

Chapter One

Sunday, February 14th, 2010

“Wait, I’m pretending to be your secret admirer?” I ask, making sure I heard her correctly.

“Yeah,” Mackenzie says, matter-of-factly.

My stomach gives a small moan of protest.

It’s just the two of us sitting around in her room. Well, the two of us plus the ten million shirtless guys on the posters hanging around. They’re all wearing celebrity-tier smiles since they’re oblivious to how stupid our little scheme is.

“Let me make sure I’m understanding you,” I tell Mackenzie. “You’re doing this to get Kevin’s attention?”

Kevin Hendricks is Mackenzie’s “ex-boyfriend.” I don’t even know if you can really call the two of them exes, though. They only went out for, like, four weeks last year.

“Right,” she replies. She leans back on her bed, a peaceful look on her face as fantasies of her and Kevin together splash through her mind. “Like, I can’t stop thinking about him,” she half-whispers. “And I can tell he’s thinking about me too. But I need to give him a little push in the right direction.”

Mackenzie holds one hand above her, and then she sweeps it toward her heart, as if to invite Kevin into it. Or at least that’s the intended romantic meaning. Personally, the first image that pops into my head is one of her pulling Kevin toward her boobs. But I quickly let go of that picture.

She sighs a serene sigh, like she’s in her own world. I feel like a mere peasant serving a queen as I sit on her fluffy pink carpet, looking at her neatly-made bed. Cautiously, I question Her Majesty. “And you think that, if you get a love letter, he’ll make a move before somebody else does?”

“Boys get jealous real easy,” Mackenzie explains, like she knows everything there is to know about them. “If I get a letter and say it’s from a guy, Kevin will see that other guys like me. And maybe he’ll realize there’s a reason for it, and... yeah.”

Yeah, there’s a reason for it all right. Today, she’s wearing her typical low-rise jeans, so low that her underwear’s always ready to peek out of them. Seriously, aren’t those going out of style? (The low-rise jeans going out of style, not the undies—people still wear those.) She has a green top on too, one short enough to give a little peek of her flat belly and low-cut enough to advertise her works in progress.

Why does she have to dress like that around me? It’s not like there are any guys around to impress... Maybe advertising how “sexy” she is just a habit now.

The old Mackenzie never would have showed off to me, to anyone. She *never* would have.

But I should get my mind back on the assignment that the new Mackenzie’s giving me. I sit up cross-legged and instinctively start rubbing my chin, thinking things through. “So, I write this love letter, and then I secretly drop it on your desk tomorrow morning?” I ask.

“For a happy belated Valentine’s Day,” Mackenzie says with a giggle. “Just make sure nobody sees you. I’ll read it in homeroom, and maybe Kevin’ll realize it’s now or never—ask me out before another guy steps in.”

“But I’ve never written a love letter before, so…”

“I’ve already taken care of it,” Mackenzie replies with a smile. She trots off her bed and opens a drawer beneath her desk. After digging through some art supplies, she proudly pulls out a piece of paper, folded up in fourths. “It’s a poem,” she announces.

As I lean forward and take it from her hand, I ask, “You already wrote it?”

“I didn’t want to make you write one from scratch,” she explains. “You’re already doing a lot for me, Cathleen.” She looks me in the eye and smiles. Maybe the old Mackenzie is still in there. “But I thought it might look more authentic if it was handwritten. I didn’t wanna do it myself because somebody might recognize my handwriting.”

I grin and say, “And you want me to do it because I have boy handwriting, right?”

It’s weird, the things I remember. In third grade, our teacher made Heather hand back worksheets to everybody in the class. But there was one paper with no name on it. So she held it up and announced, “Whose is this? It kinda looks like a boy wrote it.”

Without thinking, I looked at it and said, “That’s mine.”

And boy, did I get teased for having boy handwriting. Back then, Heather felt real sorry for what she said, but now it’s just a joke of ours. She’s the type of friend I can’t stay mad at for very long.

Why does it look like a boy’s? Well, it is a bit sloppy, and other people have trouble reading it sometimes. I think it looks fine, but I guess, as a girl, I should have “adorable” handwriting. You know, dot my *i*’s with hearts, like Mackenzie does. But that’s *so* annoying—it takes forever.

“You’re the right person for the job,” Mackenzie tells me, breaking up my thoughts. “I realized that, like, right away.”

