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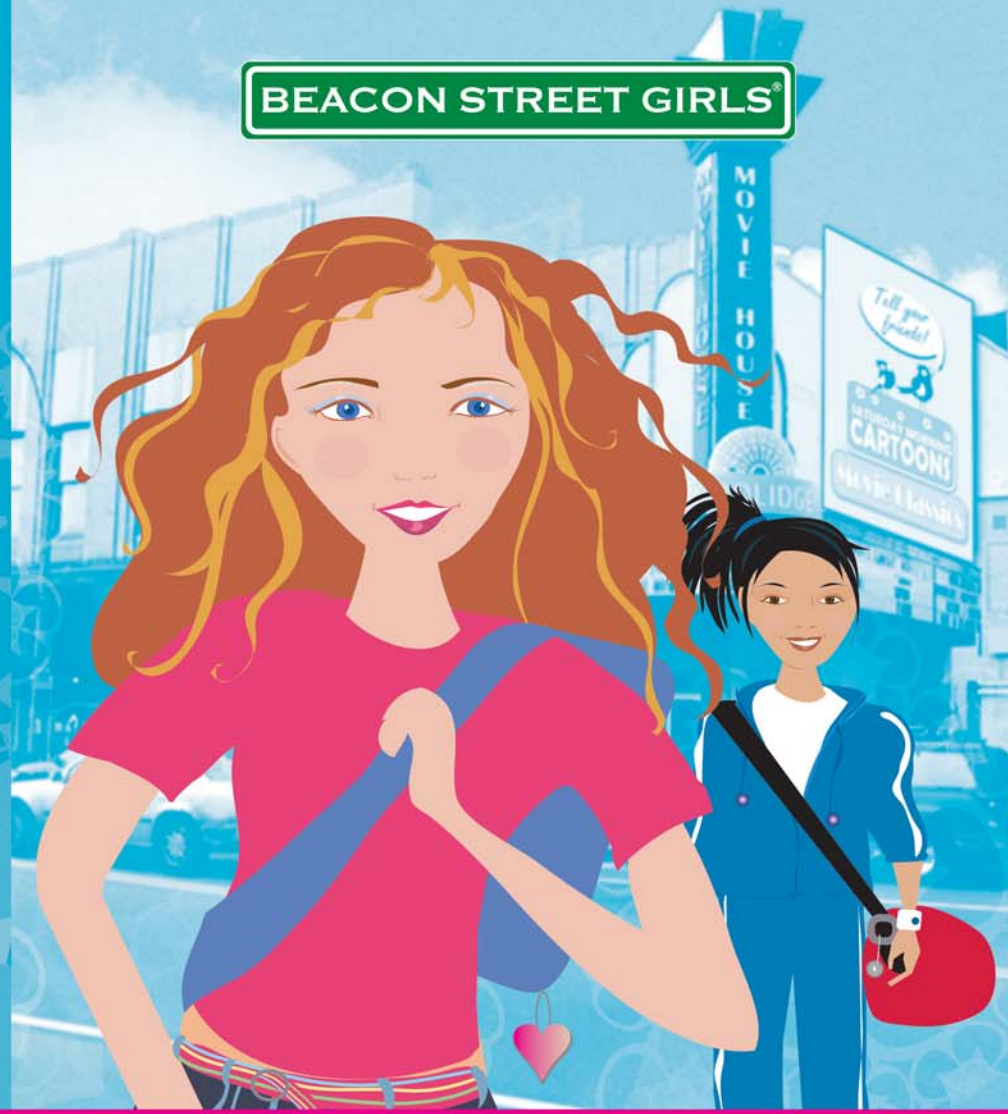
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letters from the heart

by annie bryant

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CHAPTER 1**MAKING HISTORY**

MS. O'REILLY faced her seventh-grade social studies class, arms crossed and a quizzical smile on her face. She had written a question in big capital letters on the blackboard and was looking expectantly at her students.

"Can anyone answer this?" she asked, gesturing with a piece of chalk at the board.

Maeve, her laptop open on her desk, typed out the question. It helped her to organize her notes this way, but Ms. O'Reilly's question looked just as puzzling blinking out at her on her laptop screen. Maeve pushed back her long red curls, reading it one more time.

"WHAT IS HISTORY?"

