finger up in the air, and stared at me. “Wait!”

I did. He kept his dramatic effect going for another beat before I finally did punch him in the shoulder.

“Why me?”

“What do you mean, why you?” I stalled, because I really didn’t have a good answer besides the fact that he was the first person I saw this morning.

“No, I mean, why me? As in, if I’m taking you to the park to figure out a clue, then you obviously don’t suspect me as your secret admirer.”

I froze. He was right. The only time I thought it could be him was the very first day. Past that, he was never an option. I just asked because he was a friend, and had access to a car.

The only suspects I had so far were Owen or Davis, both who had been abnormally nicer to me than usual lately. If it wasn’t one of them, I was completely stumped.

“I... I...” I trailed off. *Could* it be Max? Without any clues about the person, it could have been anyone.

“Wow...” Max said, scanning me head to toe.

“What?”

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen you short-circuit like that. You were all like—” He stood still like a statue, his head tilted, his eyes wide, and his jaw gaped. He made small movements like a robot that was stuck in position.

I shook my head, trying to clear my mind. “Ugh, *stop!* Can you take me or not?”

Max unfroze, his normal goofy smile resuming. “I mean, duh. After practice tonight, alright? Can’t stay out too late—we have the inter-squad game tomorrow.”

I nodded, already knowing about it. “Tonight’s perfect. It shouldn’t take too long.”

Max stood straight and saluted me. “At your service, my lady.”

Just before entering the classroom, he stopped, putting one hand on my arm. “Just so you know...” he started, a wicked grin creeping up his face. “I would have made a *damn* good secret admirer.”

The disappointment in my heart was unexpected. Was he ruling himself out?

After searching my face, he threw his hands up. “Not saying I’m *not* your secret admirer. Maybe I’m throwing you off. A good ol’ bluff...”

With Max, anything was possible. With the pranks he and Austin pulled, I didn’t doubt he had it in them to be behind the whole thing.

Would I want it to be Max? Or Owen? What about Davis or the other baseball boys? I had been close to them for so long, they felt like brothers to me.

But... they were cute. All of them. And some of the best guys I knew. I really couldn’t go wrong with any of them as a boyfriend. And if it was a baseball boy, then at least he would understand my dedication to sports—

“Earth to Keeks. Snap out of it,” Max said, snapping his fingers in front of my face. A few students squeezed past me, trying to get into the room.

“Sorry. Stop making me think so hard. It’s too early in the morning for that,” I said, punching him in the shoulder once more.

Max laughed and pushed me through the door, making me stumble my way toward my desk. “Don’t you worry. I promise,



tonight, no thinking involved. Just here to help.”



I had been waiting in the lobby for only a few minutes when, out of nowhere, I heard the pounding of feet, followed by a shriek, as a blur of Max came tearing down the hall. He paused just long enough to grab my hand, pull me to my feet, and drag me behind him outside.

“Come on, Scooby, we have a mystery to solve!” he exclaimed when I started running next to him. We were both athletic, and got to his car in under a minute, barely out of breath as we jumped inside, flinging our backpacks into the back seat, all while still laughing.

“What a start to our adventure,” Max whispered, leaning his head back against his seat.

I laughed. “I mean, you made it crazy, not me.”

“Still...” Max trailed off, looking out the windshield. He started the car and backed out of the spot. I leaned against the window, watching as we drove past the front doors.

“Anywhoooooo,” Max sang, breaking the silence as we turned onto Canal Street. The park was only a few blocks away.

My heart leaped into my throat, both out of nerves and excitement.

“Yes, Max?” He was like a puppy—always needing to be entertained and praised.

“How did you figure out the clue was leading to the park? What even *are* your clues, anyway? Josh said it was a puzzle piece he had to give you?”

I snorted, which caused more laughter to ensue. Max pulled into the parking lot and shut off the car, then turned to stare at me, a wild look on his face.

“I’m sorry,” I managed to say between gasps. “But you literally just gave yourself away.”

Max moved to open his mouth, only to realize I was right, and turned it into a pout instead. “Damn it.”

I patted him on the arm, calming down now. “It’s alright. I mean, yes, I love you boys, but... yeah, sorry, no. You’re Austin’s best friend, which makes you like my best friend once removed. Or something. Too close to home either way.”

“I get it. I totally would have rocked it, though.” He got out of the car and leaned his arms onto the roof. “So, what are we doing here?”

“Your guess is as good as mine,” I answered, scanning the park, hoping to find a neon sign saying ‘look here’.



## Chapter 11

“*A* place full of adventure. Fly to the moon. Be a monkey,” Max repeated with me as we circled the park for a fourth time.

We had looked under every bench, every slide, and every swing and came up empty-handed. There was no envelope. No puzzle pieces. Nothing.

With each lap, my heart dropped further. I was too late. I didn’t get here in time, and someone else stole the envelope. It was a stupid idea anyway—how could my secret admirer know when I would be able to get there? Josh had the first one tucked away for days. This one was no different.

What if I didn’t find them all by the end of the month? I had a busy schedule that was only about to get busier now that the boys’ baseball games and my own volleyball games were about to start. And without access to a car of my own, I had no way of getting anywhere with a guarantee.

Did my secret admirer know that? Did they realize I wasn’t as free to move around as others? I had to rely on friends and family to take me where I needed to be, which usually wasn’t an issue. Austin had

his own car, and considering he was going to and from school at the same time as me most days, it worked out fine.

“Do you have the clue on you?” Max asked. “Maybe you missed something.”

I shook my head. “No, it’s at—wait!” I paused, thinking. “Maybe...” I dashed back to the car, leaping over curbs and barriers in my way.

Max unlocked it with his key fob and I dove into the back seat, grabbing my backpack.

“Aha!” I squealed, pulling the envelope out of my assignment notebook. I shoved it in there the other day, not wanting to leave it at home where Mom could find it. She didn’t make it a habit to come into my room often, but there was the occasional time. And if she saw this lying around, I had no doubt her curiosity would get the best of her. We were too much alike.

“The next envelope is at a place full of adventure and imagination. Where you can be a pirate, fly to the moon, or monkeys swinging tree to tree,” I shouted over to Max.

He cocked his head, thinking. “You *definitely* left something out!” With a whoop, he leaped over the curb and back into the playground, jumping onto the stairs and climbing the net to the very top.

“Found it!” he exclaimed triumphantly, holding an envelope in the air. “And that’s not all!”

He lifted his other hand, holding something I couldn’t identify from down here. Using my hand as a visor, I squinted, trying to focus on it, but it was no use.

“What is it?” I shouted up to him.

“You’re going to *freak out* when you see!” he yelled.

My eyes went wide. What would be so good that even Max knew I would be excited about it?

Max practically flew down from the top tower. As soon as he was on the ground next to me, he paused.

“Are you ready for it?” He wiggled his eyebrows, his smile stretching his cheeks.

“Gimme!” I demanded. But before he did, I stopped him. “Wait... where was it?”

Max shrugged. “The big wheel up there. You said pirates, and my mind jumped to the—”

“Pirate wheel!” I exclaimed, hitting myself on the forehead. “Of course! Now, *gimme!*”

Max wound one arm from around his back, an envelope inside. I snatched it out of his hand and tore it open as quickly but carefully as I could.

“It’s just the puzzle piece. Nothing else,” I said, not bothering to hide the hurt in my voice. I hoped there would be another letter like last time.

“Maybe we got lost in translation,” Max whispered, shaking his other hand still behind his back.

I stared at him as if he lost his mind.

“Oh, forget it. Here.”

I reached out my hand to take whatever it was, but stopped halfway.

“No,” I whispered. My gaze darted between the object in his hand and his face. “No!”

“Yes!”

“*Are you kidding me!*” I screamed, not caring if anyone around heard. We were the only ones at the playground, but there were homes nearby.

“*I am not! It’s not even for me, but I’m freaking out too!*” Max matched my energy perfectly. I grabbed his free hand, and we both

started jumping.

“Signed?” I yelled. “Signed!”

“Your very own, signed copy of Red, Taylors Version, *in vinyl*, my lady,” Max said, bowing as he handed it over.

I had the album. I had it on my phone since the moment it dropped. I drooled over the signed copies, but didn’t have the money saved, and my parents thought getting a signed copy of something I couldn’t even use was pointless.

“Whoever he is, Keeks... he’s a good one. And he seems to know you rather well,” Max whispered.

I couldn’t answer. My eyes were glued to the vinyl in my hands. It shook slightly, trembling with the amount of adrenaline coursing through my veins.

“This is *insane*, Max. Who would do this?”

“Someone who wants to win your heart, Kerri.”



## Chapter 12

“That’s my boy!” Austin’s mom screamed from the bench next to me. “Let’s go Warriors!”

I chuckled, watching her get worked up. She cheered for Austin just the same now as she did back when he was in Little League.

“Mrs. Mathers, it’s just an inter-squad game. They’re not actually playing against another team, you know...”

“Girl, don’t you be telling me how to cheer for my son. A game is a game, and all games require encouragement.”

“Yes, ma’am,” I replied, still laughing. We had been going back and forth like this for years now, and I never meant it in a rude way. Nor would I ever suggest she stop cheering for Austin.

Especially since I cheered just as loud once they started. Not only for Aus, but for all the boys I was friends with. They all deserved equal treatment, though I did pay slightly better attention to Austin’s position.

“Where’s Owen?” Mrs. Mathers asked a few minutes later.

I covered my eyes with my hand like a visor, squinting to see out into left field. Dylan was out there, not Owen.

“I’m not sure. Did Austin say anything about him not starting today?” The only thing Max told me about the game last night was that the varsity boys would all be starting on the same side. Coach didn’t want to split them up—the nine of them needed to keep working together and finding their groove. That meant Owen, Max, Austin, Connor, Davis, and the others should all be on the field right now.

