

LOVE LETTERS FOR JOY

Melissa See



SCHOLASTIC PRESS
NEW YORK

Copyright © 2023 by Melissa See

All rights reserved. Published by Scholastic Press, an imprint of Scholastic Inc., *Publishers since 1920*. SCHOLASTIC, SCHOLASTIC PRESS, and associated logos are trademarks and/or registered trademarks of Scholastic Inc.

The publisher does not have any control over and does not assume any responsibility for author or third-party websites or their content.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without written permission of the publisher. For information regarding permission, write to Scholastic Inc., Attention: Permissions Department, 557 Broadway, New York, NY 10012.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data available

ISBN 978-1-338-87538-6

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 23 24 25 26 27

Printed in the U.S.A. 37

First edition, June 2023

Book design by Cassy Price

CHAPTER ONE

JOY

My best friend Valentina Ramirez has been relentlessly tapping my shoulder for the past three minutes and forty-seven seconds. All because of this single sheet of paper that's figuratively burning a hole in her galaxy-print backpack.

Normally, I enjoy her enthusiasm . . . just when it's outside of school.

I adjust my circular tortoiseshell glasses and turn toward her, despite the fact that I can't afford to be distracted, especially not on the day before holiday break begins. We may still have six months left until we graduate, but the competition between me and Nathaniel Wright for valedictorian is tight—within tenths of a point. There's absolutely zero margin for error.

Nathaniel has been my undisputed academic rival for the last four years. We've also run the Caldwell Science Society

together. He is the president, and I am vice president, and it's the only time we are remotely civil to each other.

“Joy.” Valentina whines, leaning against her locker, her curly brown hair splaying out behind her. “I need to give Yasmine the letter. Today. Or my plans for an epic, touristy Christmastime date will be *ruined*. What should I do?”

Valentina has had a crush on Yasmine Crawford since Pride last summer, and she has finally worked up the courage to write to Caldwell Cupid, the anonymous student who spends all their free time writing love letters on behalf of the besotted at Caldwell Preparatory Academy. She received her letter before she was even out of her apartment this morning, so she has been a bundle of excited nerves ever since.

“Give her the letter when you see her in AP Biology?” I heft the straps of my rose-gold JanSport, wincing at how weighed down it is.

Valentina used to make fun of Caldwell Cupid with me. But lately she has been obsessed. It seems like the entirety of Caldwell Preparatory Academy is, actually. Everyone is so wrapped up in romance in a way that I understand from a scientific perspective but have little interest in otherwise.

Do I even want romance in my life? I'm on the side of the asexual spectrum that declares I do. But as I'm in the running to be the academy's first valedictorian with cerebral palsy, school comes first, so I've pushed it aside.

“I know that!” Valentina bursts, pulling me out of my thoughts and pushing her translucent blue cat’s-eye glasses farther up the bridge of her nose. “But how?”

“We’ll see Yasmine soon,” our other best friend, Luca Sapienti, says, walking up to us. “I just saw her talking to Vikram about that cheerleading competition they have in January. Maybe use that as your opener?” He drapes his arm across my shoulders, pulling me into a hug. Luca and I have been friends since we were six years old, when my moms and I moved in across the hall from his family.

“Luca.” Valentina blinks her luminous brown eyes at him. “Could you give Yasmine the letter for me?”

“Nope.” He pops the *p* on the word. “I think you need to do this for yourself. It wouldn’t mean the same coming from me.”

“Joy?” She turns to me. “Could you?”

“I love you,” I say, gently laying my left hand over hers. “But what logical sense would me giving a love letter to the girl you have a crush on make?” My fingers spasm, but since the three of us have been best friends for over a decade, it doesn’t make me self-conscious.

“Joy!” Nathaniel’s voice rings out through the hallway, practically making the spray of freckles across my nose go pink from embarrassment. “Good morning!”

Luca and Valentina smirk at me before stepping aside. My friends like to joke that Nathaniel and I are secretly in love

with each other, and that our competition for valedictorian is “fueling the passion.”

They couldn’t be more incorrect, but I humor them anyway. It’s easier if I just play along so that it’s over faster and we can all get to class.

“Morning, Nathaniel,” I reply as good-naturedly as I can muster.

Nathaniel strides over to me with long legs. Gorgeous enough to be a model, he has sky-blue eyes, a head of gold curls, and a jawline that could cut glass. He could have anyone he wants: an overly enthusiastic cheerleader, or the captain of the football team perhaps. But he’s never actually dated anyone that I know of.

“Are you ready for our final meeting before break?” he asks loftily. “Mr. Baumann wants us to lead a discussion on cells, remember?”

“O-Of course I do.” I look down at my gray pleated skirt, plum-colored blazer, white dress shirt, and the tie Momma fixes for me every morning. “I’m the one who suggested the topic.”

Nathaniel’s grin falters the slightest bit. “Only because you got a better grade than me on the paper about cellular structure.” He’s well over six feet tall, so as he bounces on the balls of his feet, his body tilts, shadowing my decidedly shorter frame. “You wanted to rub it in.”

“It’s okay,” I mutter, my lips twitching. “You can admit that you’re jealous of how I got a better grade than you.”

“Joy.” Nathaniel slowly stops moving his feet, placing his hand over his tie. “Are you suggesting it’s my fault that autosave malfunctioned and deleted my notes on cellular structure in the first place?”

