

Author of Letters to the Lost

BRIGID KEMMERER

MORE

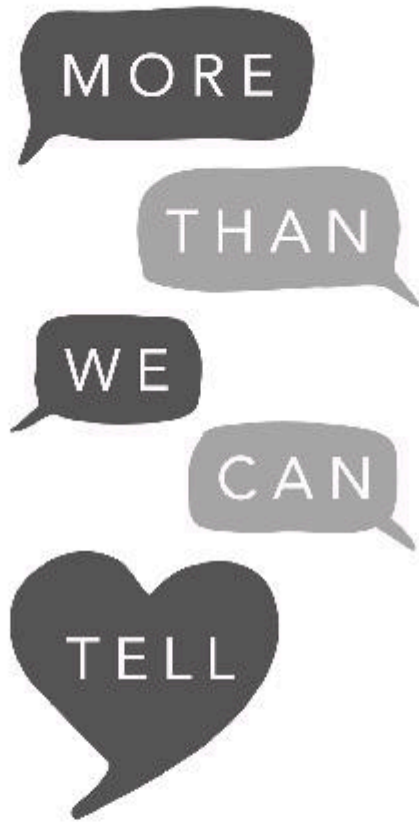
THAN

WE

CAN

TELL

BLOOMSBURY



For my mother,

who raised me to be strong,

but also, and more importantly, who raised me to be kind

ALSO BY BRIGID KEMMERER

Letters to the Lost



BRIGID KEMMERER



BLOOMSBURY

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Acknowledgments

ONE

Emma

OtherLANDS Player Dashboard

USER NAME: Emma Blue (PRIVATE)

USER LEVEL: Admin/Developer

PLAYER NAME: Azure M

NEW MESSAGE

Thursday, March 15 5:26 p.m.

From: N1ghtmare

To: Azure M

You suck.

And that's what I'm going to say when I find you and shove it in your mouth hole.

Gross. At least this guy didn't include a dick pic.

My finger hovers over the Ban Player button.

I should do it. I know I should.

Nightmare is pissed because I booted him from a team for harassing another player. It was right at the end of the mission, and me booting him

meant he lost any XP he'd earned. Two hours of gaming, down the drain.

But OtherLANDS doesn't have the biggest fan base. Maybe two hundred players on a good day. I only created the game as part of a school project. I uploaded a link on the county school's 5Core forum because I needed a few players to test it. I never thought anyone would actually *play*.

But they did. And now ... I *do* have players. I've created a community. And one idiot trolling me on 5Core could be enough to chase the rest of them away.

I can see his post now.

Azure M got mad about a little trash talk and she banned me. This is why girls are ruining gaming.

Because trust me, it's a *him*. Find me a female who'd say "shove it in your mouth hole."

I sigh and delete his message.

Then I click over to iMessage and send a text to Cait Cameron.

Emma: Some guy just sent me a message that he's going to "shove it in my mouth hole."

Cait: Mouth hole? Isn't that kind of redundant?

Emma: Right?

Cait: Some days I'm so glad that the worst I get are people telling me I'm ugly.

Cait does makeup tutorials on YouTube.

She's not ugly. Not even close.

But her makeup gets a little out there. She's into cosplay and character re-creations, and my geekery doesn't extend quite that far. Her real talent lies in the designs she creates herself. The other day she showed up at school with tiny glittered mermaid scales across her cheeks. Once she made her face look like she was unzipping her skin, but a teacher made her wash it off.

I'm not big on makeup, but I let her do mine last month after she begged and pleaded and told me she'd thought of something perfect. She put this translucent circuitry along my temples and down my jaw, very faint, then lined my eyes with dark liner and silver shadow. I thought it looked pretty cool—until the douchebags at school started asking me if I was programmed for pleasure.

I washed it off in the bathroom midway through first period.

Cait hasn't mentioned it. I haven't either.

I send another message.

Emma: I'm about to get online. Want to play?

Cait: I can't. I just set up to try a new winged eyeliner look on my mom.

Ugh. Of course she is.