“I’m glad my boy handwriting superpowers will be of use to you,” I say as I unfold the paper. Mackenzie starts pacing the room, her brown eyes drifting around. Maybe she’s a little nervous to have me reading her work. The paper has nothing but the untitled poem, written in dark purple ink:

Sharing our laughs, our play
Our cries, our dismay
Now I’ve come to see
Everything that could be
To have you as a friend would be great
But I hope more is our fate
To have you as a friend would be okay
But for more I pray
To have you as a friend would be fine
But I think our love could really shine
I don’t know what others will say
But with you I will find a way
I don’t know if your feelings are as strong as mine
But I hope I can be your valentine

Written with a heart of fire
By your secret admirer

“That’s actually pretty good!” I say. It even calms my tummy and gives it a warm, tingly feeling.

“You say that like you’re surprised,” Mackenzie replies, wearing a playful smile.

The thing is, I am surprised. With Mackenzie changing so much in the last few months, it’s nice to see she still has a sweet side.

“How long did it take you to write this?” I ask.

“Not too long,” she replies. “I looked up rhymes online.”

“But you did the rest yourself?”

“Well... I did show it to Rachel. And she made a few changes.”

Okay, that makes sense. Rachel of the grammar police is not one who would let half-baked mistakes slide by her.

“She’s a genius,” I say with a nod.

“Unless it’s at math,” Mackenzie says with another giggle.

And I actually giggle too. We haven’t done much of that together lately, so it feels nice.

“Okay, so you want me to copy the poem down in my wonderful boy handwriting, then drop it on your desk tomorrow?”

“Will you?” she asks, clamping her hands together. “I know this is kind of weird, but it would help me so much.” She puts on big, cute, pleading eyes. Like the ones Heather has.

I don’t even consider replying any other way. “Of course, Mackenzie.”

She sits me down at her desk, the shirtless guys on the walls still smiling at us. Mackenzie overdoes it with the posters, but I’ve gotta admit she has good taste. They are pretty hot: smooth and with just the right amount of muscle... It’s a shame the guys at school can’t all look like them. But I need to get my mind back on track.

Mackenzie hands me the exact pen she wants me to use (one polka-dotted with red hearts) along with a blank piece of computer paper. She thinks fancy stationary might be overdoing it.

Before writing the poem down, I look over the draft and ask if I can make some more changes to it. It feels a little weird questioning Rachel’s tastes since I’m sure she read over it a million times. But I have to make a few tweaks.

Like, I think it’d be easier to read if we split it up into more stanzas. Plus, I think the beginning can be fleshed out a bit, so I add, “My heart’s grown sore, wishing I could have more.” On the other hand, I cross out the lines, “To have you as a friend would be okay, but for more I pray.” Those just don’t have much rhythm to them, I guess. And I think some other parts need a facelift.

With all my editing, I leave a flurry of red marks on the poem, almost like a teacher graded it. Everything seems pretty good now, but a little something is still nagging at me.

Thinking out loud, I tell Mackenzie, “Those lines, ‘I don’t know what others will say, but with you I will find a way,’ they’re kind of all alone.”

“All alone?” she asks, putting her pink flip phone back in her pocket. She’d been texting rather than paying attention to my expert editing.

“You don’t really get into *why* other people would have something bad to say. I think we can cut that part.”

“But I love those lines...,” Mackenzie says gently, as if their romantic sound is taking her away. She puts her hand to her heart and says, “I don’t know what others will say, but with you I will find a way...’ He’s saying that he’d want to be with me even if everybody else thought it was a bad idea. Isn’t that sweet?”

“Yeah, except a real *him* isn’t writing this, so...”

“You know what I mean,” Mackenzie says, crossing her arms. Somebody didn’t appreciate my reality check.

“Well,” I say, “I still think we could flesh out the whole idea of what others think. How about, like, I dunno, ‘They can think what they wish...’ Umm, dish, fish—”

“I think it’s good as it is,” Mackenzie tells me with a devilish grin. “If we make it too good, nobody’ll believe a boy wrote it.”

I smile too. There’s no arguing with that logic.

I write the poem down and fold it up. “I’ll drop it on your desk tomorrow, bright and early.”

“Thanks for helping me out, Cathleen.”

She gives me a hug. She’s so eager that she wraps her arms around mine, so I can’t hug her back.

