



To My Family:

Without crazy people like you I'd never have created crazy  
characters like these...

16 REASONS WHY  
MY LIFE SUCKS

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## INTRODUCTION

Why is it that Paris Hilton gets to be pretty, famous, rich and perfect? I mean, seriously, what did she ever do? Sit around while her parents made her fortune? It's so unfair. She gets whatever she wants and I, Kate Reynolds, am stuck with this life. This horrible, sucky, waste of a life. What's so sad about my life, do you ask? Well, here's the 411:

Beth: My best friend Beth (who I love, don't get me wrong) is a MIDGET! Okay, not a midget but she's extremely short. She used to get teased all the time when she was little (I didn't meet her until seventh grade, when she moved to Luddermor).

Beth's parents are normal height. Her younger brother Trevor is normal height (for an eleven year old). But some how Beth is a freaking midget!

The first time I ever meet Beth was in my math class. I'm pretty good at math so I was in the advanced class. Beth had just come from the office, and the teacher, Mr. Armstrong, announced her.

“This is Bethany Sanders. She has moved here from...where, sweetheart?”

Now Beth is kind of shy. She’s not really good in front of a crowd, unless the crowd is family and/or friends. “Ohio,” she said, VERY quietly.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t hear you. Where?”

“Ohio,” she repeated herself, not much louder.

Now, because Mr. Armstrong is probably hearing impaired, he straightened and announced to the class that Beth was from Nebraska (where he got Nebraska out of Ohio I have yet to figure out).

The entire class started to giggle, because they knew what Beth had said.

Beth was turning red in the face, but she wasn’t going to correct him.

For the next three days everyone called her farmer when she came into the math room. Finally, I had had enough of it.

So when Mike Kernigan mooed when Beth walked in, I walked over to him, punched him in the arm and told him that if he mooed again I’d kick him in the groin.

Mike never mooed again.

So, Beth and I became fast friends. I didn’t care that she’s short and she didn’t care that I’m a sarcastic bitch. It works.

Relationship status: I’m a total loner and have no boyfriend, unless you count Rich Hartman. He tried to feel me up at this one (okay, the ONLY) party I went to. Ugh.

I had gone to the party when I was in ninth grade. Some kid I used to hang out with (other than Beth) made me go with her, and then she ditched me. Great friend, huh?

Anyway, because I had no prior knowledge of high school parties, I wandered around the house until I found a bedroom. I figure, what the hey, maybe I could be alone for a while.

WRONG.

Some couple was in their making out. It was so gross.

I quickly slammed the door shut and turned to leave. I made my way through the throng of people to the kitchen. And there he was: Rich Hartman.

He wasn't popular, but he wasn't a loser. He was just Rich. A very, VERY drunk Rich.

I leaned against a counter. People milled in and out. Then, there was no one in the kitchen except Rich and me. He walked over so he was standing next to me.

"Hey, babe," he slurred. I rolled my eyes and hoped he go away.

But he didn't. Instead, he tried to feel me up.

"Ah! Get away from me, you freak!" I pushed him away and raced as fast as I could from the kitchen.

I left, not caring about my friend anymore.

Ugh. Rich Hartman has bad breath and whistles when he talks.

So, other than that drunk kid, I'm without significant other, and I don't see one in the near future. I mean, who'd want me?

Milk Products: I'm allergic to milk AND a chocoholic. Truly a fate worse than death. You wouldn't believe how many days of school I missed because I couldn't resist a cookie or two.

Although, I do sneak pizza. Yeah, yeah, it has cheese. So, you're going to tell me that I can never eat that glorious, glorious food because my BODY doesn't want me to? Screw that. I'll take the rashes, thank you.

But it is milk that I really miss. I could drink it when I was younger, but now it was off limits. My mom doesn't buy milk anymore, because she knows I'll drink it.

She did try marking the milk every time my sister or her drank some, so she'd know if I did. But I wasn't stupid. I would take the marker she used and mark it when I drank. So that plan failed.

Feet: I can't find shoes.

No, my feet aren't a size fourteen or anything. It's just that my left foot is a size seven and my right foot is a size eight. Seriously. Either I have to buy two pairs of shoes every time I get new ones or I have to wear some of my sister's old ones. Truly pathetic.

And the worst thing about having two different sized feet is swimming.

It doesn't affect my swimming ability, it just hurts my ego.

I was at a pool once where there was this little boy, maybe four years old (I was ten). I had taken off my flip flops (which are good at hiding feet, surprisingly. Because it's hard to tell that they are different sizes when every time you step the shoes slaps).

Anyway, he was sitting on the edge of the pool and I was standing kind of behind him. I was talking with my mom. Then, the boy pointed at my feet as said, very loudly, "You're feet are different!" Well, you can imagine my embarrassment. It was a REALLY crowded pool.

And, the biggest reason that my life sucks: my sister Erica.

She has been first in her class since forever.

She is probably the prettiest girl that lives in Luddermor.

She gets everything she wants. Even my Barbie doll that I got for Christmas one year that Erica claimed as her own and then my mother gave HER the doll.

She has never had a bad hair day. My entire LIFE is a bad hair day.

She's, well....

She's perfect.

## REASON 1: MY SISTER IS BIG "GIRL" ON CAMPUS

Beth and I were sitting in my room, studying for chemistry. Okay, she was studying and I was complaining.

"Kate, just look at the functional groups. See? It's an alcohol."

"Great," I mumbled. "Can I drink it?"

"Kate! Please! I have to do well on this test. And, may I remind you, so do you."

I rolled over so that my face was in my pillow and my leg was stretched against the wall. It so wasn't fair. My sister AND best friend got to be geniuses and the only useful things I can do is algebra and make a three-leaf clover with my tongue.

"Like you're going to fail. You have a what, 97 overall?"

"99, actually. Now sit up and amuse me. Is this butane or pentane." Beth shoved me and I flipped up to a sitting position. Beth normally is a nice, sweet, shy person. But when I'm being stubborn she can get cranky.

“You know, BFF, it might be a little more comfortable if you removed the stick that is up your ass.”

Beth threw the reference table at my head and wrote down something. I shook my head, not understanding a word of chemistry. About the only thing I knew about chemistry is that no guy had ever had chemistry with me (and guys all over the world were happy for that).

I knew that Beth was starting to steam, so I picked up the table and checked it. “How many carbons does it have?”

“Four.” Beth pointed to the structural formula that she had drawn. All I saw was a bunch of Cs and Hs. Like that was really the way an atom looked like. Or whatever it was.

“Okay, four Cs. Right?”

Before I got my answer the door swung open to reveal my perfect sister. “I got it!”

Beth and I hardly glanced up. We both were used to Erica “getting it”, whatever “it” was. Usually, it was an award, scholarship, date or something.

“Uh huh. Great, Erica.” I could see her huff out of the corner of my eye. I smiled. “Now get out of my room.”

“You’re not even going to ask what?” Did it matter? I was just another trophy for my sister to parade around in front of me with. The more I lived with my sister the more I began to believe that one of us was switched at birth.

“Scholarship?” Beth questioned.

“Money?” I continued.

“A date with Johnny Depp?” Beth said and we both laughed.

Erica put her hands on her hips dramatically. “Uh! Why do I even bother?”

“Don’t know. Now, may I continue with my functional group? Okay, this is butane.”

Erica, curious, because anything nerdy attracts her, walked the few feet to my bed and leaned over my shoulder. “It’s butene. See? Four carbons and eight hydrogens. It’s an alkene.” With that, she walked back to the door.

I hoped, in vain, that she was just going to leave and spare me, the idiot child. But, of course, she turned back to me. “I am first in my class. I’m going to be valedictorian.”

Erica left and both Beth and I looked up. “Whoa.” I jumped off of my bed and chased her down. “Um, don’t they wait until like April to tell people that stuff? It’s only January.”

Erica smiled, knowing that she had my attention. “Apparently, if I keep up with the pace I’m going, there is no way anyone can get ahead.”

I stood and looked at her pretty face. “How does it feel to be a total freak?”

Beth walked up behind me, wanting to hear Erica’s response. I knew what she was going to say. I brought it on myself. “I don’t know. Why don’t you try looking in a mirror?”

With that she left us there, me fuming and my midget of a best friend trying not to laugh.

The next day I was sitting in my first period class, counting the minutes. My teacher, Mr. Mallow, was writing some equation on the board. I have yet to hear of a student that actually liked Mr. Mallow. I guess a guy whose been called Marshmallow all his life (at least his teaching career) kind of has to have people hate him.

But that cannot possible justify his personality. It really sucks.

“Okay, class. Who wants to guess what the derivative of this equation is?”

I knew what it was. I mean, this is the only class that I understand. But there was no way in hell that I was going to raise my hand.

“Jo?”

Jo was a Goth girl that tended to sit in the back of the class. She rolled her eyes and ignored him.

“Okay, I guess not.” He rubbed his face and turned to Mike Kernigan. “Mike? C’mon, I know you know.”

Mike was asleep, sitting behind me. I turned around and saw that he was drooling. As hard as I could, I kicked my leg back into his shin.

“Ow!” he yelled in pain, waking up. He rubbed his leg and looked around the class.

Of course the rest of the class laughed. I rolled my eyes, hating every person in the room just for living. Why was I forced to attend this school, filled and run by morons, when I could be home sleeping?

Mr. Mallow finally found someone to answer his question (the kid got it wrong) and continued the problem, droning on and on.

I checked the clock again. Yes, only a few more minutes!

Just seconds before the bell, while reaching down for my backpack, the P.A. system crackled. “Attention students of Luddermor High, especially those that auditioned for this year’s school play. The cast list will be posted outside of Dr. Livingston’s office after first period. Thank you.”

The entire class began to talk at once. All I did was wince. Erica had tried out for the lead role. And I knew, without a doubt, that she had got it. I glanced over at Sally Merkerson, the girl who had actually written the play this year. Her face was glowing with pride. Ugh, whatever.

The school plays at Luddermor were never actual plays by people that are actually playwrights. Every year Dr. Livingston (the scary performing arts director) goes around to all of the English classes, asking kids to try writing a play.

Most kids just ignore him and continue what they had been doing.

But Sally Merkerson is a total FREAK about writing. When most people didn't even write a play she wrote FIVE. FIVE! And I thought I was a loser.

But then one of Sally's scripts got picked and now it was going to be the school play.

The bell rang and I raced out of Mallow's class. There had to be some kind of law against forcing us students to listen to the guy for an hour. It was truly cruel and unusual punishment. I mean, what did I ever do in my past life?

I hadn't been paying attention to what I had been doing and ran straight into my next door neighbor Matt. "Whoa, Reynolds," he told me.

Matt has lived next door to me since I was born (same for him). So when we were younger our parents (his Mom and Dad and my Mom; they're like best friends) pretty much forced us into being best friends. It IS kind of annoying when the hottest junior at Luddermor has seen you in your pajamas and watched you pick food out of your teeth with floss.

But the weird thing is that Matt only calls ME Reynolds. He calls Erica Erica and he calls my mom either Mrs. Reynolds or Mrs. R.

But I'm Reynolds, like I don't even have a first name (not that I want it, but hey).

I pushed Matt out of my way and continued on.

"Ow, where's the fire?" Matt called after me, but I was already past him.

My next period was Spanish. That was probably the most useless class ever invented by man. Why the hell do I need to know Spanish? Yeah, okay, maybe if I lived in Texas or California or some other highly populated Hispanic area. But I live in Upstate NEW YORK!

I was half way to my classroom when Beth ran to my side, all excited. "They posted the cast list!" She was all excited.

I nodded, confused. "So?"

Beth rolled her eyes and gave me a "Duh" look. "Don't you remember last week when I told you I had a doctor's appointment?"

“Um, yeah. You said that you had to have a physical.” I still looked at her funny until I realized that the “doctor appointment” was her excuse. She had actually auditioned for it.

For some reason, Beth thinks I’m completely against the theater. I’m not really. I’m just against any production that includes my sister, singing, dancing Lindsay Lohan or Hilary Duff. My god, I hate them.

“Okay, well, let’s go to the performing arts room.”

Apparently I was on acid because I was still confused. “Why?”

“To see if I made the cast list, stupid. The announcement said it was outside Dr. Livingston’s office.”

I shrugged and we headed for the P.A. room. I had three minutes until I had to be in Spanish, and thankfully the P.A. room was on the way.

We pushed through the crowd outside of the room to see if Beth’s name was on the list. She was shaking with excitement. For the first time I found myself really hoping someone I knew would be the play. Normally, having someone I knew in the play (ahem, Erica) meant I’d have to see it. But if Beth was in it, I’d definitely see it.

I pushed some foreign kid out of the way so I was in front of the list. I think he swore at me in Russian, or wherever he was from. I didn’t care. No, I’m not one of those “ignorant” people. He was just in my way. Anyway, I looked over the list. The first name I spotted was Matt’s. He was the lead guy. I didn’t even know that he liked acting. He was more of a jock (he played Varsity basketball). Whatever.

I searched the list twice, looking for Beth Sanders, but it wasn’t there. I turned back, pushing the foreign kid out of my way again. Beth looked at me with this extreme look of sadness. “I’m sorry, Beth.”

I thought I saw a tear form in her eye but she blinked it back and smiled. “Well, at least your sister got the lead role.”

“WHAT!” I turned back and saw Erica Reynolds at the top. Great, I thought to myself. Not only do I have to see it, listen to it, probably help with rehearsals AND see my best friend cry because she didn’t make it.

It meant Matt would be coming over to my house even MORE than usual. Ugh.

The cafeteria of Luddermor High is a disgrace to the collective intelligence of mankind. It is a horrid, waste of a room. And the food is the least of its problems.

The tables are randomly splayed around the room and the chairs are old classroom chairs that are either broken or are missing the back rest.

So Beth and I ignore the cafeteria and go straight to the library instead. It’s quiet and I don’t have to listen to the seniors picking on the freshmen.

“I’m fine really…” Beth said, ripping a piece of paper out of her math notebook.

“I didn’t even know you were into acting and stuff.” I took a bite of my peanut butter sandwich. It was against the rules to have food in the library, but the librarians were cool and employed a “I don’t see it, it’s not there” policy. I also had a bag of Bugles.

“Well, I’m not psycho about it, but I wanted to try. You know, see if I was any good.”

“And?”

“And what?” She began to fold the paper in half the long way.

I was finishing my history homework, which was due next period. I’m probably the laziest person alive: I either do my homework during lunch or in the morning before school. I very rarely do homework at night.

My pen was running out of ink. Great, my last black pen. I reached down to grab another one from my back pack. “And… are you any good?”

“I don’t know. My opinion would be biased.” She reached across to grab a Bugle from my bag.

I snatched the pen and caught her in the act. “Hey!”

“I’m hungry.” She popped it in her mouth and smiled. “So, Erica and Matt are lead? That should be interesting.”

“You have no idea. Five bucks says they’ll pull me into the whole thing somehow.” She nodded in agreement and folded the edge of the folded paper into a triangle. “What the hell are you doing?”

“Paper football.”

“Um, why?” I guessed my strangeness had some how rubbed off on my best friend. Sorry Beth.

“Why not?” She made the last fold and tucked the flapping piece under the other fold. Then she set it up so that it was ready to be flicked.

Instinctively, I pulled my two pointer fingers together and formed the goal. She flicked it over my fingers. We played paper football all the time, so we were both pretty good at it.

“What’s the play about, anyway?” My turn to flick it at Beth.

“I don’t know. Aren’t you in Mallow’s class with Sally?” Flick.

“Um, I don’t talk to Erica-wannabes.” Flick, Bugle. “How don’t you know what it’s about? Didn’t you AUDITION for it?”

I guessed I had gotten kind of loud because the librarian “Shhh-ed” us.

“Sorry,” we said response.

Beth turned back and continued. “Yeah, well, they didn’t have us use the actual script when we auditioned. We read from some script called “Wait Until Dark”. It was about some blind woman.”

“Oh.” It was Beth’s turn to flick.it. She got it in position, aimed, but hit it in the wrong spot. It went flying higher than expected and poked me in the eye.

“Oh, I’m sorry, Kate!” I covered my eye with my hand, biting back the words I wished I could have yelled. It hurt like a bitch.

“I’m fine,” I told her, wiping away the tears that had come when the paper poked me.

The librarian “Shhh-ed” us again, and I pulled my hand away from my eye.

“Kate, do you have food?” The librarian asked.

I quickly shoved my sandwich bag (I had finished it) in my backpack, along with the half full Bugles bag.

“No,” I told her, smiling. Sometimes my charm (ha, that’s a laugh) worked on her. Not today.

“Beth, Kate, you know the rules. I’m going to have to ask that you leave.”

I rolled my eyes and Beth sighed good naturedly. We stood and pushed in our chairs and left the library.

“Sorry,” I told Beth once out.

“There’s only a minute left of lunch anyway.” We started down the hall to history (we were in the same class).

Beth had to stop at her locker, and I waited for her. Unfortunately, Matt walked up next to me. “Hey, Reynolds.”

I rolled my eyes. “Aren’t you needed in the lunchroom?” I asked him, seriously hoping he’d go away.

“Nope.” He smiled. Matt Schroeder has a PERFECT smile.

I sighed, hoping he’d get the message. “Do you enjoy annoying me?”

“Yep.”

The bell rang and the halls filled with bored kids, waiting to get home. A couple of basketball players called out to Matt. “Schroeder! Get your ass over here!”

“Gotta go,” Matt said, smiling again. He began to walk away, and I turned back to Beth, who was finishing in her locker.

“Hey Reynolds!” Matt called, loud enough for everyone to hear. I rolled eyes.

“What?”

“You have peanut butter on your jeans.” And then he left.

I glanced down to see a smear of my peanut butter sandwich across the side of my left pant leg. Lovely.

I ran to the bathroom, with Beth in hot pursuit. Once in, I grabbed a paper towel and rubbed off as much as I could. “God, he’s such a jerk.”

“Kate, if he’d been a REAL jerk he wouldn’t have said anything at all.” She had a point.

But god, he was annoying.

## REASON 2: MY FAMILY IS PSYCHO

I went home later that day, after sitting through history, English and chemistry (which, by the way, I totally failed that test Beth and I were studying for), among other pointless courses. As I hopped off the bus I noticed my mom's car in the garage. This struck me strange because my mom's an English teacher from the middle school. I swear I'm the only kid in Luddermor High that knows the difference between "good" and well".

When I was in middle school I actually had my mother as a teacher. There had been a screw up in scheduling and somehow the geniuses that run these schools stuck me in her class. Kids used to ask me personal questions about her so that they could make fun of her during school.

Kids are so immature.

But, I wouldn't tell them anything. Except when I was grounded by my mom for staying out too late with Beth at the movies. She was really pissed

about it, and so was I. So, I told all the kids that my mom wasn't actually a teacher and we were on the run from the police for murdering our landlords.

And they believed me. I was in even MORE trouble then.

Anyway, I checked inside the garage, making sure she wasn't trying to kill herself by car fumes or something (not that she was suicidal or anything). It was empty, I'm glad to report.

I slammed open the door, threw my back pack on the couch and flopped down on the recliner. It would be another ten minutes before Erica got dropped off by her friends, you know, the other beautiful-smart-actress types. Ugh, why me?

I flipped on Video IQ and drowned out my misery with the soothing combination of music videos and those word play things, I don't know what they're called. The phone rang, and I ignored it. It rang again and again I ignored it. On the fourth time I picked it up.

"Hello?" came an ancient voice over the phone.

"Grandma Reynolds?" Great. Just who I needed to talk to, my grandma.

"Katie dear?"

"Um, yeah Grandma?"

"Oh, Katie! I haven't spoken to you in forever!" Uh huh, Grandma. That's because you're senile and smell weird.

"Yeah, Grandma. Sure."

"Oh, Katie! How old are you? Fourteen, fifteen?"

"Sixteen, last September."

"Oh, well. You two girls grow up so fast!" Uh, was there a point to this call?

"Did you want to talk to my mom?" I held my breath, hoping for the affirmative.

"Did I send you a birthday card, dear?"

“Yeah, Grandma. It had five dollars in it.” How cheap can you get? Yeah, okay, you’re on social security, but who else are you going to spend on? You’re cat?

“Oh, that’s nice, sweetie.” AHHHHHHH!

“Grandma, did you call for my mother?”

“What? Call who?”

“Grandma, why did you call?” OLD PEOPLE!!!

“Oh. I don’t know. It was nice to talk to you Erica.”

“I’m Kate, Grandma!” But she already hung up.

I banged my head against the table next to the chair I was in and sat back up (did you know that banging your head against something for an hour burns one hundred and fifty calories?).

Why is my family so weird? And why is it my mom’s mom, the SANE one, died and I’m left with my dad’s mom?

That thought brought back some memories, none that I could really remember that well.

My dad died when I was like four, and I really don’t remember him that well. Erica, two years older than me but only a grade apart, says she remembers him. I think she’s full of it.

He had been a head manager at a local restaurant called Barley’s. It was a casual dining restaurant and we got to eat free there. The food wasn’t bad and everyone that worked there was like an extended family.

The restaurant itself had paintings all around, hanging on the walls, and there was this one that was painted of our whole family (Dad, Mom, Erica and me). One of the very few memories I actually have of my dad is sitting next to him, in one of the booths, while some waiter hung the painting. I remember that I hated the painting because I thought the artist had squished my face. I was crying about it.

My dad got me an ice cream sundae and told me he thought I was beautiful. Yeah. Right.

Well, my dad had a heart attack and died (not at the restaurant; it happened a few months after). I can't even remember what he looks like. Except for the painting.

When my dad died Barley's closed down, and the employees gave us the painting. It was hanging on the wall adjacent to the T.V.

The memory of my dad made me instantly look over at the painting hanging on the wall. There was my dad, Erica, me and....Damn it! I forgot to check out about my mother.

It was then that my sister flung open the front door with this freaky dramatic gesture.

"Erica Reynolds has entered the building," I announced sarcastically.

"Shut up, freak." Erica daintily hung her jacket on the coat rack and put her backpack on the floor, out of the way. "God, I'm hungry."

"Maybe if you stop sticking your finger down your throat you wouldn't be so hungry."

"I'm sorry, KATHLEEN. But I am not bulimic."

"Could have fooled me." A pillow was flung at my head. "You missed!"

I could hear Erica walk gracefully towards the kitchen. I turned my attentions back to the T.V. The greatest band ever, Green Day, was on and I snuggled up, singing along with it. It wasn't until the very end of the video that I heard the huge wail.

I looked up in the direction of the kitchen. Did Erica just realize peanut butter has fat? That'd make my day.

The wail came again and I, reluctantly, headed towards the kitchen. I saw my mother and sister hugging each other, crying. I had the sudden urge to leave and vomit, but my mother called me back as I began to walk away.

“Oh, Kathleen! Oh!” She was using my full name. Either she found about my act of vandalism against the school dumpster or she ran over a dog. I didn’t feel like listening about either. “Kate, I lost my job!”

“What? Mom, you have tenure!”

Erica hugged my mother tighter. “Don’t worry, Mom. You’ll find something. A smart woman like you must be able to find a job somewhere!”

“I’m not so sure, sweetheart.” My mother grabbed for a tissue from the box on the counter.

“Um, hello. Tenure.” I pulled out a chair and plopped down.

“Mom, you can’t lose your job now! What about Yale?”

“Aren’t you getting a scholarship?” Erica shot me a death stare. I turned back to my mom. “And please explain tenure to me again. Because I thought that once you GOT tenure, you couldn’t lose your job.”

My mother blew her nose and looked at me. “All the non-tenured teachers have already been laid off. I was the newest tenured teacher. So they cut me, too.”

“What, did like half of the school die and they don’t need teachers anymore?”

“They just don’t have it in the budget, Katie,” she said, wiping a tear from her eye with a tissue.

I felt my head fall down and I sighed heavily. This sucked. “So, what are you going to do?”

“Well...” she started, but Erica cut her off.

“Why not look for another teaching job over at Fillmore? They seem to always be hiring someone.”

“Would you let the woman finish?” I complained.

“Don’t you have a rock to crawl under?” she retorted, with a suddenly stern look.

“Girls!” She huffed and closed her eyes. She only does this when she’s tired or angry with us. I guessed it was a little bit of both. “Like I was saying, the school has offered some of the laid off teachers a job.”

“Like what?” I asked.

“Like a bus driver.”

Silence.

More silence.

“Say something!” my mother demanded.

“Well sorry. What do you want me to say? You’re going to be a bus driver!”

“Give her a break, Kate. She just got laid off!”

“Well, I didn’t hear you saying anything.”

“Alright! I won’t be a bus driver.” She stood and walked over to the fridge, grabbing a bottle of water. “There IS a teaching job I’ve been offered.”

This made Erica sit up straighter. “A teaching job? Where?”

I glanced over at my mom. She turned around and looked at us. “Well, it’s kind of in...Idaho.”

Erica’s jaw dropped. I think mine may have dropped farther. “Idaho? Are you psychotic? There are like five people and a million cows in Idaho! That is the dumbest thing I’ve ever heard!”

I was so close to being grounded it wasn’t even funny (okay, I was just using that phrase. It was freaking hilarious). At least we were staying here, and she’s going to be a...a...bus driver.

“Who do you think is hotter? Dr. Carter or...Dr. Kovac?” Beth asked, sitting on her bed holding the remote. I was relaxing in her bean bag chair.

Thursday was always a night that I spent over at Beth's house. We were devout E.R. fans, and have been since we laid eyes on Dr. Malucci (who was kicked off the show when we were in the eighth grade. That blew).

But now it was more of a hanging out time than watching E.R. time.

"Carter."

"How could you choose Carter over Kovac? Kovac's got the looks, accent, everything you need!" Beth rolled over so she was lying on her bed backwards. The station was at commercial, so we could talk.

"Why did you bother asking then?"

She sighed and rolled so she was on her stomach, propping her head up with her hands. "I was kind of hoping for an explanation to accompany the answer."

"Well, next time be more specific. Okay, you want to know why I like Carter more?"

"Yes, I do."

"Alright, he's hotter in my opinion," a "Whatever" came from Beth. "He's sweet. But he can also be a jerk, and I like a guy like that."

"You like jerks?"

"Well, not a COMPLETE jerk, but a sensitive jerk. I think I'd get sick if I spent the rest of my life with a guy who always agreed with me and did everything I wanted."

"Sounds perfect to me..." she trailed off and grabbed some popcorn from the bowl she had made. She turned back to me and gave me a funny look. "Do you realize you just described Matt Schroeder?"

Um, EXCUSE me? "Like hell I did! I was talking about Dr. Carter!"

Beth sucked in a breath. "Kate loves Matt! Kate loves Matt!"

I straightened in the bean bag. "What are you? Eight?"

"KATE LOVES MATT!" she sung out, louder enough for the entire house to hear.

I grabbed a pillow from her bed and threw it at her. She threw it back, and a pillow fight was started (she was winning).

We knocked over her picture frames on her desk, half of the blankets on her bed and the remote before her little brother Trevor walked in.

“What the hell?” Her brother was as much a teenager as I was.

“Trev! I need your help!” I called to him, hoping he’d join my fight against Beth.

But instead he snorted at us, nodded his head a little and muttered, “Girls.”

He left, and by doing so ruined the moment.

We fixed the pillows and rearranged her picture frames. Most of them were of her and me, you know, in those photo booths and stuff like that. She was one of the very rare people that I allowed to have a photo of me. The others include: my mom, my grandmother and Matt.

No, I didn’t give him one. He stole one from me.

We were in homeroom in tenth grade. Our pictures were passed out in those cheap envelopes that they come in. Beth and I exchanged pictures, which we did every year.

Matt asked me for one (because he will stop at NOTHING to piss me off). I told him to shut up and leave me alone, and then put the envelope back in my backpack. Instead of following my orders, he walked by my desk and grabbed my back pack.

“Matt!” I yelled, trying in vain to grab it back.

“C’mon, Reynolds, jump for it!”

And being the idiot I was I jumped for it...and missed. He laughed at me, along with the rest of the class.

“C’mon, jump for it! You can do it, Reynolds!”

I stood and tried to grab it again to no avail. “Give it back, Matt.”

He shook his head and ran around the room, still clutching my backpack. I chased him, and he finally stopped. I stood a few feet away from him, glaring. “Give it back.”

He smiled, a perfect smile, reached into my back, pulled out a wallet sized picture and threw the bag back at me.

He really is a jerk.

Anyway, I set up the last picture and fell back to Beth’s bed.

I was feeling a little bad. I hadn’t told Beth about my mom’s career switch. And Beth was the person I told practically EVERYTHING to (exceptions: my romantic life (mainly because I really haven’t had any), my personal physical condition, my bad grades, etc.).

But it just didn’t feel right, telling her. I mean, I wasn’t even used to it yet. My mom had always been an English teacher. And now she was going to be a bus driver. It was a plain fact.

So, why couldn’t I tell Beth? Well...I was kind of embarrassed.

Don’t get me wrong: bus drivers can be cool. But I just didn’t see my mother as ANYTHING other than a teacher.

“You okay?” Beth asked me.

I had just realized that I was sitting really stiffly on the edge of her bed.

“Oh, yeah. I guess my mind just wandered.”

“Okay, we completely missed the last fifteen minutes of the show.”

I grabbed the remote and turned off the T.V. “That show’s gone down hill since Dr. Greene died.”

“Yeah, alright.”

Beth had to drive me home (because I couldn’t drive yet). She dropped me off and left, waving good-bye.

The lights were still on in the house as I walked up.

Once inside, I found my mother sitting in the living room, watching old home movies of Erica, me and her days as a teacher.

This could be bad.

But at least Beth wasn't crying about the play. That would be worse.

### REASON 3 : MATT

The next morning was bad. I had stayed at Beth's house later than normal (thanks to the random pillow fight). So, when my alarm went off at six I rolled over, gladly smacked the snooze button, and drifted back to sleep.

Five minutes is NOT sufficient time to get the extra sleep a snooze button supposedly supplies.

The alarm went off again and I rolled back, rubbing my eyes. I yawned, looked down at the small box called an alarm clock.

"I hate you," I told it in a lazy whisper.

I turned off the alarm completely and pulled the covers closer, enjoying the warmth.

It was January, after all. And January in Upstate New York is bitter cold. A knock came to my door.

“Huh?” I asked in a stupor. My mind was foggy, as I was still half asleep.

But the knock came again, followed by a bang. “What?”

“Kate, open your door!” the voice called to me.

I rolled over so I was lying on my back. What time was it?

I sat up straight when I saw the clock. It was seven-thirty. School started in fifteen minutes.

Jumping out of my bed, I stumbled to the door.

“Kate! Get dressed; you’ve got to go to school!” I my mother yelled at me once the door was opened.

“Okay...okay.” I got myself dressed and raced down the stairs.

The bus was long gone (it picks me up around five after seven). So my mom had to drive me.

“For God’s sake, Kate. What were you two doing last night? Clubbing?” At least she had lost her (bad) sense of humor.

“Sorry. I guess we just lost track of time.” I leaned my head against the window, trying to catch a few more Zs.

Instead, my mother continued talking.

“You weren’t talking about this thing with my job, were you?”

Okay Mom, it isn’t a “thing”. It’s a PROBLEM. And a big one at that.

“No.” I closed my eyes. “E.R.”

“That show’s gone downhill since that Dr. Blue died.”

“Greene, Mom.”

“Well, whatever.”

We had made it to the school parking lot. I had exactly two minutes and eighteen seconds before the bell rang. I opened my door, grabbed my backpack, waved to my Mom and ran to the building.

Detention.

So not fair! I was only a few minutes late! Is it MY fault that no one in this building can walk faster than a SNAIL ON WEED???

I spent most of Marshmallow's class with my head on the desk. Like I could take math after a morning like this (even if math was my best subject).