“No.” My left hand twists into a knot, and I raise it up near my chest. “W-What I am suggesting, however, is that my understanding of cellular structure far surpasses yours and you just won’t admit it.”

Nathaniel’s mouth drops open, and he staggers backward. “I didn’t come here to be insulted,” he grumbles.

“No, just to insult me because you can’t stomach the thought that I’m better at something than you are,” I retort.

“I only came over here to tell you I’m going to be late to club today,” Nathaniel continues as if I hadn’t said anything. “But only by a few minutes. I have a meeting with Miss Gupta to go over my academic progress.” He raises one eyebrow. “Are you meeting with your guidance counselor, too?”

“I’m meeting with Mr. Moses the first week back.” Each vertebra of my spine clicks into place as I straighten my back. “But my academic progress is excellent.”

“Mine too,” Nathaniel replies smoothly. “I’m only meeting with her to—”

“What difference does now versus January make?” Valentina asks, eager to have something besides her love letter to grasp on to. “It’s the last day before break. C’m on, be realistic.”

Nathaniel and I gasp, placing our hands over our hearts. “Every day of school matters,” we say in unison as the bell rings.

“C’mon,” I mumble, my cheeks warm. “Let’s get to class.”

When the four of us head upstairs to the science wing, Luca and Valentina look at me, their eyes gleaming in anticipation. Anticipation of *what*, though?

It’s not like I’m going to run past Nathaniel and confess my love for him on the step above him like some weird academic homage to the balcony scene in *Romeo and Juliet*. Last year, Nathaniel and I had been chosen to read that scene in AP English and ended up arguing about line interpretation instead.

I mean, what does a pompous flirt genuinely know about romance, anyway?

“What?” My left hand contorts into a fist at my side.

“You know.” Valentina smiles cooly when Nathaniel disappears up the next staircase after the landing. “Joy, maybe if you write a letter to Caldwell Cupid, then you can confess your feelings for Nathaniel.”

“The ones you hold deep inside.” Luca pats the Caldwell Preparatory Academy emblem on his blazer.

“You’re ridiculous,” I groan. “Both of you. But speaking of Caldwell Cupid.” We reach the science wing, and it’s my turn to smile at Valentina. “You need to give Yasmine your love letter.”

Mr. Baumann’s classroom is filled with silver desks, purple plastic chairs, and lab stations in the back. Colorful posters featuring diagrams of cells, the taxonomic ranks, and more

pepper the walls. The biggest poster is an interactive one about DNA.

“Yasmine’s not here yet,” Valentina says, her excited nerves back again as we take our seats.

The door opens again, and I glance over Valentina’s shoulder. A beautiful Black girl with a braided bun and lesbian pride flag earrings dangling from her lobes just walked in. “She’s here now,” I whisper. “Be assertive.”

“Okay.” Valentina blows out a breath from between her teeth, grabbing the neatly folded letter from her backpack’s front pouch before getting to her feet. “Okay. I can do this.”

“You can do this,” Luca repeats bracingly. He turns to me; I see myself reflected in the lenses of his thick, square-framed black glasses. “Joy, show me your notes from yesterday so we can look distracted.”

“Good idea.” I unzip my backpack and remove my laptop. But instead of even turning it on, the two of us slowly scoot our chairs to the edge of the row so we can see.

“What happened to ‘looking distracted?’” I whisper.

“We’re three rows back from the door,” Luca whispers back. “We’ll be fine.”

“Hi, Yasmine!” Valentina squeaks, both of them lingering by the doorway.

“Hey!” Yasmine smiles at her, ever the captain of the cheer-leading squad. “What’s up?” she asks when Valentina doesn’t say anything next. “Did you need something?”

“Yeah.” Valentina squeezes her eyes shut. “I—I needed to . . . Um.” She awkwardly holds out the letter. “Give this to you.”

“Okay,” Yasmine says slowly, taking the paper and unfolding it. She scans the contents, her eyes growing wide. “Valentina,” she murmurs, pressing the letter to her chest. “You really went to Caldwell Cupid to ask me out?”

Valentina studies her shoes, but nods. “Yes,” she says. “Yes, I did. And—And you probably want a girlfriend who doesn’t have someone else write a love letter, but I didn’t know how else to ask you out. I’m not a words person; I’m a space person. The planetarium at the Museum of Natural History is my favorite place in the world, okay? You know that. Speaking of space, I forgot my astronomy textbook in my locker, and I have that next period because of course I took another science class as an elective, so, I’ll just—”

Before she finishes her sentence, the bell dings again for the start of the day. But instead of coming back to her seat to sit with Luca and me, Valentina freezes, then bolts out of the room instead.

“Valentina!” Luca and I chorus.

“Val!” Yasmine calls, speed walking out the door after her. “Wait! Wait, hang on! Please!”

“Miss Ramirez and Miss Crawford!” Mr. Baumann sings, adjusting his glasses and rising from behind his desk. “Class has just begun!”

“One minute, Mr. Baumann!” Valentina’s voice echoes faintly from down the hall. “Sorry!”

I turn to Luca. “That,” I say, nodding toward the door. “Running away from a girl you just confessed your feelings to, while she chases after you. That’s love?”

“I’ve never been in love.” Luca shrugs, his skinny shoulders touching his pink ears.

“Me neither,” I murmur.

“So how would either of us know?” Luca raises his eyebrows when Valentina and Yasmine walk back into the room.

Holding hands.

“We’ll have to ask Valentina,” I say, smiling at them as they sit down beside us.