Austin covered second base, scooping up some grounders and throwing them to Davis at first. Connor threw out directions from the pitcher’s mound, keeping an eye on everyone like the true captain he was.

“No, nothing. I thought Coach was keeping them all together for this game. I wonder what happened...”

It wasn’t like we could turn to ask Owen’s parents, either. Owen lived with his grandfather, who rarely came to games. Connor’s dad was like a parent to him, and Austin’s parents tried to help as much as possible as well.

I sighed. We both hoped nothing was wrong with Owen, but knew it would throw the game off slightly. Dylan was great, but he wasn’t Owen.

“Thankfully this doesn’t count. Wherever he is, I hope he’s alright, and it doesn’t affect the first real game of the season,” I said as the players rushed off the field.

Mrs. Mathers nodded, keeping her eyes glued on the game ahead. My friends jogged to the dugout. Varsity would be up to bat first, the junior varsity on the field.

Davis stepped up to bat. His first swing was a strike. Mrs. Mathers and I struck up some small talk when she asked about my parents and Dad’s recent travels.



The crack of the bat made us both whip our heads toward the game, finding Davis sprinting toward first. The JV team couldn't get the ball there in time, and he was safe. I laughed as he pretended to dust off his shoulders and blow a kiss to the pitcher.

Then he blew another toward me, adding a somewhat exaggerated wink. My cheeks flushed, and Mrs. Mathers chuckled and shook her head.

Connor was up to bat next. He swung, connecting with the ball in the perfect way, sending it soaring into the outfield. The center fielder sprinted toward it, but was too late. It landed just in front of the fence, cueing loud groans from the varsity bench. Another few feet and it would have been a home run, but instead, Connor turned it into a double.

He ran all while doing what Connor did best—leadership. As he rounded the bases, he threw out directions to the outfielders, telling them where to throw, who to look at, and cheering them on. He made it to second without much effort, clapping his hands the whole way. As he hit the base, the outfielder finally got the ball to the second baseman, and Connor was right there with advice. I had no idea what he was saying, but it was just like him to do so.

Austin was on deck, right after Max, who stepped up to hit.

“Let's go Max!” she yelled, following with a whistle. Max raised his hand in the air, waving to the invisible fans as if he was Babe Ruth.

Max swung and missed, eventually striking out. “I was just going easy on you, because Aus is up next! Didn't want you guys to suffer too much!” he yelled to whoever would listen. The varsity team began throwing whatever they could reach at him, and the junior varsity laughed, shouting their thanks. Max exited the field with his hands raised, as if he was being praised.

I shook my head. Austin was up next, and as ritual would have it, the second he left the dugout, he turned to look for us. His mom blew him a kiss, and I waved. The smile on his face was brighter than I had seen recently, which made me happy.

Sometimes Mrs. Mathers patted my knee reassuringly as we watched Austin take a few warm up swings. As soon as he stepped up to the plate, bending his knees and gripping the bat tight, we both fell silent.

First swing was a strike. Second, a ball. But the third connected in the same way Connor's had. Except it went further—right over the fence for a home run.

The stands, the dugout, and the field erupted, everyone screaming their heads off and chanting Austin's name. Connor rounded the bases and stayed at home plate, waiting for his friend.

As Austin hit third, he looked straight at us, pointing in our direction with a huge smile on his face. Mrs. Mathers was going crazy beside me. I was on my feet, clapping and cheering, watching my best friend do what made him happiest.

The varsity team won the intermural game, as expected. Connor did his best to make sure it was as close as possible, even instructing his boys not to hit as hard toward the last few innings.

The crew gathered at Austin's house after the game. I helped Mrs. Mathers prep the food before they all got there, then hung out with everyone as normal.

The only difference tonight was the fact that I now questioned everyone. Was my secret admirer in the room? Was it Davis? Or was it Owen, who still hadn't messaged anyone as to his whereabouts?



## Chapter 13

"I have a great day, sweetheart. I'll see you at dinner," Dad said as I grabbed my bags out of the backseat. "Thanks, Dad. Love you," I responded just before closing the door and walking around the back of the car and into school.

Every nerve inside of me was on fire, wanting nothing more than to sprint to my locker and see what was waiting for me. It had been a long weekend, waiting with anticipation for another note. The month was half over, and I was still no closer to identifying my secret admirer.

But the second I turned down the first hallway, the sight before me had me stopped cold.

"Owen?" I whispered softly, as not to scare him.

His hand stopped mere inches away from his locker, his hand fisted, ready to punch a hole through the metal.

"What's going on?" I dropped my gear bag at my side and took a few slow steps toward him.

He looked at me, rage in his eyes, but his hand dropped to his side. His Adam's apple bounced as he swallowed his emotions and

his chest heaved.

Those gray eyes were steely, his jaw set. After a tense moment, he lifted his hands and grabbed his head, digging his fingers into his scalp.

“Owen? Can I help?”

“No, you can’t fucking help,” he snapped. I stiffened, gasped, and took one step backward.

He stared at me, the rage turning into disappointment almost instantly. “Kerri, I’m sorry,” he said in a softer tone, reaching one hand out toward me. He must have reconsidered, as he drew it back immediately.

“Maybe I can’t help, but I can listen... if you want to talk,” I offered. I didn’t move. I wanted him to know that I wasn’t leaving. We had known each other since freshman year, and while we weren’t as close as I was to the other boys, I still considered him a friend. I had no idea if he thought the same, but any friend of Austin’s was an automatic friend of mine.

Owen slammed an open palm on the locker next to his, making me jump. “My mom...”

I waited. Owen wasn’t a talker to begin with, and especially not about anything personal. The most I knew about him was that he lived with his grandpa.

“Is that why you missed the game on Saturday?” Taking a chance, I took the step back toward him. My initial instinct was to put my hand on his shoulder or pull him in for a hug he looked like he so desperately needed, but I didn’t. I wanted to be respectful of his space.

He nodded, closing his eyes for a moment. “She’s in rehab. Again.”

My heart dropped. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s her own fault,” he responded, then turned and slid down the lockers until he sat on the floor, forearms resting on his knees, his head leaned back against the cold metal.

After slipping off my backpack and dropping it next to my other bag, I followed suit, taking up residence a small distance away from him, but close enough that we could talk without having other people hearing, if he wanted.

“They played great on Saturday,” I started. By the pained expression on Owen’s face, I could tell the topic at hand was a hard one. I thought maybe if I took his mind off of it, it would help.

I tucked a strand of dark hair behind my ear before continuing. “Austin hit a homer in his first at bat. Right after Connor got to the fence line. He was so pissed at Aus, it was hysterical. But then the varsity was crushing the JV so bad, Con told them to back off. Told the boys to give the JV a—”

“Learning opportunity,” Owen finished.

“Yeah,” I whispered. “Dylan wasn’t as good as you out there, though. Or at bat. Your batting average has improved over the winter, Max said. Says you’ve been putting in the work off field this year.”

Owen gulped again, giving me the slightest of nods. “Yeah.”

The warning bell rang, scaring me, but Owen didn’t flinch. He sat as still as a statue, barely even breathing.

“Owen?”

He licked his lips and turned his head toward me. Instead of the usual unyielding stare, his gray eyes were soft, even worried looking.

“I got you, you know. If you ever need. I know the boys can be... boys. But if you ever just wanna... sit, I can do that.” I shrugged, trying to make it seem like it wasn’t a huge deal. “Sharing the silence is okay with me.”

Owen sucked in a huge breath, exhaling through pursed lips, making his cheeks puff. “Thanks, Keeks.”

For once, hearing that name come from someone other than Austin didn’t bother me. “Anytime.”

He pushed off the floor with one hand, hopping to his feet and extending an arm toward me. I grabbed it, allowing him to lift me from the floor with ease. I bent down to grab my bags, sliding them over my shoulders.

I wouldn’t have time to stop by my locker to put them away before first period, but that was alright. I had better things going on.

Owen snatched his backpack out of his locker, slamming the door after.

“Hey, Owen?” I asked before he could walk away.

He spun, looking at me with a face I couldn’t read.

“Do you... want a hug?”

The frown on his face softened, his little lines between his brows disappearing. Without a word, he lifted one arm up ever-so-slightly.

I took that as my cue and stepped forward, wrapping my arms around his torso. He tucked me under his chin, only hugging back with one arm. His heart pounded in his chest, but his body relaxed after a few seconds.

“Thanks,” he whispered just before we let go.

“Anytime. I’m always around. You know where to find me,” I whispered back. He nodded and took off down the hall, not looking back.

I turned at the corner and headed the other direction, finding Max waiting for me outside first period.

“Where were you?” he asked, opening the door for me to go through first.

“Doing something important.”



## Chapter 14

The second the bell rang after first period, I wanted to rush to my locker. Not only to put my stuff away, but to see if there was a teal envelope waiting for me.

My bubble burst when Max grabbed my arm, stopping me right outside the classroom door.

"I grabbed this. I waited for you, but you never showed up."

In his hand was a teal envelope.

I snatched it out of his fingers lightning fast. "What the hell, Max. Why do you have this?"

"Spur of the moment decision?" He shrugged, an impish smile crossing his lips.

Rolling my eyes, I tore the envelope open and took out the note inside. After a quick glance and realizing no one was clued into what I was doing, I took off down the hallway, trusting that Max would clear the path and guide me away from any obstacles as I read.

"Dear Kerri. Another successful hunt accomplished. Great job!" I beamed at Max, who opened his mouth to start the tirade of how *he* was the real reason we found the items.

I let him drone on as I continued reading in my head.