Mallow droned on about maximum and minimum values of derivatives (thank god Pre-Calculus was easy. I fell asleep so much in that class, had it been hard, I'd still be taking it).

I felt something poke me in the back. I ignored it and continued wallowing in my own self pity.

The poke came back. I slowly turned my head over my right shoulder and saw Mike Kernigan, holding a folded piece of paper.

"What?" I whispered, wanting him to leave me alone.

"Matt told me to give you this," he said.

"Matt isn't even in this class." I lay my head back on the desk.

"He told me to give you it this morning," Mike whispered, dropping the paper on the floor and then pushing towards me.

"Do we have a problem, Miss Reynolds? Mr. Kernigan?"

Awake now, after Mallow's intrusion in my sleeping, I quickly kicked the note beneath my chair. I didn't know what Matt had written on it (and I didn't really care), but I was afraid that if Mallow saw it I'd find out sooner than expected.

Unfortunately, Mallow did see it. "What have we here?" I winced, trying desperately to hide the note. "Miss Reynolds? Please bring it forward."

Everyone's eyes were on me. I just wanted to die, right there. This could not end well.

Slowly, I reached down for the note. Picking it up, I crossed the room and handed it to Mallow. "I'm sorry Kate, Mike. But we do NOT pass love notes in my class."

My jaw dropped. AS FREAKING IF! I shot a look over to Mike, who was smiling. What an ass.

“It’s not a love not, Mr. Mallow. I don’t even know what it is.” And that was the truth. I could never understand what went on in that mind of Matt’s.

“Well, you never will,” Mallow said, ripping the paper in six pieces. I watched, with a raised eyebrow. He had serious issues.

He handed the note back to me, telling me to throw out the pieces. I did so, gladly, and returned to my seat.

“Alright, if the interruptions are done, we will continue. Now, when you are looking for the inflection points, you must first find the SECOND derivative...”

Mrs. Craven, my chemistry teacher, had detention duty that day.

“Miss Reynolds? Didn’t think I’d see you here today!”

Shove it up your... “I was late.”

“Oh,” she said, sitting down at the desk in the front of the room. That woman was a witch. She even looked like one!

I grabbed a desk near the back, and rested my head on the desk, similar to what I had done in Marshmallow’s class. This sucked. I was one of those types of people that love to flaunt authority but never actually get in trouble. So this REALLY sucked for me.

The hour and a half went by smoothly, with only coughing and sneezing making sound. There had only been three people there, excluding Mrs. Craven.

Once outside, once again in the light, I made my way to the parking lot. I had asked Beth to wait for me, but she had to baby-sit Trevor.

So, instead, I had to walk home. This was going to be fun...Not.

But as I made my way across the parking lot, a pick up truck rolled up to me and stopped.

“Need a lift?” It was Matt, driving his dad’s truck.

“No.” I continued walking past the car, hoping he’d leave me alone. But of course not.

“Hey!” he called, driving up along side me. “Did you get the note?”

“No, Mallow did.” And I continued walking.

“WHAT?” He stopped the car.

I smiled. Good, he needed to be annoyed. He annoyed ME to no end.

“Mike tried to give it to me and Mallow took it and ripped it up.” The color slowly returned to Matt’s face. He smiled, and gestured to the passenger seat. “C’mon, get in.”

I rolled my eyes, weighed the options, and decided to take the ride. It was better than walking, especially in all the snow.

Once in, Matt pulled the car out of the parking lot and headed towards our houses. “Did he read it?” he asked me.

What was he talking about? “Did who read what?”

He sighed, irritated. “Did Mallow read the note?”

“No, why?” Matt was so confusing sometimes. No doubt the note was about something embarrassing he was going to tell people if I didn’t give him the answers for the homework (Matt was above average in everything BUT math, which is completely opposite to me).

“Um, did YOU read it?” His face was starting to pale again.

“No. Will you PLEASE tell me why this note is so important?”

He smiled, and checked the speedometer. We were in the area what was infested with cops dying to hand out speeding tickets.

“Nothing,” he said a moment later.

I rolled my eyes. “You’re a jerk, you know that?”

“How so?”

“Well, I already got a detention from Mallow for being late to school. And then you had to make Mike give me that note, which made Mallow even MORE mad.” I crossed my arms across my chest, happy that I had a legitimate reason to be mad at Matt. Usually I was just mad at him for no reason.

“As long as you didn’t read it I apologize.”

“And if I had read it?” I saw that we were reaching the cul-de-sac that contained our houses. Good, only a few more minutes of Matt.

“Then we’d be discussing something ENTIRELY different.”

“Why are you so weird?” I asked him.

He smiled and pulled into our shared driveway.

We both got out of the truck, and I pulled my heavy coat closer. “Hey, Matt?”

He was already at the top of the stairs leading to his house. “Yeah?”

“What was that note for anyway?”

He smiled, opened the door, and walked into his house.

It was later that night. I had just gotten off the phone with a talkative Beth. She wasn’t upset about not making the play anymore. The reason she didn’t make the play better not be because she’s a midget. That’s a violation of the EOE (well, I don’t think Equal Opportunity Employment includes school plays, but you get my point).

I finally got her off the phone, and was about to just pull my covers over my head and sleep until I heard my name being called. I groaned, loudly I hoped, and shoved open my door.

My mother was in the kitchen when I got downstairs. “What?” I asked sleepily.

“Kate, it’s only eight-thirty,” she said, sighing a bit because I was wearing my pajama bottoms. I don’t usually use the matching top. I just wear whatever shirt I wore that day to bed.

“So? I’m tired. Is that a crime?” She gave me the evil look. It’s a wonder that I haven’t been shipped off to military school.

I stood, staring at her. “Why did you call me?”

“Huh?” She blinked a few times. Is it possible that when my mother married my father that some of my grandmother’s genes got passed on to her? “Oh, yeah. Matt’s at the door.”

“C’mon Mom. I told you how to handle that. Just get a broom and-”

“He wants to talk to you.” I swear she said “stupid” under breathe but I didn’t have the energy to argue.

I sighed heavily and walked over to the door. Under normal circumstances I’d have run up and changed back into my jeans but this was Matt, my next door neighbor since I was born. I didn’t care if I wore my pajamas around him. I mean God; we used to sleep over at each other’s houses when we were kids. Before I realized he’s a complete jerk.

At the door I found Matt, whistling and staring behind him. He turned to look at me and I rolled my eyes. “Nice sleep wear,” he commented.

“Haven’t I dealt with you enough for one day?”

He smiled this really annoying smile. Maybe I should stop here and describe this guy. He’s gorgeous. He has slightly tanned skin (if I try to tan I burn) he has the short, kind of spiky but kind of not spiky hair (I have plain brown hair; not really dark but not really light) and perfect green eyes (plain old brown eyes for me. Nothing more, nothing less). So, of course it’s my luck that I hate him.

Not that he hasn’t given me a reason to do so.

“Let’s go swing.” He began to walk to my back yard. When we were kids (Erica, Matt and I) our parents (all four of them at the time) decided to chip in

to buy one swing set for the three kids. So, it was placed sort of in the middle of our adjoining backyards.

Matt sat on the good swing, the one that was worn-in. I got the stiff yellow. The seat was a little wet from the light snow from earlier in the evening. I stood up and just leaned against the side.

“I got the lead role.” He started to swing. I could feel the change in weight through the plastic.

The snow was not very high, unusual for January. So, he was able to swing. I was starting to wish I had a jacket on. It was really cold.

“Um, yeah. I figured that out when I saw Matthew Schroeder at the top of the cast sheet.”

“What were you doing looking at the cast sheet?”

“What were doing auditioning?” A brief silence, and then, “Beth tried out and I was looking for her name.”

“Did she make it?”

I dropped my arms from the position across my chest that they were in. “What do you think?”

Matt gave me a lopsided grin and swung a bit higher. “Well, that’s too bad.”

“Are you going to tell me why we’re out here?” I was ready to leave. I really didn’t need this right now. “And please tell me what that that note was about?”

“I’m not allowed to talk to my neighbor?.” He ignored my second question.

“No, you’re not allowed to talk to your neighbor.” I began to walk away when I heard a thump. I turned around and saw that Matt had jumped off the swing and was standing in front of me. I did a double take, because I was a good fifteen feet away. Some of the snow on the ground got splashed up onto

my shirt, making it slightly wet. Ugh. “Why aren’t you out with the other preppy sheep? It’s Friday night, you know.”

He snorted a laugh and looked over at his house. “Why don’t you believe I have a genuine desire to talk to you?”

“Because you represent everything I hate. You’re a jerk. You’re a conceited ass and you’re-”

“I heard your Mom lost her job.” That was out of the blue.

He stopped me dead in my tracks. And I was just getting started, too. He was serious and all I could think off was how he was doing it again. You know, just having to be the one controlling the conversation.

“How did you know that?”

“Um, our moms are like best friends.” Oh, yeah. I had forgotten about that. But just because he has easy access to my life didn’t mean he had a right to discuss my mother’s employment status. “I was just mentioning it,” he responded after I had spoke my thoughts.

“Well, can we please keep this bus driver thing out of school, okay? I haven’t even told Beth.”

“What bus driver thing?” Oh, crap. “Wait,” he spoke between laughs. “You mean your Mom’s going to be a bus driver?” He howled with laughter. That is, until I slapped him hard on the arm. “Ow.”

“Yeah, you better say ‘Ow’. Now, I’m going to bed. Good-night.” I smiled sweetly, returned to my normal, bored, facial expression and began to walk away, shaking snow from my pants.

“So this means you won’t help me with my lines?”

I stopped walking. “What’s wrong with Erica? Isn’t she you’re opposite?”

“Yeah but.” He looked up at the only window on the back of my house, Erica’s. He walked closer to me and in a loud whisper said, “I can’t really understand half of what she says.”

“Welcome to my world.”

He laughed, and for a moment I felt good. The only thing about Matt that I like is his laughter. He has a great laugh. But the moment quickly passed and I turned to leave.

“Good night, Matt.”

This time he let me go.

It took me another hour to fall asleep.

I woke the next morning at six (which was Saturday and I was ALLOWED to sleep in) to the sound of Erica’s voice. Not just her normal, cooler-than-thou voice. No. It was her theatrical voice. Ugh. I have grown to loathe that voice.

“But Bradley! Why can’t we get married?” I assumed, in my state of lethargy, that Bradley was the name of a character in the play. What I wasn’t expecting was the other voice that permeated into my room.

“Because, Madeline, I am poor and your father will not allow me to marry you.”

What the hell?

“I don’t care, Bradley. Things can change.”

The deeper, male voice said in a low whisper, “Things can never change.”

I took me about twenty seconds to realize who the voice belonged to. Matt.

I tried to go back to sleep, but the harder I tried the louder Erica got. I don’t know if it was psychological or if the girl just enjoys making me suffer. I finally gave up and, wrapping my blanket around me, walked into the living room.

As I walked in I saw Erica, over near the corner, fake crying. Matt (who I assumed was Bradley) was standing in the middle of the room, looking at the

floor. I stood with an expression of confusion on my face. “It. Is. Six. O’clock. In. The. Morning. Will you please SHUT UP?!”

Erica turned around and Matt looked up. “Hey, you’re awake.” Very good, Matt! Now let’s try our multiplication table.

“Good. She can be Lila.”

My mind was swimming, trying to take it all in. “Why are you doing this NOW?”

Shoving a script in my hand, she walked back to her corner. “Because Matt has a basketball game later today and I have my National Honor Society meeting in an hour. This is the only time we could practice. Now read your line on page four.”

I glanced at the line, looked over at Matt, who was laughing, and sighed. I walked over to Erica (still wrapped in my blanket) and read, with as little enthusiasm as possible, “Oh no, Madeline! Your father is on his way.”

## REASON 4 : THE PLAY

I spent another half hour reading Lila's part. It was the corniest thing I had ever read. What was Sally Merckerson thinking? I'm beginning to think that Luddermor High is handing out free crack to anyone with an A average. Maybe it was a side-effect that made Beth shrink (I know that's mean, even if I'm joking. But I was pissed and didn't care).

I learned that the play is about two people (Madeline and Bradley) who are on love. Madeline's father is rich and Bradley is an orphan, hence he is poor.

Well, THIS is original, huh?

Finally, Erica had to leave for her NHS meeting, which was a relief.

"Okay, we will have to practice tomorrow, okay Matt?"

Matt nodded and Erica left. Then he turned to me. "You know, you're not that bad."

“Shut up,” I told him, and wrapped my blanket tighter around me. This SO wasn’t funny.

“You really don’t have that great an outlook on life, do you?”

I rolled my eyes and then directed my gaze at him. “Don’t you have a game to get ready for?”

Matt smiled and grabbed his script. “Well, it’s been fun Reynolds.”

“Whatever.” He left and I stomped back to my room.

It took me another hour to fall asleep.

It had been a week after the first “practice” (you know, when they woke me up). Matt and Erica were apparently really into this thing. I was still researching my crack theory. Why the hell did Dr. Livingston, a well respected theater director (even if he was a little weird), even CONSIDER this play? It was the dumbest thing EVER!

But...Erica and Matt loved it.

Well anyway, Beth and I were in my room. Once again I wasn’t listening to her try to teach me the difference between an alpha particle and a positron (who the hell cares, really?). Instead I was concentrating on the recitation of lines between Matt and Erica outside on the swing set.

Sally was standing off to the side, observing them and commenting from time to time.

“Kate!” I turned my attention from the window I was looking out.

“Huh? Oh yeah. Alpatron.” I turned back to the window.

Now Sally was leaning over Erica’s shoulder as Erica was pointing at something in the script. Matt was swinging, waiting for them to stop talking.

There wasn’t any snow. We had had a week full of days that were all above fifty degrees, a heat wave if you will. Matt was even wearing shorts. Weather is a weird thing.

“No,” Beth corrected me. “Alpha particle and positron. Alpatron isn’t even a word. No wonder you’re failing.”

Now this I took offense to. “Excuse me, Miss Erica-wannabe. I happen to have a sixty-seven average in that class.”

“Okay then. Tell me the difference between ionization energy and electronegativity.”

“Not fair,” I flipped myself around so I was facing her. “Alpha particle is helium and a positron is an electron?” I asked, showing that I was paying attention.

“Close enough.” She slammed her chemistry book closed.

“Hey! I thought we were studying.” I opened the book again, landing on a page about properties of a solid.

“Let’s stop. You’re not paying attention and quite frankly I’m just not in the mood to study.”

I sighed. “I told you that it wasn’t a good idea to study here. Why can’t we study at your house?”

“My dad’s painting the living room, remember?” She fell backwards on my bed. I could tell she was listening to Erica and Matt. I guessed Sally had cleared up whatever Erica was asking about.

I glanced over at Beth. She was looking out the window, too. “If you want they’d probably let you be Lila. Erica would gladly someone else to read her lines. She told me I suck.”

Beth laughed and sat up. “I wouldn’t want to intrude.”

“Who cares if you ‘intrude’? It’s fun to annoy Erica.”

“I don’t know,” she said slowly, closing the chemistry book.

“Oh c’mon. It’s not like we’re doing anything useful.” I grabbed her legs and dragged her off my bed

CRACK! I heard her head hit the corner post of my bed. “Ow!”

“Sorry.”

She fell tot eh ground, sat up and rubbed her head. “Have you always been this violent?” she asked.

“Have you always been this stubborn?”

She nodded her tilted head and I pulled her to her feet.

When we got to the backyard I noticed that Sally Merkerson, the crack addict that wrote the thing, was reading the script again, pointing off into the distance. “No, Matt you will enter stage left for that part.”

“Wouldn’t it make sense to come on from the right?”

“No.”

Beth wanted to turn back, but I wouldn’t let her. “Here’s your chance. Maybe if you show Sally how much better you are than Erica, you could get a part.”

“It’s already cast, Kate,” she said, tugging on my arm.

“WHAT is your problem?”

Sally, Erica and Matt saw us. Matt waved but Erica and Sally did that girly “chaw” sound (I don’t know how to describe it; just that it is sort of a sigh and a whistle type thing). “What are you to doing out here?” Erica asked.

I smiled at her sweetly, and then went back to my usual scowl.

“We were wondering if you needed a stand-in for Lila or someone.” I shoved Beth slightly in front of me. “Beth would be glad to do it.”

Beth turned around and gave the “Don’t make me do this” look. I rolled my eyes.

“Not really.” Sally started to say something else but Matt cut in.

“Well, if Kate wants to take over Erica’s part you two can go talk to Livingston about that.” I had no idea what “that” was but I didn’t care. I assumed that it had something to do with when I saw Sally checking over the script out of my window.

Sally and Erica looked at each other. Finally Erica turned back. "Fine. We'll be back in a little while." And with that Erica and Sally hopped in Sally's car and sped away.

"Wow," I said. "She actual left. Didn't see that one coming." Then I turned back to Matt. "But I think Beth would rather read Erica's part." I handed Beth the script. "Here, Erica's Madeline."

"Actually," she started. I gave her the evil eye. "Well, um. I think I have to get home. Mom said I couldn't stay that long." She began to walk away when I ran over to her.

"You are not leaving me here with Matt."

"Kate, I told you I didn't want to do this!" she said in a loud whisper.

"Um, hello? This is Earth calling for Beth. Weren't you the one who AUDITIONED for this thing?"

She said she was sorry but had to go. I let her. Either she was another of those star-struck girls under Matt's trance or she was expecting Erica and Sally to stay. Either way, she was really pissing me off.

I watched her leave. Matt walked over next to me and picked up the script. "Here. We're on page ten."

My jaw dropped. I turned to him and stared. "You're not serious."

"Of course I am. Now start with the line that says 'Bradley, my father is coming!'."

"I'm not doing Erica's part."

"Why not?"

I threw the script at his head. "The whole reason we came out here so that Beth could get a chance to act in front of Sally Merkersen! Not so that I could!"

I started to run off but (because he seems to have the habit to) he grabbed my arm. "I really need to practice and you know the part."

"I don't care." And I really didn't.

“Well I really need to practice!”

“Well you should have thought about that before you told Erica to leave!”

“I was thinking you’d help me!”

I stopped shouting and said in a low, annoyed voice, “How long have you known me?”

He threw the scripts in the air. “God, Kate. Why do you have to such a bitch all the time?”

“Excuse me for breathing!”

“Why did you bother coming out if you weren’t gonna help?”

“I already told you. I came out here for Beth!”

“So now that she’s gone you’re going to just run away and not help?”

“Exactly.”

With that I ran into the house, into my bedroom, shoved on my headphones and let the sweet sounds of Green Day flow over me. I checked out my window and saw Matt picking up both scripts, putting one on our door mat and walking into his house with the other one. God, I hated him right then. I was really starting to wish I WAS Erica. That way, my life would be perfect and I’d never have to deal with crap like this.

Ugh.

“What’s this I hear about you yelling at Matt?” my mom asked at dinner.

It was just the two of us. Erica was at a rehearsal at the high school, which was a nice break.

“Excuse me?” I asked, twirling my spaghetti around my fork.

“Pam said you two were fighting in the backyard.” She cut up a meatball.

I rolled my eyes. Pam was Mrs. Schroeder’s first name. Of course: Matt goes crying to his mother, who tells my mother, who in turn yells at me.

“He started that one.” I ate the pasta on my fork.

“Why are you so mean to that boy? He used to be your best friend.”

“Don’t worry, Mom. It’s mutual.”

She gathered her plate and utensils together, sent me a funny look, and brought them over to the sink.

A week passed.

Then another.

Then five.

It was about a week before the performance. School was the only thing keeping me sane. Hanging out with Beth meant either studying for chemistry or listening to her complain about the play. Is that what I sound like to everyone? Wow, I’m really not someone you want to hang around.

She wasn’t bitter about the whole thing. Most of her complaining had to deal with the fact that Matt and Erica would practice in the living room while Beth and I were studying.

Every time she went down for a soda or something she’d have to listen to them. At least Beth agreed with me that the script was crap.

At home was worse. Well for starters, Mom was just starting her bus driving. The weird thing was is that she said she was actually enjoying it.

“Oh, sweetie,” she said to me. “It’s really an interesting job. I get to talk to the students, and they tell me about their day,” Um, Mom? Isn’t that what Erica and I are for? “And I get to listen to the radio all day...” Okay...whatever Mom.

But there was this weird incident with her about week before the play.

I had walked into the house after being over at Beth’s house. My mom was sitting in the kitchen, wearing some Walk For The Cure diabetes research shirt. I tilted my head when I looked at it, because that was NOT one of my mom’s shirts.

“Um, Mom?” I sat down next to her. “Where did you get that shirt?”

Her eyes bulged and she stumbled over her words. “Oh well...I got it from...well, you see sweetie...I was...”

“Okay, whatever Mom.” I pushed myself up, shot her a funny look, and went to my room.

Okay, weird.

Then there was Erica. She’s had never let her achievements go this far to her head. All her school awards, nothing. Those Presidential education awards? Who cared? And those metals for the science fair? Oh, they’re so heavy...

But this play apparently meant more to her than all those things.

Everything was a battle. Like a week before I was painting my nails (black of course) and as she walked by my room she screamed at the top of her lungs (which just barely misses breaking the sound barrier) that the fumes would destroy her vocal chords and then she couldn’t talk for the show. Hello! An hour before she was painting HER nails.

And then the day after, she was making toast and told me to pull the bread out, so she wouldn’t burn her fingers. Um, okay...what would burned fingers (like you burn your fingers on toast ANYWAY, right?) have to do with acting?

My sister is such a prima donna.

And then of course, I had to deal with Matt.

Ugh.

Ever since that day he called me a bitch I had avoided at all cost. But it was really getting hard to come up with reasonable excuses. I was even trying the “the aliens that abducted me a year ago want me to come to their planet to celebrate the anniversary” excuse. I don’t think my Mom bought that one (this was when we were invited over to the Schroeder household for dinner).

Having to hear the lines being recited and helping Erica memorize (there was no way in hell that I was going to help Matt practice again) I actually knew Erica's lines as well as she did, which sucked because I hated this play.

Finally it was the day before the play.

Erica was at the last dress rehearsal, Matt was with her, my Mom had to drive a field trip bus and Beth was at her Uncle Clyde's house to baby-sit her cousin Alfred (where did these people come up with these names? Poor kid's going to have the crap beat out of him in school!) and I was left all by myself in the house.

I was seriously minding my own business. Doing homework (yes, actually homework, but it was history, not chemistry) and just minding my own business.

I had taken a break from my homework (the rare occasion that I did it at night) and went to the kitchen. It was Thursday, which meant it was supposed to be E.R. But, as I said before, Beth was baby-sitting and it was a repeat anyway.

But my stomach didn't know that.

I threw a bag of popcorn (which is what Beth and I ate during E.R.) in the microwave and heated it.

Once it was done I took my bowl of popcorn into the living room and flipped on VH1. I Love the 80's was on. So I watched it for a few minutes.

The phone rang. I ignored it, thinking it was my grandma again. She has thing about just randomly calling. It's so annoying.

After I finished off the popcorn I turned off the T.V. and put the bowl in the dishwasher, having every intention of returning to my room to finish my homework.

But things never really go the way they're planned in my life.

It was then that the phone rang again, with Sally Merkerson on the other end.

REASON 5: ERICA THE SICK, ME THE  
UNDERSTUDY

“Sally?”

Well, this was definitely NOT my grandmother, but Sally was still as crazy.

“Oh, God. Katie? Katie, are you there?”

Okay, I do not like to be called Katie. The only person I allow to call me Katie is my grandma and even then only if I’m not in the vicinity of any sharp objects. So why was Sally Merkerson, a person I DESPISED (mainly because she a.) cast Erica as the star and b.) wrote the damn thing), calling me on the phone and then calling me Katie?

I sighed heavily and said, reluctantly, “Yeah, Sally. I’m here. What do you want?” Translation: Get me the hell off this phone.

“Well,” she replied. “We have a bit of a problem.” Translation: I’m an idiot and need your expertise.

“I’m sorry?” Translation: I DON’T CARE!

“Katie! Well, Erica is sick.” Translation: Erica is sick.

“Oh...okay.” Translation: And this concerns me HOW?

“Kate!” Whoa. She was using my ACTUAL name. This wasn’t sounding too good. “Kate, Erica is really sick.” Translation: Come deal with this so I don’t have to.

“Well, Sal, if you’re implying that I pick her up then that just isn’t gonna happen. I can’t drive,” Translation: NO! NO!

“Oh, no. Your Mom already did and they’re on their way to the doctor. But... well, could you come down here and stand in for Erica? You know, until she gets back?” Translation: We couldn’t find anyone else, so you’ll have to do.

“How would I get there?” Translation: HA! I can’t get there so that means that I don’t have to deal with you anymore. I said GOOD DAY sir!

“Matt is driving over to pick you up.” Translation: HA! You can’t win!

“Wait, you mean ‘driving’, as in ‘the act of?’” Translation: You stupid freak! Why the hell must you torture me so?

“Yeah. He should be there in a few minutes. Well, thanks Katie!” Translation: I get to hang up first.

“NO! SALLY! NO, I CAN’T! ANDMYNAMEISKATENOTKATIE!” But she had already hung up.

Ten minutes later I was sitting in Matt’s dad’s pick up...royally pissed off.

I had decided shortly after getting into his truck that I wasn't going to talk to him. He had been the jerk who had my mom yell at me. Why was I obligated to talk to him after THAT?

And it was working, until the jerk struck up conversation.

“So, you know, you're saving everyone's collective ass.”

Still silence from me.

“Err....don't you feel good by helping out the play?”

Silence. I turned my head so I could see out the window, and NOT see Matt.

“It's a good thing you're the same size as your sister. I think Amy would have a heart attack if she had to redo the dress by tomorrow.

Now, Amy was the costume designer. But I thought that I was just helping tonight. He didn't mean...he couldn't...he better not...because there was no WAY I was going to...

It was then that I transformed from my monk state to Kate Reynolds. “You don't mean that...”

“That what? That because Erica is sick and you're the only one that knows her lines means that you're going to take over her part for opening night? Yeah, that pretty much hits the nail on the head.”

He laughed. The jerk laughed at that, like it was some kind of joke. UGH!!

“You're an ass.”

“Damn right, and I'm proud of it.”

The car was filled with silence.

“So, why did a big shot jock like you even bother trying out for this thing?”

He smiled. Why did he have to have a perfect smile? It so wasn't fair.

“You may not believe it Reynolds, because I know you have your issues with clichés and crap, but I’m not just a jock. I tend to break the mold a lot more than you think.”

“Meaning?” What was he talking about?

“It means that I enjoy acting. And apparently I’m pretty good at it.”

Ugh, whatever.

“You do realize that the only reason you’re even the lead is because you’re...” I trailed off. I figured he could fill in the blank.

He couldn’t. “Because I’m what?”

“You’re, you know: the popular jock. Sally probably was drooling when she found out you were auditioning.”

He laughed and turned the car to the right, heading for the school.

“Speaking of Merkerson, don’t upset her, alright? She’s already freaking out because Erica’s sick.”

I rolled my eyes. “There goes all my fun.”

“Hey, you know, you’re going to be the star of the play now.”

That threw me. Okay, so my assumption WAS right. I had to fill in for Erica during the actual performance, not just the rehearsal.

Nope, wasn’t going to do it.

“Stop the car.” I said suddenly, trying to unlock the car door.

He looked over to me, occasionally checking the road. “What the hell are you doing?”

“I’m going to pull a Keanu Reeves in Speed and jump out of this car. What do you THINK I’m doing?” I tried to unlock it again. Stupid old car.

“Keanu Reeves jumped from a car into a bus in Speed you idiot. Stop that.” He hit the automatic door lock.

“Then stop the car. There is no way I’m going to do Erica’s part.”

“Um, there are like twenty people at the school saying otherwise.”

“I don’t care. I’m not going to do it!”

But we had already reached the school.

Twenty minutes later I was crossing stage right.

“Oh, Madeline!” came Matt’s line. He crossed over to grab my hand. This was the scene where Bradley (Matt’s character) finally tells Madeline (my character) how madly in love he is with her. I was trying my hardest not to laugh. Matt was actually pretty convincing. Okay, maybe he DID get the part because he’s good.

“Oh, Bradley,” I said in my most theatrical voice, which was pretty much based on William Shatner. “Bradley. I must leave.”

“Madeline! Don’t leave!” By then I was offstage.

I watched from the side, which Matt told me was called the wings. Who was the genius that thought THAT name up? What’s wrong with calling it “the sides”?

Matt did his little scene where he shows the audience that he was in misery over losing the “love of his life”. Ugh, whatever. This script was getting worse by the minute.

When Matt’s scene was done he walked offstage towards the wing I was in. “Nice,” was my comment. “I never knew that you that you enjoy making an ass of yourself so much!”

“Bite me,” he said in a sing song voice. Then he smiled. One of those gorgeous, Matthew Schroeder smiles. But not even a Matt smile was going to make me feel better today.

This sucked. I was the only person here that didn’t WANT to be here, yet I had the most lines. I was going to kill Erica if that disease she has (or whatever it was) didn’t kill her first.

“Kate! It’s your scene!” Sally Merkerson called from the pit. “I thought you knew Erica’s part!”

Now, this was my chance. It was my chance to say that I didn't know Erica's part. It was my chance to leave and not have to worry about how without Erica the play wouldn't go on. It was chance to get the hell out of there.

It was my chance to turn back to my normal life (like it's normal to start with).

But, because I am who I am, I had to fight it. I just couldn't let Sally stand there and insult my (limited) intelligence. "Of course I know her lines!" came out of my big mouth.

"Good, now get out here and do the scene!"

It continued like that for the next three hours. Three LONG hours. And it was the same thing every time: I would forget when Erica came out and Sally would yell at me and Matt would laugh and then I would hit him, which made Sally yell at me more.

Yeah, it was fun.

Finally, dress rehearsal was over. Sally let everyone leave, except me of course. I saw Matt leave, too. Damn, there went my ride...the jerk.

"Katie," Sally started. I rolled my eyes. C'mon, I thought we were over the whole "Katie" thing.

"Yes, O Master of Lines, what is your wish?" Sally gave me a funny look.

"Amy would like to make sure the costume fits you." I looked behind my shoulder. Amy was standing there, twitching nervously. Amy had this weird thing about her: she twitched a lot. And she twiddled her thumb a little too much.

I sighed and turned around to face Amy. "Alright, where is this thing?"

The dress...was hideous.

And that would be what I'd call it on a GOOD day.

And today was definitely NOT a good day.

Not only was hideous, it was BEYOND hideous. The thing had Courtney Love written all over it.

Amy had to run over to the Home Etc. department to get some more thread, which left me alone with Sally. Hmm... if I had killed her then would anybody have noticed? Heh, probably. Damn.

“There is no way I’m wearing this,” I told Sally, after Amy left. If I had said it in Amy’s presence I think she might have snapped. The girl was a little iffy.

“You’re wearing it for one night. Hopefully Erica will be well enough to portray Madeline for next week.” Okay, she did not just say “portray”. What kind of freak was I in the company of?

Erica. How was she, anyway? Wait...that’s right, I didn’t care. She was getting what she deserved.

I had called my mother during rehearsal, when Matt was doing a scene with some else.

“Mom?”

“Hi, Kate. How are things at home?”

“Um, I’m at school, doing Erica’s part. So...what’s going on with Erica?”

“The doctor doesn’t know. He’s never seen a sickness like this. But, it’s pretty bad right now. No, Erica, the bathroom is down the other hall...I have to go. I’ll see you later tonight, honey.” And then she hung up.

“Fine,” was my answer to Sally’s response. “But Erica had better get better, fast.”

Amy came back and stitched up the last piece of clothing.

“See?” Amy said, twitching her left pointer finger. “The only thing we had to fix was the bust.”

Yep. Apparently Erica is about three cups sizes bigger than me. Gee, thanks for commenting Amy. That was a real confidence booster.

