



little miss

OBVIOUS

by
Alessa

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by Alessa

"How about a movie? Saturday night? Just you and me and a bucket of popcorn."

I scowled at the fourteen-year-old vision of out-and-proud lesbian arrogance. "I have an even better idea. How about you get the hell off my desk before I personally kick your butt off it?"

She grinned at me, unfazed. "You just can't get enough of my butt, can you?"

I screamed silently in frustration at her retreating back and may have muttered some very bad swear words that would put even sailors to shame as she turned back and winked. At me. The absolute nerve of that perv!

If there was one universal law on this planet, it would be that I, Maya Cline, completely and totally abhorred Leigh Sanders.

It's as if she was put on this planet for the sole purpose of driving me utterly mad. In fourth grade, she *purposely* spilt red paint all over my brand new white dress (no matter how many times she insists it was an accident) and poured an entire juice box down the back of my school uniform in fifth grade as a dare. You'd think by high school she'd have matured *slightly*, but no! Who decided that it would be absolutely hilarious to see how many paper clips she could stick in my hair before I realised what she had done? Leigh herself. And before you ask, it was thirty-seven. I strode happily around the school until lunch, looking like a human magnet.

Over the years, I've put up with her taunting, her teasing, her oh-so-very-not-funny pranks, and her annoying little habit of asking me out on a date every week when I *know* she's only doing it to provoke me, and I'm sorry to say that it works most of the time. And let's not forget, she violated rule number two of the Schoolgirl Code (rule number one being the common yet despicable practise of looking up a girl's skirt).

Because here's the thing: she stole my first kiss!

We were in the second grade at Lillian Girls School, performing the annual school play, and I won the part of Sleeping Beauty. Three guesses as to who the Prince was. Adrenaline and sugar charged on the day, I was exhausted by the time the performance rolled around and fell asleep on stage—not that anyone had noticed, considering I was supposed to be in '*a deep slumber only to be awoken by true love's first kiss*'. Oh, the irony.

All I remembered was being shaken awake by Leigh to the words, "Get up, you bum! Everyone's staring," which wasn't in the least bit romantic, even by second grade standards. In the script, she was only supposed to kiss me on the cheek, but according to my best friend Katie, she missed and got my mouth instead. Missed my ass! It's more like she did it on purpose! I don't even know what it felt like.

She had completely obliterated any romantic notions I'd ever had of my first kiss. And so my hatred for Leigh Sanders was born.

I jumped when something hit the back of my head. I cast a suspicious eye around the classroom, only to be met with the smirking image of Leigh two rows behind. Immature cow. Glaring, I turned back to the front of the classroom. You would not believe how much self-control it took not to march over there and pummel her to death. Not that my girly fists would make much of an impact on her athletic physique.

Over the summer of sixth grade, she'd taken up playing sports, grown taller and thinner and, all in all, come back from break looking, well, hot. (I did *not* just say that. You hear me? Blame it on the teenage hormones!) Not that she wasn't already considered good-looking, with those gorgeous azure eyes of hers, messy chestnut-coloured hair, and crooked-yet-perfect smile. But it wasn't as if I *shared* any of these opinions.

The bell rang, and I shook my head, trying to rid myself of all thoughts of Leigh and her hotness. Sorry, my mistake; I meant loseriness.

"Did it hurt?"

I glanced up at the pair of laughing blue eyes staring down at me. Since when did Leigh care about my health and well-being?

"You mean that stupid paper ball you threw at my head? I think I may have suffered from temporary memory loss. How old are you again? Five?"

She waved away my jibe and continued, "Did you fall down from heaven? Because you have the face of an angel even when you're angry," she grinned at me, almost wetting herself with laughter. *Real* mature.

"Why, thank you, Leigh." I sighed with fake sincerity. "But you're wasting your time. You know very well I'm not into girls, and if I were, you wouldn't be on my list."

She stopped laughing and turned to stare at me, confused. "Oh, really? Why not?"

