



Keep It
Together,
Keiko
Carter

DEBBI MICHIKO FLORENCE



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Some people think that all chocolate is the same, but they're wrong. Chocolate can be buttery or bittersweet, crumbly or creamy. Some chocolates have undertones of cherry or coffee or vanilla. My friendship with my best friends was like the best high-quality chocolate—sweet and smooth. Or at least it had been. Right now, I wasn't sure, and I just wanted things to get back to normal.

I had a plan all mapped out. Get the three of us together, someplace we all liked. Talk about the good things that had happened this summer. Laugh like best friends, tease each other like best

friends. Then, get us excited about the start of seventh grade.

“Audrey, come on!” I rapped on the metal frame of my best friend’s front screen door. I knew if I went into the house, it would be even harder to get her to leave with me. I popped a couple of M&M’s in my mouth. I felt my shoulders relax as I crunched into the candy shells and the earthy sweetness melted on my tongue.

Minutes later I heard footsteps. I shifted out of the way as Audrey pushed the door open and finally came outside.

“What’s the rush, Keiko?” Audrey smoothed her hands over her white shirt, then patted the back pocket of her pink shorts to check for her phone.

“Aren’t you excited to see Jenna?” I asked.

Jenna Sakai was our other best friend. Her parents had gotten divorced last year, and her dad had moved to Texas, so for the first time in three years, Jenna had spent the summer away from us.

Audrey’s hair, the color of milk chocolate, fell in soft waves over her shoulders. She’d stopped wearing it in a ponytail just last month. “She completely ignored us all summer,” Audrey said.

“Not *completely*,” I said. The three of us had all started out with good intentions, messaging back and forth, but it got hard keeping it up. Partly because I felt bad telling Jenna every little thing we were doing without her. She had probably spent the summer sitting around her dad’s apartment alone while he was at work.

“She stopped texting us,” Audrey said, swiping on lip gloss instead of the lip balm she’d been using over the summer. Her lips looked shiny and smelled like strawberries.

“We kind of stopped texting her, too.”

Audrey waved her hand. “Jenna stopped first.”

“Audrey,” I said. “Don’t be mad.” What I really wanted to say was, *Don’t ruin our reunion*.

I walked down the steps first, hoping to get Audrey moving. Over the summer, she’d decided that riding our bikes was childish. We were going to be turning thirteen—Audrey in November and me in February. After two weeks of being stuck at home, we’d begged our parents to let us take the bus. They agreed, but only to and from The Courtyard, the fancy outdoor shopping center, during the day and with advance permission. That first ride was special. Audrey

documented every part of our trip, from waiting at the bus stop to sitting together on the hard bus seats, and she snapped a selfie in front of every store we visited. Then she printed up the photos and made me a collage of our day. I had it hanging on my bedroom wall.

Now the bus would be coming in fifteen minutes, and I was worried she was trying to miss it on purpose.

At first it was weird not having Jenna around. We'd always done things as a threesome, riding our bikes around the neighborhood, going to the park for ice cream, playing board games at my house, and watching movies at Audrey's. The first few weeks of this summer, Audrey and I had texted Jenna to try to include her. Audrey even blew up a photo of Jenna's face and put it on a stick, and we took selfies with it wherever we went, like Jenna was still with us. That was so like Audrey to come up with a sweet and clever way to make Jenna feel included. But Jenna's responses were always short, and by July, she'd take a while before answering us. Then in August, she stopped texting us altogether. Audrey had stopped by then,

too. She said Jenna was selfish and didn't care about us, but I didn't believe it for a second. Jenna had never really been into constant texting—even before summer—and had zero interest in social media. She was just really different from Audrey. Audrey was Hershey's Kisses and Jenna was more like a small-batch dark chocolate bar.

“Oh great,” Audrey said under her breath as she followed me down the porch steps.

Before I could ask her what she meant, I heard the worst sound ever.

“Yo, it's the Pancake Twins!” Conner Lassiter, Audrey's brother, shouted as he and his idiot friends, Doug Nolan and Teddy Chen, walked up the block. They were a year older than us but acted like they were five.

I crossed my arms over my chest, something I did a lot these days. Audrey sped past me and I hurried after her, going the long way to the bus stop. There was no way we wanted to go by the boys on purpose.

“God, they're such brats!” Audrey said. “I can't believe we're going to have to see them at school.”

Seventh grade started in just two days. At Pacific

Vista Middle, the sixth graders had a separate building and a different lunch period, so we never had to run into Conner and the Morons last year. But now we'd share both.

"The campus is pretty big," I said. "The chances of bumping into Conner are slim, especially if we figure out where he hangs and then avoid him."