“Okay, thanks Amy. See you tomorrow.” The girl sighed happily, glad that she could finally leave, and left. I headed for the bathroom to change back into my sweatshirt and jeans. Sally followed me.

I was in the stall changing when she starting talking. “Kate?”

“Hmm?” I said, not really wanting to converse.

“Yeah, well, thanks for doing this. I owe you a lot.” No shit Sherlock.

“Yeah, okay.” Please tell me this is the end of the conversation.

“And, you’re actually pretty good. I mean, I don’t think I could pull this off as an actor. I suck. That’s why I write.”

Why is it that people feel comfortable telling me crap like this? I DON’T CARE!

“Yeah, sure, no problem.”

“Yeah. Yeah. Okay, well you can take the dress home and bring it back tomorrow night.” Oh gee, I get to wear it AND bring it home? Will the benefits of this ever stop? “The principal said that everyone that is in the play can skip last period to practice.”

Whoa, cool. At least I could get out of English. I don’t think Mrs. Logan can even speak English. She’s from some Yugoslavian country and it’s hard to understand her.

“Alright, I have to go. See you tomorrow, Kate.”

And with that, Sally Merckerson left. Yeah. Thanks for not giving me a ride.

So there I was, in the bathroom of Luddermor High, changing out of, quite possibly, the UGLIEST dress ever sewn by a human being. And that’s when it hit me. I was going to be the star of the play.

Ugh.

On my way out of the school, I noticed that Matt’s truck was still in the parking lot. He jumped out and waved. I sighed, but slung the dress over my

shoulder and crossed the parking lot. Yeah, another ride from Matt. Just what I wanted.

I opened the passenger side door, threw the dress in the back of the cab, and jumped in.

Once we were on the road, Matt started to talk. “The Merk seemed to be happy you knew all the lines. I think you have me to thank for that.”

“Um...the Merk?”

“Sally Merkerson. It’s what I call her, behind her back of course.” He let out a short laugh. How does he come up with crap like this?

“Well that’s great. You do know that ALL of you owe me BIG for this.” He laughed. “I mean it. You do.” He laughed again.

“I think you’ll change your mind once you’re up on stage. It’s a great feeling.”

“Yeah, uh huh. Sure.” How is hundreds of eyes watching your every move a “great feeling”.

We arrived in our shared driveway. I hopped out and grabbed my dress, hideous as it was.

“So, tomorrow?” he asked, almost as if he really wanted me to be there.

“It’s not like I have a choice here,” I replied. He smiled and went inside. I stood there a moment.

I was now the star of the school play. Matt was my opposite. How the hell had I gone from hoping that Erica didn’t get the part to me doing it for her?

Oh God, Beth was going to kill me.

Ugh.

REASON 6: THE SHOW MUST GO  
ON...UNFORTUNATELY

I t took me forever to get to sleep that night. Thoughts of the play, Erica, Beth and especially Matt kept swimming through my head.

The Play: I had to get up there, in front a hundreds of people (most of them I hate). The play sucked, and I hoped Sally Merkerson (or the Merk, if I wanted to use Matt's name (I didn't)) knew that it sucked. She must have. I mean, it was pretty obvious it sucked.

And...what if I forgot a line? I had forgotten a lot of lines during rehearsal. Crap, what if I forgot one? Sally would kill me. Not to mention Matt would hold it over my head FOREVER.

That was NOT something that I wanted.

And what if I'm so bad that people start throwing rotten tomatoes at me? Did they still do that? Crap, I should ask Erica, although that information wouldn't be credible because everyone thinks Erica is a great actress. I'd have to look the tomato thing on the internet in the morning.

Erica: Apparently Erica has the flu, so she wouldn't be able to do the play tomorrow. But, she should be well enough for next week (the school decided to have one show on Friday, and then two more a week later, that Friday and Saturday. I'm attending a school run by morons).

Beth: I called her when I got home and told her about it. The scary thing was... she was happy for me! She said, "That's great Kate! I'm definitely going to see it now!"

Ugh. Great, just what I need.

Although, I guessed it would be nice to have someone I LIKE in the audience. Beth was my best friend. I was just glad that she was finally over the whole not-making-the-play thing. That was pretty bad the first few days.

And...Matt: Matt was the worst part of this whole thing. In the play, we had to be two madly in love young people that would do anything to stay together. Yeah, sure. I'd rather beat Matt up than kiss him. Thank God there was no kissing scene in the play. I don't think Dr. Livingston let Sally put one in it.

Dr. Livingston was a very tall, very lanky, very STRANGE man. He never wore normal clothes. All he wore were puffed out khaki pants and a matching khaki button down shirt with a white shirt underneath. And if it was cold enough he wore a red scarf. He was exactly like all those cartoon directors. He scared me a little.

I finally fell asleep, my mind slipping away and images of the play, bad costumes, strange directors and Matt filled my head.

It was last period. Everyone was milling around the stage: Sally Merkerson was screaming at the foreign kid (whose name, I found out, was Miroslav. I was going to have fun making fun of *that* name). Apparently Miroslav was in charge of the set and had accidentally knocked down the painting of a street lamp.

Amy was scurrying around the auditorium, making sure every costume was perfect. I glanced down at my costume. It looked like she had grabbed it out of the trash and ran over it with her car. And that was being NICE.

Ugh, it was hideous.

“What, don’t like the dress? Amy will be crushed,” came a voice from behind me. I redirected my gaze from my dress to Miroslav, knocking down the lamp again. That kid was an accident waiting to happen.

“Shut up,” I replied. I knew who it was, and I really didn’t want to talk to him.

“You know, I don’t think Sally will let you wear your Converse on stage.” I looked down at my dirty old shoes. Then I looked back up at him.

“You know what, Matt. She owes me her first born child for doing this. Mind you, I’d never have anything to do with the spawn of Satan. But that’s beside the point.”

Matt laughed and I let myself smile. It felt great knowing he was laughing because I made him laugh. But the smiling soon stopped after I heard Matt yell out to Sally, “Hey, Sal! Reynolds needs some shoes!”

I heard Sally sigh loudly and yell back to Amy to get me some shoes. I smacked Matt in the arm, hard.

“Ow. God, Kate. I’m just looking out for your wellbeing.” I slapped him again.

Amy ran on stage, twitching and out of breath. “What size are you, Kate?”

Uh oh. “Um, why don’t you bring out a seven and an eight? Um, I never know which size fits better.” Amy rolled her eyes and went to the costume room.

“Clever,” Matt whispered in my ear. “Very clever.” Why was I so clever...oh, yeah. Matt knew about my feet. Just wonderful.

“Can I ask you a question?”

“Sure,” he said, crossing his arms across his chest.

He was wearing his pauper outfit. Patched up pants, an oversized white button up shirt and suspenders. He looked almost as ridiculous as I knew I looked.

“Don’t you have anything better to do than bother me?”

He smiled, but didn’t answer me.

Then I heard Sally scream. “Reynolds! Schroeder! Get you asses out here and do scene five!”

Seven o’clock. Curtain time was seven-fifteen. My heart was racing. Fifteen minutes until I had to get on the stage and perform the idiotic thing.

I wasn’t exactly nervous. I knew my lines, and it was just some stupid play. It wasn’t like my life depended on it.

It was just nervous energy, the kind you get when you have to stand in front of the class. Like that.

“Miroslav! Get over there and fix the lamp!”

“What is lamp?” came the reply, in a very strong Russian accent.

“The lamp post, the thing you knocked over! C’mon, Miro! I don’t need this,” she muttered.

Miroslav went and fixed it while Sally abused Amy for cutting John Fremont's pants too short. "Amy!"

"What?" Amy said, her left eyelid twitching. That HAS to be some kind of medical condition.

I was sitting on a stool, in the right wing, trying to control my breathing. Sally shoed everyone back into the performing arts room to talk about the play with Dr. Livingston. I was alone, still trying to breathe. I hated the feeling in my stomach.

Matt walked in and sat down on the floor in front of me. "Hey, you okay?"

"Yeah," I said, calming my breath. It was really starting to hurt.

"Hey, you'll be fine. You know the lines, you know the staging. Just ignore the audience. Imagine them in their underwear."

"Did you ever notice that every time someone tells someone that in a movie or something it always backfires?"

Matt laughed and put a comforting hand on my knee. It felt warm and I kind of liked his hand there. But then he stood up. "You'll be fine. Now c'mon; the Merk and Livingston are probably wondering where we are."

"I really don't care. I'd rather stay here."

"C'mon." Matt grabbed my wrist and tried to pull me up. "Get up."

"No." I pulled back on my arm.

But he pulled my arm harder.

I closed my eyes and went flying through the air, falling into Matt, and we both fell to the ground.

When I opened my eyes and found myself lying on top of Matt.

"Well, well, well." I turned my head and saw Dr. Livingston, Sally and the rest of the crew looking at us.

I rolled my eyes and pushed myself up. Once up, I dusted off my hideous dress and watched as Matt got himself up.

“Come on,” Sally said, pulling the headset house managers wear on her head. “We’ve got a play to do.”

If you can even CALL it a play.

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Now, I could sit here and describe to the minutest detail how the play went, but then you’d probably want to slap me. I know I’d want to slap me.

Well, here are the highlights:

- In the first scene Miroslav was walking behind the upstage curtain and accidentally bumped against the lamp post. It fell down right on the line where I say, “Bradley, your muscles are so huge!” Such a stupid play.

- In the fifth scene Matt tripped over a cord that had mysteriously gotten on stage. He fell into me and I caught him. My god he’s heavy.

- In the first scene of the second act Amy had a panic attack backstage and screamed very loudly, but it fit in because Madeline and Bradley (for reasons still unknown) were in a graveyard. The audience thought it was sound effects (at least that’s what Beth told me after).

- In the last scene John Fremont was supposed to say, “And now, Madeline, you and Bradley may marry each other,” except he forgot our character names and said “now, Kate, you and Matt”. The audience laughed, thinking it was a joke. Everyone knew who Matt was, and I assumed everyone just figured my name is Kate.

Well, that was the play. The amazing this was that I didn’t screw up at all. Not once. I nailed every line, every stage blocking and all of my cues. Matt screwed up a bit, though. I laughed at him backstage, and he hit me on the arm, which made me hit him back, harder.

It was after the play that was really the highlight of my evening.

Beth had driven to the school in her mother’s car. It was hard for her to see over the steering wheel sometimes so she has this special pillow for short

midget (is that redundant?) people. I was walking over with Beth to her car because she was ride (my Mom was home with Erica. Great, I'm the lead in the school play, unwillingly but still, and she'd rather stay home with the LIVING DEAD!).

From behind us came a shout. "Hey, Madeline and friend!" It was Matt.

Beth and I sighed. "What?" I shouted.

"I headed over to Burger King, I'm starved." He said, walking closer to us.

"Great," said Beth.

"Have fun," from me.

We started to walk towards Beth's mom's car again, when Matt jogged over to us.

"Well, I was wondering if you two would like to join me. I'm not going to sit in their by myself like a loser,"

"Why not? Aren't you used to it by now?" Beth giggled at my remark.

Matt clutched his shirt where his heart was and acted like he was truly hurt. "Kate Reynolds, you wound me!"

"I would hope so."

It took him a few more minutes, but he eventually got us to go to with him.

"So, exactly what happened with Amy?" this was from Beth. I burst out laughing Matt laughed too, but explained.

"Amy though someone had spilled Kool-Aid on Kate's wedding costume."

"What was it?"

Matt laughed and I laughed harder.

“Oh, it was just the lighting, but you should have seen her face!” Matt howled with laughter, and Beth joined in, too.

The guy behind the counter shot us a funny look and we tried to stifle our laughter. It was almost eleven, and we were really getting crazy.

“So, Matt. How did you think Kate did, under the circumstances?” asked Beth, slurping down her third chocolate shake.

“Yeah,” I said. I was feeling a little lightheaded, from all the shakes, laughing and adrenaline rushes. “How did I do, O Master of the Stage?”

“Well,” he started. He enlaced his fingers and pulled back, making the loud cracking noise that Matt knew both Beth and I hated.

“Matt!” we both shouted, and I slapped his arm. “Answer the question!”

“Well, I think you did a hell of a job. Really,” He gave me a Matt Schroeder smile and threw an arm over my shoulders. I smiled back. I hadn’t had this much fun being around Matt since we were in fifth grade, the time we had to do a science project and ended up exploding hotdogs in his microwave.

I smiled and Beth who made an “Aww!” sound.

“Well,” Matt continued, pulling his arm back and trying to save his reputation as cool and not a wuss. “I mean, she no Erica, but I mean, who is?”

This is when I shoved Matt out of the booth he and I were sharing. Somehow I had gotten in first, then Matt, with Beth on the other side. Beth and I started laughing again when Matt got up slowly, rubbing his back where it had made contact with the ground.

The guy behind the counter rolled his eyes and went to check on the fries.

“Ow, you know what? You are really strong.”

“Oh, stop being a baby.”

“Ow,” he said, still rubbing back, standing in front of the table.

A little later we were shoving our cups in the trashcan.

Out in the parking lot, Matt grabbed my arm and stopped Beth. “Why doesn’t Kate go with me? I mean, it’d save you a trip. We live right next to each other.”

“I assumed she would,” Beth said, shoving up her glasses. “See ya later, Kate. Bye Matt.” And she got in her car and drove off.

I got into Matt’s dad’s truck. “You owe me five bucks for those shakes,” he said.

“Okay...whatever.”

There was a strange, but not awkward silence for almost the rest of the ride. It was strange merely because it was rare that Matt and I didn’t talk when in each other’s presence. That is, unless I was mad at him. Then I’d be silent for weeks.

In our driveway Matt shut off the truck. “Well.”

“Well what?” I said. Why is it when there is nothing to say people say “Well”? What’s up with that? Why not say something else like “bucket” or “equilibrium”? Why is it always “well”?

“See ya later. And tell Erica to get better. I don’t think the play can stand to have you play Madeline another night.”

I punched him in the arm and told him to shut up. He laughed and we both got out of the truck. “Well,” I said. “Bye.”

He waved and smiled one of his great smiles. I went into my room and closed the door, not even bothering to talk to my mom or Erica. They’d have to wait to hear about my amazing (yeah right) performance.

It wasn’t until I was in my bed that I let myself think back about Burger King and Matt’s comment. “*Well, I think you did a hell of a job. Really.*” It was probably the nicest thing Matt ever said to me.

It took me another hour to fall asleep.

That Monday every kid that had gone to see the play came up to me during school to congratulate me on a “job well done”. Like I really wanted to hear that.

“Kate!” Mr. Mallow said upon my entering of his classroom. “Good work!”

“Um, thanks?” I took my seat in front of Mike Kernigan. He was asleep, as usual.

Once I sat down Mike sat straight up, blinking his eyes rapidly. “Huh, what?”

I rolled my eyes and slid into my seat (the kind that is attached to the desk. I hate those kinds of desks. Either the chair is too close to the desk and you suffocate or it’s too far away and your arm hurts when you write).

But then the wheels in my head began to turn.

I spun around (with about minute until the bell was to ring). “Mike?”

He had already put his head back down. I wasn’t sure if he was asleep or dead. So, to wake him up or confirm death, I pinched him hard on the arm.

“OW!” He was alive.

“Mike, remember that note Matt asked you to give me?”

“That hurt, Kate,” he commented as he rubbed his arm.

“MIKE!” I put my arm in position to pinch him again when he held up his hands to stop me.

“Sorry. Okay, what was the question?” He rubbed his arm once more.

Exasperated, I said, “What was that note about, the one Matt told you to give to me?”

He tilted his head like a confused puppy. I pointed to Mallow, who was telling Sally about what a WONDERFUL script she had written (isn’t it nice to know that my math teacher is a complete MORON?) and he nodded. “Oh, yeah. Um, I don’t know. He said not to read it.”

“And you’re telling me that you followed his instructions and didn’t read it?” Since when did boys suddenly do as told? Had the world come to an end?

“Okay...then, did he tell you what the note was about?”

He scratched his head sleepily and shook his head.

“Gee, thanks.” I turned back around. Well, that was a waste of a very valuable minute.

I looked up at the clock to see the second hand tick to the twelve, and the bell rang.

It was then that I noticed that Mallow was standing right I front of me. I must really have been tired if I didn't Marshmallow in my face sooner.

He was smiling me. Um...can you say creepy?

Then I saw him return to his desk. There were shredded pieces of paper sitting on his grading note book.

The little guy in my head screamed at me: He took the ripped up note out of the trash. He read it.

Crap, he knew whatever Matt wrote to me.

So why was he smiling?

## REASON 7: NEW YORK CITY HERE I COME

Erica was still sick. So I had to do the other two performances. It wasn't that bad actually. Except that Matt screwed up two important lines and I had to adlib some lines to make up for it. I think he may have done it on purpose, just to piss me off.

It's not like he hasn't done it before.

And he still didn't tell me about the note.

Well, the last show was over and I could finally put the play (that horrible, god-awful crap that Dr. Livingston kept calling "genius") behind me.

That was...until Livingston called all the cast members to the performing arts room during first period the following Monday. I didn't mind. I figured he wanted to make an "I'm so happy that you all didn't make me look like an ass in front of everyone" speech. And it got me out of Marshmallow's class. That man hates me.

"Hello everyone!" Livingston said. Yep, I was right. It was a speech. "Now, I have a surprise for you all!" Okay...maybe not.

"Yes! It's amazing," Sally Merkerson said. I guess we got good reviews in the newspaper or something. I mean, c'mon. It was a school play (and a sucky one at that).

"Yes!" My god, just get to the point! "Sally got a call last night from Leonardo Farley."

Who the hell was Leonardo Farley? Five bucks says he's name was really Lenny.

"For those of you that don't know who he is..." I swear Sally looked straight at me. LEAVE ME OUT OF THIS! "Leonardo is head of the high school play competition."

Amy must have gotten really excited, because she started twitching a lot more. "Oh! What did he say?"

"Well..." Now Sally was just building up the suspense.

"Look, Sally. If you don't spit it out I'm going back to Marshmallow's. And that's a living hell." Dr. Livingston shot me a look for my language. Ugh. Old people.

"Just chill a second, Kate. Well, anyway, Mr. Farley said that my script one first for the county!"

There were cheers of joy from everyone except...do I even have to say who? I just sat there, with a disgusted look on my face. Was the entire world on CRACK?!?!?! Who the hell was the genius that even CONSIDERED this play a winning script?

“That’s great, Sally,” Matt said. He leaned back in his chair and winked at me. I didn’t know why, and turned back to see Sally putting her hands in the air, trying to quiet everyone.

“There’s more! Because we won for the county, we all get to go to New York City for the annual high school competition!”

Dr. Livingston butted in. “Well, the official title is ‘Festival of Original Scripts by High School Students’.”

“Yes, well,” Sally stuttered. “Anyway, it means that everyone in the cast gets to go to New York City and perform the script in front of judges!”

My eyes bulged out of my head. Okay, yeah sure....WHAT!!

But everyone else was excited. They were all talking at once and jumping with enthusiasm.

I guessed Matt noticed my expression. “What’s with you, Reynolds?”

Everyone looked at me. I swallowed the lump that had formed in my throat. “Well, you guys have fun!” I jumped off the table I was sitting on and headed for the door.

“Kate!” Sally called after me. “Wait a sec!”

I stopped, sighed and turned to face her. “What?”

“Well, you’re coming too.”

I paused a moment and then laughed. “No. No I’m not.”

“But your Madeline. She’s the star of the show!”

“No, I’m not. I’m Kate Reynolds. Erica is Madeline. She’s going with you.”

“But what if Erica’s still sick? The competition is in two weeks.”

The doctors had told my mother that Erica had some weird disease kind of like mono but not really. So, no one had a clue as to when she was going to be well enough to portray Madeline.

Which sucked for me.

I sighed very heavily and sat down to listen to Dr. Livingston talk about money to go, dates and what not.

Could my life possible get ANY worse?

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“Mom, just tell Dr. Livingston that I can’t go and then we won’t have to deal with it!”

“Nice try, Kate. But the cast needs you and your going.”

Why does this seem backwards?

We were in the kitchen, right before the bus arrived. My mom was my last hope to get me out this whole thing.

Erica was sitting in chair, shoving tissues up her nose (figuratively, not literally). Her face was really pale and her eyes were puffy. She kind of looked like a sick puppy (AND I HATE PUPPIES!).

“Mom, it’s Erica’s part. Doesn’t she deserve to be Madeline in New York City?”

Erica snorted and blew her nose. It’s so unfair: she can look like total crap and still look better than me.

My mom shook her head, said she was late for her morning bus run and signed my permission slip.

“Mom! Haven’t I done my civil duty already? I did the shows, and now I’m done!” I was feeling like a brat, but didn’t I deserve to be bratty for a while?

“Please hand it in, Katie. I don’t need a call from the school.”

I rolled my eyes. Erica pointed at me, closing her eyes, preparing for a sneeze. “Don’t screw this up.”

Gee, thanks.

I headed out, just barely catching the bus.

Matt had asked me if I wanted a ride, but I was not in the mood to talk to him.

Two weeks flew by really fast.

I did everything I could possibly do to get out of going.

Nothing worked.

Everyone was piling into the huge tour bus we were driving. It was huge (which seemed like a huge waste of money because there were less than twenty people going).

I glanced over to my left side of the bus and saw Dr. Livingston in a heated battle with the bus driver over allowing his cat to come with him on the bus.

Man, that guy was weird.

Looking to the right I saw Miroslav hauling a gigantic suitcase behind him. He apparently thought we were on an expedition to the NORTH POLE.

Was I the only one who packed really lightly? What's so hard about packing? Shoved a few sweatshirts and jeans into a bag, toss in the toiletries and you're done.

I checked back over to the war on my left. Finally Livingston gave in and handed the cat over to a woman, who looked old enough to be his mother. She nodded, hugged him and left. Weird.

Hopping on the bus I checked around. I was the first one on. I choose a seat towards the back. I figured that the nerdy actors would be near the front and I was right. There were three rows of empty seats between me and the nearest nerd. That is, until Matt sat next to me.

I was slipping my headphones over my head, thinking the next sound I'd hear would be my beloved Green Day. But, it turned out the next voice I heard was Matt's.

“Anyone sitting here?” I glanced around. The kid three rows away moved up one, so he was four rows away. I looked back at Matt.

“Of all the people you could sit next to, you choose here?” I complained. Why was everyone out to get me?

“Of course.” And with that he sat next to me. For the ENTIRE seven hour drive. Ugh.

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We were a half hour to New York City. Matt had fallen asleep on my shoulder and I had spent three hours trying to shove him off of it.

When we had been driving four hours I got this head almost all the way off, but then he did that snuggle-up-the-arm thing and his head was practically cutting off circulation to my brain (because he had pushed his head against my neck).

When we had been driving for six hours I was really getting annoyed so I nudged his head off my shoulder...FREEDOM! But then he yawned and twisted in his chair so that he was now laying across my legs. I was ready to kill him (for sprawling across my legs, but also because he was laying on my CD player and I couldn't reach it anymore).

Finally, a half hour out from NYC, my determination worked and Matt sat up with a start.

“What the...”

“Good Morning, Mr. Happy. Stay off my shoulder.” Then I turned so my body was facing the window.

“Hey Reynolds!” I gritted my teeth and balled my hands into tight fists.

Instead of answering the jerk I turned up my Green Day. But it was all in vain. Because even though he was hot, popular and apparently a decent actor, Matt was an idiot and didn't realize that I wanted to be left ALONE.

“What??”

He smiled and stretched his arms behind his head which resulted in him banging his knuckles against the wall to the bathroom. He immediately brought them down and winced in pain. I smiled a big smile. “Shut up,” he said.

“Well, how about you tell me when you’re done being an ass and I’ll be glad to converse!” I turned back to my window.

“Well, seeing as how I’ve never been an ass I guess I am ready as well.”

I snapped my eyes shut. “Are you completely oblivious to sarcasm?”

“Only when I choose to be. So,” he stretched again “are you psyched?”

I opened my eyes and gave him a “Stop talking to me” look. “For what? Standing on a stage in New York City reciting lines that were penned by a MORON and have to have you follow me everywhere to annoy the living CRAP out of me?” I paused, just for dramatic effect. “Sure, whatever.”

“This should be fun, Kate-Kate. Just try to have fun, okay? You never seem to have fun!”

“For starters, don’t call me Kate-Kate. And I have plenty of fun. I like hanging out with Beth, and Burger King wasn’t that bad. So don’t tell me to have fun.”

He pulled his hands behind his head and stretched his legs out in the aisle. I rolled my eyes. “Who is it that shoved the giant stick up your ass?”

“Ow,” I said in a sing song voice and turned back to my window. It was going to be a LONG week.

I heard once that NYC has some of the best hotels. So, because this is apparently the way the world works (at least were I’m concerned), everyone in the competition got to stay in a Quality Inn. And a sucky one at that.

“It’s...nice.” This was from Sally.

“Yep...it is.” This was from a rapidly twitching Amy.

“Better than sleeping outside.” This was from John Fremont.

“C’mon guys,” Livingston called over the sounds of the city (which are really gross, if you listen hard enough). “Let’s get inside.”

“And what is your opinion of the hotel, Miss Reynolds?” This was from Matt.

I sighed and looked at the monster. Then, walking into the lobby, I muttered behind me, “It better have toilet paper.”

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Our rooms were small and cramped, but they weren’t as bad as previously imagined. At least, that was my first impression. It slightly changed when I found out who I was bunking with. Matt!

No, I’m joking. They wouldn’t let a boy and girl share a room (thank FREAKING god). Matt was rooming with Miroslav (which I didn’t get because in the competition there was no scenery, unless it was important to the understanding of the script. Why the hell was the foreign kid here?).

No, I was rooming with an Erica-wannabe: Sally Merkersen.

“Hey, Kate! We’re rooming!” Sally raced over to our room and immediately jumped on the right bed. She bounced on it like a five year old girl and giggled. Ugh. People...in general.

“Great,” I said, drawing out each sound. I sat down on the left bed.

“Oh, I have to see the bathroom!” I watched Sally run to the bathroom and heard her looking around. I lay back on the bed and snapped my eyes shut. This was going to be more of a hell than Marshmallow’s class. If there is a God, why didn’t you just kill me then?

I know why. Because of what happened next.

“Kate! The toilet doesn’t flush!” Now, this would royally piss off a normal person. But I’m not normal so it pissed me off beyond all human comprehension.

This was definitely not the fairy tale trip that I have always imagined New York City to be. Where were all the cool buildings? What about a carriage ride in Central Park?? Where the hell were Chandler and Monica???

Nope, instead of the snow whirled, enchanted magic of the city, I got a non-functioning toilet.

So I stood up and walked over to the bathroom door. “Okay, Sally. I’m going down to the front desk to see if we can switch rooms.”

Without waiting for an answer I walked out of the room and hung a left, towards the main desk. Of course, because our rooms were kitty-corner, Matt was walking out of his room at the same time. “Hey Reynolds, where are you going?”

I ignored him and kept walking. “Hey!” He ran to catch up with me. “Where are you going?”

“I’m going to the front desk.”

“Alright, let’s go.” I sighed but didn’t fight it. If he wanted to listen to me ask the dude if we could switch rooms because the toilet was broken, then fine by me.

We reached the front desk and I explain to the manager our situation. He said that they were booked (“We’re in New York, Miss!” he said. No shit Sherlock!) but we could use the pool bathroom when we needed it because the pool was only a short walk from our rooms.

This was really bad. I was stuck in New York City, sharing a room without functional toilet with the Merk and Matt and Miroslav (creepy foreign kid...a lot of Ms) were across the hall. I was ready to just run out into Times Square and wait for a bus to hit me when I bumped into someone.

The person staggered back, and I followed suit. “I’m sorry,” I said.

“Nope, my fault.” I looked up and saw the most gorgeous boy I had ever seen. Matt didn’t stand a chance next to him. I felt my mouth go dry and my mind went numb. “Hey, are you guys in the competition, too?”

My mind registered that we was talking to both Matt and me. But he was smiling only at me.

Wait a second...how could he tell we where in the competition? Then I realized that I was wearing my play shirt, the one Livingston made everyone wear.

So, in response to the guy's question, I nodded.

“Great, maybe we’ll run into each other again.” I giggled. I don’t think I’d giggled like that since I was five and Matt and I were in a tickle fight.

Matt jumped into the conversation just then. “I’m Matt. And this is Kate.” I looked at Matt for a nanosecond and then returned my gaze to the hot hunk in front of me.

He smiled and I melted. “Hey. I’m Aaron.”

## REASON 8: AARON (NOT REALLY A REASON)

“Hey. I’m Aaron.”

My mind sprang from its state of lethargy and I smiled. “Hey.”

“So, what school are you guys from?” he asked. I just kept smiling.

God, he was hot.

Unlike me, Matt wasn’t under Aaron’s spell. “Luddermor. You?”

I don’t know how but the three of us started to walk down the hall that led to my room. It was then that I realized I had forgotten why I was in the lobby in the first place. Why had I come here?

I heard Aaron answer Matt. “Hey! Apparently you and I are rivals. My group’s from Balkerson.”

Luddermor and Balkerson had been rivals since the beginning of time when guys assumed it was their duty to be competitive. Ugh. Guys.

Matt gave Aaron a funny look. We had reached Matt’s room. “Well, good luck.”

Aaron and I stopped a little past Matt’s room. “Hey, Kate,” Aaron said, completely ignoring Matt’s statement. “You any good at Ping Pong?”

I looked at his blinding white teeth and adorable grin. His eyes were almost too blue. “Yeah, I guess. I don’t play that much.” Wait, where the hell had Ping Pong come from? And why was I in the hall?

“Great. There’s a game room off the pool area that has a table. Wanna go play?”

I smiled again. OF COURSE I WANNA! But, because the only reason Matt was even put on this planet was to piss me off, he had to interrupt. “Actually, Kate. The Merk wants everyone at a rehearsal in twenty minutes. Oh, and by the way, if you two really need to use a bathroom you can use ours.”

Bathroom? Twenty minutes? What the hell... Oh, right. Bathroom. Broken. No flush. Lovely.

But what about the rehearsal? I was rooming with Sally. Why hadn’t she mentioned a rehearsal? I mean, the girl lives on that crap. And apparently Cheetos, as I learned from what she had packed in her luggage.

“What rehearsal? Sally didn’t say anything.”

Matt rolled his eyes. Aaron, lightly (and not roughly the way Matt does) grabbed my wrist and pulled me a little closer. “C’mon. Let’s go.”

I sent one more puzzled look to Matt and followed Aaron to the pool, and then the game room. We reached the door and he opened it for me. “Oh, thanks.”

“No problem.” He walked through behind me and walked to the table. “So, what’s your script about?”

“You’re not some spy from Balkerson trying to scope out the competition, are you?” Because that would really suck.

“No...no,” he laughed. Since when was I so funny? “I’m just interested in what the script you wrote is about.”

I looked at him, trying to figure out what those strange words were that came out of his mouth? Script? What script? WHO CARED? I was going to play Ping Pong with a walking GOD!

Oh, wait. Sally Merkerson. Play. THAT script. Right. “Oh, it’s not my script. I’m just an actor in it. My roommate wrote it.”

Aaron grabbed two paddles and a small plastic ball. He tossed one of the old wooden paddles to me and (because my hand-eye coordination is like nil) I dropped it. He laughed.

It wasn’t a Matt laughed. No one has a laugh just like Matt. But it was nice enough. And his looks definitely made up for it. “Well, to answer your question, it’s about two people that fall in love and can’t get married. It’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever read.”

He laughed again and served the ball. I returned it and we volleyed for a while. “Ours is about time travel. I don’t understand it.”