Chapter Two

Monday, February 15th, 2010

I have Mom drop me off at 6:50, thirty minutes before homeroom starts. (Yes, it starts at 7:20 AM. That’s the best part of middle school—not.) As promised, I’m putting the fake love letter on Mackenzie’s desk nice and early. It’s almost exciting. You know, weaseling into homeroom unseen, dropping off secret information like a spy, poking my head out the door to make sure nobody’s around, and then slinking out as if nothing happened.

It’s pretty easy to avoid getting spotted because nobody likes to show up that early—go figure. Plus, when they do show up, they usually hang out right inside the school’s entrance. The seventh graders take one side of the huge lobby, and we take the other. If you dare to break down this division and talk to someone of another grade, you can be sure people are going to notice it. I don’t know any seventh graders, so it doesn’t affect me. I just remember, on our first day of eighth grade, someone made a mistake with little Heather. A guy just came right up and told her, “This side’s only for eighth graders, runt!” We chased him off, though.

Anyway, once I get to the lobby after dropping off the letter, Heather’s the first of our friends to filter in. Shelby comes next, then Rachel, and then Mackenzie.

Shelby and Heather are *not* in on the whole fake love letter plan. The fewer people who know about it, the better.

But Mackenzie gave Shelby a mini-mission for the day. Shelby's locker is close to Kevin's, so Mackenzie asked her to spy on him before coming back here. You know, to see if any girls were talking to him, doing any post-Valentine's Day stuff.

"So, there were no girls around him, right?" Mackenzie asks.

Shelby grins. "Right. Kevin was alone when I passed by him the first time, *and* while I was at my locker, *and* when I passed by him the second time. Want me to repeat that a million more times?"

"Nah, a thousand times is enough," Mackenzie says with a smile.

"Still thinking of going out with him again?"

"Yeah, kinda..."

"Thought so. Have anything planned for him today?"

"No," Mackenzie says, shaking her head and trying not to smile even wider.

We always set up camp in the morning around one of the dark blue benches by the walls. Today, Shelby's sitting next to Mackenzie on our bench. If you took a picture of them together, you could yak about how the photograph represents an interesting dichotomy between one girl who is content in sweats while the other feels the need to prove herself through trendy attire. Or something like that. But these two are friends—and have been for as long as I can remember.

"Mackenzie...", Shelby says. She pulls up the back of her sweatpants. Mackenzie giggles and does the same with her jeans, so now they just barely manage to do their job.

"Doesn't that feel kinda weird?" Heather asks.

"There's not much you can do about it," Mackenzie replies, pulling out her cell phone. "It kind of sucks, but that's just how jeans are, like they're designed to go down and point out..."

"That's a downer," Rachel says, which actually makes Mackenzie laugh.

Once that random topic drifts away, I decide to tell everyone about something ultra important that happened when I was leaving Mackenzie's house yesterday.

See, near her front door, there's a picture of us five sitting around—on top of her garage. A couple years ago, a tree in her backyard had beautiful pink blooms on it, and going up on the garage was the best way to get a photo of us with them in the background. It's one of our favorite pictures.

And the frame is a pretty one she made in art class back in sixth grade, back when she actually put effort into things other than guys. It's painted to look like a mosaic of autumn leaves, a neat contrast to the springtime blooms in the photo. We all signed the back of it too.

Anyway, I was holding the picture before I headed out yesterday. I remembered our good times together, how her mom let us on the garage roof. Right in the middle of my trip down memory lane, my nose decided it would be a good time to sneeze, and my hands decided it would be a good time to drop the picture frame.

"But luckily, Mackenzie caught it," I explain.

"Good job, Cathleen," Rachel tells me, patting me on the shoulder. "You almost destroyed a precious memory of ours, all because your boogers felt like taking a flight."

"I try my best," I reply.

Mackenzie, who is still sitting there cracking up, somehow manages to say, "Tell them where they ended up...!"

“Where what ended up?” Heather asks.

“The boogers!” Mackenzie says. *Says* might be an understatement—she almost *shouts* it. Which is awesome, since it gets a few people glancing our way.

I speak softly. Real softly.

“They ended up on the picture frame.”

“Yuck!” Heather squeaks. And that makes Mackenzie laugh so hard that she lets out a snort, so the rest of us laugh too.

Sometimes, it feels like we’ll never stop laughing.

Once we finally cool down, I explain that we did get the nasal nuisances cleaned up. The frame is safe, so you can still see those pretty autumn leaves around the pink blooms.

After I’ve finished up the story, Shelby finishes up a sports drink. And in true sporty fashion, she lobs it into a nearby trash can.

“Two points!” she tells herself.