Dillon Johnson's hand shot up. "I can answer that," he said. Leave it to Dillon to be the first to respond. Filled with self-confidence, he was one of the most popular guys in seventh grade at Abigail Adams Junior High. Blond, handsome Dillon was often the first with his hand up. Maeve snapped to attention—she'd had a secret crush on Dillon for awhile now.

Maeve popped open a new window on her laptop. Thank



the stars for spell check, she thought. Maeve’s dyslexia was a continuing source of frustration, and computers gave her the extra support she needed. Of course, Anna and Joline, alias *Queens of Mean*, rolled their eyes every time she opened it up. But for the most part, the laptop was just part of everyday life, and Maeve had almost forgotten that there was anything special about it.



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 Note to Self:

I don’t know much about Dillon and history ... but I’d sure like to be part of his future. Love the blue eyes.

She had a brief, sudden vision: Future History. Sitting with Dillon ... at the Academy Awards. Maeve in a daring pink evening dress, the sort of color redheads NEVER wear, unless they were superconfident fashion pioneers like Maeve. She pictured Dillon sitting beside her in a tuxedo, looking incredible, just a little older and more sophisticated. *And the award for this year’s best actress goes to ... Maeve Kaplan-Taylor!*

Why not? A girl can dream, can’t she?

OK—maybe not in the middle of social studies. Maeve dragged her attention back to the blackboard. And to Dillon.

“History,” Dillon said, clearing his throat and not sounding so certain he knew the answer anymore, “is—uh, well—you know—stuff that happened before. You know—in the past.”

Pete Wexler, one of Dillon’s best friends and the quarterback on the J.V. football team, gave him a high-five. A couple of kids laughed.

Betsy Fitzgerald raised her hand, sneaking a glance at

Dillon. Betsy *always* had the right answer. Perfect grades, perfect papers, perfect scores on every test—but unfortunately, a lot of attitude about always being right, too. Whenever Betsy got anything less than 100%, she begged and pleaded to get her grade changed. Dillon joked that she was a Type A+.

“History is the study of important events in the past,” she said, with a kind of “Aha!” sound in her voice that made Dillon glare at her. Maeve thought Betsy sounded like a newscaster—or like she was repeating something that she’d read in a book.

“That’s what I said,” Dillon muttered.

Ms. O’Reilly lifted up her chalk. “OK. Tell me this,” she said, her voice suggesting that a challenge was coming. “Everyone watch. Dillon—catch!” She tossed the chalk to Dillon, who caught it in one smooth motion.

Pete Wexler whistled approvingly. “Nice catch,” he exclaimed.

Anna and Joline tipped their heads closer together to whisper something to each other. The rest of the class erupted in laughter and conversation, but Maeve was still busy admiring Dillon. Wow! When did he get those muscles? Nice catch was right! She smiled at Pete’s unintended pun.



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 Note to Self:

D.J. is definitely the HOTTEST guy in the whole grade.

She inspected her sentence and added a little smiley icon to finish it off. *Perfect.*

“Now,” Ms. O’Reilly continued, pacing back and forth in front of the classroom. “Did that count as history? Throwing





that piece of chalk?”

“Of course not,” Betsy said, smoothing back her dark hair. “It wasn’t important enough. History is about *important* events—like wars. And presidential elections.”

Ms. O’Reilly’s eyes sparkled. Young and dynamic, with a stylish crop of auburn curls and a round, enthusiastic face, she was one of the most challenging and well-liked teachers in the seventh grade. She really made her students think, and she never let a discussion shut down with an easy or expected answer. “Is it?” she demanded, her green eyes moving from one student to the next. “Is history only the record of the big events, or is it also the story of individual lives and experiences?”

Isabel Martinez raised her hand, looking slightly tentative. Maeve leaned forward to listen. Isabel, who had moved to Boston last month, had already become one of her closest friends. Along with Avery, Katani, and Charlotte, they were the Beacon Street Girls—the name they’d given themselves—a name that had stuck. The five of them had already been through more challenges, adventures, and good times than Maeve could count.

“I’m not sure,” Isabel began slowly, “but I think history is also what happens to regular people. My grandfather loves telling my sister and me about what Mexico was like when he was little. And that seems kind of like history to me, too.”