I smiled and hit the ball just out of Aaron’s reach. He jumped to hit it, missed and fell. I laughed and walked around the table to make sure he was alright. “Yeah, I’m fine. Nice shot.”

“Nice fall,” I said between giggles. I mentally slapped myself. Who the hell just entered my body? I, Kathleen Marie Reynolds, do NOT giggle. I barely crack a smile. And that’s on a good day.

“Yeah, well. I’ll get you back somehow.”

“You’re on!” And he served the ball again.

We played in a comfortable silence for a few moments until Aaron asked me a question. “So, was that guy an actor in the play too?”

“What guy?” Were there any other guys besides Aaron? I didn’t know of any. The only boy I could see was Aaron. The only boy I wanted to see was Aaron.

“That Matt guy you were with. He’s not...you know...you’re...”

I was confused, but then the dawn of reality slapped me across the face. “NO WAY IN HELL! God. No. I hate Matt. We’re next door neighbors. Nothing more.”

I swear I saw him sigh in relief. But then again, my imagination was running wild. I was already picking our wedding date, the kids’ names, our dog’s name, the whole shebang. “And, yeah. He’s in the play. He’s my opposite.”

“Let me guess. You’re the main female? The one in love?”

I sighed and shrugged. “Yep.”

“So, in the play you’re in love with Matt?”

“Basically. And it’s a living hell.” I hit the ball (obviously my hand-eye coordination was improving) and continued. “But trust me, it wasn’t my idea.”

“What do you mean it wasn’t your idea? Didn’t you audition for the part?”

I saw that one coming, and I’m not talking about the ball. “That’s a long story.”

He whacked the ball over the short net. “How so?”

I watched the ball bounce past my head and hit the ground. Damn, he got the point. Whatever. “Well...”

And while we continued to play Ping Pong I told my future husband the story of how I ended up in New York City.

We played for another ten minutes. I was actually winning (okay, he was letting me win, but so what?). But, because my life completely, totally and utterly SUCKS, the pain in the ass had to walk in, along with the EW (Erica-wannabe).

“Hey, Kate. Finish up; we’re gonna rehearse.” This was from Sally.

I turned to answer, but instead got hit in the eye with a small white object. “Ow,” I said, covering my eye.

In the next second both Aaron and Matt were at my sides, each one on a different one. “You okay?” they asked in unison.

I looked from Aaron, to Matt, back to Aaron, over to Sally (just to make sure she hadn’t rushed to my aid, because that would be just plain weird), and then back to Matt.

“I’m fine. It was just a Ping Pong ball.”

But neither of them would have it. “Sit down, let’s make sure you’re okay,” Aaron said, and Matt shot him a dirty look.

“Seriously, I’m fine.” I tried to get up, but Matt shoved me back down. I shot him a look.

“Let me just check.”

“Matt, I said I’m fine.” I turned to Aaron. “Really, I’m fine.”

“Okay,” Aaron said. “Well, I guess you better go practice.”

“Alright. You two go ahead. I’ll be there in a sec.” Matt hesitated, but followed Sally out of the game room. “So, you’re fine right? No blood?” I laughed and nodded.

“Yeah. Well, it’s been fun.” But I still want to hang out! Don’t make me go! MARRY ME!

“Yeah.”

I started to walk out of the game room. Now, I’m not normally a klutz, but apparently hot guys turn me into one. A klutz, I mean. Not a hot guy.

“OW!” I said and I stubbed my toe against the door.

“What, again?” He said, laughing.

“Yeah, again. But it hurts this time!” I said, hopping on my left leg, the one without the injured appendage.

“Well, sit down and let’s make sure it’s not broken.”

Uh huh. Nope. Sorry, even though you’re GORGEOUS doesn’t mean you can look at my feet. Please don’t look at my feet! They’re two different sizes!

“Oh, no! That’s fine. I really got to go!”

“Sit down and let me look at your toe!” Ooh. I like being bossed around by a hot guy. Kind of makes you all tingly inside.

So, going against the little guy in my head screaming “If he sees your freaky feet he will dump you like a sack of broccoli!” (Okay, so the little people in my head aren’t what you’d call normal, but hey, neither am I!), I sat down on one of the white plastic chairs.

Aaron slipped off my right shoe and pulled off my sock. He looked at my toe and muttered, “Hmm...”

“Hmm what?”

But he just sat there, with a furrowed brow. “Hmm.”

“HMM WHAT?!?!?”

“Hmm...it’s broken. You’re going to have to have me carry you to the rehearsal.”

Broken, what the hell? It was just a stubbed toe! How the hell...then I realized he was flirting. Flirting? With me? This hot guy was flirting with me? Whoa, I was in love.

“Ha ha,” I said, making sure my voice was airy and light. It was hard.

“Thanks, but I can walk.”

I shoved on my sock, then my shoe and walked to the doorway.

“Hey,” he called after me.

I stopped, smiled, and turned around. “What, Dr. Aaron?”

“Well, have you ever been to New York City before?” I shook my head and he went on. “Well, I lived here for about a year and I was wondering...if you’re not doing anything tomorrow...”

“Well, we’re not doing anything until Saturday. You know, the competition.”

“Yeah. Well, if you want to, I was wondering if you would like to go see the sights.”

“I ‘d love it!” I said. He waved good-bye and I returned with a wave of my own.

I headed back to the room Sally and I were sharing. All my thoughts throughout the rehearsal were of Aaron. Every line that Madeline said of love for Bradley was my heart speaking to Aaron.

My god I had gone to the dark side. Kate Reynolds: antisocial, sarcastic bitch. I was not the type of person to spew poetry with every breath. But I guess that’s what crushes do to you.

“Oh my god! What color were his eyes?” Beth was squealing on the other end of the phone.

I was in the room alone. Sally was discussing some technical thing with Dr. Livingston and was out of my hair. She was mad at me because I, and I quote, “was like in space or something”. But who cared? Aaron!

“They were bright blue.” Beth squealed again. “Oh, god, Beth. I think that I have my first crush!”

“Finally!” she chastised. “I’ve been telling you about my crushes since we were in seventh grade! Now it’s your turn.”

“Excuse me!” I said playfully, lying back on the bed. . “I don’t think you can compare Ronnie Donaldson to Aaron. Oh, he is so gorgeous Beth! And guess what!”

“What?” came an excited voice on the other end.

“He goes to Balkerson. He lives near us!”

“No way!

“Yes!” I was so happy. That is, until I heard a beep. “Hold on, Beth. Got someone on the other line.”

“Okay, but hurry up! I want to hear more!”

I switched the lines, praying that it wasn't Matt.

It wasn't.

“Kate, are you there?” I was my mom.

“Hey, mom,” I said, actually happy to her voice. I'd be happy even if had to baby-sit a monkey as long as I still got to go out with Aaron the next day.

“Hi, sweetie. How are things going? You haven't been mugged, have you?”

“No.” I rolled my eyes. “Everything's fine.” Should I ask? Did I dare? “How's Erica?”

“Oh, she's getting better. Still on bed rest though. The doctors still haven't figured out what she has.” There was a sound in the background and then my mother came back on. “She wants to talk to you.”

I moaned, but said okay. When Erica came on the first thing she said was “You're not screwing it up, are you?”

“Hi Erica, my loving sister, how are you?” I said sarcastically.

“Look, just don't blow it, okay? Hopefully I will be well enough to get down there and perform it so you don't have to.”

“You know, I don't suck as bad as you think.”

“Badly.”

“Shut up, you education Nazi.”

“Why do I even bother talking to you?”

The education thing got stuck in my head. “Are you still valedictorian? Or did the illness knock off a tenth of your GPA?”

“The faculty has been sending me all my assignments so I’ve been able to keep up.” Wow, what a nerd. If I had been sick for two weeks I’d rather be watching a soap opera than make up homework. And I hate soap operas.

There was some weird noise in the background and I heard Erica asking Mom something.

Mom answered back. “Erica? What’s going on?”

“Uh...Mom has to go somewhere but she won’t tell me where.” Pause “Crap, got to go,” Erica breathed into the phone. “Look, don’t screw it up and...I don’t know, don’t get raped or anything.”

“Oh, Erica. You care!”

“Don’t even think it.” And with that lovely sentiment, she hung up. I looked at my cell phone and then clicked it back over to Beth.

“I’m back.”

“Hey,” she said. “So, he’s in the competition, too?”

“Yeah. He says his play is as bad as the thing Sally wrote.” I scanned the room to make sure Sally hadn’t sneaked back in while I was talking with my (horrible) sister.

“Did Matt ever tell you what that note was about?” she asked. Can you say RANDOM?

But, no, he hadn’t. I had completely forgotten about the note. It couldn’t have been THAT important. I mean, he hadn’t told me what it was about. So who cared, really?

Before I got the chance to tell Beth about the status of the knowing of the note, she said she had to go (because she had to watch Trevor while her parents went out to dinner).

Oh well. I lay back on my bed and thought that to the Ping Pong game. Was he really flirting? And why did Matt seem so pissed? Ugh, I’ll never understand that boy.

Well, tomorrow was my date with Aaron. Was it a date? Or just a friend showing another friend the city of New York.

Sally came in, muttering to herself. She got dressed for bed and shut off the light. I lay there in the dark, under the covers of crappy hotels blankets, thinking to myself: maybe my life doesn't suck...as much.

## REASON 9: MATT...AGAIN

That night took forever to end. I woke up every few hours, checking the cheap digital clock on the nightstand between Sally's bed and mine.

But morning wouldn't come. At least, not until it was finally eight o'clock.

But I had to wait an extra two hours. Dr. Livingston and Sally Merkerson made us all head to the large conference room for a rehearsal (the hotel had let

us use the room. Okay, they can afford a huge conference room but can't hire a plumber to fix our TOLIET?).

"C'mon, Kate. You and Matt get up there and do scene eight." Sally pointed towards the far side of the room. Matt headed over there, seemingly completely ready to start.

"Kate, are you coming?" Aaron's eyes were so blue and he had one dimple when he smiled...wha-what?

"Kate!" Dr. Livingston screamed. Oh yeah. That play-thingy.

"Sorry," I stammered, trying to remember what scene we were doing. "Scene six, right?"

"Scene eight," Dr. Livingston said. "Please try to concentrate. I know New York is a great city but you have to be focused." I laughed...on the inside.

On the outside I gave in and walked over to Matt and performed the scene...flawlessly, might I add.

I don't know why people always say that it's hard to memorize lines. It's not, really. Or maybe it just comes naturally with me. Either way, all I know is that I'm the only person in the cast that actually knows all of his/her lines. And I found that sad because I was the only one in the cast that didn't CHOOSE to be in it.

The rehearsal went on for two hours .Two LONG hours. Two LONG hours of listening to the other people doing their small scenes. John Fremont (who was playing a monk, by the way) had to do the scene with Sam Baker (who played Madeline's father).

And Janie Harting was doing her small scene with Matt, the one where she is a girl selling apples in the market place telling Bradley (Matt) that he should go after Madeline. I actually like the scene, because Bradley (Matt) gets told off my Janie's character (Maude. Where the hell did Sally come up with these names?).

Finally: salvation.

Dr. Livingston said we could go out and see the city, as long as we go with someone. And we kept in touch.

So, as Sally and I reached our room, I raced to grab my cell phone and a sweatshirt. It was mid-March, after all. It was still cold outside. I ran to the mirror, brushing my long brown hair up into a messy ponytail.

“So...where are you going, Kate?”

I turned and saw Sally sitting on the bed, watching me get ready. I noticed her shoes were off, so she wasn't planning on leaving. And she was frowning. I sighed. I didn't like her, but for some reason I felt bad for her. She didn't seem to have many friends (other than other EWs).

I sighed again. I probably should let her come with us. It would be the right thing to do. But then again she did drag me into this play. SHE was the one making my life a living hell (along with the pain in the ass). And now I was going to ruin my day with Aaron because of her? Nope! Sorry, but no cigar.

“Oh, I'm just going down to the vending machine, see if there are any Snickers.” I grabbed my purse for good measure, just to show her that I was going. Plus, I kind of wanted to buy one of those I heart NY T shirts. Just so I could cross out the heart. I've always wanted to do that.

I turned to leave when there was a knock at the door. I opened it and there was Aaron. Glorious, glorious Aaron. “Hey,” he said, smiling.

“Hey,” I said back.

We stood there a moment, just looking at each other. The magic was broken when Sally coughed (you know, one of those “hello. I'm here, stupid” coughs.) Ugh. Why did she have to ruin it?

“Oh,” I said, pretending I had forgotten that she was there. “Um, this is Sally Merkerson, my roommate.”

“Hey,” she said, probably as enthralled with Aaron as I was.

“Hey, I’m...” he started, but I cut him off.

“Um, no time. See ya, Sally.” I pushed him out of the hotel room, but once outside Matt opened his door, with a jacket on.

“Hey, heard you guys are going to see the city.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Let’s go, Aaron.”

“I believe...” Matt said, cutting me off on my way down the hall. “Livingston said you had to go with someone.”

I glared at him. “And what does Aaron look like, a toaster?”

Matt rolled his eyes. “He wants everyone to go with another *cast* member.”

I rolled my eyes. God, he would never leave me alone. “Hey are you guys going out?” Sally said, coming outside the room.

“Yeah,” Aaron said.

“Yeah,” Matt said.

“No!” I said, hoping the entire world could just die so I wouldn’t have to deal with anyone. Except Aaron, of course.

Matt, Aaron and Sally looked at me. I shut my eyes, praying that when I opened them I’d be in my own room and this was all a dream. I opened them. Damn.

Aaron, because he was the nice guy (at least, that’s the impression he was giving me) said, “Hey, why not bring them along too?”

I pleaded with him with my eyes, but gave in. “Fine.”

So, the four of us headed out of the hotel, on our way to see the infamous New York City.

The four of us were coming out of Sbarro’s. I love pizza....really. Actually I like just about anything with cheese and too many calories (yeah, I know I’m allergic to milk. But really, I don’t care. Who passes up pizza?).

“So, want to go see Times Square? I think it’s just about time for TRL.”

“TRL!” Sally screamed. “Oh my god! I love TRL.”

Matt and I rolled our eyes. What was so special about TRL anyway? I mean, they show five seconds of the videos and then talk for rest of the show. I hate TRL.

“So, want to go Kate?” Aaron asked. I smiled up at him, completely forgetting what I was complaining about. We could be going to the gates of hell and I’d be happy...as long as I was with Aaron.

I nodded and the four of us began our trek to the famous Times Square. On the way there we saw the following: a homeless woman pushing a shopping cart filled with old soda cans and a cat, a couple of guys wearing just boxers running down the street screaming “Save the whales!”, a run-over pigeon, another homeless person asking for spare change and drinking a beer, and finally a twenty-something girl with her mouth completely pierced shut with studs all over her face and a pink Mohawk.

That’s just plain creepy.

Once we reached Times Square we noticed the familiar crowd outside of the studio and Sally dragged us over. I sighed but followed.

Sally pushed her way almost to the front. Matt followed her, but grabbed my wrist (I assumed so we would all stay together). I grabbed Aaron’s wrist with my free hand and we followed the Merk.

We finally got to where Sally considered “good enough”. She stood there and screamed with the rest of the crowd. Matt was trying to keep people from stepping on his toes, but it was getting difficult.

A cold shiver ran down my back. Aaron noticed and wrapped his arms around me, my back to his front. “So, having fun yet?”

I smiled and thought back to what we had done. We first went to see the Empire State Building (which sounds a little egotistical, if you ask me), then we took a cab (A CAB! IN NEW YORK!) and drove over to see this kind of flea market. I bought my shirt, and was readily awaiting its demise (He he).

But now, standing here, having Aaron's arms around, all I wanted to do was stay there and never move.

Well...maybe not stay EXACTLY in that position.

Because it was then that Aaron leaned down, whispered, "That's good," in my ear and in the next second I was flipped around, so our faces were inches apart...but not for long.

Aaron leaned in closer, and I found myself doing the same. And closer, and closer. Our lips almost touched, but of course....well you know.

"KATE!" Matt's voice sailed well above all of the screaming. For a nanosecond everyone stopped, including Aaron and myself, and looked at Matt. He was staring at us. The moment passed and everyone continued to scream. But Aaron, Matt and I were still in the same position.

Finally, Matt snapped out of it. "Hey, Sally. I think it's time we get back to the hotel." Sally turned, frowned and nodded.

"Yeah, we need another rehearsal. The competition is tomorrow night." Matt grabbed Sally's wrist, and followed suit with my wrist. God, he's strong. As he walked out of the crowd he pushed by Aaron, making Aaron stumble back a little.

We reached the outskirts of the crowd and Aaron hailed (hailed, such a stupid word) a cab. It came over and Aaron went to open the back door but Matt stopped him. "Hey, you sit up front."

Aaron gave Matt a look, but did as instructed. He got up front, and Sally, Matt and I piled in the back seat, in that order.

I rested my head against the window. Matt looked over at me, and I lifted my head. I could see anger in his eyes. What had I done now? God, Matt was so freaking annoying. He turned back, looking straight out of the windshield. I rested my head against the window again and sighed. Gee, thanks Matt.

Sally and I plopped down on our respective beds. “I can’t believe I was in the TRL crowd! Oh, that was so much fun!” She propped herself up on one elbow. “What was with Matt?”

I rolled over so my head was buried in the blankets. Obviously the chambermaids had come in and made the beds. “Ugh.” I said.

“What?” she asked, sitting up. “Kate, I can’t hear you.”

I rolled back over. “Male PMS?” I suggested. She didn’t buy it.

“I don’t think so. He seemed mad at you.” Angry, my brain shouted. Maybe it was a good thing that my mom was no longer an English teacher.

“Whatever.” There was a knock on the door. I rolled back over to my suffocating position. I assumed Sally got up to get it because the door opened.

Please, don’t be Matt. Please, don’t be Matt. Please, don’t be Matt. Please, don’t be Matt.

“Hi, Amy.”

Amy? Who the hell was Amy? Did I know an Amy? Amy...costume. The ugly costume. Oh, that Amy. I had forgotten the rest of the world existed. Ugh. My life sucked.

I sat up and watched the conversation.

“Hi.” Twitch. “Um,” twitch. “Someone of the cast...” twitch. “was going swimming.” Hmm...no twitch that time. Was she getting better? “We were wondering...” twitch. Damn, guess not, “if you guys wanted to come, too.”

“Yeah, I’m up for some swimming.” Sally checked her watch. “We’ll have plenty of time for rehearsal later. Kate, you in?”

I had shoved a pillow into my face during the twitching. It reminded me too much of the rambling thoughts the guys in my head were saying. I slowly lowered the pillow and eyed them both. Swimming would be a nice relaxing activity.

But I realized, I had brought my bikini. No way in hell was I going around in public in a bikini. I only wore it when I was using Beth's pool. "Uh, go on without me."

"C'mon Kate." Sally pleaded. I shoved the pillow once more into my face, considered screaming, but instead pulled it away and nodded. "Yes!" Amy left and Sally went into the bathroom to change.

I walked over to my duffel bag and glanced in. I sifted through sweatshirt after sweatshirt, jeans after jeans. I finally found my bathing suit. I pulled them out, and looked at them. "Hmm..." I said out loud. I looked back into my bag and pulled out my white shorts that I sometimes wear to bed.

When Sally was down in the bathroom, I went in and changed into my bikini. Then I put on my shorts and threw on the shirt I had been wearing before, a gray Old Navy shirt.

I came out and Sally sighed. "I thought you were getting dressed."

"I am dressed. I'm wearing my suit underneath."

She rolled her eyes, grabbed each of us a towel and we left the room.

The pool was huge. This hotel was a freaking contradiction. Huge pool, huge conference room, NO FUNCTIONAL TOLIET!

Ugh.

Sally jumped right in, splashing everyone in a mile radius. No, she isn't "overweight"; she just got some height on that jump.

I shook my head lightly and sat in a plastic chair, crossing my legs. I scanned the pool for familiar faces. I saw Miroslav, John, Janie...and Matt. Definitely not someone I wanted to see.

"C'mon in, Kate!" Matt called. I shook my head.

"Maybe later," I called. It was hard to hear because there were some little kids screaming.

He waved one of those “whatever, I have better things to do” waves. I leaned back in the chair. I heard the pool door open. I glanced over and saw a familiar face.

“Hey, Kate,” Aaron called over. I saw that he wasn’t wearing a shirt, just his swim trunks. I almost sighed, but caught myself.

“Hey,” I returned.

“Aren’t you going in?” he asked, walking over to me.

“I’m thinking about it,” I lied. No way in hell was I getting in there now. I was NOT going to wear my bikini in front of Aaron.

“Well, you don’t mind if I go in, do you?” he asked sincerely. I giggled and shook my head.

“Go ahead. I’m not stopping you.” And he splashed into the pool.

I watched him swimming for a minute or two, but then leaned back against the chair. I closed my eyes and sighed happily. I was enjoying myself, even if I wasn’t swimming.

I lay there like that for probably twenty minutes. Then a huge splash of water hit my face. I sat up with a start.

“Reynolds, get in the pool!” Matt yelled. My hands were held out under my face, catching the drips. I looked up.

“No!” I yelled back. Nice try, though.

“Reynolds, get in the pool NOW!” he screamed, pulling himself out of the pool by means of the ladder.

“Not. Now.” I lay my head back against the chair.

“Alright, then I’m coming to get you!” I sat straight up and my eyes bulged wide. He could NOT be serious.

He came after me, and I kept screaming, “No!” The little kids stopped their game of “who can stay under the longest” and watched us.

Twice I slipped on puddles of water, but I caught myself both times and continued running around the pool.

Matt chased me around to the nine-foot deep side. Then I stopped. “I’m not going in Matt.”

“C’mon,” he said. I glanced down and saw Aaron treading water, holding back a laugh. Matt leaned in and whispered in my ear. “Do it for lover boy.”

I pushed him backwards and huffed in pure anger. Lover boy! Lover boy? Well, maybe...but Matt had no right to even THINK that!

Wait...since when did I care what Matthew Schroeder thought of my (practically nonexistent) love life.

“C’mon Reynolds! Let’s see some skin!” Matt called, purposely being as loud as possible.

I felt everyone’s eyes on me: the cast, Aaron, the little kids. I huffed again and snapped. “Fine! Fine, you want to see skin?! Here you go, Schroeder!” I screamed.

I pulled down my shorts, revealing the bottom half of my bikini. Then I threw them aside and pulled off my shirt, throwing it aside as well. “There,” I said, pointing to my midriff. “You got skin.”

All the boys howled and the girls laughed. And before Matt got a chance to say anything, I did a cannonball off the edge.

My only thoughts were of the phone numbers for hit men.

## REASON 10: OPENING NIGHT JITTERS

We stayed in the pool for another hour. I ended up swimming with Aaron over in the five foot deep part, ignoring Matt, who was extremely proud of himself. What was he so proud of? I was the one that faced my fear of wearing a bikini in front of people.

“So...” Aaron started as the two of us, dripping wet, walked back down the hall to my room. Aaron’s room was up on the second floor, along with the other Balkerson kids. “Um...”

We reached my door and I pulled out the card key. I stuck it in, but only got the red light. Damn.

“Well, I know you have to practice later tonight and probably all day tomorrow-”

“Actually Sally grew a conscience last night and said we can have the five hours before we have to leave for ourselves, so we can relieve stress...or whatever.”

“Oh, well, that changes everything,” he said, with a devilish laugh. Um, okay?

“How so?” I asked, trying the door again but still getting a red light. He wasn’t some psycho killer that seduced out-of-town girls, killed them, cut off their heads and used the body for sacrificial ceremonies, right? Because that would ruin a few of my plans.

“Well, I was wondering when I’d get to see you again.”

I tried the key one more time and finally got a green light. Those card keys were beyond annoying.

I voiced my earlier concern of his possible prison time for murder and he laughed. “No, it’s just that I enjoy being with you, you know?”

I smiled, pulling the door open and leaning against it. Sally, Matt and crew had decided to stay a bit longer but I had had enough. “Okay. I’ll come find you when we’re done tomorrow.”

“It’s a date then,” he smiled and walked to the elevators. I frowned, thinking. A date? Where had that come from? We only met yesterday. Was I that entrancing? Probably not. Then again, he did try to kiss me earlier.

I looked down at my feet and saw a puddle of water. I was still standing there, wet from swimming. I closed my eyes and went into the room. After showering and changing back into normal clothes, I waited for Sally to come back and start the rehearsal.

A date? I mean, a *date* date? Or was he just using a “term” like “speak of the devil”? Ugh. Maybe rehearsal could help clear my mind.

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“He said ‘date’? Was it just a figure of speech?” Beth asked into the phone.

Rehearsal had gone well and for a few moments I had actually forgotten about Aaron. I did my part, flawlessly, and everyone seemed ready for tomorrow night. Well, as long as Miroslav stayed back at the hotel. He seemed to have a personal vendetta against that street lamp.

“That’s what I’m asking you. I mean, how could it be a date? We’re both in a strange city and both are under the protective eyes of elders.”

“Well,” she said, “then I guess it was a figure of speech. Don’t read too much into Kate.”

I leaned back against my pillow. Sally was taking a shower and I could swear I heard her singing “Baby Hit Me One More Time”. Ugh. Pop songs. Enough said.

“Yeah alright. So...what’s up with you?”

I heard a sigh on the other end. “Very little. Trevor is suspended and my mom wants me to get a job helping out at the hospital. I’d rather French-kiss a psychotic clown.”

“Nice choice of words.” I heard her laugh on the other end and was glad I could cheer her up a bit. She seemed so unhappy when she talked about home. “Um...do you know anything about Erica?”

I heard her excitement level rise. “The doctors say she’s very close to fully recovering, so she might make it to New York.”

For some reason, I was angry. How dare she get better now! I mean, I’ve worked hard. I memorized her staging in one night, unwillingly. I did all three

shows, reluctantly. I came to this godforsaken island to perform it again, apathetically. And now all my work has paid off and she goes and ruins it. Not fair!

Wait. Was I complaining about NOT having to do the part? There must have been something in the water in New York City.

“Kate? Are you there?” I blinked. Had I been thinking to myself too long?

“Yeah. Yeah, I’m here.” The bathroom door opened and Sally strutted out in a spaghetti-strap top and pajama bottoms. “I got to go. Um, tell her feel better and good luck on anything at school, okay?”

“Yeah. And good luck on your performance. You’re going to kick ass Reynolds!” I laughed at Beth’s unusual utterance of anything vulgar. I thanked her and hung up. I was glad I had found as good a friend as Beth was. At least she understood my point of view.

Sally and I both got under the covers and tried to fall asleep. It was hard. So, instead we both stayed up until two in the morning playing all the card games we could think of.

Aaron and I were in his room, the one he shared with his roommate Keith. Keith was a short kid, with wide-brimmed black glasses and a tie which he wore...everywhere. So, he pretty much screamed nerd. But he was smart enough to leave when I came (because if he didn’t I’d have a fun time kicking his ass).

Well, we couldn’t go out anywhere because Livingston was an anal freak and the pool (including game room) was overrun by seventh graders on a school field trip.

So, by logical deduction, we decided to turn on the T.V. and ended up watching cartoons. “So, Looney Tunes or SpongeBob?”

I said Looney Tunes and we tuned into the cartoon where Daffy Duck is in the scene and in the end Bugs Bunny is the artist that had been screwing around with the duck.

We watched a few more, munching down on snacks we looted from the vending machines. Another one came on.

I felt a sudden stinging sensation. Aaron had thrown a piece of caramel popcorn at my head. "Hey!" I said playfully and shot an M&M at him.

"Hey!" he said and threw another piece of popcorn. I returned fire and we continued throwing food at each other, while we chased one another around the room.

Finally, I ran out of M&Ms, but from the looks of things Aaron was still armed. "Okay! Truce!"

He held his arm over his head, threatening to throw again. "Hey, I called truce. According to the Geneva convention that means you have to stop."

"Oh really?" he asked, walking closer to me.

"Yeah," I said. My heart was pounding, and not from our excursions around the crappy hotel room. "It does."

"Oh really?" he asked again, getting up right in front of me.

"Yes," I half-whispered. I opened my mouth to say something else, but he lifted up his hand and the next thing I knew he had put a piece of popcorn in my mouth.

He laughed, watching me spit it out. Ugh, caramel popcorn. Horrible, horrible stuff.

"Gee, thanks," I said.

"No problem." He laughed and sat back on the bed. I threw the piece away and sat on the other bed, intent on watching Bugs Bunny and Elmer Fudd. "So, Miss Reynolds, tell me about yourself," he uttered suddenly.

Swiftly I pulled knees up against my chest and wrapped my arms around them. I rested my head against my arms and turned my head so I could see

him. “Well...I live with my mom and my sister Erica. Um...I’ve lived in Luddermor all my life and I once got a button stuck up my nose.”

He laughed. “That’s it?”

“Pretty much. Well...my best friend is named Beth and I can’t drive.”

“Sounds like fun,” he said, clicking off the T.V.

“Okay,” I said, lifting my head. “Your turn.”

He eyed me slyly and answered. “Alright. Well, my name is Aaron Ackerson. I am eighteen years old and a senior at Balkerson.”

“I know that part,” I said exasperated. “What about family?”

“I have two younger brothers: Jake is fifteen and Todd is thirteen. Um, my mom is a nurse at a nursing home and my dad is a lawyer.” He stood and walked over to the desk where his soda was. “I moved to Balkerson when I was ten and have lived there since. I play on the lacrosse team, have a B plus average and plan on majoring in business law, like my dad.”

I smiled and hugged my knees tighter. I was having fun. Aaron was a fun guy and I was really glad Sally had grown a heart and let us have these hours to ourselves. “So, when is your performance?”

“Seven thirty,” Aaron answered. He made a face.

“What?” I asked self-consciously. Did he just realize that I was an ugly, sarcastic girl that he wanted nothing to do with? Oh, I hoped not. I knew I wasn’t Jennifer Lopez; I wasn’t pretty in any way. But could Aaron, this gorgeous hunk, see around that to the (not so) great person I was?

“I don’t think were gonna win. I mean, the script is horrible.” Whew. That was close...at least in my mind.

“Oh, my god. So is ours! Who was the idiot that picked these scripts?”

We both laughed, but it was a nervous laugh. We hadn’t really been alone since we met (okay, YESTERDAY, but hey, sometimes true love moves faster. Look at Romeo and Juliet. Yeah, it didn’t work out so well for them but

I doubt Aaron could get a hold of an apothecary and I would be anywhere near a mausoleum).

“So, who does Keith play?”

“Oh, he’s just stage manager. Can’t you tell?”

“Oh, you mean he’s only dressed like that for tonight?” Please tell me that this is true, because I was starting to feel that EVERYONE wanted to kick the poor kid’s ass. And I was starting to feel bad for him too.

“Uh, no. He pretty much dresses like that everywhere.”

I chuckled and checked the clock. It was five. Our performance was on right before Aaron’s, which meant we started at six. I had to go, get to the theater, get in costume and makeup, and then get ready to go on. I had to go.

“Um, it’s five. I have to go, get ready, for the performance.” I stood to leave and Aaron walked me to the door. “So, I’ll see you tomorrow...I mean, if you want. You don’t have to...”

“Hey,” he said, cutting me off. He leaned down, kissed my forehead and said, “Break a leg. See ya later.”

Somehow, beyond all human comprehension, Amy got me back in that thing. I won’t even dignify it with a name. But it was hideous. I was beginning to think Amy and Sally were plotting against me.

My shoes were on, and Amy was getting the rest of my makeup on. I hate wearing makeup. It makes me feel fake, and it makes me mad other girls (okay, let’s face it, guys too) have to wear it to feel better about themselves.

“Fifteen minutes!” Sally screamed. Amy sighed and pushed me out of the chair, twitching all the while.

