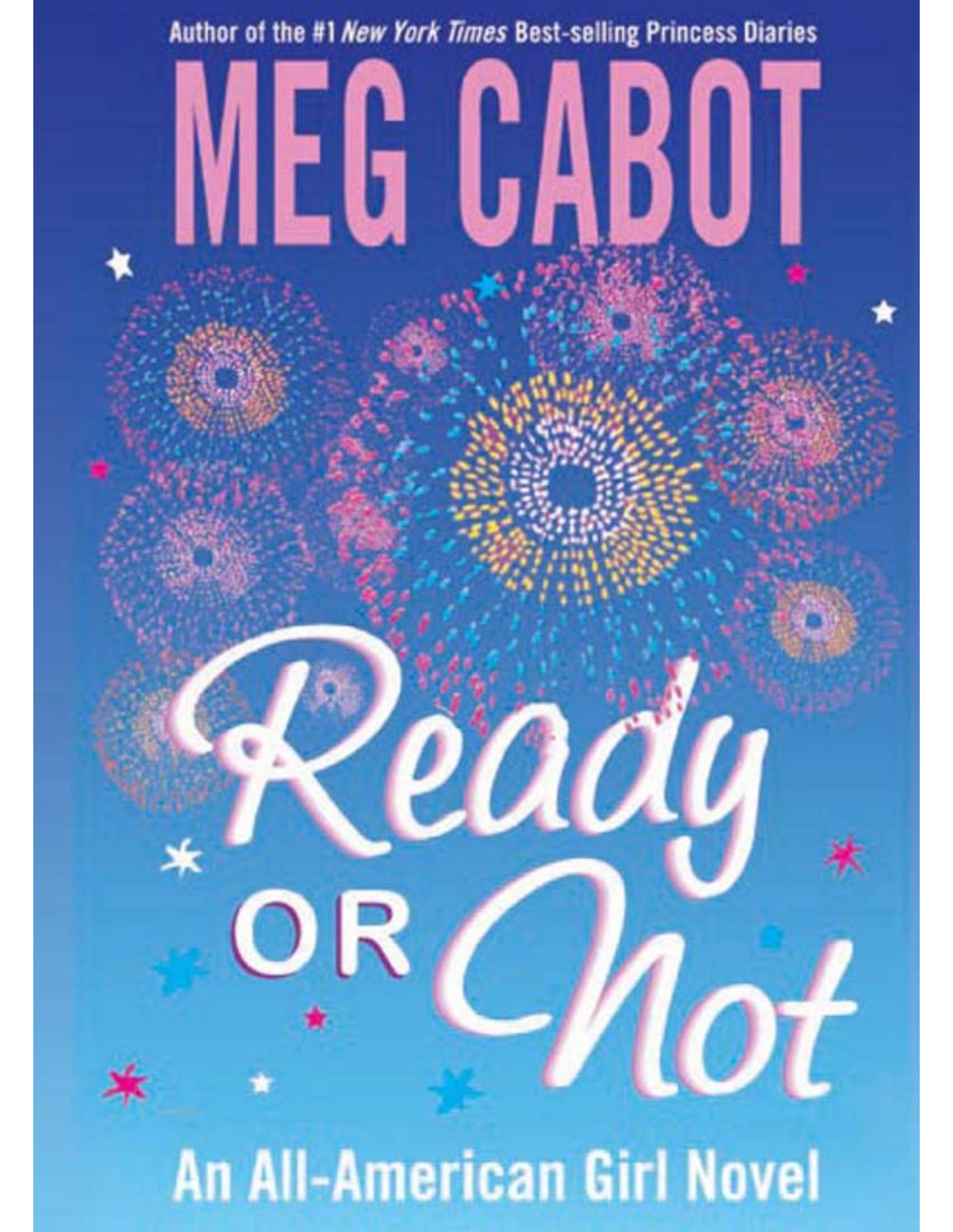


Author of the #1 *New York Times* Best-selling Princess Diaries

MEG CABOT



Ready
OR
Not

An All-American Girl Novel

Ten reasons why my sister Lucy has it way better than I do:

10. Because of saving the President, and all, I'm a celebrity, so whenever I do something really stupid such as wear my shirt to school inside out, as I occasionally do before I've had enough caffeine to fully wake myself up I can always count on a picture of it showing up in People Magazine or Us Weekly (Celebrities They're just like us!).
9. While Lucy may have bombed the SATs, she never actually does anything as stupid as wear a shirt inside out, so even if she HAD saved the President and was a national celebrity, they would never print pictures of her looking this dumb anywhere. Because this would never happen to her. She always looks perfect, everywhere she goes, no matter how early in the morning.
8. She is dating a teen rebel who owns a motorcycle, even if she is not allowed to ride on it with him, and gets to do cool stuff like go to the opening night of a performance art piece featuring a punk rock band throwing pieces of raw meat at a screen

on which is projected various photos of world leaders. Whereas, I am dating the President's son, so I get to do fun things like go to the opening night of Tosca at the Kennedy Center with the various world leaders themselves, which isn't anywhere near as fun.

