



Switch

By Megan Hart

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Don't think.

Don't question.

Just do.

The anonymous note wasn't for me.

Don't get me wrong, I'm not in the habit of reading other people's mail, but it was just a piece of paper with a few lines scrawled on it, clearly meant for the apartment upstairs. It looked so innocent, but decidedly—*deliciously*—it was not.

Before replacing the note—and the ones that followed—in its rightful slot, I devoured its contents: suggestions, instructions, commands. Each was more daring, more intricate and more arousing than the last... and I followed them all to the letter.

Before the notes, if a man had told me what to do, I'd have told him where to go. But submission is an art, and there's something oddly freeing about doing someone's bidding...especially when it feels so very, *very* good. But I find that the more I surrender, the more powerful I feel—so it's time to switch up roles.

We play by my rules now.

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Editorial Review

Review

"I was left with the feeling of having discovered something I've always wanted without ever having known that this is what I've been missing.' (Dear Author) 'Megan Hart is one of the most powerful writers of erotic romance.' (Smartbitchestrashybooks.com)"

About the Author

Megan Hart is the award-winning and multi-published author of more than thirty novels, novellas and short stories. Her work has been published in almost every genre, including contemporary women's fiction, historical romance, romantic suspense and erotica. Megan lives in the deep, dark woods of Pennsylvania with her husband and children, and is currently working on her next novel for MIRA Books. You can contact Megan through her website at www.MeganHart.com.

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Sometimes, you look back.

He was coming out. I was going in. We moved by each other, ships passing without fanfare the way hundreds of strangers pass every day. The moment didn't last longer than it took to see a bush of dark, messy hair and a flash of dark eyes. I registered his clothes first, the khaki cargo pants and a long-sleeved black T-shirt. Then his height and the breadth of his shoulders. I became aware of him in the span of a few seconds the way men and women have of noticing each other, and I swiveled on the pointed toe of my kitten-heel pumps and followed him with my gaze until the door of the Speckled Toad closed behind me.

"Want me to wait?"

"Huh?" I looked at Kira, who'd gone ahead of me. "For what?"

"For you to go back after the dude who just gave you whiplash." She smirked and gestured, but I couldn't see him anymore, not even through the glass.

I'd known Kira since tenth grade, when we bonded over our mutual love for a senior boy named Todd Browning. We'd had a lot in common back then. Bad hair, miserable taste in clothes and a fondness for too much black eyeliner. We'd been friends back then, but I wasn't sure what to call her now.

I turned toward the center of the shop. "Shut up. I barely noticed him."

"If you say so." Kira tended to drift, and now she wandered toward a shelf of knickknacks that were nothing like anything I'd ever buy. She lifted one, a stuffed frog holding a heart in its feet. The heart had MOM embroidered on it in sparkly letters. "What about this?"

"Nice bling. But no, on so many levels. I do have half a mind to get her one of these, though." I turned to a shelf of porcelain clowns.

"Jesus. She'd hate one of those. I dare you to buy it." Kira snorted laughter.

I laughed, too. I was trying to find a birthday present for my father's wife. The woman wouldn't own her real age and insisted every birthday be celebrated as her "twenty-ninth" along with the appropriate coy smirks, but she sure didn't mind raking in the loot. Nothing I bought would impress her, and yet I was unrelentingly determined to buy her something perfect.

"If they weren't so expensive, I might think about it. She collects that Limoges stuff. Who knows? She might really dig a ceramic clown." I touched the umbrella of one tightrope-balancing monstrosity.

Kira had met Stella a handful of times and neither had been impressed with the other. "Yeah, right. I'm going to check out the magazines."

I murmured a reply and kept up my search. Miriam Levy, the owner of the Speckled Toad, stocks an array of decorative items, but that wasn't really why I was there. I could have gone anywhere to find Stella a present. Hell, she'd have loved a gift card to Neiman Marcus, even if she'd have sniffed at the amount I could afford. I didn't come to Miriam's shop for the porcelain clowns, or even because it was a convenient half a block from Riverview Manor, where I lived.

No. I came to Miriam's shop for the paper.

Parchment, hand-cut greeting cards, notebooks, pads of exquisite, delicate paper thin as tissue, stationery meant for fountain pens and thick, sturdy cardboard capable of enduring any torture. Paper in all colors and sizes, each individually perfect and unique, just right for writing love notes and breakup letters and condolences and poetry, with not a single box of plain white computer printer paper to be found. Miriam won't stock anything so plebian.