*I hope you enjoyed the gift that came with the second puzzle piece. It's something I know you've wanted, and you deserve it. You're always there for others, even when we don't know it.*

*Your next clue... honestly, I'm excited about this one. For you, I mean. I hope it brings a smile to your face.*

*Clue 3: Find the next puzzle piece in the land of soft and fuzzies. Where being tackled and licked on the face is adorable, not weird.*

*Good luck.*

“Yeah, that sounds creepy as hell, man,” Max said, jolting me out of my thoughts.

I punched his shoulder. “Stop reading over my shoulder, you creep!”

He laughed and grabbed the paper from my hands, reading the entire letter aloud again.

“Max! Stop!” I whined, trying to grab the paper away from him. He held it over his head until he was finished, garnering attention from multiple people around us.

With my hands crossed over my chest, I stuck out a hip and a lip, pouting until he returned what was mine. The second it was in my hands, I stuffed it in the outer pocket of my backpack.

“See you later!” I shouted as I bolted down the hallway, dodging other students left and right. Max yelled something back at me, but I was too far away to hear it.





“Soft and fuzzies?” Mya sipped on her chocolate milk, trying to figure out the clue with the rest of us.

I shrugged. “That’s what it said.”

Stephanie and a few other girls stayed quiet, also thinking about what it could mean. Nothing jumped out at us right away, especially with the part about licking your face.

I glanced over at the boys’ table, wondering if any of them could be in on this. It was obvious that my secret admirer was either someone that knew me well, or was friends with someone that knew me well. Or close enough to a friend of mine to get information.

Which both narrowed down the list of suspects and increased it. Davis and Owen were still in the running, but honestly, neither of them made sense, either. No one really made sense. It was all in my mind, since I had absolutely nothing to go on.

“Where the hell would being tackled and licked on the face be cute and not disgusting?”

I took a swig from my water bottle and shrugged again. “That’s why I’m asking you guys.”

“Why don’t you ask those guys?” Stephanie said, pointing over to the baseball guy’s table.

A few girls I recognized, but didn’t like, were currently trying to worm their way onto the bench, batting their eyes and pushing out their boobs. I shook my head, grossed out at their behavior. Especially because I knew they had no chance.

Except maybe with Max. He would potentially give anyone a chance, but for some reason, hadn’t had a steady girlfriend in over a year.

Just before I looked away, a cold shiver ran down my spine. I tucked a rogue lock of hair behind my ear and turned back, finding a set of slate-gray eyes staring at me.

I held Owen's gaze, willing him to give me a sign that he was doing alright. He held everything in, never showing outward emotion. This morning was a complete anomaly. I was in the right place at the right time, and I was glad about that.

He didn't blink, but at the last second, his chin dipped half an inch, and he turned back toward his friends.

A wave of relief washed over me. I didn't think he was in the clear, but at least he acknowledged me.

"Guys! Why are we so dumb sometimes?" Mya cried, dropping her head onto the table. The bell rang, but no one moved.

"I wouldn't go that far, but do tell," Stephanie replied, gathering her trash onto her tray and grabbing her backpack.

"Soft. Fuzzy. Licks your face. He's talking about a *dog*. Duh!"

We all paused, hesitating for a moment. In our silence, we peeked at one another, finding the same expression on all of our faces.

Lips tucked in, the corners lifting, our eyes barely able to stay open.

In unison, we burst out laughing. I dropped my tray onto the table, Mya clutched her stomach, and Stephanie rolled her eyes, but with a smile.

"Wow. Okay, yeah, I do feel stupid after that. Now that you say it, how could we not get that?" I asked between gasps.

We made our way over to the trash, emptying our trays and putting them on top of the cans. In the hall right outside the cafeteria, we stood for a second before parting ways.

"So... dogs. Awesome. But *where* are the dogs?" I questioned. My friends shook their heads.

"No idea. But I'll keep thinking and text you later!" Mya said as she hurried down the hall.

I said goodbye to Steph and jogged down the other hall toward class. I had some thinking to do as well, including figuring out how to get where I needed to go in a more timely manner.

It was already the start of the third week, and I only had the third clue. I had to pick up the pace if I was going to figure out who was behind all of this.



## Chapter 15

"I got nothin'," I grunted toward Stephanie mid-crunch.

With our teammates on the court, a handful of us were doing abs and legs on mats on the sidelines. We just came off from our drills, but would switch again in ninety seconds.

"Me neither," she huffed back at me. "Thirty-two, thirty-three, thirty-four—"

"What are you guys talking about?" Cassandra asked while muttering her own count under her breath.

"Kerri's clue. Something about dogs. Has no idea—forty-one, forty-two—where to go," Stephanie said.

"Forty-nine, fifty." I fell onto my back, my hands at my side. My abs were on fire, and Coach was going to call us back to the court any second.

"Dogs? Like the dog park?" Cassandra said, jumping to her feet and shaking out her limbs. Coach blew his whistle, telling us it was time to switch.

No one spoke while we ran our drills. But the moment we ended and practice was over, Cassandra was at my side.

“So, dogs? Dog park? A pet store? The shelter out in Deerfield Springs?” she said, wiping her face with her towel.

I plopped onto the bench next to her, Stephanie joining us on the floor, stretching her legs.

“See, that’s the tricky part. It could be any of those, right? How do we narrow it down?” I asked, following my speech with three massive gulps from my water bottle. Coach worked us hard today, as our first tournament was this weekend. We hadn’t had a game in months, since high school season ended. And we were paying for it now.

“I don’t think you can. Maybe just try all the places?” Stephanie stood and swiped her gear off the bench. Cass and I followed suit, and we all headed to the locker room together, but slower than normal.

“Is Austin giving you a ride home?” Stephanie asked as we got to our lockers. We dumped our stuff inside and grabbed our swim suits, ready to take a quick shower. I would most likely take another one tonight, but I needed something cold over my body and to get the stench off.

After checking my phone for the time, I nodded. “Yeah, I think so. Why?”

“Well, I don’t have a ton of homework tonight. If you wanted to go run around to a few places and look, we totally could.”

I chewed on my lip while standing under the cold stream. “Lemme text him and make sure. I feel bad. Like I’ve been ditching him lately.”

We both toweled off and returned to our lockers to gather our clothes. I pulled a comb through my hair, knowing it would dry in the next ten minutes.

“Didn’t you just go to his game this weekend? And their party? And the movie night last week?” she asked from behind the changing curtain at the end of the row of lockers.

I entered the other stall before I answered. “Well, yes. But... I don’t know. Since this whole secret admirer thing started, I feel like we haven’t been the same. Something is off.”

“It could just be a phase. Everyone goes through things and handles them different. I mean, you two aren’t the perfect best friends all the time. You get busy, he gets busy, and life happens, right?”

“True...”

“So text him!” she squealed. “Tell him I’m taking you home and let’s go on an adventure!”

**ME:** Hey, Steph is gonna take me home tonight. We have something to do. See you in the morning? Dad bought donuts again!

**AUSTIN:** Yeah, sure. See you tomorrow.

“Where to first?” Steph asked as she backed out of her spot and turned in the direction of the stoplight.

The dog park, pet store, and shelter were all on opposite sides of town. “Um, probably the pet store? The last clue was at a park, so my gut says to rule that out.”

It didn’t make a whole lot of sense, but it was something to start with, at least.

Five minutes later, we parked in front of the pet store, watching the adorable puppies jump on the window pane. A local family owned it, having a family farm about an hour outside of town where their dogs ran free. They brought any extra puppies into this store whenever they had some, but otherwise sold pet supplies and gear year-round.

“You’re in luck!” Mrs. Elmora exclaimed as we walked through the door. “Five little babies waiting to be played with!”

Stephanie and I smiled at her, but I shook my head. “Actually, we’re not here to play with the—”

“Ohmygosh, look at these little fluff balls!” Stephanie cried, leaning over to pick one of the furry poofs out of the play pen. She sunk to the floor, cradling the baby in her arms.

“That one’s Gamora. Her sister Nebula is over here. Brothers Drax, Ronan, and Yondu in that play pen. The boys were getting a bit rough with the girls today, so I separated them,” Mrs. Elmora said, pointing to the other pen.

“I like the theme...” I teased, realizing what she had done with the names. Every litter had a theme. The last one had been characters from Hamilton.

She smiled at me, the wrinkles in the corner of her eyes crinkling. “You were saying, dear? Not here to play today?”

I frowned, using all my willpower to not grab a puppy and snuggle it myself. It had been a while since I had been in here.

“No, sorry. I was wondering if maybe... you had something for me? For Kerri?” I clarified, realizing she probably didn’t know my name.

Mrs. Elmora tilted her head. “No, I don’t believe I do. Should I?”

I smiled to ease her confusion, tucking my hair behind my ears. “No, that’s alright. I’m on a scavenger hunt, and not exactly sure

where my clue is leading me. It just was about dogs, so we're trying to figure it out."

"Sorry, dear. Good luck with the search though! Did you want to play with the pups anyway?"

"Say yes, say yes, say yes, say yes!" Stephanie chanted from the floor. The puppy in her lap was chewing on her finger.

"No, thank you. Maybe another time. We have other places to try," I reminded my friend. She pouted, but handed the puppy back to Mrs. Elmora, then stood up.

"Thanks for the snuggle, puppies!" Stephanie called before we left the store.

"Well, that was a bust. Want to try the shelter next?"

"Yeah. But it's farther, so if it's not there, I'll just try another day," I answered, buckling my seatbelt.

Stephanie chatted along the drive, but I stayed silent. In my gut, I knew something was wrong. I just couldn't put my finger on it.

The bell chimed over us as we opened the front doors. A lady behind the counter smiled.

"Can I help you ladies?" she asked warmly.

"Hi, yes, my name is Kerri, and I have an odd—"

"Kerri Thomas?"

My face, and heart, dropped. "Yes?"

Pure happiness shone from her face, her bright green eyes glowing behind her glasses. "Oh! I have something for you! I didn't think you'd be here today, though. He said it could be a few days."