7. When I get my photo in Us Weekly almost every single week, wearing an inside out shirt or whatever, it's usually right next to Mary-Kate and Ashley. If Lucy were the celebrity, and not me, you can bet her picture would be next to someone way cooler, like Gwen Stefani.

6. Tons of designers send me free clothes, begging me to wear them instead of my inside out shirts, so that their clothes will be in Us Weekly. Except of course I have to send most of them back, because my parents won't let me wear leather bustiers, and also, unlike Lucy, I do not have the chest to hold up a bustier. Lucy would totally get to keep them.

5. My boyfriend apparently calls sex Parcheesi. I don't know what Lucy's boyfriend calls it. But I'm guessing probably not that.

4. Lucy can figure out sales tax in her head. Oh, and can do a back handspring. All I can do is draw a naked guy. And apparently, I can't even do that very well, since I concentrate on the parts and not the whole.

3. Mom and Dad totally like--and trust--my boyfriend. Lucy's boyfriend? Not so much. So they spend hours arguing with her about him, telling her she could do better et cetera. Mom and Dad basically ignore me.

2. I have only one friend, my best friend, Catherine, who is so sweet and sensitive I can't even tell her about my boyfriend possibly wanting to have sex with me over Thanksgiving weekend on account of it would freak her out since she doesn't even HAVE a boyfriend, whereas Lucy has nine million friends she can tell ANYTHING because they are completely shallow and have no emotions. Like cyborgs.

1. She's clearly already lost her virginity and has put it behind her, since it was obviously no big deal to her. It is HUGE deal to me, however, which means

I will probably be stuck with it (my virginity) until my thirties, or death, whichever comes first.

Four

“Wait, so, what did it look like?” Catherine wanted to know.

I couldn’t believe she was so curious. I mean, I could. But I also couldn’t. Because I really didn’t want to talk about it.

“It looked like a penis,” I said. “What do you think? I mean, you’ve seen them before. You used to go skinny dipping at the shore with your brothers when you were little, you said.”

“Yeah, sure,” Catherine said. “But that was before they got, you know. Hair down there.”

“Okay,” I said. “Gross.”

“Well, it’s true. Seriously. How big was it?”

I was starting to be sorry I’d brought it up. I’d only done so because she’d asked how my life drawing class had gone. I’d thought to share with her the true meaning behind the words Life Drawing. Now I wished I hadn’t.

“It was average, I guess,” I said. “I mean, it’s not like I have a lot of experience in that department.”

“I’m just glad I don’t have one,” Catherine said, with a delicate shudder. “I mean, can you imagine, having it dangling there, all the time? How do they even ride bikes?”

“Sam?” Trust Kris Parks to choose that moment, of all the moments in the world, to wheedle up to us where we stood in the lunchline and go, “Got a minute?”

Kris is not exactly my favorite person. And up until I became a semi-celebrity, on account of the saving-the-President thing, the feeling was mutual.

But then I was on the six o’clock news a couple of times, and Kris decided I was her new best friend. I guess the fact that I’m dating the President’s son outweighs the fact that I don’t own a stitch of Lilly Pulitzer. Which, in Kris’s book, makes you one of those Untouchables Rebecca and I learned about on National Geographic Explorer.

“Listen, I was wondering if we could count on you to help us set up the gym next week,” Kris said

with a simper (SAT word meaning to smile in a silly, affected, or conceited manner). “You know, for the town hall meeting.”

“Yeah, sure,” I said, to make her go away.

“Swell,” Kris said. Trust Kris to say something like swell.’ It was almost as bad as me saying something like I’m peachy’ upon seeing my first you-know-what. “We can really use the help. So far the only people who’ve volunteered are, you know, the student council members. And Right Way, of course. It’s really embarrassing. I mean, that the President is going to be announcing this important new program from right here in our own school, and most of the kids in this school are so apathetic about it. I really hope he doesn’t think we’re ALL like that. The President, I mean. I really want to make us look good in front of him. And Random Alvarez. I mean, he’s just so hot--” Then she got a good look at my head. “What happened to your--” She broke off and bit her lip. “Never mind.”

“My hair?” I reached up to finger it. “I dyed it. Why? Don’cha like it?”

I knew Kris didn't like my hair. Preps like Kris aren't into Midnight Ebony. I was just torturing her for the fun of it.

"Oh, no, it's really nice." Kris seemed to recover herself. "It's permanent?"

"Semi," I said. "Why?"

"No reason," Kris said, with a bright smile. "Looks great!"

I knew Kris was lying, and not just because her lips were moving. I had given myself a fully objective examination in the bathroom mirror just that morning, and I knew for a fact that Lucy was right: my new black hair looked stupid. Maybe if I had dyed my eyebrows to match, it might not have looked so bad.

But I hadn't done it as a fashion statement so much as a statement statement that statement being, "Say so long to red-haired, goody-two-shoes, President-saving Samantha Madison, and say hello to life drawing, possibly-soon-not-to-be-a-virgin Sam."

