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Love Letters:

Mixed Messages

Love Letters:
perfect strangers



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SIMON AND SCHUSTER

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This story is for you, Skye.

It would not have happened without you.

SIMON AND SCHUSTER

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Dear Heart-2-Heart pal,
Roses are red. Violets are blue. I am
a junior. How about you?

Your friend,
Guess who?

Madison McKay stared at her computer screen and chewed on the last unbitten fingernail on her hand. It was a terrible letter, no doubt about it. But her teacher, Mr. Wheeler, had said, "Reveal something about yourself and ask your pen pal a question." Madison had covered all the bases, hadn't she? Okay, so maybe she'd taken a few shortcuts, but she couldn't help it. She was having trouble concentrating.

"Ow!" Madison yelped, as she ripped her cuticle.

Mr. Wheeler looked up from his desk at the front of the room. "Madison? Are you having trouble with your computer?"

"It's not my computer," Madison replied, grinning sheepishly. "It's my brain. I think I left it at home."

Mr. Wheeler scooted back his chair. "Do you need help getting started?"

"Oh, no, no, no!" Madison called, horrified that her teacher might have to help her write a simple letter. "I was having trouble choosing the perfect words to describe my feelings, but I think I've got them now."

To prove that she was fine she placed her hands on her keyboard and wildly typed:
#xty p nm4dg plafrbk vywkl asdayhxc sincerely
xxxxxxoooppss yours yours yours.

Usually a simple assignment like writing a letter to a pen pal would be a cinch for Madison. But she'd stayed up all night, tossing and turning, too excited to sleep. Today was the day Evergreen High School would nominate the candidates for student president and she was going to be one of them.

Madison had been planning for this day for nearly three years. Now that it was here, she was too nervous to concentrate on anything. Her brain was filled with cotton candy.

"Yo, Mr. Wheeler! When do we get to meet our Heart-2-Heart pals?" Robbie Leonis called from the back of the class.

"You're not supposed to meet them, Robbie. You're only supposed to write them. Didn't I make that clear?" Mr. Wheeler ran a hand over the dome of his bald head as he explained for the tenth time. "You, and all of the students at Evergreen, are to share your feelings and concerns with someone your own age. But you never have to worry that they'll tell anyone about you, because they won't know who you are. And vice versa."

"Too bad." Robbie tipped back his chair and set one black leather boot on the desk across from him. "I wrote a pretty cool letter."

Madison nearly choked. Robbie Leonis, the kid most likely to never turn in his homework, had already finished his assignment and she hadn't even started hers.

Emily Greenblatt raised her hand. "If we're not going to meet our Heart-2-Heart



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pals, how long do we have to write them?"

"We would like you to correspond for a month." Mr. Wheeler went over to the chalkboard, wrote *May 30* on it, and circled it. "After that, it's up to you whether or not you want to continue writing, or actually meet."

The Heart-2-Heart pen pal program was one of those big ideas that the Evergreen High counselors had invented to help students survive their high school years. Each student was given an anonymous e-mail address and assigned a Heart-2-Heart partner. As part of their twice-weekly advisor group meetings, students were supposed to communicate with their partners. The counselors hoped that students would be able to share their problems with each other, no matter how big or small.

Mr. Wheeler stood up and gave a general announcement to the students in the room. "Remember! Heart-2-Heart is about true feelings. Be honest and just go with the flow."

"You asked for it," Madison murmured as she deleted what was already on her screen. She took a deep breath and wrote the first thing that came into her head.



Dear Whatever-Your-Name-Is,

I resent being forced to write to a perfect stranger and share my innermost thoughts, but this is being graded. Also, everyone in class expects me to write this letter with a big perky smile because that's what I always do. Part of me would just like to skip school, catch a movie, eat cookie dough ice cream, dye my hair pink—or, better yet, shave my head—and party all night. But I'm trapped in an overachiever's body. You see, I'm working on maintaining a perfect GPA. How uptight is that? THERE! I've shared my innermost thoughts. Satisfied?

Pinky

Madison clicked SEND, stuffed her books into her pink nylon backpack, draped her purse over her shoulder, and waited for the bell to ring. She had to admit, once she'd actually *started* the assignment, it felt pretty good. Liberating, even. It was fun not having to impress anyone. Her parents and teachers always expected her to make straight A's. Other students automatically assumed Madison would be first in everything: first with the answer, first to turn in her homework, first to finish the exam.

What made it doubly hard was that everyone, including her best friends, thought Madison's success came easy. Only Madison knew how hard she had to work for her grades. She often stayed up past midnight to finish homework. She got up early to study and if she was confused, she stayed after school to ask for help. In short, she was a model student, and it was a bummer!

Madison leaned her chin on her hand and wondered about the lucky party who had just received her not-so-charming e-mail introduction. She was already starting to regret her impulsiveness. Maybe she shouldn't have been *quite* so straightforward about her feelings about Heart-2-Heart, and should not have gone off on all her troubles. What if the person she wrote to had real problems, and needed *her*?

