

Her Secret 38

CHAPTER 38 NO.38

After a brief discussion on whose car to use, River drove the three of them to the forest at a frightening speed. Once they arrived, to the trio's surprise, there were a lot of groups lined up to register for the treasure hunt. As River and Zane stood in line, Lana excused herself from them and went to the counter where Hannah and Jack were handling the registrations.

"Are you participating too, Lana?" Jack asked.

"Yes, but I came over to ask if you guys need any help? Since there's a lot of people here today..." she asked as she looked around at the different teams of three. She recognized some familiar faces of the townspeople and even her classmates but there were other people around too who she assumed were visitors.

"Nah, we got this covered!" Hannah said confidently. "Are you here with Carmen and Suzie? I saw them around earlier."

Lana shook her head. "They're in a team with Steven. I'm here with—" Lana was interrupted by someone calling out to her. She turned to the source only to find Ray waving at her and gesturing for her to come to him. She then quickly waved goodbye to Hannah and Jack as she made her way to Ray.

"You really came to participate?" he asked her with a bright smile.

"Mhmm! I can't wait to see what kind of puzzles you guys have in store." She said.

Ray laughed. "Knowing you, it'll be a breeze." He then looked at the line and turned back to look at Lana. "You're here with...River and Zane?"

"How did you know?" she asked.

"Well...River and that Zane boy really do stick out from the crowd but also, Suzie, Carmen and Steven are right there. So I just guessed that you aren't with them."

Lana silently admired Ray's ability to deduce the situation without her explaining anything to him. "Well, it's a long story as to why I'm even in a team with River and Zane in the first place..." she muttered, frowning to herself over the hassle it was to deal with River earlier.

Ray laughed. "Will you be okay?" he asked, sensing her distress.

"Of course." Lana said, unsure that she even believed herself at that moment.

"Well, good luck." He wished hesitantly.

Lana waved at him before going back to her team. It seemed to her that Zane and River did not even say a single word to each other since she left them alone. She started to feel guilty for even putting them in such an awkward position. More so guilty towards Zane than River, of course. She then glanced behind to where Carmen, Suzie and Steven were standing a few groups down. They stared at her in complete shock when they realized who her team members were.

She gave them a reassuring smile and a small wave, knowing for sure that they would be asking her a lot of questions after this entire thing was over. Silently, she was already rehearsing what to tell them in her mind when she noticed Zane turned to look at River.

“I’m surprised that you even agreed to join our team, River.” Zane suddenly said.

River shrugged, not even bothering to look at Zane while he was talking to him. His gaze was fixed towards the forest as though it was the only thing here that was worthy of his attention. “I’m just in it for the grand prize.” He lied.

Lana made a face at River’s response, knowing full well that he did not even know what the grand prize even was.

“Oh? Well that’s understandable. Even someone like you would want a relaxing trip to the hot spring.” Zane said as he nodded in confirmation.

“What?” River frowned at his sudden remark. He looked at Zane as though he was speaking gibberish.

“That’s the grand prize. A trip for 3 to the hot springs at New Gasalt. Didn’t you know?” Zane smiled.

Zane frowned and glanced at Lana. She just shrugged, since she too did not know that they were giving out a trip as a grand prize. New Gasalt was a small town, smaller than Rosecliff even but they were very famous for the hot springs over there.

Her mind went straight to imagining going on a trip to the hot springs with Zane but her short moment of daydreaming was immediately ruined at the fact that River would be there as well if they actually won the prize.

“Yea, of course...” He muttered.

“Then, let’s work hard together to win the grand prize. It would be fun if the three of us went on a little relaxing trip together.” Zane beamed, oozing out bright enthusiasm that even Lana was starting to feel hyped up. Lana smiled at him in response while River’s frown only deepened. He was seriously starting to question why he even agreed to this entire situation and was starting to feel irritated at himself.

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After the registrations were settled, the teams had to listen to a safety brief from Ray. They found out

that due to last night's rain, the parameter of where the clues and hidden and the tasks are done will be minimized. Additionally, they only had to solve a total of 7 puzzles compared to yesterday where teams had to complete 10. Naturally, the first team to complete all 7 puzzles will win the grand prize.

Lana glanced at her wristwatch, mentally noting that 10 minutes had passed since they got their first clue and now they were heading to their third location for the third clue. Never in a million years did she expect to see River and Zane working together without River being a total jerk towards him. She recalled how he was openly dismissive when they got the first two clues and wouldn't even bother looking at the clues as he would just linger around them from afar.

But suddenly, as though a switch was turned on, he started to get more involved. He would bounce ideas back and forth with Lana and Zane and Lana was pretty sure that he was only doing this to distract them, but once he offered the right answers, Lana slowly dropped her guards.

Someone whistled as the trio approached the next station. It was Taylor who greeted the three of them with a broad smile. "I'm actually amazed, you three are killing it! Maybe slow down and let the other teams catch up to have a fighting chance, huh?" He said after checking his own watch.

Zane smiled. "We're here to win big, right?" he turned to Lana.

"Yup!" she beamed as she reached out her hand to Taylor to retrieve their next clue.