The instant I have the thought I feel like a real bitch. Cait and I used to be connected at the hip, but somewhere around the beginning of the school year, we began to drift apart. I don't know if it's the gaming or the makeup or what, but more and more, it seems like one of us is always doing something *else*.

I wish I knew how to fix it. But if the solution is fish scales and translucent circuitry, it's not happening.

I sigh and switch back to OtherLANDS and log in as a player instead of an admin.

Immediately, I get a team request from Ethan_717.

I smile and slide my gaming headset over my ears. Maybe the afternoon isn't going to be *total* crap.

I have no idea who Ethan is in real life. He's in high school, because his 5Core profile says he goes to Old Mill, but that doesn't exactly thin the crowd. Ethan could be a fake name, but Ethan_717 isn't really a "character" name, so it might be real. In-game, he's built like a warrior, clad in black armor and a red cape. A mask covers the lower half of his face, and he carries

two electrified swords. Blue electricity sizzles along the steel when he draws them in battle—some of my best design work.

He barely knows anything about me, though he's one of the few people I've told that I created OtherLANDS. To everyone else in-game and on 5Core, I'm just Azure M, another random gamer. And no one on here can connect Azure M to Emma Blue.

Once we're teamed together, we can speak through the headsets.

"Hey, M," Ethan says. His avatar waves.

"Hey, E." I smile wider. He's got a nice voice. A little lower than you'd expect, with the tiniest rasp. It's kind of sexy.

Okay, yes, I might have a little crush on Ethan. Animated bluebirds aren't circling my head or anything, but still.

Which is ridiculous. Old Mill is forty-five minutes away from here. I have no idea what he really looks like. He could be a freshman, for god's sake.

"I was going to grab a few more people," he says. "Feel like running a mission?"

This is the other thing keeping the animated birds at bay: though he's funny and friendly, he only ever talks about the game.

Sigh.

"Sure," I say.

"I've been meaning to tell you; you've got a gap in the graphics in the elven woodlands. I'll send you a screenshot on Five-Core when we're done so you can fix it."

"Sweet. Thanks."

Like I said. Only gaming. Only tech.

Which is okay. I suppose I should be grateful that Ethan hasn't asked for my bra size.

After a moment, another player name appears in the team list. GundarWez. His avatar joins the team on the screen. He's huge and dressed entirely in black—which is a complete waste of all the customizations I spent so much time building in. I've never played with him before.

"Hi, Gundar," I say into my mic.

“Hey,” says Ethan.

“Hi, Azure. Hi, Ethan.”

I stifle a giggle. After the huge avatar, I expected a deep voice. Gundar sounds like he’s nine.

Another player joins. The name appears on the team list, and the smile drops off my face.

N1ghtmare. Mr. Mouth Hole himself.

His avatar is female, because of course it is. Breasts as large as my coding will allow—which thankfully isn’t too obscene. Tiny waist. Wide hips. He’s customized the costume and skin color to be uniformly beige, so his avatar looks naked. It makes me want to remove the color from my coding.

I’m frozen in a mental space somewhere between disgust and irritation. This feels purposeful, but I can’t figure out how. He wouldn’t have known I was on the team until Ethan added him.

Maybe this will be okay. I know a lot of people will say things in a private message that they won’t say over a microphone.

“Sorry,” he says, and his voice is rough and gravelly. For half a second, I think he’s actually *apologizing*, but then he says, “I thought this was a real team.”

“It is,” says Ethan. “We’ve got four. Want to run the mission through—”

“No. Not until you boot the bitch.”

Apparently, some people will say things over a microphone that should never be said out loud. Disgust shifts into anger—and humiliation.

“Go ahead.” My voice is even, though my heart gallops in my chest. “Boot yourself, Nightmare.”

“No way. I’m here to play. I just don’t want to play with some chick on the rag.”

“Well, I don’t want to play with a douchebag,” I snap.

“Guys,” says Ethan. He sighs. “There’s a kid on this team.”

“I’m not a kid!” says Gundar.

I wince. I forgot about him.

“Dude,” says Nightmare. “Would you boot her? She can’t game. She’s going to drag the whole mission down.”