I sighed and walked over to the edge of the curtain, peering out. There wasn’t an audience, because it was a competition. There were three judges

sitting in the back of the off-Broadway theater. One of them, the more...um...flamboyant one, was Leonardo Farley, the main judge.

“You nervous?” Matt asked behind me. Me, nervous? I had performed the thing three times in front of hundreds of people (for such a small school, Luddermor had a lot of seats in the auditorium). But tonight, in front of judges, people that were going to criticize me...well, that was a different story.

I turned around, breathing hard. Yes, I was nervous. I was very nervous. But I wasn't going to tell Matt that. “No, no. I'm fine,” I lied. But Matt could see right through that.

“Your knees are shaking,” he told me. I looked down. Low and behold, they were all aquiver. I could feel the nervous tension mounting. I was going to screw it up. I forgot all my lines. I was going to go out there and make a complete ass of myself.

I glanced over at the small buffet laid out for the cast members. It had plastic cups, sodas and small snacks. “I need a cookie,” I told him.

I walked over to the table and tried to grab a delicious, mouth-watering chocolate chip cookie. But before the sweet morsel touched my lips Matt had grabbed my hand. “Um, unless you feel like upchucking all over the stage I would release the cookie.”

Why did Matt have to know that I'm allergic to milk?

I dropped the cookie and sat down on the ground, right in front of the table. I was really getting nervous now. Those five hours Sally had given us (the ones I spent happily with Aaron) were not helping me. I started to breathe even more heavily.

“Hey!” Matt said, kneeling down in front of me. I looked up at his face, which was about five inches higher than mine. “Hey, you'll be fine. You know everything, you've done it a million times.”

“Judges,” was all I could get out. Why was I so nervous? God, the shakiness was reaching my hands. I held them out in front of me, so Matt could see. “Hands.” I was going caveman with my speech.

“Okay, you need something to drink.” He looked up at the table, to see what sodas were available. “Sprite or Coke?” I looked back down at me. I closed my eyes. I didn’t care. “Okay then....Sprite it is.”

He stood and poured the glass. “Ten minutes!” Sally called, standing right next to me and nearly blowing my eardrums out. “Hey,” she said, looking down at me. “Get to position.”

I looked up and sighed. Great.

“Reynolds, get up!” she said, physically pulling me up.

“Sal, give her a minute.” Matt handed me the cup. I took a sip. I felt the cool refreshing liquid go down my throat. I felt a bit less tension in my neck. “Alright, you ready?”

I looked back and forth between Sally and Matt. No, I wasn’t ready. Not even Sprite could calm these nervous. I looked back at Matt and ran for the stage door. I needed a bathroom.

I ran down the long dark hallway, trying to find that bathroom that Mr. Farley had shown us a half hour ago. I felt along the walls hitting, in order, a fire alarm, an electrical socket, something wet and finally the small template that read BATHROOM in Braille.

I opened the door and headed straight for the stall. Was it situational irony that I started my acting career changing in a stall and now on my last night I was puking in one?

Well, I guess that’s not important when you’ve emptied your stomach contents of pizza and M&Ms into a toilet in a strange bathroom.

“Hey, Kate, you in here?” I heard a voice call. I pulled myself from the position I was kneeling in. Wiping my mouth with a piece of toilet paper I hit the flush button for the toilet.

“Yeah, I’m here,” I answered. Five bucks says Matt sent her here to check on me.

“Kate? It’s Sally. You okay?” I stood and opened the door, confronted with the image of Sally. I saw my face in the mirror. Amy would have to fix my lipstick. Ugh, I hate lipstick.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” I told her, holding my forehead with my hand.

“You look flushed,” she said, putting a (comforting?) hand on my shoulder. “Hey, Reynolds, you’ll be fine. You’re probably the best actor I have...even if you didn’t even want to be here in the first place.”

I smiled slightly and dropped my hand. Was I a good actor? Wow, I thought I was horrible.

“It’s nerves, I guess. But, I puked, so I guess I’m better now. “

“Okay...” she said, not believing me (about the “I’m better” part, not the “I puked” part...I hoped). “Well, we still have a show to do. Do you think you think you can do it?”

I nodded and she nodded too. She snatched my hand and led me out the bathroom and down the hall.

We arrived backstage a minute before show time. Miroslav ran on stage to fix the lamp and rushed off. The extras in the first scene got set on stage left and Matt dragged me behind the upstage curtain to stage right, where the two of us walk in.

Once over there, Matt turned me so I was facing him. “Hey,” he said, in a serious tone, holding my head with a hand on each side. “Hey, you’ll be fine. Okay?”

I nodded. I tried to think about nice things, like Green Day, Aaron and kicking Matt’s ass. It was working, thankfully.

The lights went up and the show was starting. Matt sent me a meaningful look, dropped his hands and we walked on stage, now pretending to be lovers. Ugh, such a bad script.

“Oh, Bradley!” I called to Matt, sitting on the bench.

“Madeline! I’ve heard about your father.” He sat down next to me.

“Bradley,” I cried into his shirt. This was pathetic, but at least my nerves had calmed down. “But,” pulling myself up. “Now, we can marry!”

Matt and I stood, center stage, pretending to be overcome with joy. John Fremont came out on stage.

“Come with me, children,” he said, gesturing offstage. “Your wedding awaits you.”

Matt, John and I walked offstage, Matt and I holding hands (for the show, not because I wanted to). The show was over and I’d never have to do it again. A feeling of pure happiness swept over me and my nerves, which had been killing me for the last hour, settled.

I heard quiet applause from the judges and I smiled. John was high-fiving Janie Harting, who didn’t seem to know what he was doing. Sally was jumping, sending random prayers skyward. I watched all this take place, not even realizing I was still holding Matt’s hand.

When I finally DID realize I turned and told him, “You can let go now.” He looked down and smiled.

“Sorry,” he said, in a loud whisper. He released my hand. My hand suddenly went cold without his warmer hand around it.

Matt walked over to see Sally and I found a chair and sat down. It was FINALLY over. Oh, thank god. I closed my eyes and sighed in relief. All I could do was picture me home, with my bed and my friends and Aaron, away from this stage. Oh, happiness!

Matt walked back over to where I was sitting. “Hey,” he said, pulling a white carnation from behind his back. “You did good, Reynolds.” He held out

the flower and I looked at it. It wasn't covered in itching powder, was it? Hey, you never know with Schroeder.

"Um, thanks Matt." I took it from his hand and smiled. Okay, so Matt could be a good guy.

"Matt!" Sally called. He rolled his eyes, winked at me and walked back over to her.

Well, it was over and hey, I got a flower out of it.

I set the flower down next to my chair and heard a familiar voice. "Kate!"

I turned my head and was rewarded by seeing Aaron. His group was coming in, trading places with my group. "Hey, sounds like you guys did a good job."

"Well, judges don't know what they're talking about," I told him, getting a laugh out of it.

"I got to see the last minute or so. I thought you were really good." I smiled, and saw him pull something from behind him. Déjà vu? "Here, for you."

It was a perfect red rose. I gasped. My first thoughts were of the carnation, the one Matt gave me. I didn't want Aaron to think anything was happening between Matt and I (especially because nothing WAS happening between Matt and I) so I kicked it with my foot as far back as I could while taking the rose from him.

"Thank you," I said, wholeheartedly. He smiled, his dimple adding to his good looks.

"Well, got to go get into costume." He waved and began to walk away.

"Good luck!" I called after him, hoping he heard.

The last thing I remember before leaving was seeing Matt, standing in the corner, wearing a frown.

## REASON 11: ERICA IS BETTER

I don't think I had ever had a better night's sleep than the night of the performance.

I was dead tired and the second my head hit the pillow I was asleep, still wearing the Ithaca College sweatshirt and jeans I had changed into before we left the building.

But the next morning I felt like crap.

I woke up to the sound of the alarm. We were supposed to be leaving around noon, so we could get home in time so the cast could get enough sleep for school the next day (because today was Sunday).

Horrible Oldies music blasted in my ear, causing me to jump with fright. I turned and slammed my fist down on the snooze button. "SALLY!" I screamed, not caring if the people in the next room heard me or not.

Turning my attention to the bed next to me, I noticed that Sally wasn't there. I saw a damp towel lying on the floor of the doorway to the bathroom. So...either she had just given birth or she had taken a shower already.

I must have been thinking slowly, because apparently five minutes had passed and DJ Joe came on telling me the Monkees were the artist of the song coming up next. I grabbed the clock, ripping the plug out of the wall, and threw it on the ground. "AH!" I screamed, shoving the nearest pillow into my head. I lay back down and struggled not to scream again.

All I could think about was Matt's expression the night before. What was his problem? I mean, he had been so sweet, helping me calm down and get ready for the performance. He had even given me a carnation...uh oh. No, dear God don't tell me he saw me kick it away when Aaron gave me the rose!

Yep. I was fairly certain he did.

I was thinking all this when the door burst open and, I think, the loudest noise ever heard by humankind was heard. "WE DID IT!"

I pushed the pillow farther into my head.

"KATHLEEN REYNOLDS, DID YOU HEAR WHAT I SAID???" Sally shrieked just inside the door.

I pushed the pillow as far as I could into my face. "Yes, I heard you Sally. Everyone in the tri-state area heard you," I said in a normal voice, though it was probably muffled through the pillow.

"KATE!" She screamed, running to my bed, shaking me, running back to the door and banging on all the doors of the cast. "OPEN UP!" she screeched.

I sat up, pulling the pillow off. There was a face print in it. I smiled weakly.

Once Matt, John, Amy, Miroslav, Janie and crew were in our room (and I had pulled the blankets over me) Sally ran to get Dr. Livingston. “What’s going on?” and “Why are we here?” filled my small hotel room.

“Kate, what’s going on?” John asked.

I moaned and tore the covers off me. “She’s coming off her acid trip. She might be a little screwy for the next couple of hours.”

John gave me a funny look and I closed my eyes. Ugh. SALLY!

We waited another minute before Sally returned with our director. “Okay, Sal,” Matt said, rubbing sleep from his eyes. At least he didn’t get much sleep either. “What’s going on?”

“WE WON!”

“Huh?” Everyone said at once. Why couldn’t this wait for later? I mean, it was...I checked the clock. SIX-FIFTEEN! Not...fair.

“We won for our category! I was named best scriptwriter for the Historical category!” She was jumping up and down, and landing on many toes that didn’t belong to her.

“Wait...” Amy said, twitching her lip (how did she do that?)  
“We...won?”

“YES!” Sally looked like she was about to pop from excitement.

“We won?” Janie asked. Why was this not sinking in to the others? I got it the FIRST time she screamed it.

“Yes! And there’s more.” I stood, walked over to the wall and banged my head against it.

“Kate?” Dr. Livingston asked, and everyone looked at me. I turned, sighed and leaned back against the wall.

“Well, what it is, Merk?” I said, not realizing I had used Matt’s nickname for her.

But apparently she did notice (or she ignored it). “We are invited to perform in the showcase!”

“What is showcase?” Miroslav asked, totally and utterly confused. He scratched the back of his right leg with his left foot, tilting his head like a puppy. (I HATE PUPPIES. I HATE ANYTHING THAT COULD GROW UP TO BE A DOG AND KILL ME!)

“They have a showcase where the winning plays are performed like an off-Broadway production. We get to do the Historical performance! They invited us to stay another two nights!”

Dr. Livingston clapped his hands (in a very girly way, mind you). Everyone cheered halfheartedly, mostly from sleep deprivation. Another performance? Could I take another performance?

“That’s great, Sally!” Dr. Livingston squealed. I hung my head and shook it. Just lovely.

It was then that a phone rang. Everyone looked, including me. The ring was my ring tone for when Beth called me, which was American Idiot (Beth thought it was funny, so I used it). “It’s Beth,” I said.

Everyone watched as I crossed to my suitcase and grabbed my phone. I checked the number, just to be sure. Yep, it was my dear friend Beth Sanders.

“Hey,” I said softly into the phone. I could still feel everyone’s eyes on me, still in my clothes from the night before.

“She’s coming!” Beth yelled in my ear. Was there a mission sent from the President telling everyone to BLOW MY EARDRUMS OUT??

“What?” I asked, still a little lethargic. I mind was swimming. Who?

“She’s COMING!” Beth said louder, like that would help the information process in my head.

“Huh?” That was when I heard everyone turned around, looking at the door.

“SHE IS COMING!” Beth screamed into the phone.

“Who??” I asked, trying my best to understand. WHY DIDN'T SHE JUST SAY WHO “SHE” WAS?

“ERICA!” came my answer, but the voice didn't belong to Beth. It was Sally's.

I looked up and saw my perfect, egocentric, valedictorian sister standing in the doorway of my hotel room.

“ERICA IS COMING TO NEW YORK!” Beth yelled in my ear.

“No,” I said, closing my eyes. “She's here.”

“This is the hotel they gave you?” Erica asked, sitting daintily on my bed. I rolled my eyes and turned up the volume on my CD player.

“Yeah, doesn't it suck?” Sally answered back, sitting on her bed, trying to cross her legs the way Erica was. Okay, wasn't Sally the one that was FASCINATED with the room when we got it? What happened with that?

“Oh well. I mean, you won, right Sally?” Erica asked innocently.

“Oh yes! It was amazing Erica. I mean, everyone got their lines right, no one screwed up horribly and the judges were crazy about it!”

Damn, my volume was all the way up and I could STILL hear them.

“Well, that's great. Really, I'm happy for you. I just wish I could have been here for you.” She sighed dramatically, trying to steal the pity from me. Hey, I was the one that was dragged into this. I was the one that was forced to get up there and perform HER part. I was the one that did it RIGHT.

“Oh, well. Kate did fine.” I smiled at that. Ha, evil sister of mine! I could do your part, no problem! “But...” Sally continued. “If you're up to it then you can be Madeline for the showcase tomorrow!”

Red light. Stop. Freeze...WHAT?????

“Really! Yeah, I'm up for it!” Hello? Do I get a say in this?

“Great! I’ll have to tell Dr. L, Mr. Farley, the commission. But, they’ll be fine with it!” I’m still here, Merkerson. ASK ME IF I’M OKAY WITH IT!

“I’ll tell Dr. Livingston.” I’M SITTING RIGHT HERE! YOU’VE BEEN IGNORING ME FOR SIXTEEN YEARS! HELLO! MY TURN!!!!!!

“Okay!”

I was ready to scream. Yeah, okay, so I DIDN’T want the part originally. But, I guessed, I don’t know. It grew on me. Luckily for the other two females in the room, there was a knock at the door and I jumped up to get it.

When opened the door I saw Aaron. He was standing there, so hot and so perfect (okay, lacking a Matt smile, but hey, everyone needs a fault right?).

“Hey,” he said.

“Hey,” was my brilliant reply.

“Well, we’re going now and I wanted to say good-bye.” Um...GOOD-BYE! What did that mean? Good-bye as in “I never want to see you again so get out of my face”? Or as in “Good-bye, sweet princess. I shall count the moments until I am privileged with the chance to again see your golden face” (Hmm...I like the second one)?

“You’re leaving?” I asked.

“Yeah, we lost. I told you the script sucked.” I smiled. Wait...our script sucked too! Why were we forced to stay?

“Well, we won, so we have to stay a while longer.”

“That’s cool,” he said. Then, in a split second, he leaned down and kissed me. Right on the lips. But it was brief, much too brief. “So, I’ll see you when you get back?”

I gushed like a freaking middle schooler. “Yeah.”

He smiled and began to walk away. I watched him leave. He turned his head around as he walked and winked. I smiled again and waved. Then he was gone. I was without Aaron access for two more days. Ugh.

Once he was out of view I returned to my room. Thank God Matt wasn't around, I thought.

Whoa. Where did that come from? What did I care if Matt cared who I kissed (well, who kissed me)? Whatever.

Back in the room I was immediately greeted by two bodies flying out of the room. "Bye, Kate!" Erica said, in a very unfriendly tone.

"Be back later!" Sally called behind her.

I was alone. No Aaron, no anybody. I checked the clock again; seven forty-five. Had it been that long? Well, Sally had come barging in, we had the little group "chat", Erica showed up...Aaron left. Yeah, I guess it was that long.

I looked longingly at my bed. It had never looked so good before.

I was sitting at the table in the back of the conference room, watching Erica do her part. Ha, she was messing some lines up. But Sally was eating it up.

My head was resting on my hands (I had propped my arms by means of my elbows on the table), and I had spread my fingers so that they covered my eyes. "That's great!" I heard Sally tell Erica.

The rest of the crew mumbled their agreement. I had the cast's support; they didn't want Erica taking over again so close to the biggest performance. I gave up caring shortly after arriving at the conference room. Hey, she wanted to make an ass of herself, by all means go ahead. It would be more entertaining to me.

"Hey, Kate!" Sally called to me. I spread my fingers so I could see. "Which side did I have you move to right after Bradley gives you the ring?"

I sighed. Directors, who needed them? "Left," I yelled out, holding the word out.

“Oh, right. Err...your left or mine?” I put my fingers back in front of my eyes and squeezed my face. God woman, figure it out for yourself.

It was then that Dr. Livingston got a call. He walked over towards the door, away from the rest of the cast, but in ear shot of me. The other guys kept practicing, but I listened in. What can I say, I’m nosy.

“Yes, but I’m not sure how we can...Alright, but I can’t be sure...Yes....No...Seven cast members...She has to? ...But, can’t you pull some strings? ...Alright...Alright, thank you.”

He slammed his cell phone shut and turned to me. I quickly averted my eyes back to the rehearsal, seeing Matt roll his eyes and Erica and Sally jumping up and down. I will NEVER understand girls.

“Kate, can I see you a moment?” Livingston asked. I nodded, pried my fingers from my face (they felt like they were glued to it) and walked over to the guy. “We have a bit of a problem.”

I was finally relieved of duty, so I was going to have as much fun with this dork as possible. “But, Dr. Livingston, I only do weed when I can’t find any good Meth!”

“What?” he asked loudly, catching everyone’s attention.

“What’s wrong, Dr. L?” Erica asked.

He turned around so he could see everyone. “Well, Erica. We have a bit of a problem. It seems that because Kate was in the original cast, she has to perform.”

Whoa, no. That’s alright. I’d rather be in the audience anyway. Sally and Erica sighed.

“Well, she could take my part,” a tiny voice said. We all looked at Janie Harting. She was very pale and looked ready to throw up. “I’m really not feeling well.”

Dr. Livingston had a look, like he was seriously considering this. “Actually, that might work.”

“Why don’t you go back to bed, Janie? You look like crap,” said John Fremont.

“Thanks,” she said quietly and stood to leave. She walked over to me, handed me the script and nodded. I nodded too, like it was some weird code or something.

“Feel better!” John called after her. I was beginning to think John might like Janie.

I looked down at my lines. YES! I was Maude, the girl who tells off Bradley (Matt). Perfect!

I spent the next hour memorizing lines, thinking about Aaron, thinking about how I would get to tell off Matt, thinking about Aaron and memorizing lines.

“Do you want pepperoni?” Erica asked me.

“No. Just cheese,” I answered. Erica had ended up staying in our room, meaning I’d have to share a bed with her. Wonderful.

“How about you, Sally?” she asked. We were ordering pizza for dinner, so we could work on Erica’s lines. Everyone else had gone out.

“Um, I like pepperoni.”

“One large pizza with pepperoni please,” Erica said into the phone. Oh, gee. Thanks.

Erica saw my face. “Oh, just pick the pepperoni off. Besides, aren’t you allergic to cheese?” Thanks even more.

Erica finished her order and hung up the hotel phone.

“Thirty minutes,” she told us. I fell back against my pillow. That thing was really getting abused.

Sally and Erica stood at the front of the beds, ready to rehearse. “ Okay, I’ll have to do Matt’s part,” Sally giggled. Wow, girl bonding. Not interested, thank you.

I would have worn my headphones but Sally made me play director so I could “critique” Erica while performing. Oh, you want a critique?? LEAVE ME THE HELL ALONE!

It was the longest half hour of my life.

When the pizza finally arrived I raced to the door to pay the dude. The pizza guy was typical: early twenties, goatee, unable to count change.

“Ah! Pizza!” Erica cried dramatically. I rolled my eyes, thanked the guy and slammed the door shut.

The pizza was completely eaten in fifteen minutes. Sally ate three of the eight slices, Erica ate three of the slices and I got two. Talk about sister love. She almost bit me for the last piece.

“Erica!” I yelled, after she had grabbed the slice.

“Oh, go memorize lines!” she said. Why is it that she is perfectly sweet around other people but the second she talks to me she turns into Mr. Hyde?

After I had thrown the box away there was a knock on the door. Why was everyone knocking on that door?

“Kate, go get that,” Erica said, flipping through her Teen People.

“Get it yourself,” I shot back. I grabbed the magazine from her and threw it on the floor. “I’m not your maid!”

“Well obviously,” she said, bending down to pick the magazine back up. “A maid CLEANS messes. You just are one.”

Erica and Sally both laughed at that. Gee, thanks Sally. Just when I thought we were starting to get along.

I grunted but walked to the door and pulled it open. It was Matt. That was a surprise.

“What?” I asked. He was mad last night, so why was he here? To make up? I didn’t care. Matt and I fight all the time.

Expecting an apology for his rudeness last night, I was caught off guard when he said instead, “Livingston wants you and me in the conference room, five minutes.” Um, okay?

“Why?”

“I don’t know, Reynolds! Just be there.” And then he went back to his room. Matt. Ugh.

Five minutes later I was in the conference room with Matt and Livingston. “Okay, let’s run your scene.”

I sighed and Matt and I got up and did the scene (the one where I’m Maude and telling off Bradley (Matt)). Whew, I had my lines memorized. So, tomorrow night shouldn’t be that bad. It was a smaller part, I knew my lines and it was actually fun.

“Okay, that should be fine. Nice job guys.” Dr. Livingston yawned, patting his mouth. He rubbed his eyes and gestured to the door, meaning we could go.

“Thank you!” I said skywards and raced to the door, trying to stay ahead of Matt so I wouldn’t have to talk to him. No luck.

“You ready for tomorrow?” he asked, back to his normal self.

“Wait, “ I told him, and he stopped. Where was the Matt from last night? The pissed off one? And why was he being so nice all of a sudden?

“What?” he asked.

“What’s with you? Last night you shoot me down and now your Mr. Happy?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he said and began walking again.

I caught up with him and walked next to him, practically running to keep up. “Last night you were all ‘Get out of my face!’ and now you’re all ‘Ready for tomorrow?’. What happened?”

“Nothing,” he breathed, slowing. “It was a stressful night, I guess.”

“Bull,” I shot back, wanting an answer.

“Whatever,” he called behind him as he walked away. I leaned back against the wall (which was sticky, I’m unhappy to report) and closed my eyes. I’d have given my left arm to be anybody but me.

My life sucked.

Erica was kicking me. She was tossing and turning and mumbling “Jason! AHH! The purple backpack. No, Mommy, the vase broke itself.”

Um...okay?

“Erica,” I whispered, trying to pull back some of the blanket she had yanked off of me, but she had a death grip on it.

So I lay there, on my abused pillow without blankets and being kicked in the thigh by my sister. This was definitely the life.

“Alabama, Alaska, Arizona...” Great, now she was reciting the fifty states. Next she’ll be giving me Bach’s biography.

“Erica, shut up!” I whispered loudly in her ear.

But the states kept on coming.

I wasn’t going to get any sleep this way. The showcase was tomorrow and I needed sleep to get me through it. It wasn’t going to be pleasant, especially since my scene was with Matt. He was acting all weird lately...and I still didn’t know what the note was about Plus, I wasn’t even going to be able to see Aaron tomorrow. Ugh. I couldn’t wait to get home.

Erica kicked me in the gut and I sat up straight. “ERICA!” I screamed.  
She sat up again, and (reflexively, I hoped) she slapped me in the face.  
“Mutant hamsters!” she yelled.

My sister has the WEIRDEST dreams.

I held my face. “Ow,” I said out loud.

Erica was rubbing her eyes. “Wha-what’s going on?”

I closed my eyes tightly. “You were kicking me.”

“Oh, sorry.” She said halfheartedly and lay back down. She tugged all the blankets back on to her.

“Can I have some blanket,” I asked, kicking her in the back of the knee.

“Ow!” was her reaction. “Not now! Go to sleep freak.” And she resumed her quest to alphabetize the fifty states in her sleep.

I moaned, grabbed my pillow and threw it on the floor. I grabbed a towel and used it as my blanket. Thanks a lot Erica.

I swear I’m adopted.

## REASON 12 : THE PERFORMANCE

Well, I don't think I ever got to sleep that night. Erica continued talking throughout the entire night, and the various topics of discussion included: space ships, Weird Al, Laverne and Shirley, trees and some guy named Jimbo. What went on in that genius head of hers?

The morning sun splashed into our room and I gave up trying to sleep. Apparently the entire WORLD hated me.

Last night, before bed, Dr. Livingston had been in and out of our room, calling all the parents to tell them of our extended stay. “Yes, Mr. Leary” and “Mrs. Stubbs, no, no, she’ll be fine” filled out hotel room. And then of course I had to deal with the kicking. Oh...the kicking.

I checked my thigh and low and behold a bruise was forming. Gee, thanks dear sister.

My phone rang. It was Beth.

“Where are you guys? School starts in five minutes!” Beth whined. I was starting to feel bad about spending so much time away from my best friend. She doesn’t really have anyone else to talk to.

“Sorry, I didn’t get a chance to call you last night.” I yawned and continued. “We’re staying an extra night here.”

I heard Beth sigh on the other end of the phone. “So, you’ll be home sometime tomorrow?”

“Hopefully. Unless Sally cons her way into winning something else,” I mumbled into the phone and glanced up at Sally’s bed. She and Erica were still asleep.

She sighed again. “Alright.” There was a loud ringing noise in the background. “Okay, well, that’s the bell. I’m late. I’ll see you tomorrow then.”

“Yeah. See ya tomorrow.” She hung up and I fell back into my pillow, the dead line still ringing.

Someone knocked on our door. My eyes snapped open. What now?

The knock came again. I sat up, banging my head on the desk. I grabbed my head in pain, and looked down to see that my phone was still on. I turned my head to see the digital clock, still clutching my throbbing head. It read eight-twenty.

Noticing that I was the only one still in the room, I got up, finally let go of my head and opened the door. It was John Fremont.

“Hey, you’re awake.” Um, astute observation, Mr. Monk.

“Yeah, so?” I asked groggily. My head hurt from the table and lack of sleep.

“The cast is having a Ping Pong tournament. Matt told me to come get you.”

Ah, so Matt will wake me up and drag me out to the game room but he can’t do it himself? He has to send someone else to do it. Nice.

“That’s okay; I don’t want to.”

John rolled his eyes and sighed. “Matt told me to get you, not ask you.”

I hung my head. Was it worth the fight? Probably not.

I gave in and told him I had to get dressed.

I thought I was asleep, until the first wave of chlorine hit me. That woke me up.

“Kate, over here!” Sally called. “You’re playing winner.” I turned and saw everyone packed into the game room. I began to walk over when a huge splash of water fell on my head.

“Oh, sorry!” A little boy said quickly, and returned to his game of tag. I wasn’t completely drenched, but my hair was and the top part of my sweatshirt. Wonderful.

I shook myself, trying to remove any excess water. Then, giving the little kid a look, I walked over to the game room.

“Have a nice swim?” Matt asked, serving the ball to Miroslav (who turned out to be pretty good, contrary to my first belief).

“Huh. Very funny,” I told him in a snide voice and sat in the only unoccupied chair. I watched Matt and Miroslav finish their game (Matt won, but only by a point).

Miroslav hung his head and walked away from the table, leaving an opening. For me.

“You’re up, Kate,” Sally said, motioning to the table.

“That’s okay,” I smiled, turning my head.

“Get up here Reynolds,” Matt said, tossing me the paddle. I wasn’t paying attention, and it hit me in the forehead.

“Ow!” I yelped. It had hit me right where I had hit my head on the desk. “What, are you TRYING to kill me?”

Matt smiled, and for a second everything was okay. A Matt smile can do that, you know. “C’mon, Kate. Scared of losing?”

Okay. I am a BIT competitive. It’s not my fault; I just can’t ignore a challenge. Kind of like when he wanted me to get in the pool. Damn, Matt was good at that.

“Scared of losing to you? God, my psycho grandmother can play better.” Ha, Mr. Schroeder. Two can play at that game.

“A bet then?” Matt said.

I smiled, the right side of my mouth raised higher than the left. Everyone in the room cheered on, hoping it would be something good. “What’s the wager?” I asked, very interested.

“Loser has to go skinny dipping in the pool.”

Everyone laughed at that, but then I reminded him that there was a lifeguard and the old guy would never let that happen.

Yep, I’m always the one to ruin everyone’s fun. The cast moaned collectively and Matt frowned.

“Okay, okay. Then winner gets to push loser in the pool.” Okay, not as good as the original bet, but it would be entertaining pushing Matt in the pool.

I knew I could beat him. Yes, my hand-eye coordination sucked, but hey, miracles happen. I mean, what about that hockey team back in 1980? That was a miracle wasn't it? And what about the whole Red Sea thing?

So, I stood, making a dramatic bow towards the crowd (which I had realized just then did NOT include Erica, thank God) and strutted over to the table. Holding my paddle against my chest I said, “Ready?”

“Always,” Matt responded, and we began to play.

Let me tell you, it was an intense match. Matt started off hitting the ball lightly, so it was easy to hit. But then WHAM! He would smack it into oblivion.

But, once realizing his pattern, I beat him at his own game and would to the same thing, only sooner. He caught on and in the end we were just smacking it as hard as we could, ignoring the rules of the game.

Somehow Miroslav had kept track of the score. When the ball finally lay to rest on the floor, both Matt and I slightly out of breathe, everyone turned to Miroslav.

“What?” he asked, completely confused.

“Who won, Miro?” Sally asked.

He was still a little confused, and then comprehension dawned (okay, this kid was just plain WEIRD). “Kate did.”

The cast was divided. The boys booed and the girls cheered (except Miroslav, who cheered for me). I smiled, tilted my head to the side and raised my eyebrows.

Matt's eye went huge. “Kate, c'mon. You know I wouldn't push you in if I won,” he pleaded with me.

I just walked around the table, forcing him to walk backwards, towards the game room door. “Oh yes you would,” I answered him finally.

“No, I wouldn’t,” he pleaded again. Finally, he had backed all the way out the door. The pool was only ten feet away.

“Oh really?” I was having a little TOO much fun now. But I didn’t care. It was time for a little revenge.

The entire cast had filed out of the game room, eager to see the fall. Matt was mere inches from the side of the pool. He looked back, and the little kid who had splashed water on me looked up at him. The boy’s face was of pure terror, and he swam away as fast as his little legs allowed him.

Matt turned back to me. My smile was probably from ear to ear. “Kate,” he said harshly. “Don’t.”

“Oh,” I said, bringing a finger to my chin (like one of those snotty college professors). “So, you wake me, you tell me to come to the game room, I get splashed, I WIN the game and now you say I don’t get my half of the bet?”

“That is exactly what I’m saying,” he told me.

I smiled, and his eyes widened. “Oh Matt!” I cooed, making him get closer to the pool.

“Okay, look Reynolds!” He tilted his head and stuck out his bottom lip. “See? I’m doing the puppy dog face!”

“I hate puppies!” I retorted. He was right at the edge.

Now, here was my moment. Be nice little Kate and let him off the hook? Or be normal Kate and push him into the pool?

Well, which one would YOU pick?

With every ounce of energy I could muster I pulled my arms back and, almost in slow motion, I pushed forward, making contact with Matt’s chest and then he was gone, in the water. I was rewarded with the huge splash that followed, and also the look I got from the lifeguard.

Matt resurfaced and everyone laughed. I just smiled and waved. He spluttered water from his mouth and wiped water from his eyes. “Bitch!” he yelled at me. The little kids giggled at the sudden swearing.