“No points,” Rachel tells her, shaking her head. “You could’ve recycled that.”

“If you wanna go dumpster diving, go ahead.”

I think Shelby’s just joking when she says that. But, when you’re around Rachel, nothing involving the environment is a joke. Nothing. She looks at the trash can, and it’s kinda dirty. (I guess the janitors don’t like doing work over the weekend either.) She then looks through her backpack, which might be every bit as messy as the trash can. Why she carries around so many books and folders at once is a mystery. Out of the mess comes two pencils and a hair scrunchie.

She pulls back her long, black hair as she approaches the can. And she starts using her pencils like chopsticks to reach deep down for Shelby’s empty bottle.

“It’s like a crane game,” I point out, “only the prize isn’t much to brag about.”

With the dexterity of a true video gamer, Rachel lifts the bottle out of the trash and plunks it in the recycle can.

“Make sure you wash those pencils,” Heather says as Rachel returns from her delicate operation.

“Wash them?” Rachel asks. “Like, give ’em a bath?”

“Maybe you could rub hand sanitizer on them. Think that would work?”

“That’s not a bad idea.”

“Wanna give them a bath right now?” Heather asks, smiling an eager smile.

And, lo and behold, that’s exactly what they do. A hand sanitizer bath for two pencils.

“It’s a shame we can’t give ’em a bubble bath,” Rach says as she rubs up and down on one of them.

“Ooh, I loved those *so* much when I was little!” Heather squeals while she cleans the other, the bracelet on one of her wrists jingling.

I love how random things get when we’re together.

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Once the five-minute warning bell rings (or actually, makes a beepy, buzzy sound), our group splits up. Rachel and Shelby go to their homeroom while me, Mackenzie, and Heather go to ours.

I guess Mackenzie really thought everything through. She's walking nice and slow. That way, lots of people will already be in the room by the time she opens the letter. She's even smoothing out her forever-shinier-than-mine brunette hair, ready to dazzle everybody. Plus, our teacher, Mrs. Walker, is *always* late, so Mackenzie will have plenty of time to stage a riveting performance.

When we get to our homeroom, which is just a bunch of boring desks facing a boring teacher's desk, Mackenzie puts on one convincing act when she beholds the "surprise" letter waiting for her.

"What's this?" she asks herself loudly as she sits down. She even takes the liberty of raising her low-rise jeans for the occasion. I take my usual seat to her left, and Heather takes the one to her right. Then Mackenzie unfolds the piece of paper and lets out some gasps, sounding so surprised.

"What is it?" Heather asks. She leans in, real eager to look at it. Like I said, she's not in on the plan. So, her surprise is totally authentic, making Mackenzie's show even more believable.

"It's a valentine... from a secret admirer!"

"A secret admirer?!" Heather gasps, putting her hands over her mouth.

She's the perfect audience: she says that loudly enough for just about everyone to hear. Her little shout even gets Kevin's attention, and his desk's in the front row. Unlike Mackenzie, the cute guy's kind of shy, so he's discreet when he turns around to see what's going on. But he's easy to keep track of since he has an explosion of brown, curly hair on top of his head. I can't really tell how he's reacting, though, because I'm busy playing my role.

"It doesn't say who it's from?" I ask Mackenzie.

"Nope, he just said, 'Your Secret Admirer.' And he even wrote a poem for me."

"What does it say?!" Heather asks. Her big blue eyes shine with amazement. And the people around us look curious too. They glance our way whenever they can, trying to look like they're not eavesdropping. I even see one girl scrunch her face, jealous of the show-off.

"It's real pretty," Mackenzie says, an excited, smitten look on her makeup-adorned face. She doesn't take her eyes off the letter. "He must've spent a lot of time writing it."

"Whoever he is, he must care about you a lot," I say.

I almost gag on those words. This is all starting to feel really, really stupid. Helping her land a guy by lying... But I can't back down now.

"You think?" Mackenzie asks softly. She returns to admiring the letter.

"So what does the poem say?!" Heather asks, barely breathing. "Can I see it?"

"I'll read it out loud so you can both hear it. Scoot in close."

Following Mackenzie's every command, we slide our chairs next to hers. That way, it'll at least *look* like she's reading it only to us.

Almost everybody else gets quiet. Kevin glances our way again, so maybe the plan is working. Maybe he will get jealous. Maybe he will step up his game with Mackenzie. And maybe she'll be grateful that I helped them get back together.