"Do you ever wake up in the morning and look at your hideous face in the mirror?" I asked, my voice syrupy sweet.

Seeing Leigh's reaction as I took down her impressive ego a couple of notches was priceless. I shot one last withering glance in her direction before storming towards my next class.

Because even though I may have found her *slightly* attractive, it didn't erase the fact that I hated her.



I shuffled tiredly towards my locker, rubbing my eyes. Staying up late to complete the third draft of my English essay was evidently not the best decision I'd ever made.

"Late night?" Katie leaned into the locker next to mine, her pixie haircut now dark red, as opposed to the usual blond it was last week.

"Yep. I was grinding my way through the dance floor and getting high at Samantha's birthday bash last night."

She didn't even bat an eyelid. "Sarcasm doesn't work when you're half-asleep, sweetie."

Finishing my English essay," I yawned.

She sighed and rolled her eyes. "What? Isn't this the fiftieth time you've rewritten it?"

"Third, actually," I corrected.

"Whatever," she dismissed me with a wave of her hand. "I remember reading it the first time, and it totally kicked ass to me."

"So maybe I'm a bit of a perfectionist," I admitted.

"Perfectionist? More like obsessive-compulsive," she snorted.

Sure, I tended to have psychological breakdowns whenever I got less than ninety-eight percent in a math exam or forgot to do my Home Economics homework, but that didn't mean I was neurotic. I'd just set myself some future goals that came along with a set of high standards that I expected to live up to. Stop laughing!

"Hey!" I swung for a punch at her arm, which she dodged easily.

"Too slow," she grinned. Thank you, reflexes. I opened my mouth to retort but was cut off.

"Hey, Maya!"

I automatically turned around at the sound of my name.

"Has anyone ever told you that you have beautiful eyes?"

I stared, dumbfounded, at Leigh, who had materialised out of thin air and was now leaning against my locker. Her smouldering blue eyes held my startled amber ones, and, for a moment, my heart fluttered as she tucked a stray strand of black hair behind my ear. I jerked as if she'd been holding two hundred volts of electricity, and stepped back.

"Has anyone ever told you that if you so much as glance in my direction one more time, I will ensure that not even plastic surgery will allow you to recognise yourself?" I snapped, annoyed at my response to her touch.

I could have sworn I saw something in her eyes flicker before she relaxed and returned to her usual lightheartedness.

"Well, didn't someone wake up on the wrong side of the bed this morning?" And with that, she continued down the hallway, whistling, as if with just one touch she hadn't turned my knees to jelly.

"You guys still in denial?"

I stared at Katie like she was on the strongest crack known to man.

"Don't even go there!"

The silly girl was under the poor, misguided impression that, 'underneath all my burning hatred, lay a red-hot desire to ravish Leigh' (her words, not mine). And it was exactly that—a poor, misguided impression. The only thing that lay beneath my burning hatred was my increasing desire to strangle her with my shoelace.

"I'm just saying that I think you guys would make the cutest couple," she insisted.

This from a girl who thought that our balding, fifty-plus-year-old English teacher bawling his eyes out during Titanic was cute.

"Newsflash: we hate each other. Leigh loves pissing me off. Therefore, I hate Leigh. End of story," I growled.

"You keep telling yourself that, but she looks sincere to me, even if she sometimes appears to be joking. Maybe one day you'll see it for yourself," she smiled at me sympathetically.

Was she feeling sorry for me? I love my life! (Most of the time.) I love waking up to the sound of glass-shattering opera, courtesy of Mrs. Whinter-with-an-H next door. I love every time the hot water runs out by the time it's my turn to have a shower. I love the fact that my crappy internet connection takes ten minutes just to get to Google.

I love the fact that every time Leigh asks me on a date, a small part of me wishes she actually meant it.

Yeah, my life's all hunky-dory. No need for a pity party at all.