“Oh, now, you don’t mean that!” I laughed.

For a moment, everything was great.

But then the lifeguard yelled at us to leave. Everyone got out of the pool area walked back to our rooms.

“Kate!” I heard Matt call. I looked back, seeing a sopping wet Matt. He looked like a drowned rat.

“Have a nice swim?” I asked, repeating his earlier question.

“Shut up.” He flung out his arms, trying to stop the dripping. I couldn’t help but laugh. “Oh, you are so dead, Reynolds.”

“See you later,” I called in a high girly voice, and walked back into my room.

Oh yeah, that was worth it.

The audience was filing in, and it was starting to feel like the show we did back home. Why is it that when there are hundreds of people I’m perfectly okay but when there are only three judges in the audience I FREAK??

Well, we were all back stage, and I was filled with memories of Aaron. I was standing right where he had given me the rose.

I smiled, recalling the memory. Sally screamed next to me, telling everyone that we had ten minutes to curtain. She turned to her side and eyed me suspiciously. “You’re not gonna puke again, are you?”

I shook my head lightly. Nope. This time, I was going to be fine. This performance was going to be great.

“Bradley?” Erica called, wondering around the stage. Mistake three, I counted.

Her first mistake was exiting stage left in scene two. She was definitely supposed to exit stage right. Yeah, it was minor, but it was also a mistake. Score one for Kate.

Her second mistake was in the line “But Bradley, I fear that I will never see you again”. Instead, my genius sister said, “But Bradley, I fear I will see you again”. I was the only one who laughed at that. The audience probably wasn’t even paying attention.

And now her third mistake was wondering around the stage. She was supposed to be off. But I guess that she had forgotten what she was supposed to do.

So, I let her sweat. I watched her parade around the stage, in the ugly dress (which was made funnier because Amy hadn’t had enough time to fix the bust and Erica was, well, let’s just say a little bigger in that area). She looked like she couldn’t even breathe.

Finally taking pity on her, I made a hitchhiker motion when she was looking at me. She caught my eye and quickly made her way offstage. Once off (and you’d think the girl would thank me) she slapped me hard on the arm.

“Gee, thanks sis. Leave me hanging out there.”

“At least I remembered my lines when I was Madeline.”

And I received another slap.

The lights were coming down, which was Matt’s and my cue. It was finally the scene. The one where I got to tell him off. Ooooh. I couldn’t wait.

Matt and I walked on the stage in the dark. I stood near the cart, where the apples Maude (I) was supposed to be selling. Matt was supposed to sit with his legs hanging off the edge of the stage, whistling.

I bent down so I was about to pick up an apple. I heard Matt sit, and I knew the lights would be on soon.

As if the tech guy knew my thoughts (which are scary enough as they are. I don't need other people listening to the guys in my head) the lights came up, causing some splotches of color to form in front of my eyes.

Uh oh. It was happening. I don't know what it is, but when I'm in front of people I suddenly start smiling. It's a goofy, dorky kind of smile and I can't help it. I smile. So to counter it, as I was doing then, I made myself think of sad things. No Aaron, I told myself. He's gone.

The smile slowly disappeared.

By now the lights were all the way up. I straightened, and held the apple in front of my face. Matt began whistling, and the scene had begun.

I examined the apple (Maude was a stickler for detail). Then, replacing the apple, I pushed my cart across the stage, stopping when I saw Bradley (Matt).

"Sir, do you care for an apple?" I asked, in my most theatrical voice. Sally Merkerson was going to die for writing such a horrible script.

Bradley (Matt) stuttered, having been lost in thought. "Excuse me?" he asked me, standing.

I sighed, bringing my hands to my hips. "Would you like to buy an apple? Three cents."

Bradley (Matt) dug around in his pockets, looking for the money. He handed them to me and grabbed an apple from the cart. He walked stage right, tossing the apple in the air.

"Aren't you the Bradley that the monk has spoken of?" I asked, as Maude.

Bradley (Matt) stopped and turned. "Yes," he said matter-of-factly.

"Then why aren't you going after Madeline? She's just left town!" I crossed the stage to him, ignoring my cart of apples.

"I've been thinking that it would be better for her if I just left her alone."

Bradley (Matt) stooped down, still holding the apple. "Oh," I said, loving my part so much. "So, you're just going to give her up like that?"

Bradley (Matt) looked up at me, confused. "What are you saying?"

“I’m saying,” I said, walking back to my cart. “That if you love her as much as you say you do, then you better go after her. Love like that comes only once.” I began to push the cart off stage, when Bradley (Matt) called me back.

“Wait!” I stopped. “So, you think I should go after her, even if her father disapproves?” Corny, corny script.

“What, am I speaking a foreign tongue? Yes, I’m saying to go get her!”

“But,” he said, stuttering. “But, it’s better this way.”

I marched over to him. “If you love Madeline and she returns your ardor then what else is there?”

“But, I’m unsure if she returns my love.” Matt was so convincing, it was starting to scare me. He gazed into my eyes, and it was hard to remember that we were performing a script.

“Then, go to her and find out.” I said.

And then he did it.

It was his line. It was time for him to say, “You’re right. You’re absolutely right! I’ll go find out!” and then run offstage. But did he do that?

No, of course not. Because if had then he wouldn’t have ruined my entire life.

Because right then, instead of reciting his line and running offstage like a good little boy, he did the worst thing he could of have done.

He grabbed my head, pulled me close and kissed me.

Right there, right in front of the audience, judges, the cast and everyone else I forgot to include. I could hear the gasps and was surprised as hell.

My first thought: What the hell!?!?!?!?!?

My second thought: He smells good.

My third thought: What the hell!?!?!?!?!?

My last thought: How am I going to cover it when he stops?

But he didn’t stop. He just continued to kiss me.

Moment passed, but they felt like years.

Finally, he pulled me away, breathing heavily.

Then time stood still. My mind raced with thing I could do to cover. OH GOD, WHY DID MATT HAVE TO DO THIS TO ME????

Recovering, I stammered backwards. “How dare you!” I screamed, hoping it seemed rehearsed.

Matt (Bradley) shook his head, trying to decide whether I was being Maude or Kate. Right then, I wasn’t sure if who I was being either.

“How dare you!” I repeated. Then, I felt my mind working again. “You stand here and declare your love for another and then kiss me!”

Matt shook his head again, trying to see where I was going with this. I lowered my head. “Are you drunk?” I asked, hoping for some humor.

“I’m sorry-” Bradley (Matt) started.

“Go, now. Go and find out Madeline’s feelings. Go now, before I hurl my apples at you!”

Matt caught on to my drift, and returned with his original line. “You’re right. You’re absolutely right! I’ll go find out!”

And with that, the jerk ran off the stage. I returned to my cart, made a loud “Humph!” noise and wheeled the cart away. The lights dimmed and the horrible scene was finally over.

I leaned against the wall in the wings, breathing VERY heavily. Matt was a dead man. No...he was BEYOND dead. He was deader than the deadest man (did that even make sense?).

There were five more scenes to go, but I wasn’t paying attention. All I could think about was Matt.

Matt, my next door neighbor for SIXTEEN YEARS!

Matt, the guy who used to sleep over at my house!

Matt, the last person on EARTH that I would imagine kissing, and on stage too!

Then again, he was the one doing the kissing. I just stood there. Stood there like an idiot.

The play was over and the house lights came up. The entire cast was brought out on stage for applause and the curtain call. I was led out by Sally, who stood to the edge and got her own special ovation.

Once offstage, everyone filed into the back room, so we could discuss. Somehow I made my way there. There was a cake on the table, along with soda and cups, plates and forks.

Someone handed me a piece, and I vaguely remembered putting it down on table.

Everyone was ignoring the topic that everyone wanted to discuss, namely, Matt and me.

Matt was standing in the opposite corner, speaking with John Fremont. He was smiling, laughing at something John had said. I cocked my head to the side and watched him laugh. Was he completely oblivious?

Slowly, I started walking over to him, knocking over anyone in my way. As I knocked into them, people turned to watch me approach Matt. It was like the wave.

I reached him, and by then I had everyone's eyes (including Sally and Livingston, who were having a heated discussion on how well the script was written). Whatever.

Stopping in front of him, Matt turned to me. "Kate?" he asked slowly, knowing what I wanted to "discuss".

I lowered my gaze to his plate, which contained a half eaten piece of cake. I reached out for it, pulled it from him and placed it off to the side, on another table.

"What are you-" he started, but stopped when I returned my stare to him.

I stared for a moment longer. And then my palm made a loud impact with his left cheek (Yep. I slapped him).

Matt staggered backwards a bit and I was breathing heavily, watching him grasp his face in pain. “What the-”

“You asshole,” I told him (in a dramatic, hushed voice), pivoting my feet and running out the door. I could vaguely hear someone say “She got you good, pretty boy” from the room.

I found my favorite bathroom stall, the one I was in the first time I was there. I flipped down the toilet seat and sat, finally allowing myself to cry.

Matt...was dead to me. How dare he! I let myself cry long and hard, and almost missed the timid knock on the stall door. “Kate?”

Wow. It was Erica. I ignored her.

“Kate, open the door.”

Nope, wasn’t going to do it.

“Kate, c’mon. We’re leaving.”

I snapped my eyes shut. Great, just what I needed.

“Kate, please come out.”

“Why?” I said suddenly. “What, are you guys planning another embarrassment for me?”

“Kate, we both know no one planned that. That was all Matt.”

“Whatever.”

Erica sighed heavily. “Kate, if you don’t open this door then I’m busting it down.

I opened the door. I knew that Erica is pretty strong.

“Come on out,” she ordered me. I stayed right where I was. She glared at me, and then her look softened. “Hey, have you been crying?” No, I just stuck soap in my eyes, you moron.

“Go away, Erica.”

She returned to glaring. “Excuse me! I come to help my sister feel better and you bitch at me?”

“Like hell you were!” I screamed. Now was my moment to tell off my sister. “You’ve made my entire life a living hell and have completely ignored me. Like you even care.”

Her features softened again, like she had never thought about that.

Before she could talk again, continued with my rant. “Aren’t you supposed to be the popular one? Why aren’t you home, with your popular friends and popular life! Why must you be here, making me angry?”

“Kate...” she trailed off.

“Just leave me alone!” I screamed, kicked the door shut.

A moment passed. Then another. And finally I heard the door to the bathroom open and shut. Erica had left.

I sat there, huffing for a moment. That had been building up for a while. It felt good to have it off my chest.

At last I got up, walked out of the stall and checked my appearance in the mirror. I looked like crap. Ripping off some paper towel I blotted my eyes. Then I ran the water, and splashed cool water on my face and behind my neck. I held myself up by the sink and stared down into the drain. And I thought tonight was going to be a GOOD performance.

I straightened and threw out the paper towel. I rubbed my eyes for good measure and walked out of the bathroom. The door to the discussion room was open, and I noticed that everyone in there was now wearing their street clothes. I glanced down. I was still wearing Maude’s dress.

“Okay,” Dr. Livingston said, breaking the tension that had formed in the air, after I had walked in. “Let’s get going.”

Everyone filed out past me, including Matt. He didn’t even look at me when he passed me. Good, he deserved it. Erica threw my clothes at me on her way out and shut the door, giving me privacy to change. After doing so I left too and followed them to the bus waiting outside.

It was finally over, and tomorrow I could go home.

## REASON 13: MOM...AND THE BUS DRIVER?

The bus ride home the next day was almost unbearable. Matt, Erica, Sally and people stayed as far away from me as the bus allowed them, I was glad for it. I wasn't in the mood to talk to any of them. Last night was bad enough.

Here's what happened:

“I’d like to say you all did a fantastic job!” Dr. Livingston said when we were all out getting pizza. “Really, you amaze me.”

My first thought was to say, “Matt probably amazed you too”. But I knew better. And it was better to keep my mouth shut.

Matt had sat on the opposite side of the table. His cheek was still red, and he made sure that he was in as much shadow as possible. I smiled, but it passed quickly and I returned to my scowl.

“So, in honor of Sally’s amazing script writing...” Yeah right. “And your amazing talent as actors, congratulations!” Everyone lifted their glasses (filled with soda, but they pretended it was champagne) and I leaned back in my chair, knowing that everyone was trying their best to ignore the kiss thing.

“Thanks,” Sally said, acknowledging the applause everyone gave her. I rolled my eyes. That script belonged in the floating dumpster, but I guessed I was the only person who could see that.

My mind slipped away then, tuning out everyone else. They weren’t really talking to me anyway.

Tomorrow I’d be home, in my bed with my own stuff. I wouldn’t have to sleep next to Erica or Sally anymore. And I’d get to see Beth. I was really starting to miss her. Maybe I’d even be able to see Aaron. Balkerson wasn’t that far from Luddermor.

Something caught my ear, and my mind whipped back to reality. “I can’t believe he did that,” Janie was whispering in Sally’s ear. Janie had still been sick, so she was back at the hotel when the whole thing happened. But after the performance Janie had felt better and came out to celebrate with us.

I turned my head, and Sally and Janie quickly turned from each other. Ha. Guilty as charged.

Something inside of me told me not to say anything, and I spent the rest of the night like that: silent as the grave.

Now, here I was, riding home on the bus, ignoring everyone and everything. My CD player was blaring, and Green Day soothed my head. There was actually a slight bump there from the day before, when I banged it on the desk and Matt hit me with the paddle.

Matt. Ugh. Wasn't it bad enough I lived right next to him? No, he had to kiss me onstage in New York City. Yep, my life is a living hell.

The bus hit a pothole and everyone was bounced in the air (apparently the bus driver was going a little fast). On my return from my flight into the air, my CD player slipped off my lap and hit the floor...hard.

The top part broke off and my Nimrod CD leaped out. My batteries flew across the floor.

I snapped my eyes shut and counted to ten, barely holding control. A scream was trying to escape.

I picked up the two pieces of my CD player, saw that I couldn't fix it and picked up my CD. I dusted it off, and carefully put it back in my CD travel case. I looked down the aisle, and saw John Fremont picking up the batteries. He stood and brought them over to me, wordlessly.

He dropped them in my hand and returned to his seat. I stared at the back of his head. After what felt like forever, my gaze redirected itself and I was suddenly staring at the back of Matt's head.

But then I was staring at Matt face. He had turned around to look at me. "Good job, Reynolds," he said, in a not-so-friendly tone.

I guess the slap wasn't good enough. Something inside me snapped. "I HATE YOU!" I screamed, throwing the bottom half of my CD player at his head.

I missed. Instead I hit the back of the seat in front of him. I sat there, panting, praying to the nearest god (I have many gods: the god of forgotten

homework, the god of good complexion, the god of finding an extra dollar in my pocket, etc...) that I could control the urge to strangle him.

I don't know why I felt like this; I just did.

I guessed people were used to my antics lately and they ignored me. Matt looked down at the broken music player and smiled at me. I couldn't believe my eyes. WHY WAS HE SMILING?

I gave up figuring him out and returned to staring out the back window. Only now I didn't have my music.

Ugh.

After all the drama of the bus, I was happy to get home. It was late and I was ready for bed. I was sitting in the backseat of my mom's Trailblazer, with Erica up front chatting about the play and how it went (casually forgetting the kiss, of course).

"Well, it sounds like you girls had fun." She glanced at the rearview mirror, to see my reaction.

I made a face (my signature Ugh face, which Mom knew all too well).

She ignored me and continued to talk to Erica. And Erica had only been there two days! Like she knew anything!

If I had been in a really good mood (and I mean REALLY good. I'm not a person that talks about her feelings all that much.) I would start talking about Aaron. God, I missed him. My brain drifted to the Ping Pong game we had. And then I thought about the Ping Pong game with Matt. Ugh.

Then I thought about the TRL crowd. How he almost kissed me. And then he did kiss me when he was leaving. Ah, happiness!

Then my mind went back to the incident. First, when Matt freaked out back in the TRL crowd. Then...ugh. The kiss Matt gave me on the stage. Ugh (times a million).

Then my mind went back to one of the first things Aaron said to us (well, Matt, but who's counting?).

*"Hey! Apparently you and I are rivals!"*

Something in my mind was about to click, but it was then that Mom announced, "We're home!"

I mind snapped back to reality (wow, that was happening a lot lately). My house. My fortress. My bed.

I refused to allow myself to look at the house next to it, but I did sneak a peek at the driveway. Matt's car was there (the truck, which was the only one they had). So, the jerk was home. Lovely.

I pulled my suitcase out of the back of the car and slung my bag over my shoulder. Erica grabbed her small overnight bag and ran, very girly might I add, to the door. I was about to slam down the back door when my Mom stopped me.

"So, what happened?" she asked, eyeing me suspiciously.

"What do you mean?" I asked, shutting the door. I picked up the suitcase, which I had put on the ground and leaned against the car.

"You're only quiet like this in two cases. Scenario one, you're angry at Erica. Scenario two, you're angry at Matt. So, which is it?"

I sighed. My mom knew me a little too well. "Would you believe a combination of both?"

"Well, that sucks," my mom said. Now, my mom NEVER says sucks. And on the few, VERY few, times she does, it's only for a laugh.

"You have no idea," I told her as I walked past. Once inside, I flipped on the kitchen lights. Checking the microwave clock, I realized it was after eleven. Erica was up in her room, singing to herself. Hungry, I opened the fridge door in search of something bad for my teeth.

"So..." my mom said, sitting in a table chair.

I smiled, settled for yogurt (the only other choice was pudding, and I can't eat chocolate). "So...nothing. Just the usual crap."

I nestled down in a kitchen chair.

My mom nodded, not believing me. "What happened?"

I hung my head. My yogurt was starting to taste like bile in my mouth, so I shoved it away. "Ugh. Why can't you just let me wallow in my misery?"

"Because by law I can't. Trust me, if I could would."

I smiled. At least my mom was being nice to me. Okay, yeah the whole CD thing had been overkill, but I was still the victim here.

"How did you meet Dad?" I asked her suddenly.

She shook her head quickly, as if she hadn't been listening. "What? Huh?"

And now my normal mom was back, the one that was just like my grandma. "I said, how did you meet Dad?"

"Why?" she asked all nervous and surprised.

"I'm just asking," I said in defense. "Did you meet in college or something?"

My mom grabbed my yogurt and started to eat it. She could have it. "Mmm mm," she said (which was her way of saying "Nope" when her mouth was full). "An interview."

"Huh?" What was she talking about?

"He was the person who interviewed me for my first teaching job."

"Oh...And then you married him?!" Wasn't that somehow illegal?

"Well, after we had dated for two years," she said defensively. I laughed, a real laugh. I hadn't laughed like that since...well, the pool I guessed. "Why do you ask?"

"I dunno. I guess you don't talk about Dad a lot and I was curious." She gave me a funny look, patted me on the shoulder and stood.

"It's late. And you're going to school tomorrow."

I yawned in agreement. I really didn't want to, but if I didn't get my ass to chemistry I'd fail.

I hauled my carcass up the stairs to my room, but before I got there my mom stopped me. "Um, Kate?"

"Yeah?" I asked groggily, hoping it would be quick.

She hesitated a moment and then smiled. "Nothing. I'll talk to you tomorrow."

"Good idea," I said, yawning again, and made my way to my room and my sweet, sweet bed.

School was a nightmare.

Every other moment I was avoiding Matt, Erica or being bombarded with questions from Beth.

"Were you scared?" "What were the judges like?" "Does Sally Merkerson snore?"

I tried my best to answer all the questions, but I just wanted to sleep. I had about three hours of sleep the night before

"No." "Pretty normal, except for that Farley guy." "Yeah, but not that loud."

Beth and I made our way to chemistry. The smell of chemicals hit me, making me nauseous.

"Welcome back Miss Reynolds," Mrs. Craven said (with a witchy kind of voice that really scares me.)

"Um, hi Mrs. Craven." I took my seat at the lab table, the one that was right next to Beth.

She plopped some papers down in front of me. "Here are all your assignments that you missed, and I need to speak with you outside a moment."

Beth and I exchanged looks and I shrugged. Was she going to throw me in an oven and find my long lost brother Hansel and fatten him up? I wouldn't put it past her.

We both entered the hallway. A few stragglers were making their way to class, one couple was making out against a locker farther down and the nerdy kid was still picking up his notebooks that the bully had knocked from his hands.

"Kate, I'm afraid if you don't get your grade a little higher you may be faced with summer school."

Ugh. I did NOT need this right now.

"I know, Mrs. Craven. It's just-"

"That," she interrupted me, putting a hand in front of my face. "Is why I am giving you a tutor."

A TUTOR! The witch!

"Um, a tutor? But...but...Beth already helps me a lot."

"Yes, but I feel that a friend tutor is not as beneficial. You need someone who you aren't as close to."

This so wasn't fair. Why did she have to do this to me now, right after the worst night of my life (alright, it was two nights before, but you get the drift)?

"Alright," I responded reluctantly. As long as it wasn't some EW. And especially not Erica herself. "Who did you have in mind?"

She smiled. The old bat smiled at me. Either it WAS Erica, or someone much worse.

And it was. Someone much, MUCH worse

"Doesn't that nice Matthew Schroeder boy live near you?"

My eyes literally BULGED out of my head. NO! NO! NO! NO! NO! NO!  
NO! NO! NO! NO!

"Yeah..." I said slowly, hoping she'd get the drift.

She didn't.

“Good. I’ll tell him when he’s here next period.” She smiled and prepared to go in. “You really are smart, Kate. Just try to apply yourself and you’ll be fine.”

And then she went back in.

FINE! There was no WAY I’d ever be fine again. So not fair.

I looked back at the couple making out. They were all over each other. At least the girl got to kiss someone she wanted.

The only kiss I had ever gotten was a good-bye one from Aaron and one from Matt for...well, I still hadn’t figured out why he had kissed me.

Ugh.

I went back into the classroom, dreading every passing second.

School was out. Unfortunately.

I hoped with all my might that Matt had turned Mrs. Craven down, and I wouldn’t have to deal with this.

But he had accepted and was waiting for me at my house (he had drove, I took the bus).

“Hey Reynolds,” he said coolly as I approached.

“Why are you talking to me?” I said annoyed, walking past him without stopping.

“Well I be your tutor. Ready to learn?”

“Are you ready for me to throw the other half of my CD player at your head?”

This shut him up.

“C’mon,” he said finally. “If I don’t help you you’ll fail.”

Ugh! I hated him right then. “Fine,” I said.

Matt and I were not three steps into my house when Larry showed up.

Yep. Larry. Oh that's right. You haven't met Larry. Well, Larry is going to be my new...my new...

"Kate! You're home!" My mom called. No duh. I LIVE here...unfortunately.

"Yeah..." I trailed off, completely forgetting Matt existed.

"I'd like you to meet Larry. This is my daughter, Kate."

"Kate!" he said, in a deep voice. Larry had a bit of a pot belly, but he was wearing an Adidas shirt and jeans, so he was actually presentable. His hair was thinning, but it wasn't entirely gone, and he had dark brown eyes. He seemed like the uncle type.

"Hi," I said, very VERY confused. There was an awkward pause. "Um...who are you?"

My mother gasped at my "rudeness" (well, SHE sure as hell wasn't saying anything!) but Larry laughed.

"So, you didn't tell her, did you?" He asked my mother, pulling her in a one-armed hug.

"I was going to right now." TELL ME WHAT?

"Um, tell me what?"

"Well...Larry and I are getting married."

WHAT!!

"Um...when did this happen?"

"Two days ago, right after Erica left! Larry proposed!"

So, what you met this guy three days ago, or what??

"That's great!" was all I could get out.

Suddenly, being tutored my Matt wasn't looking so bad.

"Come, sit down," my mom instructed, pointing to Matt and me. Whoa. Matt was still there.

She got everyone drinks, and we all sat at the kitchen table.

“Well, we met bus driving,” my mother answered Matt’s question.

“Yep, and we’ve been ‘dating’ for about two months now. Is that what you kids still call it? ‘Dating?’”

I held my head in my hands, embarrassed more for the dude than myself.

“Two months...that’s kind of fast,” Matt commented, sipping his lemonade.

“Well, we enjoy each other’s company, we’re both widowers, so, why not?” My mother was beaming. I hadn’t seen her THIS happy in years. But that didn’t mean I was happy.

“Um, A.) you’re a WIDOW and B.) why didn’t I know about this until NOW?” The three of them looked at me like I was some kind of cockroach that needed squashing. “And where is Erica?” She deserved to wallow in this misery too.

“I didn’t want to tell you because I knew how you’d act,” she said matter-of-factly.

I just rolled my eyes. What kind of mother doesn’t tell her daughter that she is in a serious enough relationship that might lead to MARRIAGE? Apparently MY mother is that kind of mother.

“Alright,” I gave in. “Where’s Erica?” I asked again.

“She’s out with Sally Merkenson.”

“MerkERson, Mom,” I told her. Whoa that threw me a little. The play was OVER! Why were they still “hanging out”? “Did you tell her yet?”

“Yes, this morning.” I wished could have seen her reaction.

The conversation steered towards Larry. He had been a bus driver for ten years (he was forty-five). Prior to that, he had worked as a “cubicle warmer”, as he put it. He didn’t actually tell me what his job was.

In the end, I found out that I actually liked the guy, except for the whole “secret dating” thing.

“Well, I have to go tutor your daughter, Mrs. Reynolds,” Matt said.

Then it hit me. What was good ol' Larry's last name?

"Pritchard. Lawrence Pritchard," he said, smiling at my mother.

Well, it wasn't horrible, but it wasn't Reynolds either.

"Alright, well, go make my daughter smart, Matt," my mom said. I couldn't believe she just said that.

I rolled my eyes and Matt and I went to the living room. There was no WAY I was letting him in my room.

He "tutored" me for an hour before he left. All I could think about was how much I hated him, how much I wanted to see Aaron, and how angry I was with my mom for not telling me about Larry BEFORE she got engaged to him.

Larry stayed for dinner. We had spaghetti and I discovered that Larry was a twirler, like me.

Erica was home, so the four of us were eating together. That sounded weird in my head. Four? It had always been three. Well, except for the times Matt had spent the night here (I usually spent the night at Beth's, not visa versa. Her house was so much more interesting than mine).

After dinner I immediately ran to the phone to talk to Beth.

"Hello?" It was Mrs. Sanders

"Oh, hey, Mrs. Sanders. Is Beth around?"

"Hello, Kate. Yes, she's here, hold on." I waited for about a minute, and then Beth finally got on the phone.

"Hey," she said into the phone.

I grabbed my teddy bear and hugged it to my chest. "You'll never guess what just happened to me."

"Um, lemme guess. Space ship landing?"

"No." This was a game we played. Whenever one of us said "guess what" the other had three chances to get it right.

“Um, you went cow tipping with Aaron?”

“No!” I laughed. It was good to laugh with Beth again.

“Um, you’re failing chemistry?”

Oh yeah. I had forgotten about that. “Well, yeah. But there’s more.”

“Tell me!” she whined.

“Well, the first thing is...Matt is my chem tutor now.”

“Oh that sucks!” she commented sympathetically. At least someone cared.

“Yeah, and the weirdest is yet to come.”

“Don’t keep me in suspense! Tell me now!” I smiled at the phone. Short in height and short in patience. That was my best friend.

“My mom is getting married.”

I guessed that she dropped the phone, because there was a loud thump noise on the other end. She picked it up and screamed! “OH MY GOD!”

“Yeah! I know.” I lay back down on my bed (my bed, I loved it so). “His name is Larry Pritchard. And he’s a bus driver too.”

“No way!”

We continued our conversation for another half hour. Finally, Mrs. Sanders told Beth to get off so she could check her email. “Got to go. See ya tomorrow!”

“Yeah,” I said, kind of quietly.

I hung up the phone and looked around my room. Something was different about it.

Or maybe it was just me.

## REASON 14: AARON (THIS TIME A REASON)

“Hello?” It was eight in the morning, Saturday. Who calls me at eight in the morning?

Apparently Aaron does.

“Hey,” he said nonchalantly into the phone. I could feel my knees turning to Jell-O (but I was sitting down so it didn’t affect me much). Plus, anything that wiggles and is made of horse hooves is just plain wrong.

“Oh, hey Aaron.” Smooth, Reynolds. Real smooth.

“You doing anything today?” I smiled. I couldn’t even remember if I was doing anything that day. Who cared? A day with Aaron would be just the remedy I needed to help me forget about this week.

“No, not really. Why?” It felt great being asked this by, quite possibly, the hottest senior I had ever laid eyes on. I crossed my fingers, hoping he wasn’t going to ask me to watch his cat or something.

“Well, I’m pretty bored. Wanna catch a movie?”

HELL YES I WANTED TO CATCH A MOVIE! I didn’t even care what movie it was. Two hours in the dark next to the living god? Damn right I was coming.

“Sure. What time?”

I could almost hear him smiling on the other end. “You don’t even care what movie?”

No, of course not. I thought I had already explained this. “No. I’d go ANYWHERE to get out of this house.”

“Alright. How about I pick you up around eleven, we’ll grab lunch and catch whatever’s playing.”

A scream was trying to escape my mouth. Yes! This was turning out to be great! So perfect!

“Okay.” I told him how to get to my house, smiling the entire time. Ooooh, this was better than slapping Matt.

He picked me up at quarter of noon. I didn’t mind. I had spent more time working on my hair that morning than I had ever in my life. And it still wasn’t right. My part was off center and one strand of hair would not get out of my face. It was like it was glued there.

His horn beeped and I leaned out of the bathroom window. He was driving a Jeep Wrangler, a brown one. I grinned. This was too good to be true.

Quickly brushing my hair once more, I threw the brush on the bathroom counter and slipped my feet back into my flip flops. I pulled down on my

plain, black T shirt and looked down at my shorts. When did my thighs get so big? And why was my face so blotchy?? Oh god, NO! Not today!

I mentally slapped myself. Shut up, Reynolds, the little guy in my head told me. You're making me sick.

The door bell rang. "Katie!"

It was my Mom. She was calling me Katie more and more frequently. It was really starting to piss me off.

"I'm coming!" I called down the stair, taking one last look in the mirror. Not great, but okay.

I raced down the stairs, nearly tripping over Erica's backpack and two steps on my way down. Once down, I skidded to a stop and saw Aaron standing in my doorway, in his semi-baggy jeans, light green Polo shirt and white undershirt. So hot!

I melted on the spot. "So, McDonalds or Burger King?"

My mom eyed me. "Where are you going? And who is this?"

Oh yeah, I hadn't told Mom about Aaron yet. Larry had kind of ruined my whole I-might-have-a-boyfriend speech. "Oh, yeah. Mom, this is Aaron. We met in New York."

My mom smiled at Aaron (obviously she could tell he was hot too. Um, aren't you engaged Mom?). "I'm Samantha Reynolds." And she stuck out her hand.

Aaron took it and shook. "I'm Aaron. I'm from Balkerson."

My mother smiled again and gave me a look like "You had better not be thinking what I think you're thinking". My god Mom, as if.

"Well, if we're going to make the twelve-thirty we better get going." I nodded and grabbed my purse. It wasn't a girly purse, just some ratty old thing that I used to keep my wallet in.

"Alright, let's go." I waved to my mother and we walked out the door. Aaron raced around to the passenger side of the Jeep and opened the door for

me. "Well thank you." I said, pretending to be sophisticated. I got in and buckled, making sure I was out of sight of Matt's window. I didn't know if he was even there (because basketball was still going on) but I didn't want to risk it.

Aaron got in his seat and started the car. "Alright, let's go," he told me, and turned up the radio. It was playing some rap-metal song that I had never heard of before. But I banged my head along with Aaron, who seemed quite familiar with it. "You never answered my question."

"And which one was that?" I knew what it was, but I loved hearing Aaron's voice.

"Where do you want to eat?"

I put my finger to my chin, pretending to think about it. "Burger King."