Taylor shook his hand as he placed the envelope on her open palm. "Maybe next year, I'll tell Ray to just keep the event as a tourist only thing." He muttered.

Lana made a face. "Don't hate the players, hate the game." She smirked as she turned to her two team members and opened the envelope. She then frowned at the contents and glanced back at Taylor.

He was smugly looking at her the moment he saw her reaction. "Goodluck with that." He winked.

Lana rolled her eyes and paid attention to the contents.

[orrn iru wkh uhg uleerq rq wkh erxjk]

"It has to be some kind of secret code...?" Lana muttered as she scratched her chin.

"Looks like gibberish to me. Almost like someone just keyboard smashed." Zane said seriously as he narrowed his eyes. He then glanced up to River. "What do you think, River? Any ideas?"

River was staring intensely at the piece of paper. "It's probably a code like she said," he gestured at Lana. "But which code? Hmm..."

"You know you can ask for a hint right?" Taylor called out to the team. "But of course, in return, you'll have to face a time penalty." He said sweetly with a smile on his lips.

Lana turned to glare at him. He was clearly taunting them after Lana's playful remark.

Zane then laughed. "We might consider that. We are in the lead so a little time penalty in exchange for a hint won't be that bad." Zane suggested to River and Lana. Lana was about to agree with him until River shook his head.

"Hold on." He then looked towards Taylor. "How long is the time penalty?"

Taylor held up 3 fingers and Lana sighed in relief. "3 minutes is doable, right?"

"30 minutes." Taylor confirmed. "The time penalty for a hint is 30 minutes."

The trio groaned in unison when they found out that fact. "Are you serious?" Lana complained.

"Hey, hey, don't hate the messenger, hate the game." He beamed, using Lana's previous remark back at her.

"You little—" Lana muttered, ready to argue with Taylor who she always had a form of rivalry with even since she met him.

He is Hannah's oldest cousin and it was a given to everyone who worked at the station that Taylor has a very competitive side to him. He had the strange ability to make the most mundane things into a competition and most of them don't bother to entertain him when he suddenly comes over and declares that no one could chug a carbonated drink faster than him or finish their paperwork faster than him.

No one except for Lana, who just enjoyed taking Taylor up on his challenges just to see his devastated face whenever she won against him.

"Oi, stop being a brat and pay attention." River called out to her before she could finish her sentence. She turned back to him only to glare at him. River ignored her stare and tapped the piece of paper. "I'm pretty sure that this is a Caesar cipher."

"What's that?" Zane asked.

"It's basically a form of code that Julius Caesar used, hence the name of it. It's a type of substitution cipher but we just need to figure out the number." He explained.

"The number? It's not a fixed number?" Lana asked.

"It's a pretty versatile code. For example, some people would write it as a shift of five, which would be A equals to F or another example would be a shift of two—"

"If it's two then A equals C?" Zane asked him, feeling as though he was starting to understand how this cipher even worked.

River nodded. "Yea, basically. To decode it, you write it in reverse. So that would usually mean C equals A and so on." He added.

Lana absent-mindedly nodded her head as she listened to the two talk. Her eyes were fixed at the words on the piece of paper, unblinking as she tried to decipher it in her head using different numbers.

"So, how did Julius Caesar do it? I mean, what number sequence did he use?" Zane questioned.

"A shift of three."

"Three." Lana and River said at the same time. The two boys turned to look at Lana.

"You know about this cipher too, Lana?" Zane asked, sounding rather impressed.

Lana shook her head frantically. "No! I just guessed since this is our third clue after all..." she muttered shyly. Wondering if she sounded a bit silly for even admitting that she took a guess.

River scoffed. "And here I thought you were actually using your brain for once, but it was just a simple guess." He teased.

"Shut up." She hissed at him. "How do you even know about this anyway?" she asked him.

River shrugged. "I read. Unlike someone." He smirked at her.

Lana took in a deep breath and forced herself to ignore him. She then turned around and walked towards Taylor.

"Are you here for the hint?" he beamed.

Lana smiled. "You wish." She said as she reached towards his pocket and pulled out a pen. "I'll be borrowing this, Mr. Messenger."

Taylor sighed in defeat. Lana then scribbled on the paper to decode the message as the two boys watched over her shoulder. When she was done, she felt rather proud of herself. She turned back to her team members and showed them the decoded message.

"Look for the red ribbon on the bough." She read it aloud.

"Good job, Lana!" Zane said as he patted her shoulder. Lana's body tensed up from his touch alone.

River noticed and frowned. He then flicked her forehead so she would turn her attention to him. She

glared at him as her fingers rubbed against the spot on her forehead where he touched her. "What?" she muttered at him.

"I'm guessing that's our next location." He said as he pointed ahead. Lana and Zane's eyes followed the direction where River was pointing. A few miles ahead of them stood a tall tree that was decorated with colourful ribbons on its branches. If the three of them were not immersed in decoding the cipher, they would have instantly noticed the tree. Lana sighed, feeling as though she just made her life harder for no reason. She then turned back to Taylor who was just smiling back at them innocently.

"Well then, let's go to the next spot." She huffed as she tossed the pen back to Taylor who caught it effortlessly. He could not sulk as he watched the three walk towards their next destination.