I leaned back against the cherry tree tucked away in the corner of the school oval and reached into my backpack to check through the exam paper one more time. Don't you just hate how every time there's an error in the marking, it's never in your favour? Sighing heavily, I covered my face with my hands and let a wave of disappointment crash over me.

At the sound of approaching footsteps, I glanced up and groaned as Leigh strolled over and plonked herself down next to me like she belonged there. Foul beast.

"Are you okay? You look like the Principal just announced math is a waste of time."

I stared glumly at the ground, too depressed to respond to her jab. "I got eighty-two percent on my chemistry exam."

"What? Does that bring your average down from six hundred percent to a mere three hundred?"

"Shut up, Leigh," I replied through gritted teeth. "Just shut up."

She looked up at me with a defiant smile on her face. "Sorry. Just trying out my luck."

I snorted. Was she deluded or something?

"So... do you need anything? The periodic table? Math homework? A hug? A back-rub? A date?"

"You know what I could really use right now?" I sighed dramatically.

"No, what?" she sounded curious.

"For you to drop off the face of this planet," I snapped, before swiftly getting to my feet and walking away.

Ha! Eat my dust, Leigh.

A hand fastened over my wrist, preventing me from leaving.

"Maya. Don't go." Her voice was soft, and her eyes were exploring mine, making my stomach flip.

"Don't worry. It was just a pop quiz. It doesn't even count towards our final report mark."

When Leigh was right, it meant there was something seriously wrong with the universe.

And right now, there is something seriously wrong with the universe.

I snatched my hand away and sat back down—only because my stomach was feeling queasy. Not because the touch of her hand made my legs turn into jelly.

We sat there side-by-side for a few minutes, neither of us speaking. I racked my brains for any memory of the last time we'd been in each other's company, minus our parents, who generally forced us to be civil to one another without ripping at each other's throats. I bet that even when we were babies, she stole my pacifier, and I retaliated by whacking her with my rattle. Good times.

She broke the silence first. "Maya? Why do you hate me?"

I squinted at her, attempting to discern whether this was another one of her "hilarious" jokes.

"Why do you ask?"

"Well, I honestly can't recall a time when we've actually willingly had a civil conversation."

What is she? A mind reader or something?

"I... I don't... hate you, Leigh..." I muttered, staring hard at the ground, embarrassment causing me to blush. Stupid blood. Why do we need it anyway? Oh, that's right—it carries oxygen around the body and is essential for our survival. Silly me.

I could feel her penetrating gaze, but I refused to look her in the eye. So maybe I lied to you before when I said I hated her, but I didn't want you to think I was *in love* with her or anything. Because I'm not. Really. I'm not into girls by any means. It's just not my thing.

"Why, thank you, Miss Cline. And if it pleases you to know, I don't hate you either," she said nonchalantly, causing a burst of warmth in my chest. Being around her was seriously damaging to my health.

I glanced over the fence at the gravestones lined up in neat rows and exhaled loudly. Our school was situated next to a cemetery. As if starting the day with double physics wasn't depressing enough.

"You know what?" I mused.

"What?"

"I think I would care if you died."

She stared at me like I'd just announced that Pizza Hut was having a free all-you-can-eat for fourteen-year-old schoolgirls before breaking into a smile.

"See! I knew somewhere in your little, black heart, you had romantic feelings for—"

"Because your corpse would probably release highly toxic contaminants into the earth, causing unnecessary pollution in the natural environment and eventually lead to increased effects of global warming," I cut in quickly.

For a moment, she sat there, stunned. Then, spotting my grin, she returned it with a laugh and a shake of her head.

Some things never change.



It was raining. Aside from the obvious, it also meant that I had two choices: a) make the half-hour walk home in torrential rain, sans umbrella or any other waterproof device, or b) camp out on the covered front steps of the school until the rain stops. But judging from the way it was pouring down buckets, I'd be sitting here until the next Ice Age.