Ms. O’Reilly’s eyes lit up. “Thank you, Isabel,” she said warmly. “I think you’re absolutely right. History is NOT just about presidents and wars, but also about individuals. About their experiences, their challenges and struggles, and their stories. For the next three weeks, our class is going to be learning about history from a special perspective. By way of introducing our unit on immigration in the twentieth

century, we’re going to be creating a classroom museum based upon our collective experiences. We’ll call it the Heritage Museum, and it will remain on display for the rest of the grading period.”

Ms. O’Reilly proceeded to tell the class a little about her own family’s history. “My family came to America from Ireland in the 1890s and settled in South Boston,” she explained. Maeve tried to imagine Ms. O’Reilly with a family. She pictured a smaller version of her teacher, every bit as round-faced and smiley as she was today, holding her mother’s hand. She had to keep herself from laughing out loud.

Note to Self:

Teachers as kids ... very strange thought.

She ran down the list of her teachers in her mind. Mr. Sherman taught pre-algebra. It was impossible to picture him one minute younger. Mr. Maxwell, the computer teacher ... well, he was only in his twenties. Maeve could easily see him younger. Geeky, to be exact. Madame Dupin, her French teacher ... well, she was not so sure about that. Madame Dupin was nice enough, but a little too grandmotherly with her gray hair and comfortable shoes to imagine her much younger. Of course, there was the infamous day Henry Yurt, mispronouncing Madame, called her, Madummy Dupin instead of Madame Dupin, and the class went totally crazy with laughter. On that day, Madame Dupin’s pale blue eyes did look kind of mischievous. OK, so maybe she was kind of fun when she was a girl. But Mr. McCarthy, the P.E. teacher—no way could Maeve picture him any age other than forty-three. Not to mention a cranky forty-three. Maeve didn’t like





him. He played favorites—he really only liked the jocks—and Maeve definitely wasn't a jock.

But what was she doing? There was no time now to keep imagining younger versions of her teachers. Maeve turned her attention back to Ms. O'Reilly, who was walking over to her desk and opening up a big cardboard box.

She took out a heavy glass, ornately carved. "My great-grandfather was a glassmaker. This is one of the glasses that he made when he worked in a factory in Ireland." Then she held up a framed map. "This is a map of Waterford county in Ireland where my family came from. Waterford crystal is some of the most famous crystal in the world. And this ..." She paused as she held up a small piece of paper. "This is a ticket from a ship leaving Ireland and going to Boston in 1849. It belonged to someone in my mother's family—we are not sure whose ticket it was. But we do know, because of the date, that he or she must have left Ireland at the height of the Irish Famine."

"What kind of famine?" asked Katani in a concerned voice.

"It was caused by a blight that damaged most of the potato crop in Ireland for years, and British land policies that forced Irish farmers who couldn't pay their rent off their farms. Close to a million Irish died from hunger and disease. And many more immigrated to America. They came here sick and tired but determined to have better lives."

The class was silent for a moment—many of them imagining what it must have been like for these brave people to come to America so long ago.

Now, what I'm going to ask you to do over the next few weeks is to create your own display in our class's collective Heritage Museum. To begin, each one of you is going to do some research into your own family's history. Have you

always lived in the same place? Where did your parents come from, or your grandparents, or great-grandparents? How did they make their way to America?"

Maeve grinned at Charlotte, who was sitting two desks away. Charlotte, who was new to Brookline and to Abigail Adams this year, had lived all over the world with her father, who was a travel writer. It was all so exotic. Last year they'd lived on a houseboat on the Seine in Paris. The year before that, it was Port Douglas, Australia—and before that, the Serengeti desert in Africa. But Maeve suddenly realized that she really didn't know much about Charlotte's mother and where she came from. Finally, an assignment that was actually going to be fun! Who knows? Maybe Charlotte's mother was a princess or something and maybe somebody, somebody like herself, had an actress somewhere deep in their background. That would be so outrageous!

Ms. O'Reilly's voice brought Maeve back to reality. "Each of you," she continued, "needs to find three objects that you can bring in to class to create your own display. Each object should reveal something important about your family. Something that represents what kind of history your family has lived through and what interesting things might have happened to them along the way. Ms. Rodriguez and I are teaming up, so she'll be working with you on this project in English class as well. You'll each write a brief report on what you've learned and give a presentation to the class in three weeks."

Betsy Fitzgerald cleared her throat, her hand up in the air—again. "What if you're not really from anywhere?" she asked plaintively. "What if your family has *always* lived in America?"