There was the gut feeling again. Even my secret admirer didn't think I was capable of figuring out the clues in a timely manner. "Um, well, I..."

"Here you go!" she interrupted, saving me from stumbling over my words. She leaned across the counter and handed me an envelope,



the same teal envelope the clues came in.

I knew inside would be a puzzle piece. I hoped there would be a little letter. But it didn't help my upset heart.

"Thank you so much," Stephanie said, looping her arm through mine and turning me back toward the door.

"Are you alright?" she asked once we got back into the car.

"Yeah."

"You got kind of quiet back there. What happened?"

I sighed. "I don't know. I feel like I'm doing this whole thing wrong or something. Like, I have no idea who the guy is. He seems to know a whole lot about me, but there are literally no clues about him. And what the lady said back there—she didn't even expect me for a few days."

"That's what you're upset about? I mean, the track record has you at a few days, so it's not that big of a deal. Life gets in the way, and you can't really just drop everything to play a scavenger hunt for a secret admirer. You still have school and practice and family and friends. I'm sure your guy knows that," Stephanie said, turning so her back was against her car door. "Are you going to open it?"

Instead of answering, I slid a finger under the flap and broke the seal. Turning the envelope upside down, the puzzle piece fell into my hand, but nothing else. No note. No other gift, nothing.

My brows furrowed. "Huh."

"What?"

"There's nothing else."

"Is there supposed to be?" she asked, finally starting the car and leaving.

I looked out the window, watching the stores as we passed. "No, I guess not. There has been with the other two, though. The first, he

bought us ice cream. Last week, it was a signed Taylor Swift Red vinyl. I was at least hoping for a note or something..."

Stephanie whistled low. "Wow. Dude must *really* like you."



## Chapter 16

It didn't make sense.  
Another teal envelope, my name on the outside, was taped to the front of my locker.

I folded my arms, tilting my head, and squinting.

"If you look any harder, it may burst into flames," Austin's voice said in my ear. I didn't even flinch.

"I'm confused," I muttered back.

Austin took a step forward, untaped the envelope, and handed it to me. "Confused by what?"

"Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why another so fast?"

"Why... do I feel like this conversation is going in circles? Just open it," he said, leaning against the row of lockers, staring at me.

I stared back, narrowing my eyes at him this time. "Where were you last night?"

His face crumpled in confusion. "What?"

"Last night. Mom said you came by before dinner, but you didn't answer any of my texts the rest of the night."

“Why are you thinking of this now? Why not ask when I was at your house eating your donuts this morning?” he shot back, the confused look on his face becoming almost defiant.

I pursed my lips. “Just thought of it.”

“Well, *if you must know*,” he continued in a sassy tone. “Mom needed me to help her unload some stuff for the basement reno. I was up and down a flight of stairs for almost two hours. When I was done, I had to take another shower, and then I collapsed.”

“Hmm. Okay.”

Austin barked out a laugh. “Believe me or don’t. But next time you come over, Mom will put you to work too.”

I grimaced. “No, thanks, I’m good.”

“Open the envelope then.”

I didn’t listen. Instead, I tucked it under my arm and continued staring at my best friend. “Why do you suddenly care about the envelope? You made it clear at the beginning that you didn’t really want to be involved.”

Austin’s head bounced back and forth. “That’s not *exactly* what I said. I just... well, fine. I talked to Mom about it.”

“And?”

“And she said I was being a stubborn asshole and I should be nicer. And more involved. If you want me to be involved, that is.”

“Do you?”

His face fell. “I mean... if you want me to be. I know I’ve been a bit out of sorts the past few weeks, and yeah. It’s... hard to seeing you do something this big without me. If you want me in, I’m in.”

I couldn’t stop the smile that began stretching my cheeks. “I’d love it, Aus. Felt kinda lonely without you in my corner.”

He let out a huge breath and reached for me, wrapping me in a hug and squeezing tight. “Thanks, Keeks.”

“Wanna see what this says?” I asked, lifting the envelope in the air and waving it around.

“Oh! Another envelope! Lemme see, lemme see!” Max shouted from down the hallway. Austin and I turned and watched him sprint down the hall, his backpack flying behind him.

“Move! I have people to do and things to see!” he yelled at a few students in his way.

Austin shook his head, and I started laughing. Typical Max.

He skidded to a halt in front of us, grabbing onto Austin for stability.

“Okay, I’m here. Continue on. Wait, why do you have another so soon? You got one yesterday?”

“That’s the million-dollar question,” Austin replied, slinging an arm over Max’s shoulder.

His eyes lit up. “Million dollars? I’m in! If I guess right, do I win, or is it a split three-way type deal?”

I rolled my eyes once again. When the two of them got together, chaos always ensued. “Can I read it now?”

Max glanced at Austin, waiting for approval. Austin nodded, and Max looked back at me. “Continue,” he said with a serious look.

“Oh, my fu—whatever. Just hush so I can get through this before the bell rings!” I chastised.

Pulling the letter out, I handed the envelope to Austin to hold and unfolded the paper.

“Dear Kerri. That was your fastest one! I apologize for making you trek all around town when you don’t have your own mode of transportation. That was an oversight on my part. I appreciate you going with it and doing the best you can. Since I had such a severe flaw in my plan, I consulted the neutral party, and they said I could make an exception.”

I paused for a breath, and also because my heart was beating out of my chest. Whoever it was knew that I didn't have my own car to take to get to these places. But to contact the people who ran the game to change the rules? That was above and beyond.

"Read, dammit!" Max cried.

"Sorry!" I answered just as the warning bell rang. Max and Austin groaned.

"Wait! We're going to class together. Just read along the way!"

"What about me, jerkwad? Why can't I hear it?" Austin responded, dropping his arm from around his friend and backhanding him in the gut.

"Oof," Max moaned. "Because of that, a-hole. She'll tell you later. She's all mine now."

"They said I could make an exception," I rattled off as fast as I could. "From now on, Max Newman is at your disposal for transportation to any location you figure out."

"Wait, what?" Max replied, looking around, confused.

I froze. He didn't know? "You didn't know?" I practically shouted, even though he was right next to me.

He threw an angry look at me. "How dare they just volunteer me without asking! That's rude. Inconsiderate. Disrespectful—"

"You twat, don't lie," Austin replied, pushing Max down the hall, causing him to stumble a few feet. My gaze bounced between the two of them.

"Of course I knew. I was messin' with Keeks. It's more fun that way," Max replied, standing tall and pushing Austin back.

"I gotta go. Tell me the clue at lunch," Austin replied, laying a hand on my shoulder and squeezing gently.

"Tell *me* the clue now, woman," Max replied once Austin was out of earshot.

“Are you sure you knew? And you’re okay with it?”

“Keeks, I’m the reason you even got past clue two, so yeah. I’m good with it. I mean, if you have any chance of finishing this before the month is over, you *need* me,” he said, his usual grin settling on his face.

I started to argue, but he was right. Without him, it would have taken way longer to find the clue at the playground. With my brain all scrambled these days, I could use all the help I could get.

“Well, thanks, Max. I appreciate the assist.”

“Put it on my scorecard, girl. Now let’s figure out the next clue.”



## Chapter 17

We didn't figure out the next clue. I didn't even get a chance to read it until lunch.

Stephanie and I stood in line, grabbing our food and chatting about practice tonight. I didn't tell her about getting another note. I should have. As I left the line and headed toward my boys, guilt racked through me.

She helped me. She, Max, and Mya had all been huge in assisting me with the hunt. Without them, I probably would still be stuck on the first clue. Asking Mom or Dad to take me to random locations without explaining why definitely wouldn't be happening anytime soon.

But... I wanted to figure this one out with Austin. Since he officially came on board, I wanted to make sure he was a part of everything. I didn't want to leave him out again.

I would tell Stephanie. And Mya and Cassandra, and anyone else who helped along the way. Eventually.

A swarm of younger girls surrounded the table before I could get there. I paused, mid-stride, three tables away. I narrowed my eyes, telepathically trying to tell them to move out. The possessiveness I



felt over those boys, especially since I knew the girls had no chance, was extreme at times.

Someone next to me coughed. I turned, finding a guy from my Spanish class last year trying to sit. "You mind?" he asked, gesturing to the bench I was blocking.

"Sorry." I continued on, keeping my eyes glued to my target.

No one noticed when I arrived. I stood there like a fool, waiting for someone to make space for me to sit.

"Excuse *me*—" I started, before I was interrupted.

"Move," a low, deep, but forceful voice said.

Everyone at the table froze, staring at Owen. His head was bent, his hooded eyes not looking up. But everyone heard him.

"She sits," he commanded, jutting his chin slightly toward me.

One of the girls gasped, one looked at Max with a questioning face, and the other stood.

Max laughed. "You heard the man. Out with you," he said.

The three of them huffed and puffed, but left without a word. The daggers they threw my way said more than words would anyway.

"Thanks," I said to Owen, sliding onto the bench next to Austin. A waft of flowery perfume hit my nose, leftover from one of the girls.

"That was... interesting," Austin said, looking straight at Owen with a hard stare. Owen didn't answer, but moved his shoulders in a way that could be considered a shrug if he tried harder.

"Kerri comes first," Max answered for him. "Can't leave our favorite Keeks just standing there, can we?" He added a wink, and blew me a kiss, causing Austin to throw a wadded-up napkin at him.

Max ducked and missed it. "Besides, we have a clue to work out, right?"

I nodded. "Yeah, fourth clue."

Owen looked up for the first time when I said that. I caught his gaze, but once again couldn't read his expression.

"Well, on with it then!" Connor announced before shoving his pizza into his mouth.

"Eating was on the top of my to-do list, but let's see if I can get both done, huh?" I replied, pulling the letter out of my backpack. Austin still had the envelope from earlier today. Or maybe he threw it out. I didn't know.