I glanced around and found the area deserted. Perfect. Not. Staying behind after class to discuss an extra-credit assignment meant I missed my bus and any opportunity to scab a ride off some good Samaritan with a car. I sat down with my back against the brick wall, figuring that if I was going to be sitting on the cold, damp footpath wearing a school uniform in ten-degree weather, I might as well get comfortable. Within five minutes, I was a human icicle.

"Need a ride?"

And so appeared my angel in disguise, brown hair plastered to the side of her head, clothes dripping as she sat astride her bicycle.

Leigh.

Did I say angel? I meant Satan himself. For a second, my heart skipped a beat, but I brushed it aside as a surprise.

"What are you doing here?" I asked suspiciously.

Her white school shirt was clinging to her torso due to the rain, and it was doing ridiculous things to my insides. She spun the bicycle around with ease and offered me the back seat.

"Basketball training."

I took one last look at the sky, still emptying the contents of the Pacific Ocean, and gave in.

"Yeah. Okay."

She stayed silent for two heartbeats, then reached out and gently brushed the backs of her fingers against my cheek.

"You're freezing, Maya."

I stopped breathing. The corner of her mouth turned up into a half smile before she murmured, "We'll get wet, but it still beats waiting for the rain to stop."

Stunned, I lifted my hand to touch my cheek. It was burning. By the time I pulled myself up from the school steps, my heart rate still hadn't returned to normal. What on God's green earth was wrong with me?

I slipped onto the bicycle seat behind Leigh, thankful for the warmth of her back pressing against my wet cheek. Leigh reached into the backpack and pulled out a navy sweater that could have only belonged to a guy, and gave it to me.

"Here. That should warm you up."

I gripped my seat, shocked at the wave of jealousy creeping up on me with the implications of a guy's sweater in Leigh's backpack. I bet you anything, it was Eric's. That asshole was all over Leigh like a rash during summer camp. But then so were others, including several girls, on account of Leigh being the hottest number in a ten-mile radius.

Oh, God. I was officially losing it.

"It's my brother's." And just like that, all I could feel was relief flooding through me.

Mental institutions, here I come.

"I really don't care," I replied, faking confidence but, in truth, annoyed with myself for feeling jealous and annoyed with Leigh for making me feel this way.

She responded with another half-smile. "Okay, hold tight," she said, returning her attention to the road.

I studied her cautiously from the corner of my eye while my hands possessively encircled her slim waist. This was not the usual loud, do-everything-humanly-possible-to-drive-me-into-an-early-grave Leigh. This was the quiet, gentle side of her that I rarely got a glimpse of. My eyes strayed to the rain droplets dotting her arm like tiny diamonds, and my fingers itched to just brush them away, but I reined in the urge.

This was Leigh. The girl who tugged on my ponytail throughout all of the fourth grade, until I finally cracked and got my hair hacked to chin-length. I gave myself a swift mental kick in the butt. Think arithmetics. Think chemistry and English. Think anything but the soft, milky skin of Leigh's arm!

"Turn left at the intersection," I instructed, directing her towards my house.

"It's okay. I know the way," she replied, her eyes not moving from the road ahead.

"How do you know where I live?" I demanded indignantly.

"I know lots of things about you, Maya. I know the number of times you brush your hair in the morning, the colour of your underwear, and all your deepest, darkest secrets. I know everything. I've been watching you." Her voice was low, almost menacing, and I was seriously contemplating screaming and throwing myself from the bicycle and into the roadside ditch when Leigh threw her head back and laughed so hard she nearly had us crash anyway. "I'm kidding. You should have seen the look on your face," she managed, wiping tears from her eyes.

I attempted a scowl, but somehow my mouth twitched into a smile, and I couldn't help but chuckle along with her. Stupid, traitorous mouth. Her laugh was infectious.

"Shut up, Leigh."

She glanced towards me, eyes sparkling, and grinned wickedly, causing a hot flush to creep up my neck.

"Nah. You were sick last term, so I used to bring over the work you missed." Noting my silence, she added, "And in case you still think I'm stalking you, Katie gave me your address."