"Well," Ms. O'Reilly said with a smile, "we all come from



somewhere, Betsy. I'll help you do some research and find out more about your family. But remember, history doesn't necessarily have to be about immigration. Some of you may have grandparents who served in a war. Or who started a company. Or who did something else that you're very proud of. Find out all you can about your family's history by talking to your relatives. Your first task is to think. What are you curious about? Which members of your family do you want to talk to? After you've learned more, choose three objects that represent that history to share with the rest of us." The bell rang, and Ms. O'Reilly gave them a parting wave as she gathered up her materials and left the room.

Anna snapped her notebook shut, rolled her eyes, and gave Joline "the look." Anna ALWAYS looked scornful. Maeve couldn't remember the last assignment Anna hadn't groaned about. And talk about acting as though she didn't have any history! Anna and Joline were way too cool to acknowledge anything that had happened more than five minutes ago. They acted like they'd *always* been in seventh grade. The mere mention of being younger seemed to humiliate them. Maeve had a sudden recollection of Anna years earlier, in first grade. She hadn't always been super-cool. As Maeve grinned at the memory of Anna, front teeth missing, lopsided grin, Anna looked at her as if to say, "What's so funny, not-cool person?" Maeve still had a snapshot of Anna from that grade, back when they used to trade class photos. She had one of Joline, too. She bet neither of them would be eager for anyone to see those photos now. Maybe she should bring the pictures to school, Maeve mused. But her better self won out. Even if it was Anna and Joline, it would be so mean to embarrass them that way.

"Don't worry, Anna," Dillon said with a grin. "Just bring

in a few shopping bags from the mall. That ought to cover it. Anna and Joline's history—in the bag!" Maeve giggled. So funny. Dillon was definitely one cool guy.

Anna flipped her hair back with a scowl. "What a lame assignment," she retorted. "Who cares about the past? Hasn't Ms. O'Reilly ever heard the phrase 'that's history'? It means over. Done with. THROUGH."

"I think the assignment sounds awesome," Avery piped up. Avery, who'd been adopted from Korea when she was a baby, loved the idea of finding out more about her own history, and she wasn't going to keep quiet just because Anna and Joline were trying to act too cool for words. "Are you actually afraid you might learn something new, Anna?" she asked. One of the few people in their class who was not intimidated by the Queens of Mean, Avery just grinned broadly when Anna glared at her.

"I know what I'm bringing in," Pete Wexler announced. "A football, a baseball, and a hockey stick."

"I think this is actually supposed to be about your *family*, dude," Dillon said, grabbing his books. "And not just about YOU. Plus it's supposed to be about the past, not about the present."

"What about an OLD football?" Pete asked.

Everyone was talking about the assignment as they gathered up their things. "I don't even know where my dad's family comes from," Abby Ross was saying to Katani as the girls headed out the door.

"I think this assignment could be really interesting," Isabel said, her dark eyes shining. "I would really like to learn more about my grandparents' life in Mexico." Isabel's parents had moved to America from Mexico but her grandparents had remained there. "I mean, I love to visit them and eat my



abuelita's cooking, but I never really asked them a lot of questions about their past. My grandfather loves to tell stories, so I know he'll really like this assignment. I might even draw some cartoons or something," Isabel enthused.

Katani nodded. "I bet you could do a really great project, Isabel. You are such a good artist, your display will be fantastic. There's a lot of stuff I've wanted to know about my family background too, but you know how it is ... you just never get around to asking. I think I'll interview my grandmother."

Katani's grandmother, Mrs. Fields, was the principal of Abigail Adams Junior High. Everybody in Brookline thought she was the greatest. All the kids liked her because she was so calm, nice, and fair. There were so many things that weren't fair, Maeve mused, like having to go to school on sunny days, having to go to bed before 9:30 during the week even if there was a great movie on, and having to put up with an annoying little brother. It was very reassuring to know that the principal of your school was fair.

Katani said her grandmother had lived in Brookline all of her life. Katani knew a few things about her grandmother's life in the 1950s and 1960s, but she was eager to learn more. Mrs. Fields had lived through the civil rights movement and often talked about the time she saw Martin Luther King, Jr. come to preach at her family's church. She also thought that her grandmother had been part of some bus ride or protest march. Katani said she was going to interview her grandmother like they were on NBC news or something. Maeve could just see Katani preparing for the interview. "Katani, I bet you'll even dress up in a suit like a newscaster."