I have a bit of a stationery fetish. I collect paper, pens, note cards. Set me loose in an office-supply store and I can spend more hours and money than most women can drop on shoes. I love the way good ink smells on expensive paper. I love the way a heavy, linen note card feels in my fingers. Most of all, I love the way a blank sheet of paper looks when it's waiting to be written on. Anything can happen in those moments before you put pen to paper.

The best part about the Speckled Toad is that Miriam sells her paper by the sheet as well as by the package and the ream. My collection of papers includes some of creamy linen with watermarks, some handmade from flower pulp, some note cards scissored into scherenschnitte scenes. I have pens of every color and weight, most of them inexpensive but with something—the ink or the color—that appealed to me. I've collected my paper and my pens for years from antique shops, close-out bins, thrift shops. Discovering the Speckled Toad was like finding my own personal nirvana.

I always intend to use what I buy for something important. Worthwhile. Love letters written with a pen that curves into my palm just so and tied with crimson ribbon, sealed with scarlet wax. I buy them, I love them, but I hardly ever write on them. Even anonymous love letters need a recipient... and I didn't have a lover.

Then again, who writes anymore? Cell phones, instant messaging and the Internet have made letter writing obsolete, or nearly so. There's something powerful, though, about a handwritten note. Something personal and aching to be profound. Something more than a half-scribbled grocery list or a scrawled signature on a premade greeting card. Something I would probably never write, I thought as I ran my fingers over the silken edge of a pad of Victorian-embossed writing paper.

"Hey, Paige. How's it going?" Miriam's grandson Ari shifted the packages in his arms to the floor behind the counter, then disappeared and popped back up like a jack-in-the-box.

"Ari, dear. I have another delivery for you." Miriam appeared from the curtained doorway behind the front counter and looked over her half-glasses at him. "Right away. Don't take two hours like you did the last time."

He rolled his eyes but took the envelope from her and kissed her cheek. "Yes, Bubbe."

"Good boy. Now, Paige. What can I do for you today?" Miriam watched him go with a fond smile before turning to me. She was impeccably made up as usual, not a hair out of place or a smudge to her lipstick. Miriam is a true grande dame, at least seventy, and with a style few women can pull off at any age.

"I need a gift for my father's wife."

"Ah." Miriam inclined her head delicately to the left. "I'm sure you'll find the perfect gift. But if you need any help, let me know."

"Thanks." I'd been in often enough for her to know I liked to wander and browse.

After twenty minutes in which I'd caressed and perused the new shipment of fine writing papers and expensive pens I couldn't afford no matter how much I desperately wanted one, Kira found me in the back room.

"Okay, Indiana Jones, what are you looking for? The Lost Ark?"

"I'll know it when I see it." I gave her a look.

Kira rolled her eyes. "Oh, let's just go to the mall. You know Stella won't care what you give her."

"But I care." I couldn't explain how important it was to... well, not impress Stella. I could never impress her. To not disappoint her. To not prove her right about me. That was all I wanted to do. To not prove her right.

"You're so stubborn sometimes."

"It's called determination," I murmured as I looked one last time at the shelf in front of me.

"It's called stubborn as hell and refusing to admit it. I'll be outside."

I barely glanced up as she left. I'd known Kira's attention span wouldn't make her the best companion for this trip, but I'd put off buying Stella's gift for too long. I hadn't seen much of Kira since I'd moved away from our hometown to Harris-burg. Actually, I hadn't seen much of her even before that. When she'd called to see if I wanted to get together I hadn't been able to think of a reason to say no that wouldn't make me sound like a total douche. She'd be content outside smoking a cigarette or two, so I turned my attention back to the search, determined to find just the right thing.

Over the years I'd discovered it wasn't necessarily the gift itself that won Stella's approval, but something even less tangible than the price. My father gave her everything she wanted, and what she didn't get from him she bought for herself, so buying her something she wanted or needed was impossible. Gretchen and

Steve, my dad's kids with his first wife, Tara, took the lazy route of having their kids make her something like a finger-painted card. Stella's own two boys were still young enough not to care. My half siblings got off the gift-giving hook with their haphazard efforts when I'd be held to a higher standard.

There is always something to be gained from being held to the higher standard.

Now I looked, hard, thinking about what would be just right. Don't get me wrong. She's not a bad person, my father's wife. She never went out of her way to make me part of their family the way she had with Gretchen and Steven, and I surely didn't rank as high in her sight as her sons Jeremy and Tyler. But my half siblings had all lived with my dad. I never had.