"Did you guys hear the news?" Max exclaimed before I could start reading. It gave me a minute to eat my grilled cheese, dunking it into my tomato soup.

"Oh stop, Max, it's not that big of a deal," Austin cried, rolling his eyes.

Max gasped, throwing a hand to his heart as if he was offended. "Not a big deal? Not a *big deal*? Austin Mathers, you insult me!"

"Just say it already, you drama queen," Connor said with his mouth full.

"Thank you, oh Captain, my Captain." Max glared at Austin, sticking his tongue out at him. Austin didn't give him the satisfaction of a reply. "The news is that I, Maxwell Seymour Newman, was chosen by the neutral party of the Secret Admirers as the *official* mode of transportation of one Kerri I don't know your middle name Thomas, for the remainder of the month."

The pride he said this statement with made it hard to make fun of him, but it didn't stop the boys from doing so. They all broke out into insults and abuse, Max dodging items thrown at him. It was all in fun, and I laughed along with everyone, including Max.

"A whopping week and a half, you mean?" Davis said before tossing a potato chip. He looked at me and winked. "Forget this idiot, Kerri. I can take you wherever you need to go. I'm here for you."

I held back a gasp. Davis Maguire... he was at the top of my list of suspects. All the winks, the sly smiles in the hall, the wave at that inter-squad game. All things that didn't happen before this month. Sure, we were friendly, but never this friendly. I didn't answer him, but the blush on my cheeks probably did.

"Okay, okay, stop!" I called a minute later, having eaten half of my grilled cheese. The guys were still going at it. "Do you want to help me figure out *where* Max will be taking me next or not?"

"Finally," Austin cried. "Make the kid shut up already. Read on, Keeks."

"Thank you. Now," I started, smoothing the paper out between my hands. I didn't trust the table to be clean enough. "there's this whole thing with Max and such. Then, okay, here at the bottom—clue four. Your next location is a place of hopes and Dreams, no Bull shit. Where even Rookies have a Lot of fun."

I frowned, my brows creasing. "Hmm."

"What's wrong?" Austin asked.

I turned the paper toward him for a second before grabbing a folder and placing it on top in the middle of the table. "See? Dreams, Bull, Rookie, and Lot are capitalized, even though they shouldn't be."

"Aw, dang it!" Max cried.

I whipped my head up, wondering what had happened. To my surprise, I found almost all the boys around me smiling. Except Max, who was pouting, and Owen, who didn't really smile much anyway.

"What?" I asked.

"The first clue after my promotion and I can't even help!" Max scowled, lowering his chin into his hands, elbows resting on the table. He added a fake lip-quiver for dramatic effect.

"Why?"

"Because," Austin started, "the clue leads to the—"

“Baseball field,” all the boys chimed in together.

I jerked back, surprised by their harmony. “Are you sure?”

Connor barked out a laugh. “Are you really asking *us* if we’re sure about *baseball*?”

“Honestly, woman, it’s like you don’t even trust us,” Max added.

I lifted both hands in the air, pretending to weigh something between them, with a smirk on my face. “Well... I mean...”

“Oh, shut it, Keeks. You know we’re right,” Austin answered, slapping my hand closest to him down.

Sighing, I put the letter and the folder back in my bag and focused on finishing my lunch before the bell rang. “Yeah, yeah, I know.”

“See,” Max chimed in. “I told you, you needed us!”

I pointed my spoon at him while I ate my soup. Instead of answering, I just rolled my eyes and continued on as they started a conversation around me. I was used to tuning them out anyway.



## Chapter 18

“So. Where do we start looking?” Connor rubbed his palms together, looking as if he were ready to jump onto the field and start playing.

He, Max, Austin, Owen, Davis, and I all stood in a row on the path behind the bleachers.

“Are you sure we’re at the right spot?” I asked.

Max lifted his hands, palms up, in question. “Only one way to find out.”

“What other field would there be?” Davis asked. “I mean, there’s the practice field, but that’s not as cool as the varsity field. It doesn’t even have seating besides the dugout bench.”

The thought bugged me all day. The boys were so adamant that the clue was leading to Ryder High’s baseball field. But... what if it was the fields from the park district? Or the run-down dirt field behind the mom-and-pop shop?

“I call visitors side bleachers!” Max cried, jogging around behind home plate.

“I’ll take home side bleachers,” Connor added, breaking away from the line.

Davis stuck his hands in his pockets and strolled toward the gate leading onto the field. "I'll hit the visitors' dugout. Kerri, you could join me?"

I didn't answer, but felt Austin take a half step closer to me.

Owen didn't say anything, but walked in the direction of the home team dugout.

That left Austin and me, standing alone on the path, contemplating our move.

"So... where else could we look?" With both bleachers and both dugouts covered, I didn't know where else something could be hiding.

He tossed a ball between his hands, catching it without even having to look. "I guess let's let them finish their search first and then figure it out?"

It was getting late, though. We had to wait until the boys and I were done with our respective practices. They were out on the practice field today, as they had their first official home opener this weekend, and the grounds crew didn't want them messing up the field before then. They didn't always practice on the main field anyway. But it guaranteed that no one had been around here to mess with anything.

"Nothing over here!" Max shouted, making his way back to us.

"Same."

"Nope, nothing."

"Empty handed," Connor added, the last one to come back to us.

I sighed. "Well... wrong field?" Inside, I was heartbroken. I was so hopeful that this one would be easy, and we could find it quickly. Time was running out, and I didn't want to not finish the game.

The boys began debating other fields to try. All except Owen. He stood, his arms crossed over his chest, looking out at the field with

narrow eyes.

“What are you thinking?” I asked, stepping over to him and keeping my voice low.

He jutted his chin toward the dirt and extended one arm, pointing toward the bases. “Dirt hasn’t been groomed. The rest of the field is pristine, but not the dirt.”

My face scrunched in confusion. “You think the puzzle piece is... under the dirt?”

Owen shook his head and pointed again. “They don’t groom the dirt until they switch the bases. They don’t switch the bases until the night before the game. If we practice on this field before a game, we use practice bases, not the good ones.”

The lightbulb went off in my head. “So, if they haven’t changed the bases yet, then...”

“Could be under there,” he finished, finally glancing over at me. His lips twitched. I counted it as an almost smile.

“Guys! To your positions!” I cried, clapping my hands to get their attention. “On field! Hustle! Max, to third!”

Everyone paused and stared at me, confused. “Do I have to repeat myself?” I commanded, clapping again. “Hustle!”

They all broke into a jog, heading to their respective positions. Max ran to third, even though he played shortstop. Austin jumped onto the bag at second, Davis at first, and Connor to the pitcher’s mound. Owen, usually in the outfield, strolled toward home plate, even though it wasn’t a base that could come up and have something put under it.

Cupping my hands around my mouth, I yelled, “Owen thinks the bases could have clues. *Carefully* check, please, and thank you!”

Max, Austin, and Davis stepped off their bases, crouched down, and lifted with two hands.

“Got something!” Max called. Connor hurried over to him, helping him hold the base up while Max untaped whatever was beneath it.

Owen, having seen Davis wave him over, did the same at first base. We all looked at Austin to see if something was there, but he shook his head.

“Guess they skipped me,” he called.

Everyone made their way back to me next to the dugout. Max and Davis handed over envelopes.

“What’s in them?” Davis asked, a bit of a giddy tone in his voice.

I put one under my arm and opened the other. A puzzle piece slid out.

“What’s that all about, anyway?” Connor questioned, scratching his head.

“I’m not sure, exactly,” I answered, putting it back in the envelope and securing the flap so it wouldn’t fall out. I swapped it with the other one to open. “I’m not allowed to put them together yet.”

Carefully opening the second one, I reached in and plucked out the contents.

It wasn’t a letter. Or a note. Or a gift card or anything of the sort.

They were tickets. Baseball tickets. They weren’t until May, but they were for the major league team downtown.

“Holy shit, look at those *seats!*” Max cried, ripping the tickets out of my hand. “Right behind home plate!”

I nodded, looking up at all of them, trying to catch their eyes. Someone had to know *something*, right? They couldn’t all be this clueless about who my secret admirer was.

Max’s eyes were glossed over, as if he were almost in tears about how good the tickets were.

Connor grabbed them from Max, and the two of them started discussing.



Owen wouldn't meet my gaze, keeping his head tilted down, staring at his shoes.

Davis flashed me a smile before jumping into the conversation with Max and Connor. At least he didn't wink.

Austin didn't look at me, but came to stand next to me instead. "You're taking me, right?" he asked, sliding an arm around my shoulder.

"Screw that. She's taking *me*," Max squealed, launching himself at me. He hung his arms around my neck until Connor dragged him off.

"Knock it off, Max. Leave Kerri alone. Let her choose who she wants to take closer to that date, huh?" Connor said. "And if you took one second to think, idiot, you would realize the date is for next month. Meaning *after* her secret admirer is revealed. So who do you think she'll take?"

Max tapped a finger to his lips, pretending to think hard. "Yeah, still me."

The boys all laughed while I rolled my eyes. I turned and headed back toward the school to get my bags. I was sure Austin would have a million more reasons to convince me to take him while we drove home.

But Connor was right—if I figured out who my secret admirer was, and we clicked... wouldn't I take him instead?



## Chapter 19

Two clues found in two days meant that the next letter didn't come for a while.

There was a week and a half left in the month, and I was no closer to figuring out who my secret admirer was than on day one.

"It's killing you, isn't it?" Mya asked at lunch. The boys were in Coach's office, going over tape before their first game this weekend.

Austin's game was mid-day on Saturday, and my first match of club season was Sunday. Which meant we were both ridiculously busy this week, making sure we were on top of school work, harder practices, and longer days.

We already planned a study session at my house after practice tomorrow, but I figured that would be all I saw of him until the game Saturday.