“Dude,” says Ethan, his tone full of dry mockery, “she built the game.”

I wince. I try not to tell anyone that.

“Is that why it sucks so hard?”

“What is your problem?” I demand.

“You’re my problem,” says Nightmare. “Stupid whiny bitches who think they know how to game because they took a few coding classes, but really, they just *suck*. Now shut your mouth hole or I’ll keep my promise to shove something in there—”

I slam my laptop shut. I yank the headset off. My heart pounds away. My eyes are suddenly hot.

It’s nothing new. I shouldn’t be upset.

I’m good at this. I built this game. I know what I’m doing.

You’ve got a gap in the graphics in the elven woodlands.

Okay, so it’s not perfect. But I can *fix* it. What does that Nightmare guy have? A chip on his shoulder? An exhausted right hand?

Ugh. I can’t believe I just thought that.

Nails scratch at my bedroom door. Before I can get up to open it, Texas, my yellow Lab, shoves the door open with her muzzle. She’s full of wags and a snuffling nose that keeps pressing at my hands.

It sounds adorable, but really this is her way of telling me she needs a walk.

Good. I need a distraction. I lock the computer, shove my phone in my pocket, and hurry down the stairs.

All the lights are on, but no one is around. Texas hops up and down on her front paws, looking eagerly at the back door.

I grab her collar and peer out into the darkness. Mom stands on the patio, a glass of wine in her hand. She’s wearing dark jeans and a trim jacket, and her hair is in a ponytail bun. No makeup. She thinks it’s a waste of time. She’s a pediatric cardiologist, so you’d think she’d be oozing with empathy

and compassion, but maybe she uses it all up at work. Around here, she's buttoned up and critical.

Compared to her, Dad looks like a stoner. He hasn't shaved in days, and he's wearing a zip-up sweatshirt and jeans. He's sprawled in one of the Adirondack chairs, a laptop balanced on his knees. A bottle of beer sits open on the pavement beside him.

Light from the fire pit reflects off both of them. I can't hear what they're saying, but considering their irritated expressions, I would bet money that Mom is lecturing him about *something*.

I catch the tail end of a sentence. "... don't like the influence it has on Emma."

Gaming. She's whining about gaming. As usual.

She spots me, and her face shifts to exasperation. "This is a private conversation," she calls.

These are the first words my mother has spoken to me all day.

I slide the door open a few inches. "The dog needs a walk."

"Take her, then." As if I wasn't about to do that. She takes a sip of wine. "You need to get out of your room once in a while. Spend some time in the real world."

That's a dig at my father. He spends his life attached to a computer, living in otherworldly realms. He's a game designer.

Apple, tree. Yeah, yeah, I get it.

You can imagine how much this pleases my doctor mother, who I'm sure envisioned me running Johns Hopkins by the time I turn twenty-five. She'd have no problem if I were holed up in my room with a biology textbook.

Dad sighs and runs a hand down his face. "Leave her alone, Catharine."

"I would appreciate it if you would back me up on this, Tom." A lethal pause. "Unless you're too busy with your game."

I slide the door closed. I don't need to hear the rest of this argument. I could practically write the dialogue.

No one in this house would ever say "mouth hole," but the vitriol is the same.

With a sigh, I grab the dog's leash and turn for the front hall.

TWO

Rev

Happy birthday, Son.

I hope you'll make me proud.

Robert.Ellis@speedmail.com

The note was in the mailbox. The envelope is addressed to me.

Not to me *now*. He'd never call me Rev Fletcher. He might not even know that's my name.

It's addressed to who I was ten years ago. There's no return address, but the postmark reads *Annapolis*.

I can't breathe. I feel exposed, like a sniper rifle is trained on me. I'm waiting for a bullet to hit me in the back of the head.

Ridiculous. I'm standing on the sidewalk in the middle of suburbia. It's March. A chill hangs in the air, the sun setting in the distance. Two elementary-school-age girls are riding bikes in the street, singing a song and laughing.

My father doesn't need a bullet. This letter is enough.