"Burger King it is."

It wasn't until we pulled into the parking lot that the memory of the night Matt, Beth and I were there popped into my head. But by then it was too late.

The movie was one of those R rated teen movies. Apparently Aaron knew the kid that was in the ticket booth and he got me in, even though I was still sixteen. It was the first week of May, which meant I had four months until I was seventeen. Four LONG months.

The theater was only half packed. There were a group of high schoolers down near the front, talking loudly and throwing popcorn at each other. I smiled. Aaron and I had played that game in the hotel.

Over on the left side there were some older people, mid-thirties or so, who were quieter, but still talking.

In front of us were three rows of college kids, not talking thankfully. But some were making out, something I wish I could have been doing. Others had pulled their legs over the seats in front of them. It was completely normal.

What wasn't normal was that I was sitting in a dark theater, next to Aaron Ackerson. My palms were sweaty which scared me, especially when Aaron reached over to grab my hand. Being the dumb girl that I am I looked down and just stared at his hand covering mine. And stared. And stared.

"If you don't want me to hold your hand, just say so," he whispered in my ear.

"Oh, no. It's not that," I said uncomfortably. How do you tell a guy as hot as Aaron that no guy has ever wanted to hold your hand? I mean, the only guy who had even willingly touched me was Rich Hartman (that freak who tried to feel me up) and Matt, but that was mostly to hit me.

"Well, what is it?"

The thing was...I DIDN'T know what "it" was. I guess it was just really weird. You know, having Aaron hold my hand. Yes, he had kissed me, but that was more of a polite good-bye kiss than anything else.

"Nothing. I'm just a little tired, I guess," I whispered back to him. Some of the college kids turned to look at us, some of them smiling, and turned back to the movie.

We had been there for almost an hour, and I still hadn't figured out the plot to the movie. I was beginning to think that there WASN'T a plot; it was just strange things happening to strange people.

Aaron and I sat in the dark a little bit longer. Near the end of the movie, Aaron leaned over. "You don't look like you're having fun."

I didn't? I was, though. I liked being there with Aaron, sitting a dark room. But something was wrong. Something was gnawing in the back of my brain but I couldn't put my finger on it. What was it?

"Oh, I am." And I turned back to the movie. But instead of watching the character "Jasper Rascotren" get slapped upside the head by "Lily Smith" my eyes settled on the couple making out in front of us. I tilted my head, watching them. The thing came back to my brain. What was it???

“Jealous?” he teased.

“Of what? Swamping spit?” I turned to him, smiling.

“Yep.”

“Well, I’m not.” And I averted my eyes back to the screen.

I could feel Aaron’s hand leave mine, leaving it cold. Did I do something wrong?

I got my answer. Aaron used the hand that had recently held my hand to grab the back of my head and he leaned in.

But I didn’t. Something was very, VERY wrong. I pulled away from him, turning my face. His hand slipped from my head, and I snapped my eyes shut. Nope, something was DEFINITELY wrong here.

He stretched, so he almost touched me with his elbows, but he exhaled and his body shrunk back to its normal size. I centered myself in my seat, and we watched the rest of the movie in silence.

Aaron dropped me off at my house. We had only communicated through small talk all the way home. “When is your prom, Kate?” “Um...dunno.” “Well, are you going?” “Um...dunno.” “Have any plans for the summer?” “Um...not really.”

It went on like that until we made it to my house. It was the first time I was happy that I was leaving Aaron’s presence. I got out of the Jeep without Aaron’s assistance. I walked around so I was in front of Aaron. “Well, see you sometime,” he told me.

I looked down at my feet and nodded. “Yeah,” I said. A breeze blew by and my hair began to fly around. I tucked it behind my ear and looked into his eyes. “Um, I’m sorry about-”

“Hey, forget it,” he told me. Then he drove away.

I was scared that I was going to cry. But strangely, the tears wouldn't come. So I had two choices. Stick my finger in my eye and make artificial tears or go inside and forget it, like Aaron had told me.

I took the latter route and walked into my house. Erica was chatting with Larry in the kitchen. I only heard part of the conversation, and the part I heard was very confusing.

"No, red is the best color," Erica argued.

"Red. Red is one shade of white away from pink. Now blue, that's a manly color." Larry had a point.

"I think you're missing the point, Mr. Pritchard."

"Oh, come now, Erica. Call me Larry."

"Alright," she said happily. "Larry. I think red is a unisex color. I don't think any color is girly or manly."

Where had THIS conversation started? On second thought, I didn't really want to know.

I made my way up the stairs to my room. That's where I found him.

Matt.

"What are you doing in my room?" I asked him. He was sitting on my futon bed, examining my teddy bears and looking through my CD collection.

"I thought you threw this thing out," he commented, gesturing to my oldest teddy bear, the one my dad bought for me when I was born.

"Who let you in my room??" I was fuming.

"You know, you need to work on your people skills." He picked up my teddy bear and put it in his lap, hugging it.

"Matt! Why are you here?" I asked, making sure I looked angry.

"You and I had a tutor session, oh, about an hour ago." Oh god. I had forgotten about that. Who cared? Like he even wanted to be near me after New York City.

"You're not serious."

“I’m dead serious. Do you want to fail chemistry?” He put my teddy bear back and stood. “Because if you want to go to summer school, by all means go ahead.”

I made my hands into fists and controlled my anger. “Matt, why couldn’t you have waited for me in the living room?”

“What, and listen to Larry go on about his theories about dollar store scams? Spare me.” Um, dollar store scams? I hadn’t thought about that before. Maybe this Larry guy had some other cool things he could tell me about.

But that was off topic.

“Fine. Tutor me, Schroeder. Just hurry up so I can take a nap.”

Matt stayed for two hours. I will never again forget how to tell the difference between natural and artificial transmutation. And I will have fusion and fission burned into my brain forever.

“So, are you ready for the nuclear test on Monday?” Matt was sitting at my desk, with his notebook opened.

I was lying across the width of my bed, my head hanging off the side facing Matt and my legs up on the wall. You know, for a guy who had been recently slapped, screamed at and almost hit in the head with a broken CD player, he seemed to get over it pretty quickly.

Matt Schroeder, the last great mystery.

“No. Craven is the cruelest person in the world. A test on a Monday. Especially after Aaron...” I trailed off. I had said too much.

“What about Aaron?” Matt asked, suddenly interested. He turned in the chair so he was facing me. I closed my eyes.

“Nothing.”

“Spill it, Reynolds.”

I opened my eyes and saw that Matt was right in my face, leaning as far as the chair would let him. I could almost feel his breath on my neck. “Get out of my face!” I pushed him back and sat up to a normal sitting position.

“Tell me.”

“No.”

“Tell me!”

“No!”

“Where you with him...when you were supposed to be here with me?”

I rolled my eyes and looked out my window. Why did I bother? He figured it out anyway.

“What happened?” he asked in a softer tone.

“Nothing.” It felt good not to lie. Because it wasn’t a lie. Nothing happened. “Absolutely nothing.”

He turned his head a little, so I could only see the right side of his face. Then he smiled. A glorious, glorious Matt smile. I forced myself not to smile back.

“And we’re not happy about this?” he asked, now playing the role of a shrink. Why did I suddenly feel like I was on Law and Order?

“I’d rather not talk about this right now.”

“Fine.” He surprised the hell about of me by complying with my wish. “But remember: if you want to talk about it, remember that you’ve known me your entire life.”

“Yeah,” I said as he walked out my door. “And you won’t let me forget it.”

I was still confused by Matt’s behavior the next day. Last week he was so angry with me I thought he would force his parents to move to France so he wouldn’t have to be in the same country as me. And then yesterday he’s Dr. Phil? What was going on with him?

But I had more things to worry about.

Like how my heart was broken.

I knew that Aaron was a little angry at me for the whole movie thing. I didn't know what had come over me. Something just didn't feel right about it.

But I never thought I would drive him to this.

I was in the living room, watching some MTV show on T.V. I wasn't really paying attention, but it was better than witnessing the make out session in the kitchen between my mother and future stepfather. Yes, even my MOTHER gets to make out and I get the "something's wrong" feeling. I'm so juvenile.

Erica came waltzing into the living room, grabbing the remote from off the table next to my chair.

"Hey!" I protested. Typical Erica. Has to be in charge of EVERYTHING.

"Shut up." She retorted. I rolled my eyes and she flipped the channel over to the news. Ugh. How old are you Erica? Fifty? Seventy?

"Aren't you supposed to be out with Sally?" I asked her, because apparently she and Sally had been working on another script. I knew where THAT script was headed.

"Nah, she's out with some guy."

That threw me. Sally Merkerson and a GUY? I thought she was just some crappy script producing workaholic.

"Really, who?"

"How the hell should I know. Now shut up they're doing the weather."

I sighed and held my head in my hands. "You are truly pathetic."

"Shut up freak," she directed at and then turned her attentions back to the T.V. "Okay, high of sixty tomorrow. Good."

I started to walk back to my room, where I could listen to my music (on my stereo, I hadn't gotten a new CD player yet). But Erica's voice called me back.

“Aaron,” she called.

What? Huh? Where had Aaron come from?

I turned back, thinking his car was in the driveway. Maybe he had come back to say he was sorry for the way he acted and wanted to make up.

“Huh? Where?” I asked, running into the room again.

“What?” She asked. Is this gene hereditary? My grandma had it, my mother had it and now Erica had it. Was I next?

“You said Aaron,” I explained, exasperated. Wasn’t she the valedictorian? Why couldn’t she figure this out?

“Yeah. Aaron.” And she turned back to the T.V. AHHHHHHHHH!

“What about him Erica?” This was really getting old.

“Aaron is the guy.”

“Yeah, he is a guy.” A very hot guy, but a guy nonetheless.

“No, Aaron is THE guy. The guy Sally’s with. She said they’re going to the movies or something. Whatever. As long as she’s ready to work on the script later.”

But my mind tuned her out as soon as I heard “The guy Sally’s with”. What did that mean? And why was Aaron taking HER to the movies?

“Are you listening to me?” Erica asked, snapping me out of my little reverie.

“Um, yeah. Script thing.” I didn’t care. I needed Beth’s car.

Beth was turning left. We were only a few minutes from the mall, and my heart was pumping. Why did I feel so jealous? It wasn’t like Aaron and I were dating. Right?

“Do you really want to do this?” Beth asked, pulling into the right turn lane.

“No, but I have to.”

She nodded knowingly and smiled a sad smile. “So,” she said. “Sally was with Aaron?”

“Yeah,” I said, holding my forehead with my hand. Was I getting a fever, or was it just emotions run amuck?

“How does Sally even know him? He goes to Balkerson, right?”

“Yeah,” I repeated. “I introduced them.” How could I have been so stupid? “She, Aaron, Matt and I went to the City. She was more interested in Carson Daly than Aaron, though.”

“Um, Carson hasn’t done TRL in a while,” she corrected me. How did she know this? I guessed there was a lot I didn’t know about her.

“Well, whoever. There,” I said, pointing near the Jeep. “Park over there.”

Beth did as I instructed. We were a few rows of cars back, but the Jeep was in view. We had timed it so that we got there a little before the movie ended. They should have been coming out soon, if Erica’s information had been correct.

“And what happens if it IS Sally? Or someone else? What does that mean?”

“You sound a lot like Matt, you know.” It was meant to be funny, but Beth wasn’t laughing. Neither was I. “I don’t know. I just need to know if it’s Sally.”

And that was when they came out. Aaron and Sally. Hand in hand.

She wasn’t feeling weird about holding hands with Aaron. She was laughing, carefree. My heart sank. Aaron was over me, and had moved on to the next member of the cast.

“Okay, we’re out of here,” Beth informed me. “You need to get him out of your mind.”

I didn’t say anything, but watched the road slip by as Beth drove me home.

“Hey, you’ll be fine. There are other guys in the world Kate.”

Yeah there were. I was just too blinded by Aaron to see that.

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A knock came to my door. I had been lying on my bed, hugging the bear that Matt had been hugging the day before. It was almost nine at night. I had homework due the next day, including studying for that chemistry test. But I was on too high of an emotional rollercoaster to care.

And it wasn't all about Aaron.

It was more about Beth's comment. "There are other guys in the world Kate."

And she was right.

The knock came again. "Kate?"

Great, just who I needed to talk to. Erica.

"Go away, no one's here," I called out.

"Kate, open the door." Memories came flooding back. The kiss, the slap, the bathroom stall, the screaming. Why was it that my life seemed to come full circle? And every time it always ended up sucky?

"Fine," I mumbled, hauling my carcass out of my bed. I crossed my room to the door and unlocked it. Once open I saw my older sister.

"You missed dinner," she said.

"Yeah, I wasn't hungry." I went back to my bed and crawled under the covers. Why didn't she know enough to leave me alone?"

Erica plopped down on the edge of the futon, in a very unladylike manner. "So, it was Aaron?"

No, it was Big Foot. I was upset because he had left the Bearded Lady. God you're an idiot.

"Yeah." I pulled the covers closer to my head. I just wanted sleep, but it wouldn't come.

“You know, I only saw him that one time, that time he kissed you...” she trailed off. How did she know he kissed me...oh yeah. She was there when he came to say good bye. “He wasn’t bad to look at.”

“Huh. That’s an understatement.” She laughed softly. It was a strange noise, hearing my sister laugh. She was usually pretty serious.

“Well, I think he’s a jerk,” she said, pulling at my frayed blanket.

I sat up and straightened. “You didn’t even know him.”

“Well, he hurt my little sister, didn’t he?” Didn’t see that one coming.

“He didn’t HURT me, per say.” Okay, the fink goes out with Sally behind my back and I defend him?

“Well, he did sneak around with Sally today, didn’t he?” She let go of the blanket and looked at me. “Hey, I know I’ve been a bitch to you, and I’d like to apologize.”

“Did Mom send you to do this?” I asked suspiciously. This was really weird, Erica being nice to me.

“No. Now this is from the heart so shut up,” she said, pushing me playfully. “I just want to tell you that I don’t think that you completely suck at everything and that I do care about you.”

“Alright.” I’m not good at this emotion stuff. That’s probably why I’m not one of those girls that cry in the bathrooms between classes over how their boyfriends were cheating on them and how they broke a nail last period.

“So, forget about him, okay kid?” She smiled and I smiled back. I liked this new, improved Erica. She was actually pretty cool.

“Yeah, okay.”

And then Erica patted my shoulder and stood to leave. She got to my door when a Gilmore Girls moment hit me.

“Hey, Erica?” I called out. Se stopped and turned around. “I love you. You know...as my big sister and stuff.”

Her face lightened and she smiled. “I love you too Kate.” She raced over to my bed and we hugged. I was finally feeling like a little sister and not an insect in this house.

We released and she returned to my door. Erica stopped once more and turned to me. “Hey, Kate?”

“Yeah?” I asked, expecting her to say something like “Don’t tell any one about this, okay?” But she didn’t.

Instead she said. “Don’t call me ‘big’ sister, okay? I prefer older. ‘Big’ is bad for my self-esteem.” Then she left.

I smiled and lay back in my bed. Well, I may have lost Aaron.

But it felt like I had gained a sister.

## REASON 15: THE CHEMISTRY, THE GRADUATION AND THE WEDDING

The six weeks of school until the last day went by really fast. Beth and I spent most of them hanging out at her house, usually swimming in her pool. Well, except for the hours that Matt made me study for chemistry.

But even then it was okay, because Matt and I had moved on from that performance. And I was glad for it. It is really hard to avoid the guy that usually gave me a ride to school and lived right NEXT DOOR to me.

But the best thing about those weeks was Erica. She was either out of my way or we were really nice to each other. And the best part was...she got accepted to Yale!

“I got it!” she screamed when the letter arrived.

I had been upstairs, painting my nails (the only color nails should EVER be: black). I’m sure you’ve all come to the conclusion that I’m Goth. But I’m not. I just wear what I like. And I like black nail polish. And black shirts. And Care Bears.

“What?” Mom asked from the kitchen. Larry was over and they were deciding what color they wanted for the bridesmaids (Erica, Me and Beth. Mom has always liked Beth. She could have chose Matt’s mom or some of her other friends to do it but she chose us three instead). Larry, which was evident from his and Erica’s discussion from that Saturday, was very good with colors. My Mom sucked at colors and had Larry to help her.

Erica thought it was sweet. I thought it was a little telling. But hey, I liked the guy.

“Yale! I’m accepted! I’m accepted.”

I tried to fix the nail that I had been working on when Erica’s scream screwed me up. I tried smudging it so the spot that was screwed up was covered but it was pointless. So instead I walked down the stairs, holding my hands out in front of me so I didn’t knock them into anything.

I came down stairs to see Erica jumping up and down, her pigtails flying behind her head. Why couldn’t Erica pick an age? Either she was old and watching the news or she was young and wearing pigtails.

“Kate, I got in!” she shrieked at me and tried to hug me.

“Wet nails, wet nails!” I warned her and she backed off, not wanting anything on her Old Navy sweatshirt.

“Oh sweetie!” Mom cooed. Larry came up behind her and hugged Erica, who returned his hug. Larry had really become like one of the family. And I wasn’t resentful either.

It was then that Erica started to cry. Okay, our whole sister bonding moment had been sweet but I wasn't going to let this one go by without an eye roll.

"I'm so happy!" she said, in between tears. Her grin was from ear to ear. Another eye roll from me.

Larry, Mom and Erica hugged once more. I patted Erica lightly on the back, trying to keep my nails as far from the fibers of her sweatshirt as possible.

"Okay!" Larry announced, as soon as the hug was over. "Celebratory lunch, on me!"

"Larry, you don't have to do that," Erica started. But Larry cut her off.

"Yes I do. You're my future daughter and I am going to take you all to lunch to celebrate."

There were no more arguments.

Mom had to clean up the kitchen before we went, and I had to go use the blow dryer to finish drying my destroyed nails.

"Hey, Mom, Larry!" Erica called from outside. She had been jumping outside because her jumping inside had caused the good China in the cabinet to shake; Mom didn't want it broken.

"Yeah?" My mom answered.

"Can Matt come too?" That had made me jump, dropping the still running hair dryer. The hot air hit my feet and I yelped.

"Kate!" My mom yelled. I guessed she heard me drop it.

I heard her ask Larry if it was alright. "Hey, the more the merrier!"

I picked up the hot hair dryer, shut it off and ran back down the stairs. "Um, what?" I asked him.

"Why not, Kate-Kate?" Was there something tattooed on my forehead that read "Go ahead! Call me a pet name! I don't mind at all!" God I hoped not.

“Matt was outside and asked me why I was jumping, so I said I got into Yale,” Erica informed me. She turned to Larry. “I invited him.”

“Good,” Larry said, smiling. He turned to my mom, gathering the pictures of dresses that were strewn across the table. “You know what, Sam?” he asked her. “I think you should go with the light green. It goes perfectly with Kate and Erica’s eyes.”

I self-consciously put my hands over my eyes. Was this a good thing or a bad thing?

“Thanks!” Erica said, happily. It was then that Matt entered.

“Um, is there a ghost or something?” he asked me. I brought my hands away from my eyes and looked at him funny. “Well, you were covering your eyes.”

Oh yeah, that.

“No, no,” I mumbled. All I could think about was how my nails had that funny feeling they get right after they dry. It doesn’t feel so good.

This lunch had sounded like fun, until Matt got invited. It was then that my brain started to work.

“Hey, Larry?”

“Hmm,” he asked. He had moved over to the kitchen, pointing to the dress he had mentioned earlier. My mom was leaning over it, contemplating it. “No, that one Sam,” he pointed to a dress on a different paper.

“Oh,” was my mom’s reply.

“Well,” I said, continuing with my great idea. “If Erica can invite Matt can I invite Beth?”

“Sure.” He was going to be the COOLEST stepfather in the world. “Tell her to meet us at Tully’s around two.”

Yes! Now this was going to be a great lunch. I raced up the stairs for the second time that day and ran to grab the cordless phone.

“Beth? You have lunch yet?”

“No,” came my answer. “Why?”

“Well, Erica got into Yale-”

Beth cut me off with, “That’s great!”

“Yeah, I know.” And it WAS great. Yale was in Connecticut. That was far enough away from Luddermor for me. I thought to myself: Yeah, separation will keep us closer together. “Well, we’re all going out to lunch, Mom, Larry, Erica, Matt and me. Wanna come?”

“Of course!” she said matter-of-factly. Oh, this was going to be fun.

“Okay, two o’clock, Tully’s. See you there.”

“Alright.”

And I went back down stairs to look at the dress Larry had pointed out. If I was going to wear the thing I wanted to make sure I liked it.

All six of us piled into the restaurant. The waiter seated us at a long table right near the game room. Once our drink orders were placed (Larry: regular, Mom: Diet, Erica: Diet, Beth: iced tea, Matt: Root Beer and Me: water). I don’t drink soda anymore. Only water for me. And the occasional glass of milk (that I’m not supposed to drink). And well, that Sprite Matt gave me that time I was nervous in New York City.

“Game room?” Matt offered to Beth, Erica and me.

Matt and I laughed. The last time we were in a game room I had got to push him in the pool. Oh, good times.

Erica declined. She said she wanted to talk to Mom and Larry about college. But Beth and I accepted. “You’re paying, right?” I asked. I didn’t bring any money with me.

“Yeah, yeah.” Matt, Beth and I stood, pushed in our chairs and chased each other to the game room.

Beth and I were drawn to the air hockey table. I don't want to brag, but I kick ASS at air hockey. "What about me?" Matt whined playfully.

"What ABOUT you Schroeder? Put in the money and stand back." Beth and I laughed. This was good. This felt right, being here with my best friend and next door neighbor.

Was Matt just my next door neighbor? Something told me I should consider him more than just a neighbor. But I ignored it.

"Fine. But you have to do the car racing thing with me Reynolds." I rolled my eyes, sighed and made the "Huh" noise, all at once.

"Alright. Now stand back and watch me kick Beth's butt."

The game started. Within the first thirty seconds I had made my first goal. Yes, I had sucky hand-eye coordination, but that fact flew out the window when I had an air hockey puck in my hand.

"C'mon Beth, don't let her win!" Matt cheered her on.

"Shut up, you're distracting me!" She yelled at him, but it was all in good fun.

I score another goal. And another. Matt was now standing next to Beth, instructing her. Beth was doing her best to hit the puck back, ignore Matt and keep her glasses up on her face. But it wasn't working very well.

"Matt!" she scolded him, after I made another goal.

"Oh c'mon Beth. You don't want to lose to HER, do you?" As he said that, I moved my hand the wrong way and Beth's shot made it to my goal. Damn, she scored.

"What's that supposed to mean Matt?" I asked him, pulling the puck out of the hole on the side of the machine.

"Just that I'd be embarrassed to lose to you." He said. In the next instant, I hit the puck the wrong way, sending it flying. I might not have hit Matt if he hadn't been there, coaching my best friend.

But he had to be the big man, and so he got hit by the runaway puck. Right in the chest. “Ow,” he said once it had made contact.

I covered my mouth, trying not to laugh. But Beth and I laughed anyway, hard.

“Yeah, yeah. It’s funny. You hit me with a puck. Cute,” he said, trying to sooth his broken ego.

Beth and I finally got our laughter under control and we began to play again. I won, seven to two. Yep. I kick ass.

Matt dragged me over to the racing game, the kind were you sit in the phony car seat and use the pedal. Beth sat on the motorcycle thing next to the car game, watching us.

I’m glad to say that I won THAT game as well.

After we had finished lunch, we stayed a few minutes longer, just chatting. Beth was sitting next to me, and Matt was across from me. We talked about school, how much chemistry sucked and the fact that in a few short months we’d be seniors. Senior. The word sounded foreign. I was going to be a senior. It seemed like kindergarten was only a few days ago.

“Alright. I’m stuffed and I better pay the check, unless you guys feel like washing dishes,” Larry announced.

We all said, “No!” in various different ways, and all got up.

Larry paid the check and we were about to leave until I ran into someone a LITTLE too familiar.

“Um, Mrs. Craven?” The witch eats real food? I thought she was into roasting lost children.

“Mrs. Craven!” Beth and Matt chimed in, as confused as I was.

“Oh, Kate. Matt. Beth,” she acknowledged us all. “Oh, and there is my best student ever! Erica!”

Erica hugged the old bat (who really looks like a witch. She's got the mole and everything). "Hey, Mrs. Craven. Guess what!"

"What, she said, really looking interested.

"I got into Yale!"

Mrs. Craven shrieked and they hugged again. The three of us juniors felt a little out of place. At least, I know I was.

They ended their embrace and we began to leave again (Mom and Larry had gotten out of the restaurant before we met up with her). "Oh, and Kate?"

I stopped, waiting for the flying monkeys to come get my shoes. There's no place like home. There's no place like home. There's no place like home.

"Yes, Mrs. Craven?" Prepare for the worst, Reynolds.

"You got an eighty-nine on the nuclear test. Nice job." And then she continued into the restaurant.

Eighty-nine? Hell yeah! Maybe this studying thing wasn't so bad. And with that eighty-nine, I was out of failing range!

Beth congratulated me, and Matt slung an arm over my shoulders. "Hey! See, it was worth it!"

I smiled and looked over at him. Yeah, the whole thing was worth it.

I swear Luddermor is run by idiots.

They had planned an outdoor ceremony for the graduation. Yeah, that would be okay. I mean, June is supposed to be warm, but not too warm right? Okay, I was cool with that (if you pardon the pun).

I mean, I could have handled it if it was ninety-odd degrees.

But nope. The Luddermor faculty had to choose the ONLY day of June when it RAINED.

Yep. And it wasn't a torrential down pour. Because if it had been, the ceremony would have been moved inside.

Nope. It was just drizzle. Which meant we had to stay out there while the audience had to sit and slowly get soaked.

And they wouldn't even let us use umbrellas! "Then you'd be obstructing the view of the people behind you," the principal informed us. Gee, thanks.

Mom, Larry and I had to sit through A-Q, watching as each kid walked across the mini stage, grabbed their diploma and sat back down. I was ready to pull each and every hair off my head, eyebrows included.

"Erica Elizabeth Reynolds," the principal called, and the three of us stood and cheered, along with the rest of the crowd. It was amazing, and I actually felt happy for my sister. She was beaming when she took the diploma, hugged the principal (what was with all this hugging??) and crossed the stage. On her way down she raised her arms over her head in an "I did it!" gesture.

After all the graduates were seated, my sister had to make her valedictorian speech. Not much to say really. It was filled with quotes from dead Greek guys and words of wisdom.

The reception after the graduation was minimal, to say the least.

Soda, cookies and cheese covered crackers filled the tables of refreshments. Wonderful. Either I couldn't eat it or I WOULDN'T drink it. I knew Luddermor like me.

"Mom!" Erica squealed as she ran into my mother's open arms.

"Oh, my baby is graduating high school!" My mother gushed, wiping the tears from her eye.

Larry was off talking to an old friend he knew from when HE went to Luddermor, which meant I was next in the hugging line. "Oh, Kate!"

She hugged me tight, and all I could think about was how my lungs were being crushed. I patted her on the back, trying to be happy for her (did you

ever notice how weird that fabric that they use for the gown feels?). But it was hard to be happy for her when I was losing the ability to breathe.

“Lungs. Crushed. Erica!” I pleaded, hoping she’d stop. She finally did and I brought a hand to my chest, taking a long, deep breath. “Thank you.”

“Sorry. I’m just so...so...!” She trailed off.

“Hey, Erica!” one of her girl friends called from the crowd.

“Oh, that’s Angie. I’ll be back!” she called behind her, as she raced to embrace her friend.

I turned back to the refreshments. Ugh. The last time I had cheese was in New York, you know, the pizza. Let’s just say my face wasn’t that pretty the next couple of days.

I was starting to realize I had done a LOT of stupid things in New York City.

The wedding was a week later, the first day of July.

School had been out for two weeks, and I had passed everything, including chemistry. Yeah, no summer school!

The nice thing about it was that I was finally able to make myself sleep in past eight. But on July first my mother made me get up at quarter of six. Ugh.

“Because we need to get your make up on, your dress on and I know you” was the answer to my question “Why?”

So I got out of bed, showered and came down stairs. Mom and Erica were sitting at the table, discussing something.

“What’s going on?” I asked groggily. I am definitely NOT a morning person.

“Oh, we were just talking about how things are going to be different.”  
Hmm, in retrospect Mom had no idea how right she was.

“Okay,” I said, joining them at the table. I interjected into the conversation at random points. We mostly talked about things like Larry being our new “father”, Larry bringing some of his stuff to the house and about being patient with Larry if he left the toilet seat up. Stuff like that.

At about nine, Mom suddenly perked up with “We have to pick up Beth and get over to the salon.”

After picking Beth up and driving to the salon, we walked in the door. All I could smell was nail polish remover and shampoo. Ugh, horrible smells.

“Okay, Rudy,” my mom told the woman at the counter (who looked a lot like Rhea Pearlman in “Matilda”). “We all need our hair done. And Erica, Beth and I need our nails done.”

I smiled. It was the only thing I had fought over with my mom about the whole thing. I had let her make me wear the dress Larry had picked. I had let her talk me into doing my hair. But I was NOT, I repeat NOT, going to have my nails done.

Rudy, who was doing my hair, had finished and I sat in the chairs, watching the other three get their nails done. Beth looked happy; she wasn’t used to this type of attention.

“It was so much fun!” she told me, when we all piled into the car.

“Yeah, whatever. I prefer doing it myself.” I leaned back in the seat, careful not to “hurt” my hair, as Rudy had instructed me.

“Okay, dresses at the house and then we’re off to the chapel!” Mom called. They weren’t really getting married in a chapel. It wasn’t even a church. They were getting married in our backyard. I guessed she was just using chapel as an expression.

Erica got into her dress first. My mom had wanted us to do this thing: she made us each go up and get changed individually, and then walk down the stairs so we could all go “Ooh!” and “Aah!”. Whatever.

Well, Erica came down the stairs, like she was some kind of princess. And of course, she looked the part. Her hair and make up made her even more beautiful than she already was. “What do you think?” she asked us, doing a Marilyn Monroe.

“Beautiful. Absolutely beautiful,” My mother cooed.

“You look hot, Erica,” Beth agreed. I rolled my eyes, but smiled.

“Well, Kate?” Erica asked.

“What do you think?” She rolled her eyes at me. “Okay, you’re hot. Happy?” She smiled and made room for Beth to go get changed.

We waited five minutes, and finally Beth came down the stairs. The first thing I noticed was...where were her glasses? Then I remembered: she had worn her contacts today.

“So?” she asked shyly. Wow. Beth looked good. Really good.

“You look so pretty!” My mother and Erica said together, while I fixed a piece of her hair that had fallen out of place. And she did. Look good, that is.

“Okay, Katie, you’re turn,” my mother instructed. Ugh. I was dreading this moment.

“Alright,” I said slowly, trudging up the stairs. My mom had hung all the dresses on the bar that held up the shower curtain (except for hers, which was in her room). I plucked down the last hanging dress and undressed. Standing there, in only my underwear, I looked at myself in the mirror. I sighed and then pulled the dress in front of me. I tilted my head, shook my head and began to put on the dress.

I only had to zip up in the back when I heard it. Matt’s voice.

“Hey, Mrs. Reynolds. Or, is it going to be Mrs. Pritchard?” Matt asked, down in the living room where everyone else was (except Larry, who was at his apartment getting ready).

“I’m going to keep Reynolds, Matt. Larry told me to.” She giggled.

Oh crap, the guy in my head told me. Matt’s going to see you in this dress.

Wait a minute. Why did I care if Matt saw me in a dress? Yeah, it’s true that the only dress I’ve ever worn was the one I wore when I was little for Christmas and stuff. But since sixth grade it had been jeans for me.

I finished zipping the dress and looked once more in the mirror. My face was all red. Not good.