Katie, that shifty little toad.

I remembered—I couldn't get out of bed for a week and almost went into cardiac arrest at the thought of all the work I was missing. On my doorstep every day of that week was the work I needed, a thermos full of chicken noodle soup, and a small slip of paper with a knock-knock joke that never ceased to make me smile, despite its corniness.

"But I thought it was Sara who'd been delivering all that stuff!" I burst out, surprised beyond belief. Sara had been my lab partner until her family moved away in June.

Leigh snorted, "Sara wouldn't even know how to boil water, let alone cook."

"You *made* that soup?" I asked incredulously. The thought of Leigh in an apron, behind a stove, and cooking me chicken noodle soup had me all but melting into a big gooey mess on the back seat of her bicycle.

"Not quite. My Mom did." Now she was the one surprised. "It didn't taste like it was straight out of the packet, did it?"

That was true. The soup was much too nice to have been made from just powder and hot water. "That was some darn good soup."

"I know. Mom makes it all the time."

"Tell her I said thanks." My voice was so soft I didn't think she'd catch it, but she turned and smiled at me.

"No problem."

For some reason, a large part of me wanted to reach over and kiss her. But I could never do *that*. I mean, after all, this was Leigh, and even if I no longer hated her, there was no way on this planet I was remotely romantically interested in her. I'm simply not into girls. Girls are not my thing, right?

Don't you just love self-denial?

"We're here," her voice drew me out of my mental argument.

I looked up and flinched. The rain still hadn't ceased, and we were both soaked to the bones.

Before I could do anything, Leigh got off the bicycle and helped me get up. I hated having to let go of holding onto her back and found myself speechless when she took my bag as I stepped around the bike.

"Here, let me carry that."

Leigh Sanders, chivalrous? Had there been an apocalypse I didn't know about?

We made it to my front door and stood there, two fourteen-year-old girls staring awkwardly at each other. Well, at least I was awkward and shaking from cold to boot, but Leigh looked her usual cool, calm, and collected self, shaking water droplets from her hair and leaning against the wall. Darn it! Sometimes life just isn't fair.

"So thanks, um... yeah... thanks for the ride... thanks..." I did *not* just say the word 'thanks' three times in one sentence. This was coming from the girl who topped the class in English. Yeah, I wouldn't have guessed either.

She stood there, looking amused. The jerk. "What's so funny?" I scowled.

"You're nervous," she smiled smugly and took a step towards me, but I barely noticed—I was so busy venting out my anger. Again.

"Me? Nervous? Why the hell would I be nervous around you? You're just a brain-dead, miserable jackass with no heart, who revels in making my life on earth a living hell!" I shouted, inflicting my deadliest glare on her.

Which seemed to have no effect on Leigh. Isn't life just peachy?

Because she took another step forward, leaning over, and whispered into my ear, "If I had no heart, then why would I be doing this?"

And then her lips came crashing onto mine.

There was only one word that could sum up how it felt to be kissed by Leigh.

Devastating.

It was like New Year's fireworks exploding behind my eyelids and a choir singing "Love Is in the Air" in my ears. My heart racing at three hundred kilometres per second, my knees all but giving out, my stomach somersaulting, my mind completely filled only with thoughts of *her*.

I was floating, and before I knew it, I was kissing her back!

And I *felt it*. I felt every raindrop on her lips. I felt every heartbeat beneath her skin. I felt it all the way down to my toes.

Then reality hit me like a tonne of bricks.

What in the hell was I doing?

I pulled away, blushing furiously as I untangled my fingers that had unconsciously found their way into her wet hair, and reluctantly removed myself from her arms. She was panting just as hard as I was, but her eyes were smouldering, and it was all I could do to not throw myself back at her.

Because I was a studious fourteen-year-old schoolgirl who did not fling herself shamelessly at other girls. I'm simply not like that. I'm not into girls. Girls are not my thing!

"I—I—h—have to go," I stuttered, wrenching open the door and slamming it shut before she could do anything to change my mind. *Real* smooth.