"You have no idea," I answered, pushing a chicken nugget through some ketchup before popping it in my mouth.

"No idea about what?" Stephanie asked, plopping down across from me.

“The puzzle pieces. The lack of clues about the guy. The fact that it’s almost over and I’ve gotten nowhere.”

Steph tilted her head. “You haven’t put the pieces together yet?”

My head rested on my hand, but I looked at her sideways. “The first note said not to. Not until he says so.”

“And it’s Thursday. She hasn’t gotten a letter since Tuesday morning,” Mya piped in.

Stephanie chewed while she thought. “Well, you got one Monday and Tuesday. That’s the fastest so far.”

“Yeah, but she also found both clues the same day. Why would her secret admirer stop now? She was on a roll,” Mya asked, her brow raised in question. She and Stephanie continued their banter for a moment, completely forgetting I even existed.

I sighed, lowering my head to the table. “I’m a failure.”

Something soft bounced off my tiny ponytail and fell to the floor.

“Shut up, you are not,” Stephanie cried. The bench bounced, indicating more people joining our table. Just what I wanted—more witnesses to my pity party.

“What’s going on?” someone I didn’t recognize the voice of said. Lifting my head, I found a boy I knew the face of, but not the name.

“Kerri, Stephanie, this is Tucker,” Mya said, waving her hand around. Tucker’s hair hung in a wave to the top of his ears, his narrow green eyes crinkling in the corners as he smiled.

“Hey, Tucker,” I replied with a small wave.

“We’re discussing how Kerri is not a failure for not figuring out her secret admirer yet,” Mya mentioned.

“Oh, that’s right, you’re the chosen one this month! I would ask how that’s going, but I can read the room...”

I stuck my bottom lip out in a pout. “Yeah.”

Stephanie cleared her throat. "It's not her fault, though. The guy hasn't given her any clues!"

Tucker's brow furrowed. "Wait, what? Isn't that the whole point?"

I shrugged, reaching for my water. "I would suppose so, but she's right. It's been a scavenger hunt, but to locations where I found puzzle pieces. Not clues on who he is."

"Hmm," Tucker murmured, looking away suddenly. He reached into his backpack and pulled something out, hiding it on his lap for a moment. "Guess you wouldn't want something like... this, then?"

He lifted a teal envelope off his lap, dangling it with two fingers over the table.

Mya gasped, Stephanie squealed loudly, and I froze. Why did Tucker have my envelope?

"Someone gave it to me in the hallway. Said to deliver it to you discreetly."

"Whoops," Stephanie mumbled, covering her mouth with her hands. "Sorry."

I took it from Tucker's hand, still confused. "Why wasn't it taped to my locker?"

"It's the last one," Tucker whispered.

I whipped my head in his direction. "What?"

"Who was it?" Stephanie said at the same time.

I paused, realizing her question was better than mine, but wanting both of them answered.

Tucker shook his head. "Some freshman I think?"

So, *not* my secret admirer. "Oh, the neutral parties, duh. Whoever is behind this wouldn't be walking around with the envelope in hand."

"Are you going to open it?" Mya asked.

"She can't," Tucker answered before I could, pointing to the envelope.

We all looked down. I flipped the envelope over, finding the flap closed with a wax seal. *Open in private* was written.

“Oh. Bummer,” Stephanie muttered.

Her face matched mine—drawn and crestfallen. I wanted to rip it open right here, right now. But, I also had to listen.

“I suppose if it’s the last one, it’ll be the one that tells you to put the puzzle together. So it’s better that you do it in private, when you have them all, right?” Mya asked. She was the only one who had a good head on her shoulders sometimes.

“I guess so...” I mumbled, slipping the envelope into my backpack.

Sneaking a glance over to the boys’ table, I found three pairs of eyes staring back at me—Austin, Davis, and Owen.

Davis wagged his fingers in a small wave. Owen diverted the moment he caught me, but Austin didn’t. He stared back, his brows furrowed, a frown on his face matching mine. He jutted his chin slightly, silently asking if I was alright.

I tilted my head back and forth a few times, giving him a “so-so” kind of answer. Lightning fast, he answered via text.

**AUSTIN:** What’s up?

**ME:** Secret Admirer stuff

**AUSTIN:** Then why do you look like you just hit the net on the final serve?

**ME:** And what does that look like?

**AUSTIN:** Upset, mixed with a little bit pissed off.

**ME:** Huh. I mean, you aren't wrong.

**AUSTIN:** Never am, Keeks. You ready for the match this weekend?

**ME:** Well, I *\*was\**. Now I'm stressed about this.

**AUSTIN:** What does it say?

I looked up at him and shrugged. Connor punched him in the shoulder to get his attention. All he had time to do was mouth “later” at me before being dragged back into whatever conversation I had pulled him away from.

Later it would be. And now I would have to sit on the knowledge that the final clue was in my backpack. All day long. Through what was bound to be an extra grueling practice.

Did I open it in Austin's car on the way home? Or did I really have to do it in *private* private?

The puzzle pieces made the decision for me. I would have to wait until I got home.



## Chapter 20

"Austin's not staying?" Mom asked, holding the door from the garage to the kitchen open for me to pass through. She waved to Austin as he backed down the driveway, shutting the door after me. "I made extra spaghetti."

Shrugging off my bags and kicking my shoes under the side counter, I sighed. "No. I have stuff to do tonight. And probably need to take an ice bath followed by a long, long shower."

Dad entered, his nose in the air, sniffing. "Oh, Kerri's home?" he joked.

I punched him lightly on the shoulder. "Dad!"

"Just messing with you, sweetheart." He wrapped me in a hug. "Where's my best friend?"

I groaned. Sometimes it felt as if my parents loved Austin more than me. "You do know that he has a home. A family. People who love him *outside* of this house, right? And you have an actual son."

The crestfallen look on Dad's face made me laugh.

"Well, yeah. But Eric is at his friend's tonight... okay, fine. Go wash up so we can eat. I'm starving," he answered, walking over to give

Mom a peck on the cheek. “Smells great, babe.”

After dinner, it was finally time.

Time to open my last clue.

I felt around in my backpack until I got to the envelope. Pulling it out, I examined it. It was slightly thicker than the others.

With a deep breath, I unsealed the flap and opened it. It was stuffed. It wasn't just a quick note with a clue, it was a full-on letter. Pages upon pages worth.

Part of me didn't want to read it. It seemed... daunting. Overwhelming. And also, kind of sad.

Going for it, I peeled open the pages, holding their weight in my hands, and read.

*Dear Keeks—*

That was it. That was all I needed to confirm my suspicions. One of my baseball boys *was* my secret admirer.

It wasn't Max. Dylan? Davis?

Owen.

It had to be Owen.

And after that talk the other morning... where he showed me a side he never let anyone see... it all made sense.

“Stupid, stupid, Kerri. How did you miss all the signs?” I whispered to myself.

Even though I felt confident in my conclusion, I read on.

*This is it. The last clue. There's one more puzzle piece in the envelope. Don't put it all together until you finished this letter*



*though, okay?*

*I know this is going to come as a shock. And if it's a bad shock, then I'm sorry. But I've held back my feelings for you for a while now, and when I was given this opportunity... well, I couldn't pass it up.*

*You mean everything to me, Kerri. Literally, everything. I couldn't imagine my life without you by my side.*

The papers fell out of my hands after that, floating to the floor in a heap, thankfully staying in order.

*What? Owen? Couldn't imagine life without me? We weren't even that close... no one was that close to Owen except Connor.*

With a million thoughts racing through my mind, I grabbed a hair tie off my wrist, wound it into a ponytail at the nape of my neck, then reached for the pages again.

*You've been my best friend since we were kids. Every hardship, every dream I've accomplished, every happy memory has you in it. And I want to continue that. Except, I guess now is the time that I confess.*

*Ever since freshman year, Keeks, I've seen you in a different light. I can't put a finger on it, but it's all of you. Your heart. Your willingness to help others. How you put everyone else before yourself. How you do everything you can to help people accomplish their goals.*

*Not only who you are to others, but who you are to me. My best friend. The person I rely on more than anyone else in the world. Not a day goes by without you in it.*

My heart plummeted to the floor.

Austin? *Austin* was my secret admirer? This whole time he... he... He *lied* to me.

The person he relied on more than anyone else in the world, except when it came to sharing how he felt. For *years* at that.

And this entire month. What was it, a joke? He lied about *everything*. About not knowing who the guy was, about wanting to stay out of it because he couldn't vouch for the guy, about wanting to help me.

*Help me?* Ha! I bet he had a good laugh about that one.

Wait.

Were the other guys in on it too? Is that why they chose Max to assist? Did they all know?

Heat rose in my face, my cheeks flushing, burning with anger. Did he think I was going to read this and swoon?

Hell fucking no.

I grabbed my phone off my desk and swiped it open with a bit more force than needed.

"Come on, come on, pick up," I whispered as I jumped to my feet and began pacing around the room.

"Keeks?" Austin's voice came through the phone, a slight waver in his tone.

"What the hell?" I shouted. I immediately clamped my hand over my mouth, regretting the words.

"Um..."

"Sorry. That's not what I meant. I mean, it kind of is. But also... Austin. It's you."

"Yeah."

"You lied to me," I whispered. As soon as the words left my mouth, tears pricked at the corner of my eyes. It felt like a betrayal.

“I did. For good reason, Keeks.” Austin switched to monotone, not giving me any leeway with his voice. I would give anything to see his face right now, to be able to read it.

“Aus...”

He sighed, and I knew he was running a hand over his dark, cropped hair in frustration. “Did you read the whole thing?”

I paused. “No.”

“Please do.” And with that, he hung up.

Austin had *never* hung up on me before. Ever. Not even when we were in the dirtiest of fights.