Putting on the most romantic voice she possibly can, Mackenzie reads the final draft of the poem out loud.

Sharing our laughs, our play
And our cries, our dismay
I've come to see
Everything we could be
My heart's grown sore
Wishing I could have more

To have you as a friend would be great
But I hope more is our fate
To have you as a friend would be fine
But I think our love could really shine

I don't know what others will say
But with you I'll find a way
I don't know if your feelings are as strong as mine
But I hope I can be your valentine

To you with a heart of fire
From your secret admirer

Heather gives a spellbound “wow!” as she cups her hands over her heart, the exact response Mackenzie was probably hoping for. A part of me is proud that she likes the poem. I did help revise it, after all.

“It's so sweet...,” Mackenzie says.

“Do you think he's serious?” Danielle Wagner asks.

I guess Danielle, lurking among the crowd of spectators, couldn't take it anymore. She had to speak up. As usual, she's dressed in a frilly skirt and gaudy top, with her hair carefully done up. To put it poetically:

It's all funny because none of those
Change the fact she has a big ugly nose.

“Of course he's serious,” Mackenzie says, her body going stiff. Her voice wavers for the first time, I guess because she can't follow a script now that other people are involved. “A guy doesn't write something this sweet as a joke.”

“Can I see it?” Danielle asks, her hands on her slightly-plump hips.

Mackenzie pauses. After running the options through her head, she decides to hand Danielle the paper. “Just be careful with it,” Mackenzie warns her. “It's special to me.”

One of Danielle's hands stays glued to her hip as the other holds the paper. She pulls it real close to her face, almost close enough for that great, big nose of hers to touch it. I guess she's inspecting the boy handwriting.

I should be careful today, making sure nobody sees what I'm writing down, just in case they happen to recognize my scribbles.

The bell rings. No Mrs. Walker in sight. No surprise there.

"The guy's trying awfully hard," Danielle says, making a show of shaking her head as her intricately-braided blonde hair sways with it. She's one of those girls who *think* they're popular, even though they're not. Not at all. Everybody thinks she's annoying. That's probably her motive for getting wrapped up in this: her annoying nature just has to annoy us. "He sounds desperate."

"I think he's being sweet," Mackenzie says, trying to hold on to her enthusiasm.

"Yeah," Heather adds. "Like, every guy has a different way of showing his love."

A nasally laugh breaks through the room.

"Who said it was a *guy* showing his love?" Steven Gibson asks. "It could've been a lesbian." My breathing stops.

"Yeah, I'm *sure* it was," Mackenzie says, rolling her eyes and forcing one of her giggles.

"I'm sure it was too," Steven replies.

Steven Gibson's one of those boys who *think* they're funny, even though they're not. Not at all. Everybody thinks he's annoying. So, him and Danielle would be a perfect match, like, a match made in hell. If it weren't for the fact they annoy each other.

Today, he obviously didn't bother doing anything to his hair, which is a black bog of cowlicks, or try to hide the cluster of zits on his chin.

Steven snatches the paper out of Danielle's hands. I flinch like he's just touched a wound. He folds it back up and says, "I was walking down the hallway, and I saw *Cathleen* holding something that looked just like this. She went in here, and then she came out without it. Heh, *came out...*"

With his toothy grin and small pointy nose, he reminds me of a rat.

My chest hurts.

People's eyes aren't just glancing our way anymore. They're staring right at us, devouring every detail of this juicy news. Happy, devilish grins on their faces. Excited whispers. Snickering.

My face is burning red.

"Quit making stuff up!" Mackenzie barks, losing her cool. "And give that back!"

"But it makes sense," Steven says, unfolding the poem. He puts on a mock romantic voice and reads, "To have you as a friend would be great, but I hope more is our fate. To have you as a friend would be fine, but I think our love could really shine." His smile, a real dopey-looking one, grows. "It's a friend of yours! And what friends do you have that're guys?"

"Lots of them!" Mackenzie shoots back. "And how is this any of your business?" She leans over and tries to snatch it out of his hand, but he holds it up above his head.

"Name one."

She slouches down in her seat. "There's, umm... Kevin."

"I didn't write it!" he calls out, putting his hands out in front of him. And that makes everyone laugh. Mackenzie stares at him, swallows hard, and then looks at the floor.

As for me, I'm... still processing this.

Steven's smile somehow gets even bigger and dopier as he keeps looking over the poem. "And this: 'I don't know what others will say, but with you I'll find a way.' Cathleen, were you afraid of what people would say... just because you're gay?"