"Earth to Madison!" a voice called from the fringes of her consciousness. "Wake uh-up!"

Madison blinked several times in confusion. She looked up to see a smiling face framed by short, dark pigtails and oversized wing tip glasses staring down at her. It was her best friend, Piper Chang. "I *am* awake,"

Madison replied. Then she noticed the empty classroom. "What happened to the rest of the class?"

"*They*"—Piper gestured to the rows of empty desks—"all thought the bell meant, 'Go to your next class.' Apparently you don't interpret it that way."

"Next class!" Madison bolted out of her seat in alarm. "I'm going to be late."

"Correction. You *are* late." Piper pointed to the round clock above the door. "Two minutes late, to be exact. However, in your case, it doesn't matter."

"Are you crazy? I've got calculus with Hooper this period," Madison said, scooping her books into her arms. "Tardiness always matters with Hooper."

"Excuse me." Piper folded her arms across her chest and tapped her foot impatiently. "Aren't we forgetting something?"

Madison patted her shoulder for her purse, checked her books in her backpack, and made sure her PalmPilot was in the zipper pocket. "No, I don't think so, Piper. Give me a clue."

"The assembly next period? Hello?" Piper slid her bright purple glasses down to

the tip of her nose. "Alex Kazinsky is nominating you for school president, and I am seconding the nomination."

"Oh, the election!" Madison slapped her forehead with her palm. "How could I forget?"

After tossing and turning half the night, Madison had pulled herself out of bed an hour earlier than her usual six A.M. to make sure she'd have time to get ready. It had taken a half hour to get her short dark hair to wisp in just the right places so that it framed her face and emphasized her big brown eyes. She'd tried on three different outfits before finally settling on a pink cashmere sweater with a rolled collar, a pink-and-brown-plaid kilt skirt, and white over-the-knees stockings that she hoped gave her the earnest but highly fashionable schoolgirl look she was aiming for.

"I think this Heart-2-Heart assignment really got me rattled," Madison confessed. "I mean, what can you say to someone you don't know? I just didn't know how to get started."

"I thought it was a piece of cake," Piper said as she linked arms with Madison and pulled her toward the classroom door. "I

merely described myself, gave my initials, P. C., reminded my pen pal that the nominating assembly was next period, and warned him or her that they'd better vote for Madison McKay—or else!"

Madison shook her head. "Piper, you told them everything. They'll figure out who you are."

Piper stopped to raise a purple lacquered nail. "Ah, but I left out a few very telling details. Like the fact that my mother is Swedish but my dad is Chinese. And nowhere in the entire correspondence did I even mention my perfect 4.0, or that I was the very first student at Evergreen High to own a MINI Cooper."

"But what about your innermost thoughts?" Madison asked. "Didn't you share any of those?"

"I don't have innermost thoughts," Piper said brightly. "They look just like my outermost thoughts."

Madison chuckled. That was true. Whatever went into Piper's head came out of her mouth, which made her a little too blunt for comfort sometimes. But Madison liked that her friend was bold—in words and in dress.

Today Piper was sporting typical Piper apparel: purple-and-lime green polka-dot mini, purple vest, and lemon yellow tee with her trademark candy apple red high tops—all from her favorite place—Urban Outfitters. Her motto was, “No color is too bright or skirt too tight!” Madison wished she could be more like her.

“Piper, you are truly out there,” Madison said, draping an arm around her best friend’s shoulder.

“That’s right.” Piper took a stick of gum from her heart-shaped purse and folded it in half. “With me, what you see is what you get.” She pushed open the door into the hall. “Now, come on.”

Madison took one step out the door and froze. The hall was totally deserted except for the one person Madison did not want to see: Jeremy Drum. He stood at his open locker, dropping books into a gray-and-black backpack. Just the sight of him made Madison’s stomach do flip-flops.

“What’s the holdup?” Piper called, giving Madison a shove from behind.

“Could you just wait a second?” Madison hissed. “*He’s* out there.”

Piper didn’t have to ask who *he* was. She already knew. Jeremy Drum—Madison’s nemesis. At Homecoming their freshman year he had managed to totally humiliate Madison in front of a stadium full of people. The prank easily rated a perfect “10” for meanness, which hadn’t won Jeremy any friends with the students or teachers. It certainly had made a permanent enemy of Madison.

Madison waited for Jeremy to close his locker and move on. He slipped a black sport coat over his gray T-shirt and jeans, and shut the metal door with a loud *clang*. He jerked back when he spotted her in the doorway.

“Whoa,” he murmured, shaking his jet-black hair away from his forehead. His pale blue eyes looked at her evenly. “I didn’t see you there.”

Madison was too flustered to speak. Instead, she turned and marched straight into the girls’ bathroom at the other end of the corridor. Her cheeks were blazing hot.

Piper was right behind her. “Way to handle Jeremy. Just run!”

“I don’t know why he still gets to me,