“What the *hell*?” I screamed, before remembering Mom and Dad were down the hall.

“Kerri? Are you okay?” Mom shouted back.

“Fine! Sorry, just a frustrating math question!”

Yanking out my hair tie, I stomped around the room for a few more minutes before sitting back in my desk chair.

He knew I didn’t finish the letter. Which meant that the rest of it, the pages worth, held more information I needed.

Grabbing the rest of the pages, I leaned back, propped my feet on my desk, and dove back in.

*I know you, Keeks. Inside and out. I know your heart. I know your goals and dreams. I know what makes you happy and sad.*

*I also know that without a little help, you didn’t put the clues together to figure out it’s me. You’re probably mad at me right now, aren’t you?*

I snorted. That jerk knew exactly where I left off reading when I called him.

*It's okay to be mad at me. This month has been harder on me than I thought it would be. My initial intention was to show you how good we were together. To subtly tell you how much you mean to me, and how amazing I think you are.*

*I kind of blew it literally on the first day. I led you to believe I didn't want any part of the game. In reality, I was shitting my pants scared. I knew you would come to me. I mean, I hoped you would. I always want to be the one you come to with problems.*

*But lying to you was harder than I realized. How I thought I could play it cool with you out there figuring out the clues and possibly connecting the dots was stupid.*

*I hated lying, Keeks. Worse than anything. As the month went on, I convinced myself that by the time you got to this letter, you would hate me for lying.*

*Please, know my heart was in the right place. All I want is to give us a shot.*

*If you haven't figured out why I sent you to those specific places yet, let me explain. Get comfy.*

Following his advice, I dropped my feet to the ground and launched myself on my bed. Snuggling under the covers, I flipped the page over and continued reading.

*First clue—the ice cream shop. Think back to when we were ten. It was the first place we were allowed to go alone. Your Dad dropped us off in the middle of downtown and told us he would pick us up in two hours. We were completely on our own for those two hours, with shops and stores to explore. We felt so*

grown up. Then again, our first spot was the ice cream shop, so....

*I wanted to act like an adult and get something mature, so I got plain chocolate on a sugar cone, the same as my mom orders. But not you. You still ordered your Jamocha Almond Fudge like a weirdo. Even the guy behind the counter said it was an odd choice and barely anyone ever orders it.*

*Second clue—the playground on Canal Street. If there was any place I love the most, it's that playground. Because that's where I met you for the first time. I was on the swings, trying to flip over the top bar, and you were at the top of the tower by the steering wheel, being the captain of a pirate ship.*

*When stinky Dennis tried to say girls couldn't be pirates, you punched him. That's when I came over and asked to be your first mate. And I've been by your side ever since...*

*Third clue—this one was hard. You hide your emotions well from others, but never from me. And I've never seen your heart break or seen you cry as hard as you did when Tillie died last year. It killed me knowing I couldn't fix it. All I could do was be there for you and hold you while you grieved.*

*So why the shelter? I wanted you to remember. Remember when we went there every summer, playing with the animals and helping take care of them through their volunteer program. We haven't been back since Tillie, which I get. But the shelter is one of the things I love about you. You turned down volleyball camps because of your commitment to volunteering there.*

*Fourth clue should be obvious. Every hope, dream, wish, and goal I've made has been on a baseball field. You would lie with me for hours on the infield of the park district fields, going over a game, making new goals, or talking about life. Some of my most*

*important decisions were made by a field, and you were always there. Always.*

*Your final clue. Take the last puzzle piece, and put them all together. Once complete, you'll see where to find me. It's not as public as the rest. Just for me and you. I'll be there, waiting, tonight.*

*If you think you can see me as more than just your best friend... come find me. If not, I'll still be here for you, always. As the first mate to your captain. Nothing about that will change, ever.*

I couldn't move. I could barely breathe. Everything he said was spot on. It all made sense. And I wasn't mad at him for lying to me anymore. He knew I wouldn't be able to stay mad.

Austin Mathers was my best friend. My ride or die. The only person I trusted with everything. Until right now, I never thought about him any other way.

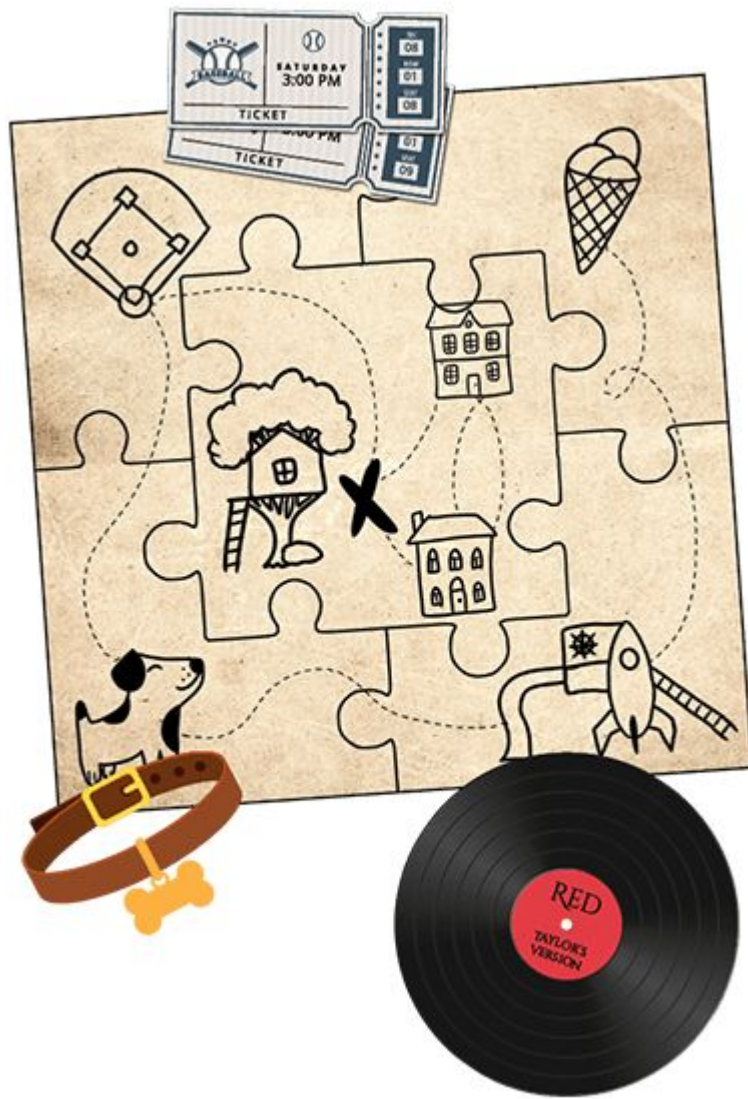
But... was that the truth? Austin never really had a girlfriend. But when I saw the groupies hanging at their lunch table, my stomach always did a quick flip. I convinced myself none of them had a shot with the guys, because I always claimed Austin as mine.

Keeks and Aus. It's always been the two of us against the world.

I loved him. That was never in question. I just... did I *love* him?

Either way, I had to see him. Sitting up and flopping across my bed, I reached over and grabbed my phone, scrolling until I found the number I needed.

"Max? I need a ride."





## Chapter 21

*M*ax didn't shut up the entire ride. I didn't speak, just continued to stare at the paper and completed puzzle in my hands. I taped the back together so it wouldn't break apart, not that I needed it.

It was a map. A crudely drawn one, like from a pirate ship. X marked the spot, with dotted lines from different, badly drawn places, including everywhere from the clues, Austin's house, and my house. They all led to the X.

The creek. The treehouse.

"We have arrived. Shall I stay and wait for you, m'lady?" Max asked, snapping me out of my thoughts.

I rolled my eyes. "Max, you're obnoxious," I said before opening my door. He gasped, but I continued. "But thank you. I appreciate your help with all of this."

"Tell my main man I say hey," Max replied just before I shut the door. I paused and leaned in through the window.

"Excuse me? You knew?"

He shook his head. "Not for sure until now. But the Taylor vinyl? I remembered seeing a package at his house a few months ago and



wondered why the hell he bought it for himself. Didn't click until I saw it again at the park. But then I wondered why he hadn't given it to you before—I mean, we passed Christmas already.”

I sunk down into a squat, resting my arms on the inside of the window, my chin on my wrists. “What gave it away now?”

“The look on your face,” he answered softly. “It's a mixture of surprise, shock, and concern. Worry mixed with confusion.”

“I'm not sure what to do,” I whispered, biting my lip.

Max laughed. “Yes, you are. Keeks, there is nothing I am more certain about than you and Austin. He's my best friend too, remember? That guy has only had eyes for you for years. When you dated that jerk freshman year? He went ape shit crazy at my house. Every time Josiah pulled some stunt or made you feel bad about volleyball taking up your time, Austin wanted to punch him in his little, tiny mouth.”

My eyes grew wide. “He did? He never said anything.” That was only partially true. Austin told me he didn't think Josiah was right for me, but it wasn't until after we broke up.

“He loves you, Keeks. I mean, we all do, but he really, really does. Give him a chance. I think you two are perfect for each other.”

Nodding, I stood and patted the top of Max's car. “Thanks, Max. See you tomorrow.”

He pulled away, leaving me in the dim light of the late setting sun and streetlights.

In the distance, between the trees, I could see the treehouse. I shouldn't have been able to see it normally, but something was causing it to glow inside. I hadn't been here in years. Austin and I discovered it in fifth grade, by accident. Technically, it was on private property, but far away from the house it belonged to. The owner said we could visit whenever we wanted.

We made it our little escape all throughout middle school. But when we got to high school, and became busier than ever, our time here fell away.

Carefully making my way down the path, I reached the ladder. “Coming up,” I called softly.

As I poked my head through the hole, I stopped.

“Too much?” Austin asked.