Then I saw it. The perfect gift. I took the box from the shelf and opened the top. Inside, nestled on deep blue tissue paper, lay a package of pale blue note cards. In the lower right corner of each glittered a stylized S surrounded by a design of subtly sparkling stars. The envelopes had the same starry design, the paper woven with silver threads to make it shine. A pen rested inside the box, too. I took it out. It was too light and the tiny tassel at the end made it too casual, but this wasn't for me. It was the perfect pen for salon-manicured fingers writing thank-you cards in which all the t's were dotted by tiny hearts. It was the perfect pen for Stella.

"Ah, so you found something." Miriam took the box from me and carefully peeled away the price sticker from beneath. "Very nice choice. I'm sure she'll love it."

"I hope so." I thought she would, too, but didn't want to jinx myself.

"You always know exactly what someone needs, don't you?" Miriam smiled as she slipped the box into a pretty bag and added a ribbon, no extra charge.

I laughed. "Oh, I don't know about that."

"You do," she said firmly. "I remember my customers, you know. I pay attention. There are many who come in here looking for something and don't find it. You always do."

"That doesn't mean it's the right thing," I told her, paying for the cards with a pair of crisp bills fresh out of the ATM.

Miriam gave me a look over her glasses. "Isn't it?"

I didn't answer. How does anyone know if they know what they're doing is right? Until it's too late to change things, anyway.

"Sometimes, Paige, we think we know very well what someone wants, or needs. But then—" she sighed, holding out a package of pretty stationery in a box with a clear plastic lid "—we discover we are wrong. I'd put this aside for one of my regular customers, but he didn't care for it, after all."

"Too bad. I'm sure someone else will." I wasn't surprised a man didn't want the paper. Embossed with gilt-edged flowers, it seemed a little too feminine for a dude.

Miriam's gaze sharpened. "You, perhaps?"

I waved the flowered paper aside and shoved my hands in my back pockets as I looked around the shop.
"Not really my style."

She laughed and set the box aside. She'd painted her nails scarlet to match her lipstick. I hoped when I was her age I'd be half as stylish. Hell. I hoped to be half as stylish tomorrow.

"Now, how about something for yourself? I have some new notebooks right here. Suede finish. Gilt-edged pages. Tied closed with a ribbon," she wheedled, pointing to the end-cap display. "Come and see."

I groaned good-naturedly. "You're heartless, you know that? You know all you have to do is show me...oh. Ohhh."

"Pretty, yes?"

"Yes." I wasn't looking at notebooks, but at a red, lacquered box with a ribbon-hinged lid. A purple-and-blue dragonfly design etched the polished wood. "What's this?"

I stroked the smooth lid and opened it. Inside, nestled on black satin, rested a small clay dish, a small container of red ink and a set of wood-handled brushes.

"Oh, that's a calligraphy set." Miriam came around the counter to look at it with me. "Chinese. But this one is special. It comes with paper and a set of pens, not just brushes and ink."

She showed me by lifting the box's bottom to reveal a sheaf of paper crisscrossed with a crimson ribbon and a set of brass-nibbed pens in a red satin bag with a drawstring.

"It's gorgeous." I took my hands away, though I wanted to touch the pens, the ink, the paper.

"Just what you need, yes?" Miriam went around the counter to sit on her stool. "Perfect for you."

I checked the price and closed the box's lid firmly. "Yes. But not today."

"No?" Miriam tutted. "Why is it you know so well what everyone else needs, but not yourself? Such a shame, Paige. You should buy it."

I could pay my cell phone bill for the price of that box. I shook my head, then cocked it to look at her. "Why are you so convinced I know what everyone else needs? That's a pretty broad statement."

Miriam tore the wrapper off a package of mints and put one into her mouth. She sucked gently for a moment before answering. "You've been a good customer. I've seen you buy gifts, and sometimes things for yourself. I like to think I know people. What they need and like. Why do you think I have such atrocities on my shelves? Because people want them."

I followed her gaze to the shelf holding more porcelain clowns. "Just because you want something doesn't mean you should have it."

"Just because you want something doesn't mean you should deny yourself the pleasure," Miriam said serenely. "Buy yourself that box. You deserve it."

"I have nothing to write with it!"

"Letters to a sweetheart," she suggested.

"I don't have a sweetheart." I shook my head again. "Sorry, Miriam. Can't do it now. Maybe some other time."

She sighed. "Fine, fine. Deny yourself the pleasure of something pretty. You think that's what you need?"

"I think I need to pay my bills before I can buy luxuries, that's what I think."

"Ah. Sensible." She inclined her head. "Practical. Not very romantic. That's you."

"You can tell all that from the kind of paper I buy?" I put my hands on my hips to stare at her. "C'mon."

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Billie Sneed:

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