“Kate!” my mother called up the stairs. I guessed that I had been taking too long. “C’mon down.”

I snapped my eyes shut and opened the door. Well, here goes.

I walked down the hall and stopped at the top of the stairs. I had on heels, so I was worried about tripping.

“Kathleen Reynolds, get down here!” my mom ordered, but she said in it a gleeful tone.

The first step made me nervous. My ankles weren’t used to the heels. By the time I got to the fifth step I was used to the feeling, at least on stairs. When I made it to the bottom, everyone stopped talking.

All I could think was: Ha! You were right Reynolds! You’re hideous and now they realize it.

“What?” I asked self-consciously. I just wanted them to stop staring.

But they wouldn’t. They wouldn’t answer me or stop staring. It was starting to piss me off.

“Okay, ha ha. The joke’s over,” I said, hoping to get out of this whole thing with a little bit of my dignity left. “Okay, Mom. Your turn.”

But they continued to stare. “Hey, okay. I’m not the bearded lady, alright?” I mean, I didn’t belong in a freak show, right? RIGHT???

“Wow,” was all I got. And it was from Beth.

“You look amazing,” Erica said, standing from her spot on the couch. She walked over to me (SHE was used to the heels) and stood next to me.

“You two look like twins,” my mom said. I rolled my eyes. Like THAT was possible. “I need a picture of this.”

She ran to get one of the disposable cameras. I looked over at Matt, who was still staring. “Are you gonna say something or are you gonna stand there looking like a fish?”

He snapped to, and ran his hand over his face. My mom raced back and took our picture. Then she ordered Beth to stand with us, in the middle (she gained about three inches with those shoes). And finally, she made Matt get in the picture with us.

“Oh, no,” he protested, but my mother wouldn’t have it.

“Get over there, Matt.” And he did, standing right next to me. Now was I was only about an inch shorter than him, unlike normal when I was about four.

The pictures were done and Erica, Beth and I got Mom into her dress. Now, she was the one who REALLY looked beautiful.

We all made it outside, where Larry’s car had just pulled up. He got out, and ran to my mom. They hugged (okay, isn’t it bad luck to see the bride before the wedding?)

“Are we all ready for a wedding?” Larry asked, and I smiled. I hoped my mother was enjoying this. Because although I was really happy for her, I was never wearing a dress again.

The ceremony was “lovely”, as my mom’s friend Lola called it. It was small, only twenty guests, but it was better that way.

My mom cried during the whole thing, and Larry couldn't stop smiling. Yeah, you better be smiling dude. You were lucky enough to marry my mother!

I couldn't help smiling either. I watched as they exchanged rings, and the famous line "You may now kiss the bride" was heard. Larry leaned down and they kissed. Okay, NOT something I wanted to see.

But then they pulled apart and turned around. My mom's face was all wet, from crying, and her lipstick was now slightly smudged. But she still looked beautiful. They marched down the aisle, hand in hand and I smiled. This was the best day of her life (except for when she married my dad, had Erica, had me and won hundred dollars at bingo).

Erica, the maid of honor, walked down the aisle after her, arm in arm with the best man, Larry's friend Steve.

Next it was Beth's turn (she had been partnered up with Larry's nephew who was thirteen and was about her height). They strode down the aisle, smiling at the people seated (which included Matt and his parents. His mom was my mom's best friend).

Now it was my turn. I was partnered with Larry's other nephew (who'd be my twenty year old step-cousin), Alex. Alex hooked his arm through mine and we began to walk down the aisle.

Well, I guessed my life had been going pretty well, because just then I tripped. Those stupid heels!

I went flying, crashing to the ground. I could feel everyone's eyes on me.

God why does my life suck?

Alex helped me up. Everyone was laughing quietly (except Matt who was laughing like a freaking hyena) and applauded me. I made my way down the aisle as fast as I could go. God, that was embarrassing.

With the ceremony over, everyone got from their seats and went in our house, where (while we were outside) the caterers had set up everything. The

wedding was at one, so we weren't going to serve lunch or dinner or anything. It was going to be a "snack".

I saw an oatmeal cookie and grabbed it, not caring about the butter used to make it.

I saw Matt over in the corner of the room, talking to his dad. "Hey, Reynolds," he called. I knew he was talking to me because I'm the only one in my family that he calls Reynolds.

I walked over, reluctantly though. As soon as I got there, Mr. Schroeder looked at me and said, "Are you alright, Kate? That looked like it hurt."

I hung my head, trying not to laugh. Okay, it was embarrassing. But it was really funny. "I'm fine, Mr. Schroeder."

Matt smiled a wonderful little Matt smile. "So, what do you want?" I asked him.

"Nothing, just wanted to say hi," he said with a smirk. "Oh, and by the way, the grass called and wondered if you were coming to visit again."

"Shut up!" I slapped him on the arm, not caring that Mr. Schroeder was there. Knowing Mr. Schroeder, he'd probably want to slap Matt, too.

"The bouquet!" someone called, and the entire female population ran outside. I walked out with the male population (you know guys, they just want to see the girls fight for it).

Once outside Lola, my mom's friend, got all of us in one big mass. My mom turned around, and I tried to get myself out of the huddle.

I got out, and my mom threw it. Something hit me in the back of my head and I spun around and picked it up. I heard all the girls sigh and whine.

I looked down at the object in my hands.

It was the bouquet.

REASON 16: I WIN (DEFINITELY NOT A  
REASON)

The airport was very crowded. A whining toddler was sitting in the hard plastic seat next to me. “Mommy! I want ice cream Mommy!” I did my best to refrain from smacking the kid upside the head.

Next to me was Larry. Then Mom and then Erica. Mom and Erica were talking about normal mother/daughter things. “No parties, young lady.” “No boys over.” “Don’t forget to lock the doors when you leave.”

All of the standard answers were given back to her and Mom my sighed. I smiled. “Kate, that goes for you too.” Damn.

Larry shifted in his chair, sort of accidentally pushing me closer to the whining kid. “Mommy, that girl is getting close to me!” Ugh. Children.

“Hey, you guys going to be okay when we’re gone kiddo?” Ever since Larry became my step dad he has been calling me kiddo. Erica was champ (um, isn’t champ a nickname for a BOY?).

“Yeah, don’t worry about us, Larry. I’ll probably be with Beth the whole time.”

He smiled his big smile, but still badgered me. “Are you sure? The honeymoon is two weeks.”

Nope. I’m not sure. When you guys are gone I plan on throwing a huge kegger party, strip naked and streak down the street and then pass out in front of a 7-11 allowing for the strange homeless guy to rape me and force me to join a suicidal cult. Please.

“We’ll be fine,” I informed him, hoping that would be the end of it.

“Attention all passengers of Flight #253 to Miami, your plane is now boarding,” came the voice on the P.A. system. This was it: my mom was going to leave Erica and me alone for two solid weeks.

“Alright, kiddo, champ, we’re off!” Larry said blatantly. “C’mon Sam, before we miss the plane.”

“Oh, alright.” She reached over and hugged Erica tightly. “Be good sweetie.” Then she let go of her and walked the three steps over to me.

“Have fun, Mom,” I told her. I really was hoping she’d have fun.

“You too, honey.” She hugged me and I hugged back. This was going to be the last time I’d see her until she got back. “Good bye!”

Erica and I stood next to each other and waved at our exiting parental unit. They slowly disappeared among all the tour groups, little kids and confused foreigners. I smiled. This was a little weird, but very liberating.

“Okay,” Erica said when they were finally out of view. She grabbed the car keys from her purse and swung them around like cowboys did with their guns. “Let’s hit the road.”

I followed her out of the airport, and we made our way through the maze of a parking lot until we reached my mom’s Trailblazer. I was ready to jump into the passenger seat when Erica stopped me.

“Hey,” she said, stopping me.

“Huh?” I asked. What did she want? Now that Mom and Larry were gone she wasn’t going to go psycho on me, was she?

“Want to drive?” There has yet to be a question that so desperately needed an answer of “YES!”

But because I only like to flaunt authority, not get in actual trouble, my stupid mouth replied, “Um, Erica. I don’t have my permit.”

“Oh, who cares? Hop in,” she said, pointing to the driver’s seat.

I looked at it longingly. I desperately want to drive. I know I was sixteen and COULD have been driving; I just hadn’t gotten around to taking the permit test. But oh, how I wished I could be driving.

It didn’t take me long to make up my mind. “Alright.” And I raced around to the other side of the SUV and got in.

I buckled, and looked at the steering wheel. It was so beautiful. “Okay, here are the keys. You know how to start the ignition?”

“I know how to start the car, Erica. I’m not a total idiot.” I grabbed the keys from her hand and turned the ignition. The car came to life and the radio came on. It was Green Day!!

“No radio,” Erica said, and turned it off. I could have cried.

“Hey!”

She rolled her eyes and looked at me. “Either I drive with the radio or you drive without it.”

I sighed. Fine, Erica. Have it your way.

I looked down at the handle between us. “Okay,” Erica instructed. “Push the brake with your foot before you get out of park.” I did so. “Now, push in the button on the side of the lever and pull in back to drive.” (Luckily we were parked so I only had to pull out. I think I would have died if I had to back out).

It was the weirdest feeling, driving. I had never done it before. Well, yeah, I had done go-karts and stuff like that but never in a real car. I got the exit of the parking lot. “Okay, stop at the Stop sign.”

“Oh, and let me guess. Red means stop and green means go?”

“Very good!” she said, sarcastically. But I saw her smile.

Erica only let me drive a little ways down the road. When we got to heavier traffic she made me pull over so we could switch.

“Thanks, Erica,” I told her as we pulled into our driveway.

“Sure. You needed to practice.”

“So,” I asked, wanting a good answer. “How’d I do?”

“Well,” she said, tilting her head to the side. “For a beginner okay, but if you were thirty years old I’d be a little concerned.”

“Shut up!” I declared playfully. I shoved her and she shoved me back.

“Okay, we better get inside.”

Erica and I got in the house. It was still kind of early; it was only seven-thirty. I looked around the kitchen. It was weird not seeing my mother there, skimming through a book or cooking or something.

“Kind of empty, huh?” Erica voiced. I nodded in agreement. “How about this? We make a batch of popcorn and watch a movie?”

“What movie?” I asked, walking around the kitchen island to get to the cupboard with the popcorn bags.

Erica walked over to the island and sat on one of the stools that went with it. “Um...Pirates of the Caribbean?”

“Love it, but have seen it a lot lately.”

“Alright...” she trailed off, thinking.

“10 Things I Hate About You?” Heath Ledger. Give me a moment to drool.

“Nah, I don’t like Heath Ledger.” Um, HELLO Erica! WHAT are you smoking and WHY aren’t you sharing?

“Okay, we won’t watch 10 Things I Hate About You.”

I put the bag in the microwave and turned on the timer. As it started to heat up I sat in a stool across from Erica. “Erica...”

“I’m thinking, I’m thinking!” she said defensively.

“Oh, this isn’t about the movie.” I fidgeted with the bottom of my shirt. This was a bit of a weird topic.

“Well, what then?” she eyed me, and rested her chin in her left hand, her elbow propping it up on the table.

“You remember how you used to go out with Jason?” She had dated a guy named Jason for almost a year back when she was a sophomore.

“Yeah, why?”

And here it was. I didn’t even know why I was asking. The question had just popped into my head.

Okay, that's a lie. I knew why I was asking. I just didn't want to admit it to myself.

"How did you... I mean, did he ask...or did you...or was it a blind date thing?" I knew I was rambling and probably not making sense. All I knew was that these strange feelings that were starting to invade my head didn't make much sense either.

"If you're asking how we met, then the answer is he asked me out during bio." The microwave timer stopped and the bag stopped popping. "I'll get it," she said when I didn't make a move for it.

She opened the microwave door and took out the bag. Then she pulled out a big bowl and, having ripped the bag open, she poured the hot contents into the bowl.

"Yeah, okay..." I said, continuing with my thought. "But, how did he ask?"

"He said 'Hey, want to go see a movie tomorrow?' and I said 'Sure'. Why do you ask?" she questioned me, putting the big bowl in the middle of the island.

"Um, just wondering." It was a boldface lie and we both knew it.

"Why, are you interested in someone?" she asked, grabbing a hand full of popcorn. I did the same and she continued. "Oh, god. Tell me it's not Aaron."

Aaron? Aaron who?

Oh yeah. THAT Aaron. The one who had made me practically fall in love with him and then broke my heart. Yep, that Aaron.

"No....no. It's...it's not Aaron."

"Okay..." she said with a mouthful. "Who then?"

I couldn't say his name. Because, I really, REALLY hoped that this was just a phase or something. Because, it couldn't be true. That would be too weird.

“Just forget I said anything, alright?” She gave me a funny look but nodded.

Erica stood and walked around the island. “Okay. Go change into your pajamas. I’ll pop in Dodgeball and we’ll sleep in the living room.”

“Alright.” And I got up to go do as Erica ordered. But I was still filled with muddled thoughts.

It was probably so much easier being a guy.

“If you can dodge a wrench, you can dodge a ball,” Rip Torn said on the T.V. I don’t think truer words have ever been spoken.

“So, you haven’t told me what you’re majoring in yet.” I rolled over so I was lying on my back, looking at Erica upside down.

“I don’t know yet; I didn’t declare a major.” She lowered the volume on the T.V. and gave me a look.

“What?” I asked.

“What do you plan on majoring, kid?” Ugh. The whole calling-your-younger-sister-kid thing. Not needed.

“I don’t know either. Not much interests me.”

“Except Matt,” she said matter-of-factly.

I sat up and nearly choked on my popcorn. Where had that come from?? Was I that transparent??? Oh, tell me that his name wasn’t written all over my face!!!

“Wha-what?” I stammered.

“I said ‘Except math’. Mom says you’re really good at math.”

Whew. I was hearing things.

I sighed a sigh of relief. That was a little close. “Oh, yeah. Math.” I thought my heart was about to explode it was beating so fast.

“Are you alright?” she asked, concerned.

“Yeah, I’m fine.”

She gave me another funny look and turned the volume back up.

I did my best not to think about Matt anymore that night, but it was pretty hard.

It was the day before my mom and Larry were coming home. I was walking home from Beth’s house.

Beth would have given me a ride home, but her car died.

“I’m sorry, Kate! I would drive you home, but the other car is in the shop.”

“No problem,” I told her, although it was a big problem. I was wearing my flip flops, and after a while it hurt to walk in them (plus it was kind of embarrassing, you know, with two different sized feet).

But I soldiered on anyway.

I had waved good bye to Beth (I had gone over to go swimming with her). She waved back apologetically and went back into her house.

At least I could use the three mile walk to clear my head.

It was impossible to deny it anymore. I had tried to, but the thoughts just keep slipping back to my brain.

All I could think about was Matt. That night in our backyard, the play, the Aaron thing, the pool, the pool AGAIN, the kiss and the slap. Every time I relived that slap in my mind I winced. That was bad. Very bad.

Even when I was swimming in the pool with Beth Matt permeated through my thoughts.

*“Why don’t you believe I have a genuine desire to talk to you?”*

*“Because you represent everything I hate. You’re a jerk. You’re a conceited ass and you’re-”*

But Matt had cut me off. I never got to finish telling him how I felt.

Why hadn't I noticed it before? Why hadn't I known that I was so completely and totally in love with him? This was wasn't fair! I wasn't one of those girls! You know the type, the kind. The ones that only go to school to check out who's hot and available. No, I didn't want to be one of the girls that fell for hot guys like Matt. Okay, yeah I had fallen for Aaron. But didn't that screw me over?

And what about him? What if I told him how I felt and he started laughing or something? What if I spilled my heart out in front of him and he stood there and shot me down? I don't think I could have handled it.

Life just wasn't fair.

I reached the corner where the gas station with the mini mart with the really cold air conditioning was. It was then that I realized I was sweating like crazy.

I went in and was instantly welcome with a blast of cold, chilly air. I sighed, but had to move out of the way so a large woman could get by.

For some reason my mind told my body to walk through the mini mart. I walked down the aisle with the drinks and I grabbed a bottle of Dasani. I checked the price, checked my pocket, and realized that I didn't have enough. I had to buy the cheap store brand.

Who cared? It was water, right?

The nerdy college kid behind the counter watched me approach. I was starting to feel a little self conscious.

"Will that be all?" he asked when I put the bottle on the counter.

"Yeah," I said tiredly. Thinking through my emotions was not something I did everyday and it was taking a lot out of me.

"A dollar seven," he told me and I plunked down the cash.

He took it and looked me up and down. "What?" I asked.

"You doing anything tonight?" he questioned me, trying to be slick. Was he...no, he couldn't be...

“Excuse me?” I asked. He could not be seriously asking me out.

“How about a movie, you and me?” he said as coolly as a nerd could, while handing me my change and the bottle.

“No!” I quickly raced out of the mini mart, water bottle in hand. That was SO weird. God, why were total FREAKS attracted to me?

I kept walking, occasionally glancing behind me to make sure the nerd wasn’t following me. As I approached my house (well, the cul-de-sac that my house was situated in) I slowed.

Erica was out with her friends (including Angie, the one at the graduation) and wasn’t going to be back for another couple of hours. And I really didn’t want to come home to an empty house.

I tried to walk as slow as I could. But my house kept getting closer and closer. I was almost past my other neighbors (some old Asian people that I didn’t know very well) when I heard something behind me.

Please don’t be mini mart nerd, I thought. PLEASE don’t be mini mart nerd.

But when I checked there was nothing. Just a beat up sidewalk. So I continued walking.

Matt probably didn’t return my affections. I mean, he had the entire female (and possibly male) population he could pick from. Why me? Just because I lived next to him didn’t mean anything.

And just because I had known him my entire life and we used to sleep over at each other’s houses when we were kids didn’t mean anything.

And just because we hung out a lot more that I wanted (well, before these feelings hit) and he had that weird reaction to Aaron didn’t mean anything.

Right?

The noise came again. Now I knew it wasn’t mini mart nerd because it was a low growl. The sound sent shivers through my spine. Unless this guy had some weird lung disease it WASN’T mini mart nerd.

With deliberate slowness I turned. Still nothing. Okay, I was definitely starting to hear things.

I only got three more steps in before the noise came again, but a LOT louder this time.

Oh crap. The thing I was most afraid of (except my hair in the morning).

A dog.

It was a huge Doberman with big...shiny...big teeth.

I could have handled it had it been a snake or some kind of poisonous spider. But no, it had to be a dog.

A big dog with big...shiny...big teeth. The shivers came again to my back.

I sucked in my breath, scanning around me for anyone to help me. I could NOT handle a dog.

The dog started to walk closer to me, with this evil look in his eye. Oh crap. "Nice doggy," I said in a sing song voice. "Nice, big," Gulp, "scary doggy."

But the nice, big scary doggy kept coming closer, eventually causing me to back up. I glanced around me again. Damn, no one was around.

Now the dog was starting to pick up it's pace. "Okay, doggy. You can get away form me now."

It wasn't working. The dog was now right in front of me. And it didn't look happy. "Okay, dog," I told it, becoming more serious. "Either you're going to go away or I'm throwing this bottle at you're head!"

The dog barked. "Okay," I said sheepishly. "You're didn't like that, did you?"

The dog barked again, louder this time. I hated dog barking. "Okay, okay, STOP Fido. Now go away!"

But the dog wouldn't have any of it. It was then that something snapped. I feigned a move to the left and the dog followed. Throwing the bottle at his head I raced around his right side to my house.

But I guess the dog didn't like it.

He started to chase after me. My heart was pumping. I was deathly afraid of dogs, and this was NOT how I wanted to die. Not like this, being ripped to bloody shreds by some mutt ten feet from my house.

The dog chased me into the backyard. Now that I didn't have any ammo, I was left without anything to protect me. "Go away dog!!" I screamed, hoping someone would come to my rescue.

The dog just kept coming. I raced around the swing set, trying to jump on a swing. No luck. The dog barreled through the wall of plastic seats and kept running after me.

Then the worst thing happened: I slipped.

I could feel my left flip flop give under me, and I fell backwards. At first all I felt was mud beneath me and all I could hear was my blood pumping in my head. Then I heard it again, the dog. It was coming right for me.

I couldn't get back up quick, so I just curled myself into the fetal position, expecting to feel dog teeth in my back.

But they didn't come. I waited another moment, seriously thinking I was three seconds from seeing the Pearly White Gates. But the teeth still didn't come.

"AH!" came a voice behind me. I couldn't move to see who it was. All I could do was breathe, and even that was a challenge. "AH!!" the voice came again.

I finally mustered the strength to sit up. I caught my breath and looked behind me. It was Matt.

And his arm was bleeding.

“Matt?” I said, in between huffs. It felt like I had gotten the wind knock out of me.

“You okay?” he asked, holding his right arm tightly.

I tried to answer him, but the words wouldn’t come out, so I just nodded when he looked at me.

“Good.” He was breathing hard too.

I recovered enough to ask, “The dog?”

“He’s gone,” Matt said, trying to stand. Once he was up on his feet, I saw that his right leg had a big gash that was bleeding, too. “Can you get up?”

I tried, but couldn’t. The shock was still affecting me. He limped over to me, held out his good left arm to me and I pulled myself up.

Together, leaning on each other, we made it inside my house through the back door. Once in, we let go of each other and leaned against separate walls.

Silence filled both of us, and all I could do was look at Matt’s injuries. It looked like the dog hadn’t bit him, but it did cut him with his teeth hard enough to make him bleed so much.

“You need to clean that,” I told him, finally snapping out of it. “Go sit on the couch.”

He took another deep breath and did as I told him. Slowly, because the shock was still kind of there, I made my way up the stairs and to the bathroom. I grabbed a bunch of Band Aids and the peroxide.

Carefully, I made my way down the stairs and headed to the living room, grabbing a towel from the kitchen on the way. Matt was sitting on the couch, but awkwardly, so his bleeding leg didn’t touch the fabric.

“Okay, lift up your pants,” I ordered him, and poured some peroxide on the towel.

“You could at least buy me dinner first,” he joked. I smiled weakly and began to clean the wound. “Ow!” he said, trying to ignore the searing pain that peroxide does to wounds.

“Do you want a bullet to bite?” I asked, copying my mother’s famous phrase, the one she used when Erica and I were little and scraped our knees.

“Just shut up and do it.” I finished with his leg and put on the bandages. They’d have to do for now.

I sat down next to him, rolled up his sleeve and did the same procedure on his arm. “Um, thanks,” I said, concentrating on his really muscular arm.

He turned to look at me. “For what?”

“Um, saving me from that dog,” I dabbed his arm again, avoiding eye contact. “You know how much I hate dogs.”

“Yeah. I remember when you first saw Sally.” I burst out laughing. After all of that, how could he be joking like this?

“No, really,” I said, once I got my laughter under control. “You didn’t have to.”

“And watch you get mauled by some mutt? No way. If anyone’s going to kill you, it’s gonna be me.”

I smiled, and started to put the Band Aids on. “You’ll have to fight with Erica about that one.”

He smiled, a perfect Matt Schroeder smile, and I put one the last Band Aid. “You know, if you really wanted to go running with the dogs you probably shouldn’t have worn flip flops.”

“Shut up!” I said, slapping him on the shoulder, being carefully of his arm.

Then we fell into an awkward silence. I knew I had to tell him. But I didn’t have the guts to tell him.

But there was something I wanted to tell him, and KNEW I could. “I’m sorry.”

“Huh?” he asked, turning to look at me. Oh, please Matt. Don’t make me look into your eyes. This isn’t good.

“I’m sorry...you know, about everything.”

“Um, okay.” He turned back to staring across the room at our T.V. But there was something I still didn’t get. Why?

“So...” I started. He turned back and looked at me. “I slap you all the time, I sort of ignore you when Aaron shows up, I pushed you in the pool, I slap you again, I scream at you, try it inflict bodily harm against you by means of a broken CD player, I yell at you for being my tutor and make fun of you every chance I get...” I said, counting each one on a finger.

He smiled. “Is there a question in there?”

Yeah, there was. “But then you forget it all and then save me from a dog?”

“Yeah...why is this so hard to understand?”

“I don’t know. It’s just not normal. I thought you’d be mad at me forever.”

“I’m the one who kissed you, right? I deserved it. And I already told you. I’m not going to see you get killed by some dog.”

I was afraid to ask, but I knew it needed asking. “Because I’m your neighbor?”

“No.” I turned so I was looking right in his eyes. They were WAY too bright.

“Then why?” I asked, scarcely breathing. I was only inches from his face.

“I...” he started. It seemed like he was as flustered about this as I was. Matt, if you’re going to shoot me down then do it here, when no one else is around. “I...I care about you, you know?”

Care? Okay, it wasn’t ‘love’, but it was a start.

“Oh.” For some reason, ‘care’ wasn’t cutting it with me. I needed more from him than ‘care’.

“Oh what?”

“I don’t know.” I looked at my feet. This conversation was not going as planned. “Never mind.”

“You do that too much, you know?” My eyes snapped up to meet his gaze. “You did the same thing when you had that problem with Aaron.”

Well, that was unexpected. “You knew about that?”

“I’m not an idiot, Reynolds, I can figure things out.” I sighed. Yeah, I knew he wasn’t an idiot.

“Right.” Okay, this wasn’t going anywhere and I was feeling like an idiot.

“Well, what then? Actually say your feelings. You have a right to, you know? Just like every one else. It isn’t necessary to suppress your feelings.”

I did suppress my feelings, didn’t I? I keep them all inside so I don’t have to worry about them. But now that was coming back to bite me in the ass. It was now or never.

“Why did you kiss me?”

That shook him. “Um...”

“Did you want to? Or was it some ‘I want the spotlight’ thing?” I straightened, being dead serious.

“I wanted to.” The statement came way too quickly. I wasn’t expecting it. “I’ve kind of wanted to for a long time.”

He WANTED to? Suddenly I started to feel these butterflies in my stomach. “Really?”

“What, you think you’re sister is the only pretty girl in your family?” Was he calling me pretty? “Plus, with you there’s the bonus of not knowing what could happen, and the high chance of being slapped.” Was he saying what I thought he was saying? Was he saying... “So, yeah. I wanted to.”

I couldn’t say anything. All I could do was stare at him. And he stared at the T.V. again.

Right then was probably the best moment of my life.

Because, for the first time, I really let my emotions take over me.

I slowly leaned towards him, closing the gap between us. It was only inches but it felt like miles. Matt turned to me and began leaning in, too.

There was no feeling that something was wrong. This was very, VERY right.

The gap closed, and our lips met. This was very, very, VERY right.

And it was everything I hoped it would be.

It was a simple, little kiss. It wasn't one of those hot, passionate kisses that you read in those romance novels, the ones where the two people are crushed against a wall. Those are so fake and hormone driven.

No, this was real. It was everything I had ever hoped for. It was Matt and me, sitting on my living room couch, kissing.

And that's how we stayed until Erica came home.

Now I knew what that note was about.

## EPILOGUE

I t was the end of July and the pool was FREEZING!  
“C’mon in Kate!” Matt called.

Beth, Matt and I were swimming in Beth’s pool. Beth had called me earlier that day and invited us both over because her parents had to go to some important business meeting.

“I don’t think so!” I called back, smiling. I knew where THIS was going.

“Get in Reynolds!” he shouted, getting out of the pool.

This time, I was wearing my one piece (thank god). As Matt approached I inched back on the bench, holding my hands out and turning my head. “No!” I cried.

He grabbed my wrist with a wet hand and pulled me forward. I ended up in his arms, and he wrapped them around me. I smiled again.

Okay, I’ll get in Matt.

“Either get a room or get in the pool!” Beth shouted from the pool.

I rolled my eyes and pushed out of Matt’s embrace. Instead of doing my normal pool thing (which is get in the shallow end and work my way over, getting used to the water) I jumped in the deep end (which is eleven feet).

“Ah!” I heard Beth say, getting splashed.

I surfaced and saw Beth wiping water from her eyes. “Sorry,” I told her, not sorry in the least.

Then a wave of water crashed over me. I coughed out the water and turned behind me. Matt had done a cannonball off the diving board.

I swam over to the deep end and splashed him. “Jerk.”

“Of course!” He splashed me back. I laughed.

Beth swam over to the two of us and rolled her eyes.

This was right. Here I was, swimming with my best friend and boyfriend.  
Yep...boyfriend.

It was weird calling Matt my boyfriend, since usually I just called him “moron” or “loser” or “go away”. But now...now I was calling Matthew Schroeder- my next door neighbor of over sixteen years, the guy I used to call my best friend, the popular jock that under normal circumstances wouldn’t give me a second look- boyfriend.

The phone rang inside the house. Beth sighed, swam to the ladder and said, “I’ll get it.” She ran into the house.

Matt swam closer to me and I treaded water, staying near the edge of the pool. “Having fun?” he asked.

I knew what he meant.

“Yeah, I am.” Finally. It was about time that I started to enjoy life.

Erica was off checking out Yale and that area of Connecticut. I don’t think I’ve ever been so close to my sister. She and I have NEVER gotten along.

I heard that Sally and Aaron had broken up. Apparently Aaron was after her because he thought she could help him with his “acting career”. Yeah, okay. WHATEVER.

I had thought that he was working his way through our cast, which meant that either he was going to go after Erica or Janie Harting. But I knew Erica wouldn’t give him the time of day, and John Fremont had finally asked Janie out (she accepted).

So...it sucked to be Aaron.

“Um, hello?” Matt waved a hand in front of my face.

“Wha-what?” I shook my head. Whoa. My mind had slipped away again.

“You really have problems with reality, don’t you?” I smiled, realizing that Matt was treading water right in front of me.

“Shut up,” I said, flicking some water at him. With one quick motion he grabbed my hand, pulled me closer and kissed me.

Oh yes, life was DEFINITELY good.

We kissed for probably another couple seconds when Beth came rushing out. “Kate!”

We pulled apart and I looked up. Beth had the phone in her hand.

I reluctantly swam over to the ladder, got out and grabbed the phone.

“Hello?” I asked into the phone, really wanting to get back in the pool with Matt.

“Kate?” It was my mom. Um, well this was weird.

“Yeah?”

“Well, I think you should come home. There’s something we need to talk about.”

Okay, what did I do? I haven’t spray painted the dumpster lately (which I only did because Beth dared me), and I can’t drive so it wasn’t like I had totaled the car or something.

“Alright.” I pressed the OFF button and handed the phone back to Beth.

“My mom wants me to come home.”

Beth frowned but nodded. Matt walked over to me, drying himself. “I’ll drive you home.”

OH.

MY.

GOD.

This isn’t possible.

It JUST CAN’T BE!

Okay...well, Matt drove me home. Once there I went into my house (okay, AFTER another kiss). And once I got inside, I saw Mom and Larry sitting at the kitchen table.

“What’s going on?” I asked. They looked up at me with a strange look. This was going to be bad.

I pulled a chair out and sat. “Kate, I don’t want you to freak out.”

This was going to be REALLY bad.

“What’s going on?” I repeated.

Mom and Larry looked at each other, and then smiled. Mom turned back to me and I swear I saw a small tear in her eye. “I’m pregnant.”

Pregnant? Okay, whatever. Have fun Mom...

WAIT!!

PREGNANT? No, Mom. You CAN’T be pregnant! YOU’RE FORTY-SEVEN!

My eyes bulged and the breath caught in my throat. “Pregnant?” It was barely a whisper.

“Yeah. I’m going to have a baby!” Larry squeezed my mother and they looked at me, hoping for a good response.

But I didn’t have one.

“That’s great, Mom,” I squeaked out finally.

Mom smiled.

Larry smiled.

I just sat there, while Larry and Mom began to talk to each other.

A baby? HOW DID THAT HAPPEN?

Okay, yeah I knew HOW it happened. That’s just WRONG!

But why? Oh...why?

It’s official:

My life sucks.