The space was immaculate and transformed. From what was once a barren treehouse, just the plain floor and nothing else, now was something fun.

Two bean bag chairs, a small rug, and a basket full of snacks and candy lined the walls. Battery-powered string lights crisscrossed the ceiling, lighting the place up in a soft glow.

I pulled myself through the hole and stood, slightly hunched, in the middle of the room, turning around. Pictures of Austin and I hung from the walls, from clothespins on a string.

“Austin...” I whispered, my heart pounding in my chest. I felt his presence behind me before he even spoke.

I turned, finding his eyes full of worry. He reached a hand out, taking both of mine in it, holding it tightly, as if keeping me in place.

“It’s been a lifetime of Kerri and Austin,” he whispered back.

“An amazing adventure.” I tipped my chin up slightly to look him in the eyes. He closed his and leaned forward, resting his forehead on mine, bringing my hands to his chest.

“I’m sorry I lied.”

“Love is never having to say you’re sorry.”

“Keeks, I...” he trailed off, at a loss for words. Thankfully, he had a bunch in his letters, which I had placed on the floor with the puzzle when I climbed up the ladder.

“Keeks and Austin. It’s always been the two of us. Together,” I replied. His eyes flew open at my words, staring into mine.

“Yeah?”

I smiled and squeezed his hand. “Yeah.”

I wasn’t sure when I made the decision. Maybe it had been made for me all along. After years and years of being best friends, there was no one I’d rather have by my side anyway. The two of us made sense. I loved him more than anyone. Now... it was just a slightly different type of love.

He dropped my hands and wrapped me in a hug, smothering me into his chest. I tried to laugh, but I could barely breathe.

Beating on his back until he let me go, I took a step back and burst out laughing. “I just said I was cool with this, and you try to smother me?”

He laughed as well. “Well, I never said I was good at relationships.”

I paused. Relationship. The moment we changed from being best friends to boyfriend and girlfriend.

“What now?” I asked, sinking into one of the bean bags and grabbing a bag of Cheetos from the basket. Austin followed, snatching a bag of M&M’s instead.

“There’s one gift you didn’t get,” he said nervously.

I glanced at him as he reached behind the basket of snacks and picked up something blue. He dangled it on one finger.

“From the clue that led to the shelter?” He bit his lip, waiting for my answer. “She forgot to give it to you and explain.”

A dog collar. He was holding a dog collar.

“I talked to your mom a while back about Tillie. She said she and your dad had been talking about getting a new dog soon anyway...”

My eyes lit up. “Really?”

He nodded, tossing the collar to me. I caught it, staring at it in my hands. “She said whenever you were ready, you and I could go to the shelter and find one. It’s up to you.”

Ice cream. A signed Taylor vinyl. Baseball tickets. A dog. There was no one that knew me better than Austin.

“I can’t believe I didn’t think it was you the whole time,” I admonished, a bit ashamed. “What do we do now?”

“Not sure, honestly,” he said, tossing a few chocolates into his mouth and crunching down. “I didn’t really plan past this.”

I tossed a Cheetos at him. “Seriously? This entire month was perfectly planned, every note, puzzle pieces, this moment, and now nothing?”

Austin shrugged. “Yup.”

Standing, I went to check out the pictures. “Typical you. You plan the pranks, and Max pulls them. Always a planner, never a doer.”

My lips tugged into a small smile as I moved from photo to photo, all happy memories of us growing up. I didn’t even flinch when a hand landed on my shoulder, turning me around.

“There’s one thing I’m going to do that I didn’t exactly plan…” he mumbled. Without hesitation, he cupped his hands around my cheeks, pulling me to him, and planting his lips on mine.

Tingles shot from head to toe as Austin kissed me. Instead of feeling awkward, it felt right. Comfortable, safe, and a bit exciting.

Way better than any other kiss I ever had.

“And so, a new adventure begins,” I murmured against his lips as we broke apart.

“To new adventures.”



## Epilogue

*Austin*

"It was you the whole time?" Connor blurted out as soon as his butt hit the bleachers, groaning slightly as he did.

We had our first game yesterday, and while we crushed it nine to one, it was still a workout. Muscles ached just about everywhere.

Kerri and Mom were there, plus Dad and Uncle James. I loved having my own cheering section in the crowd, which is why I made sure Keeks had her own here today. Of course, her parents and brother were here, but she deserved more. She deserved everyone.

The girls were warming up and running drills. I staked out seating for myself and the guys as soon as I dropped Kerri off a few minutes ago.

Owen settled in next to Connor, scanning the court, a weird look on his face. I watched him closely as his gaze settled on Kerri and his face softened.

“You good?” I asked, leaning around Connor toward Owen.

He glanced at me out of the corner of his eye and nodded. “Yup.”

“You know—”

“She’s yours. She was ours, and now she’s yours,” Owen muttered. His tone of voice hit me hard, square in the chest. Owen didn’t share much, but that said a lot.

“That’s not true. Yeah, we made a slight change, but I don’t own her. If you need her...” I whispered. Connor cleared his throat and raised his eyebrows as I looked up at him. I was still leaning over his lap and he was in the awkward middle.

“Thanks for the clarification, Aus. Nothing changes about our relationship with Keeks. We just won’t kiss or anything. Leave that up to you,” Connor said with a wink and a laugh.

“Dammit, I wanna kiss her!” Max said, plopping on my other side. I back handed him in the chest.

“What? No one else ever wanted to kiss her? I mean, that girl does everything. She’s always there for us. And now Austin gets her all to himself? Screw that!”

No one responded, letting Max be Max and get it out of his system. The game started, and we were all on our feet cheering for Keeks and her team as they played.

They dug deep and gave it everything they had, but still ended up with a loss. But the massive grin on Kerri’s face would make you think differently.

“You guys! You’re all here!” she shouted as she made her way up the bleachers. Little pieces of hair that didn’t make her ponytail plastered against her head in sweat, her shirt soaked.

The sight of her muscular legs in those tiny shorts didn’t go unnoticed either...

We all stood, but I jumped down to the bleacher bench below to grab her before my friends could. I had no doubts Max would try to scoop her up first.

“Of course we came,” I said, opening my arms wide and wrapping her in them. I lifted her up and twirled her around as much as I could in the limited space of the bleachers. Placing her down on her feet, I planted a soft kiss on the side of her head.

“Ew, gross, Aus, I’m dripping sweat,” she said, wiping her face, her nose crinkled.

“Well, then let me fix that,” I whispered, leaning down and kissing her on the lips instead. A chorus of groans grew behind me, but I didn’t care. “There, no sweat on your lips.”

I knew a blush would have been evident on her cheeks had she not been red from exertion already.

“You played great, Keeks,” Connor said, reaching down for a high five.

“Yeah, you guys crushed it. Keep it up, kid,” Max added, jumping down to be next to us. He really was like a puppy, unable to stay still and always excited.

“Thanks, guys. It means a lot that you all came. I mean, I assumed Aus would be here, but for all of you...”

“You always show up for us, no matter what. It’s the least we can do. Great game,” Owen said so softly we barely heard him over the noise echoing around the gym.

Kerri smiled up at him.

“Men, if you don’t mind,” I started, slinging an arm over Kerri’s shoulders, “I have a lady to take out on a date this afternoon.”

Kerri laughed and smacked my chest. “*After* I shower. Give me a while. I’ll find you in the lobby.”

She took off without another word, joining her teammates to pack up their stuff and head to the lockers. I couldn't take my eyes off of her.

"Get your head out of the gutter, man. Stop thinking about her showering," Max yelled, loud enough for people around us to hear.

"Dammit, Max!" I answered, looking down at the ground and walking to the stairs.

He wasn't wrong, though.

Today was our first official, real date.

I couldn't wait.

Want more Kerri and Austin? Grab this [bonus scene](#) and see just how Austin felt when he realized it was his turn to be the Secret Admirer!

Did you love *Dear Kerri*? I'd love to hear! Drop a review for me on [Amazon](#) and let me know your thoughts!

Keep reading the *Love Notes* series. Available on [Amazon](#).



*Also by Danielle Keil*

Want more friends to lovers stories? Check out *Into the Light*, a college romance, today!

*When Jackson gets to college, he finds the girl of his dreams right away. The only problem? She's his roommate's girlfriend.*

The second I walked onto campus, I knew things were going to be different. New school, new me.

What I didn't expect was to be completely and utterly enchanted by a girl.

My roommate's girlfriend, to be exact.

Everyone knew their relationship was toxic, except for the two of them.

Emmy was the smartest and most beautiful girl I had ever met. But I couldn't have her.

Every time he screwed up, I was the shoulder for her to lean on. When her life got rough, I was her safe place.

Time and time again, I held back my feelings for Emmy.

Eventually she would have to figure out her own life.

*I just didn't know if I would be there when she did.*

Read [\*Into the Light\*](#) today!

## Acknowledgements

I AM SCREAMING.

Y'all, I had no idea you guys would love this series so much! It took a completely different turn for me. Not only was it novella vs full length, but it wasn't quite as "deep" as a lot of my books go.

To be honest, I think I need it though. And, I guess, y'all did too!

The amount of reviews saying how happy *Dear McKinnon* made them was overwhelming. Honestly, I may have cried at every single one. It means the world to me that you loved it so much! And I hope I did the same here with *Dear Kerri!*

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## *About the Author*

Danielle Keil grew up in the Chicagoland area. A recent transplant, she is enjoying the Mississippi life, especially the pool in her backyard.

Danielle has been happily married for over 10 years, and has two young children, a daughter and a son, who are exact replicas of her and her husband.

Danielle's love language is gifts, her Enneagram is a 9w1, and she loves everything purple.

The way to her heart is through coffee, chocolate and tacos (extra guac).

Want to hang out?

Find her on [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), and [TikTok](#)!

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