He puts his hand on my shoulder. I shove him away, but that just makes him laugh again. Danielle's cackling like a witch too.

Everyone else is still snickering at us, like jackals that have their prey trapped. I hear faint whispers like, "They're around each other all the time..." or "I knew there had to be *some* gay people at our school..."

Steven looks at me and adds, "I remember one teacher calling you a good writer. And you're Mackenzie's friend. Who else do you think wrote it?"

Heather looks every bit as panicked as I am. She's using one of her hands to squeeze the fingers on the other. Her eyes strain as she thinks hard.

"Just because we don't know who wrote it doesn't mean Cathleen did," she says. She's trying to help, and that's nice of her. But she doesn't sound all that confident, probably because of how confused she is. There's so much going on, all at once.

"Well, let's look at the handwriting," Steven suggests. "Cathleen, pull out something you've written, and we can compare it."

"N-no!" I yank my backpack right up against my feet.

He grins, looking down at me like I'm a suspect losing an interrogation. "Why not?"

Mackenzie comes to my defense with, "She doesn't have to prove anything to you!"

"Okay," Steven proudly announces, "but right now, I'm guessing Cathleen here's just shy about being a lesbian!"

He pats my shoulder one more time and I shove him away one more time. He drops the letter on the floor, probably on purpose, and prances back to his seat. After a second, Mackenzie scoops up the poem, no longer enchanted by it.

There's a lull in the chaos, a calm amidst the storm of chatter. This is my chance to defend myself. But my half-functioning brain can't come up with anything. And I know sitting here saying nothing will just make everybody even more suspicious. And that just makes me even more nervous.

"Isn't he crazy?" Mackenzie sighs, flicking her wrist like she doesn't care.

One by one, my words come out: "He has an overactive imagination."

But I don't think anybody's paying attention to those words. They're all talking to each other about what just happened.

I'm about to say some more words when Mrs. Walker comes fast-walking in, a briefcase in hand. She practically slams it on her desk and tells us, "Sorry I'm late. Before the period's over, I have a few reminders I should give all of you."

A few? It's like they last forever.

I just sit there as she rambles about pointless stuff, like throwing our trash away properly—does she think we're eight years old or something? Normally, I'd find it kind of funny how she's trying to put clips in her wild black hair and spout off instructions at the same time. But right now, I need to assess my situation.

How did I not see Steven when I snuck in? And why is he being such a jerk to me? I've never done anything to the scrawny loser.

Will people actually think I'm a lesbian? If I'm going to stop the rumor, I *need* to do something before everybody leaves the room. Once they run off, the story will keep spreading and spreading like a virus... I have about thirty seconds between when the bell rings and when everybody's long gone. I've gotta say something good, something that'll prove I did not write a love letter to a girl. Maybe I'll be safe. Maybe I have a chance.

But nobody will believe anything I say at this point...

But maybe they'll believe Mackenzie!

Yeah, if she comes clean with her whole scheme, the accusations against me will be done for. Her plan obviously didn't work. Just look at how fast Kevin told everybody he didn't write the letter. He wasn't impressed or jealous or any of that stuff. It's time for her to give up on him.

I run my logic through my scrambled brain a few more times. And when the bell rings, I look over at Mackenzie. She's taking her time putting her backpack on, so I whisper to her, "You have to tell everybody what really happened... before things get out of control."

She ignores me.

Completely ignores me.

She puts her backpack on, gets up, and trots out. She doesn't even take the beautiful love letter with her.

My eyes follow her in disbelief. Or at least they do until they see Steven snickering at me even more, wiggling his eyebrows up and down. I shoot my look somewhere else. And for some reason, I don't say anything in my defense—my brain's broken at the moment. Instead, I just slide my backpack on slowly. By the time I do, just about everyone else is gone.

But Heather's standing near me, holding the stupid poem. I snatch it out of her hands and tear it in half. I give her the pieces and say, "Throw 'em in the trash."

Following Rachel's example, she throws them in the recycle bin instead. After taking care of that, concern floods her blue eyes, like she wants to tell me something but can't think of anything to say.

"See you at lunch," I mumble, walking right past her. Yeah, I'm being kinda mean to Heather, but can you blame me for being mad at everyone and everything?

As soon as I get the chance, I text Rachel and Shelby: "Avoid Mackenzie. Evil. Let everyone think I wrote her a love letter. Details at lunch."