I dropped my arms from my chest, needing to swing them instead to keep up with Audrey. At least now we wouldn't miss the bus. My knees started to ache from stomping on the sidewalk like it was Conner's face. You'd think eighth-grade boys would be more mature. Last year, Doug came up with the nickname the Great Wall of China for Audrey, Jenna, and me, which was super weak, especially since none of us are Chinese. Jenna's Japanese American; I'm half Japanese American; and Audrey is a mix of English, Irish, and French.

When we got on the bus, Audrey kept busy on her phone, texting with her cousin Sylvia, who lived in San Francisco and was in high school. These days, Sylvia seemed to be the expert on everything from fashion to romance.

Three stops later, Audrey and I stepped off the bus

at The Courtyard. We loved coming here to shop and walk around because all the stores were outside between palm trees and flowering plants, fountains, and brick walkways. The only real tragedy was that there were no chocolate shops.

Audrey and I headed to our usual meeting spot by Heart & Seoul, the Korean BBQ food truck. She kept texting while we walked. Ever since she'd gotten her own cell phone at the start of sixth grade, she was constantly on her phone, messaging other people and checking celebrity sites. It had been annoying at first, since I had to wait to get my own phone till my birthday months later, but now I was used to it. I stretched my neck to try to see around the back-to-school-shopping families and teenagers crowding the walkway, dodging shopping bags and ginormous purses.

"There she is!" I said, nudging Audrey.

Jenna stood next to a metal bench by the food truck, her shoulder-length hair now an electric blue, not the black-with-a-pink-streak she'd had in June. The rest of her looked the same, though—faded jeans and Angry Little Asian Girl T-shirt.

When we reached Jenna, I was so excited, I lunged at

her. I caught myself, though, because Jenna wasn't big on emotional displays.

"One hug," she said. Then she surprised me by wrapping her arms around Audrey and me and squeezing. It was over before I could blink, but it was a good sign.

"Whoa," I said, my heart filling with relief and happiness. "You must have really missed us."

Audrey said nothing. I took one look at her mouth closed tight as she stared down at her phone, and my stomach wobbled. Jenna was happy to be with us, but Audrey acted like she'd rather be somewhere else.

"How was Texas?" I asked, filling up the silence. "Different from California, I'll bet."

Jenna sat down on the bench and shrugged. "Different. Yeah." She rummaged in her army-green messenger bag. "I brought back gifts."

Audrey perked up at this. "You did?" She sat down next to Jenna, finally smiling and putting her phone away.

"This is for Keiko." Jenna handed me a chocolate bar.

"Single-bean dark chocolate," I said, reading the label. "From Madagascar! Wow! Thank you!"

Jenna grinned. "Like it would be hard to please you."

Audrey shifted, her hands fluttering, trying to mask her impatience.

Jenna handed Audrey a box. I sat down on the other side of Jenna and watched as Audrey ripped off the top. She gasped and lifted out a sturdy pink metal lockbox. “Awesome!”

“No more hiding your thumb drive in your tampon box,” Jenna said.

“That reminds me,” Audrey said, pointing at me. “Tell Jenna!”

“I finally got my period, like, two weeks after you left for Texas,” I said with some pride. Audrey’s had started in the sixth grade. She warned me that it might take a while for it to come regularly. So far, I hadn’t had it a second time.

Jenna raised her left eyebrow at me.

“It wasn’t something I wanted to text,” I said. “Has yours started yet?”

Jenna’s cheeks turned pink and she shook her head once. I wasn’t sure if that meant she hadn’t had it yet or she didn’t want to talk about it. Jenna was super private.

“This is great.” Audrey opened the lockbox. “I keep

worrying that Mom will have one of her rare but overly thorough cleaning sprees and toss out everything under the bathroom sink.”

Audrey had to share a desktop computer with her horrible brother. She journaled all her precious memories and thoughts, and there was no way she would risk having Conner find them and use them against her. So she stored everything on a thumb drive and hid it in a tampon box in the bathroom they shared. It was a truly brilliant hiding place.

“Thanks, Jenna,” Audrey said.

Jenna smiled. I nudged Jenna, and she nudged me back.

Relief melted over me. Now *this* was the perfect reunion! The three of us were together again, without any leftover weirdness from being apart. Of course, I would have liked it if we had all spent the summer together, but Audrey and I’d had a really fun time. We’d watched a bunch of movies and talked nonstop about what seventh grade would be like, and Audrey had given me countless manicures. The sharp prick of guilt stabbed me, but I pushed it away. I wanted to bask in this moment. Audrey fiddled with her gift from

Jenna, a smile playing on her lip-glossed mouth, and Jenna and I leaned our shoulders against each other. I didn't want anything to ruin this moment.

“I have something kinda cool to tell you guys,” Jenna said.