By the time I'd calmed down enough to move to my bedroom and glance out the window, she was gone.



I'd spent the entire morning avoiding her, racing out of the classroom just as the bell rang, spending my lunch sandwiched between the romance and self-help sections of the library (a coincidence, I tell you), and ducking behind doors at the sight of any five-foot-three girls with brown hair. I wasn't crowned Queen of Hide-and-Seek in third grade for nothing, you know. But even that didn't help me because Leigh finally cornered me during the break between sixth and seventh periods.

"Why are you avoiding me?"

Well, that was straight to the point.

I took one look at her brooding expression and decided to come clean.

"What are you talking about?" Okay, so call me a coward, but my mouth and brain clearly don't work on the same wavelengths.

"Don't play dumb with me, Maya," she growled. My heart did a funny little flip as the sound of my name rolled off her tongue like a caress.

"You did *not* just call me dumb," I glared back at her. How dare she just march over here and call me stupid? Egotistical jerk. Note to myself: Am I bipolar or what?

"I believe I just did," she replied coolly.

That dim-witted, supercilious, freakishly cute fruitcake!

Fuming, I took a few deep breaths to compose myself and blinked up at her innocently. "Could you do something for me?" I asked sweetly.

She stared at me, surprised for a moment, before answering, "For you, I'd do anything."

"Could you buy yourself a one-way ticket to anywhere far, far away from me and never come back?" The moment I said those words, I wanted to grab them back and stuff them into my big, fat mouth.

Leigh flinched, and something in her eyes flickered. Anger? Disgust? *Hurt*? And then she just closed herself off from me, her face expressionless and impish eyes usually sparkling with laughter now brimming with signs of the first tears about to roll down her cheeks. And it scared the bee's knees out of me.

"Maybe I will," even her voice was soft and broken.

She stared right through me. Like I no longer existed.

I'm an idiot.

No, not an idiot. I'm the biggest moron in the entire moronical world of moronic morons.

I opened my mouth, but not a single sound came out. What was I going to do? Apologise? Beg for forgiveness? I guess I was just so used to hurling abuse at her that I didn't really know how else to act around her.

Leigh inclined her head slightly, as if accepting the situation, and strode away, leaving the feeling of guilt to sink to the pit of my stomach like a stone.

What have I done?



"What did you do?"

I stared in confusion at the almost comical image of Katie standing at my bedroom doorway—hands on hips, red hair wild, face twisted into a furious scowl. I would have laughed if I wasn't so depressed.

"Leigh's been walking around as if Krispy Kreme has just closed down, and you've been moping around looking like you've run over your neighbour's pet dog."

I winced and muttered defensively, "Oh, that's right. Just assume *I'm* the one who's at fault."

She looked at me. And I cracked. It's a gift of hers—reducing people to a babbling mess with the intensity of her gaze.

"So maybe I might have told her to go away in a not-very-pleasant way..." She kept staring. "...the day after we made out on my doorsteps in the rain."

Okay! I admit it! I'm a cold, heartless bitch and a disgrace to the human race, but just stop looking at me like that, dammit!

"Maya, out of all the stupid things you've done... ARGH!" She shrieked, her face turning ten different shades of purple.

Katie's going to kill me.

She marched towards me, eyes bulging.

Thank you, God, for the precious fourteen years I've spent on planet Earth.

She reached over and grabbed my pillow, gripping it so tightly that her knuckles turned white.

To my parents, I leave all my money and worldly possessions, except my CD collection, which I already promised to leave to Katie, even though she'll probably be in jail for my murder.

And she shoved her face into my pillow and screamed.

But I'm sure they have CD players in prison cells. Wait, so I'm not dead yet?

After two minutes, she lifted her head from the pillow, looking considerably calmer.

"Why would you do that to her, Maya?" Her voice was freakishly placid, like she was having an out-of-body experience.

"Do what?" Was she referring to the kiss or the get-the-hell-out-of-my-life?