Katani gave Maeve a huge grin. "You know I will, girl. Looking professional goes hand in hand with being professional." Maeve, Avery, Charlotte, and Isabel all laughed

in unison. Katani was so going to have her own business some day.

As Maeve slid her laptop into her book bag, she started thinking about her mom and dad and what different worlds they came from. Her father's family, like Ms. O'Reilly's, had come from Ireland. His parents had come to America after World War II when they were only sixteen years old. They met on the boat coming over. Nana Mary and Grandpa Tom still had their Irish accents. Maeve loved to listen to them talk.

Her mother's family had come from Eastern Europe—Maeve wasn't exactly sure which country. She knew her parents used to tease each other about how different their backgrounds were. It went along with the differences in their temperaments. Maeve's father was a cheerful, relaxed man who loved taking life easy. He always joked that he was well suited for running the Movie House, because he loved nothing better than enjoying himself and watching other people have a good time. He had a favorite motto: "Art is the key to understanding life." Maeve's mother was more the driven type. She'd gone to New York University and majored in English. She'd taught high school for a few years before she got married. Once she had kids, she stayed home and never had a job, outside of helping in the cinema. She was an organizer fiend. Maeve's mom could be really fun, but she was much stricter than her dad. Maybe some of this had to do with her background, Maeve thought. Well, she was going to have a lot of learning to do for this project.

"Hey! What if I discover a famous actress in my family's past?" she said, grabbing her things as she followed her friends to the cafeteria. "Wouldn't that be cool? Maybe I'm actually related to some awesome old celebrity. Like Audrey Hepburn or Greta Garbo!"





All the Beacon Street Girls laughed. It was clear that Maeve had Hollywood in her veins. She knew the words to every song in every movie ever made. And whenever they were in a jam, Maeve could recite the perfect movie line to fit the occasion. Her personal favorite was “Life is like a box of chocolates; you never know what you’re gonna get,” from *Forrest Gump*. When she wasn’t watching movies, Maeve loved reading about them. Every time she passed a magazine stand she had to grab the latest celebrity magazine. This meant that she knew every bit of Hollywood gossip ... much to Avery’s amazement and occasional disgust. “How can you read that stuff, Maeve? It’s so ridiculous. I mean who cares about who’s marrying who for twelve minutes?” ranted Avery.

Katani came to Maeve’s defense. “It’s research, Avery. Maeve has to learn about the field she wants to succeed in. I read fashion and business magazines. It would be kind of silly if Maeve read all about fruit flies and how they multiply.” Katani was the only one who could get Avery to calm down sometimes.

If it were up to her, Maeve would gladly spend every afternoon taking voice lessons or working on dance moves. But her mom had different ideas. Her mom’s plan for Maeve was Hebrew class two days a week and tutoring with Matt Kierney. And to Maeve’s disappointment, hip-hop dance class had been dropped until she brought her grades back up. But Maeve was an optimist. She was sure she’d be back to dance in a matter of weeks.

“It’s funny. Dad and I have traveled so much, but I don’t think I know that much about where his family comes from,” Charlotte wondered out loud. “I mean, I know they were from England a long time ago. But I don’t even know exactly where.”

“I hope it wasn’t Oxford,” Avery said with a grin. Everyone giggled. The memory of the girls’ last adventure was still fresh in their minds. Charlotte’s father had been offered a teaching position in Oxford, England, and it had taken all five of the Beacon Street Girls to convince him to stay put and to give Charlotte a chance at her dream—to spend her junior high and high school years in the U.S.

Charlotte was really looking forward to the Heritage Museum project. She loved research and writing, and she was curious about her family and its past. Her mother had died when she was young, leaving Charlotte with lots of unanswered questions about her background. Maybe, like Maeve, she would learn more about herself in the process. “Who knows?” she mused. “There might even have been an astronomer in our family.” Charlotte loved science almost as much as writing. *Stars and books*, she liked to say ... those were her two best friends.

“I’ve got a triple-header research project,” Avery added thoughtfully. “I’ve got my mom’s history and my dad’s. But I’ve also got my own.” She grinned. “It’s going to be cool, finding out more about where I really came from.” Avery loved challenges, and with her usual blunt, go-for-it manner, she was looking forward to this one.

It was clear this assignment was going to give all of the Beacon Street Girls a lot to think about in the coming weeks. There was a great deal they were all going to learn about themselves and about each other.