"Reject her like that." She still sounded eerily passive for someone who looked like they were about to commit first-degree murder a mere five minutes ago.

"I... I didn't *reject* her exactly..." I stuttered.

"You kissed her, then told her to piss off. What else would you call that? A proposal?" She didn't have to be so blunt about it.

"Because... I'm just not like that. I... I'm not into girls; why can't you understand it? And besides... she's an idiot!" The excuses sounded feeble, even to me. She raised an eyebrow.

Well, sometimes I think you're an idiot, but you don't see me calling you a dumb loser who should get laid on a regular basis to benefit mankind."

"Hey!"

She sighed and sat next to me on my bed. "Maya, you're the smartest person I know, yet somehow you're the only person besides Leigh who hasn't realised your true feelings for her."

"You mean my feelings of hate?"

She gave me the look. One day I'm going to design super-protective sunglasses so that her stares will cease to have any effect on me. Then she'll be sorry!

"You know what I mean."

I shifted uncomfortably, feeling my face grow hot. "No, I don't, actually."

"I've seen the way you gaze at her when you think no one's looking, the way your face lights up whenever she walks into a room, or whenever she asks you out."

My face so does *not* light up whenever she's around. She's seeing things. "But this is the girl who's done everything in her power to annoy me practically all my life," I reminded her, in case she'd forgotten that Leigh was supposed to be the bane of my existence.

"This is also the same girl who stayed with you all night and held your hand when you got homesick during sixth grade camp. The same girl who let you cry into her shirt at your grandpa's funeral, and didn't say a word when you told her that she smelled like a toilet and hated her. The same girl who bought you a bouquet of daisies and took you to see *Enchanted* when you thought everyone had forgotten your thirteenth birthday, even though she hates that movie more than anything." Jesus, that girl had a memory of a steel trap. "You've been clinging to the idea that you hate her like a lifeline because you're just too damn scared to admit that you're crazy about her!"

It was as if I were seven all over again, playing the role of Sleeping Beauty and waking up to find my Prince Charming.

Katie was right. I never realised how obvious it was to everyone around me.

"Maybe I might like Leigh... just a little," I muttered, doing a rather impressive impersonation of a tomato. "I mean, she's quite... pretty... and she has some rather notable... qualities..." I trailed off, my eyes straying to the figure at my doorway.

Someone shoot me now.

I could feel Katie's stare jumping back and forth between my stunned, this-is-so-not-happening-to-me expression and Leigh's pensive gaze.

"Is that the time? I really have to go. I have an, err... orthodontist appointment in, uh... five minutes. Got to go. Bye, Maya. Nice to see you, Leigh," she shrilled airily before flouncing past Leigh and out my bedroom door.

The stupid girl didn't even have braces. The look I shot her could only be described as murderous.

"What are you doing here?"

"I-" This was the first time I'd seen Leigh so unsure of herself. "I came here to... talk... Your Mom let me in."

"Oh."

The girl I'd just realised I no longer hated (in fact, quite the opposite) had been standing at my doorway for God knows how long, possibly overhearing my moment of self-actualisation and leaving me on the brink of an emotional crisis, and the only coherent response I could muster was, *Oh*. Me? A genius? I've never thought otherwise.

"You said you thought I was pretty."

Oh, God. She heard everything.

You? Up there? Just do the right thing and put me out of my misery.

"I'm pleading momentary insanity." I inched backwards as she walked steadily towards me, bringing a whole new level to 'deer caught in headlights'. Goodbye, cruel, cruel world.

"And you said you thought I had notable qualities."

A bolt of lightning would do. But if you're having a little trouble with the thunderclouds, I could do with just a cave-in of the ceiling, or even a collapsed lung or something.

"Yes, well, everyone has some good traits. I mean, even Hitler thought what he was doing was right." Oh, bravo, Maya. Compare Leigh to the poster boy for genocide. Nice work!

By now my back was pressed against the wall, and she stopped, her disconcertingly beautiful face barely a centimetre away from me. I could see each individual fleck of bluish silver in her eye.

"So if I were to draw a conclusion from the evidence I have right here before me, I'd derive that you don't hate me at all. In fact, dare I even say that you *like* me?" She grinned cockily, but her expression darkened as she realised I wasn't laughing it off or just plain insulting her—exactly what I'd been doing for the past, oh, ten or so years. "Do you like me, Maya?" she repeated softly, her gaze wavering between incredulous and hopeful.

And that's when I exploded—figuratively speaking, of course.

"How dare you?! You've been terrorising me, annoying me, and being a darn right pain in the freaking ass since Kindergarten, and you have the absolute nerve to ask me if I *like* you?!"

She flinched, and her eyes flickered with something I might have identified as hurt if I wasn't too busy figuratively exploding, before her face took on that blank, expressionless mask that I was so afraid of.

"I see," her voice matched the tonelessness of her face as she took a step back, away from me.

"No, you don't see!" I shouted, practically pulling my hair out in frustration, face blotchy red, eyes tearing up. Not a pretty sight, I tell you. I grabbed her firmly by the shoulders so she couldn't run away, and continued my ranting.

"You never see! You never see that every time you tell me I'm beautiful, or smart, or funny, even though I know I'm none of those things, you have the ability to make me feel like I'm worth it. You never see that every time you talk to Lindsey, or Harriet, or Janice, all I feel like doing is throwing my math textbooks at your head for making me feel jealous. You never see that every time you laugh, it's like I'm fighting in freaking World War III with myself, trying not to grab you by the collar and kiss you. You never see that every time I tell you I hate you, what I really mean to say is that... is that... I LOVE YOU!"

My hands slid from her shoulders, and feeling light-headed, I inhaled some sweet, sweet oxygen. She was just standing there, so straight and calm, looking like she didn't know what hit her.

For three tortuously long seconds, she didn't say a word.

I knew it. This whole thing was a mistake. My brain cells can't be deteriorating because I never had any to begin with. Of course, she doesn't feel the same way. I mean, look at her. She could have had any guy she wanted. Why on earth did I think she would instead choose a girl like me?

And then she opened her mouth to speak, and my mouth turned to dust, the air sucked right out of my lungs. Her eyes were molten, *burning*—and I was so far gone there was no hope of returning.

"You never see that every time I say how beautiful, or smart, or funny you are, I *mean* every single one of those things. You never see that every time I talk to Lindsey, or Harriet, or Janice, I can't help but glance at you every five seconds just to see if you're looking. You never see that every time you smile, I have to practically chain myself to my desk so I won't grab you because I'm terrified that I'll never be able to let you go. You never see that every time I ask you out or spin out one of my pathetic pick-up lines, what I'm really trying to say is that I am completely, irrevocably in love with you, and I have absolutely no idea what to do about it."

I saw stars. Millions of them. And they spread this warm, happy glow that left me tingling all over. In a good way. She *loved* me, and it was obvious to everyone all this time except me. I felt tears spilling from my eyes for the first time. I felt like wrapping my arms around Katie and telling her that she was the best friend a girl could have. I felt like I could swim the Pacific Ocean and still have energy to hike up Mount Everest.

Stupid Leigh has given me a multiple personality disorder.

I wiped my eyes and smiled shyly, "Well, I might have an idea."

She slid her arms around me and pulled me flush against her, making me gasp. Someone had better dial an ambulance—I think I'm having a heart attack.

"And what might that be?"

"You could place that sweet mouth of yours onto mine." I turned an even darker shade of red as her grin widened. I have no idea what she sees in me. I must resemble a beetroot.

"Miss Cline, I believe that's your best idea yet," she declared, and kissed me. And they say there's no heaven on earth. Liars!

I've changed my mind. If there is one universal law on this planet, it would be that I, Maya Cline, am totally and irrevocably in love with Leigh Sanders.

The End