Of course, the fact that I'd dyed my hair BEFORE my first life drawing lesson, and then deciding to rid

myself of my virginity (possibly), was just symbolic of how far I'd come from the pre-dye, red-headed me.

“This Return to Family incentive of the President’s,” Kris went on, studiously ignoring my hair. “I hope you’ll tell him how excited we all are about it here at Adams Prep, and that we’re behind him one hundred and ten percent. I mean, family is the most important thing.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Well, who isn’t pro-family?” That’s what I said. But inside my head, I was going, Why won’t you die, Kris Parks? Why?

“Maybe you’d be interested in coming to a Right Way meeting sometime?” Kris glanced at Catherine, as if aware for the first time that I wasn’t standing there alone. “You and your, uh, friend.”

Kris knows perfectly well what Catherine’s name is. She was just being what she is, a preppy uber-snob. Which she illustrated a second later by going, as a girl in an Adams Prep dance team uniform walked by, in her flippy purple skirt, “Oh my God, did you hear about Debra Mullins? She supposedly hooked

up with Jeff Rothberg under the bleachers after the Trinity game last week. She's such a slut." Then she added, cheerfully, to me, "Well, see you in the gym Monday!"

"Oh, we'll be there," I said, just to get Kris to leave. It worked. She left us to order our double cheeseburgers in peace.

"God, I hate her," Catherine said.

"Tell me about it."

"No, I mean, I really hate her."

"Welcome to my world."

"Yeah, but at least she sucks up to you. On account of David. She'd never call you a slut. I mean, if you and David ever, you know. Hooked up. And she found out." Then, Catherine added, with a laugh, "Like that's ever going to happen."

I didn't know which Catherine found more unlikely the prospect of David and I ever having sex, or Kris finding out about it. I wasn't about to let her know that the former was more imminent (SAT word meaning threatening to occur immediately; near at hand; impending) than she might expect.

Not because I didn't trust her to keep it a secret. I'd trust Catherine with my life.

It was just that I still wasn't sure what I was going to do. About Thanksgiving, I mean. I hadn't had a chance to tell David yet that my mom and dad had actually said yes to my spending the weekend with him at Camp David.

Which I was still sort of sore about. Their saying yes, I mean. It was so obvious that they'd only said yes because they'd been distracted by Lucy and her SAT score situation. I mean, God forbid Mom and Dad should pay attention to ME for a change. As usual, the middle child was getting the short end of the stick, attention-wise, in the Madison household. Although I guess I couldn't TOTALLY blame Lucy for their saying yes. The fact is, my parents have this perception that I'm the Good Kid. You know, the one who, yeah, might try to sell celebrity drawings from her locker and dye her hair black, but who ultimately is going to throw herself on an assassin to save the President. Nobody worries too much about a kid like that. A kid like THAT would never

do something as reprehensible as sleep with her boyfriend over Thanksgiving weekend.

It would so serve my parents right if I became an unwed teen mother.

Still, I wasn't about to mention any of this to Catherine. She has enough to deal with, what with her mom not letting her wear pants to school seriously, she has to wear below the knee skirts, even in P.E. and the mockery this brings with it. I'm not about to add to Catherine's troubles the fact that her best friend is considering losing the big V. Besides, it isn't anybody's business, really. Anybody's but my own.

Which was why I plan on keeping it a secret even from the person I most want to impress.

“Whoa,” Dauntra said, when I burst through the door to Potomac Video with just a minute to spare before my after-school shift started. “You did it!” I didn't know what she was talking about at first. I thought she meant that I'd decided to have sex with my boyfriend, and wondered how she'd known.

Especially since I hadn't decided any such thing.
Yet.

Then I remembered my hair.

"Yeah," I said I have to admit, her reaction which was actually admiring--made all the What did you do to your hair's? I'd gotten in school today totally worth it. Around Potomac Video just like around my own home--I am perceived as somewhat of a goody-goody. I mean, I'm the girl who saved the President, the girl who doesn't NEED that six seventy-five an hour to pay for childcare or whatever. I'm considered something of a freak around there.

Until, of course, I dyed my hair. Now, I was cool. I hoped.

Because the clerks at Potomac Video? They're WAY cool.

Especially Dauntra, with whom, along with Stan, the night manager, I work on Friday nights. Her motto (taped to her employee locker): Question authority. Her favorite movie: A Clockwork Orange. Her political party: NOT the same as David's dad.

In fact, one of the first things she ever asked me was, “Has it ever occurred to you that if you had just let him get shot, you might have spared us all a lot of grief?”

And while this might be true, I don't think even Dauntra could have stood there and just **WATCHED** someone point a gun at someone else, no matter how different her political views were from that person's. Especially, as I'd pointed out to her, considering the fact that, much as people might dislike the President and judging from the latest polls, people disliked him very, very much--I knew someone who loved him a lot namely, his son, my boyfriend, David. No matter how much he might disagree with some of the things his dad had done during his administration, David's affection for his father never wavered.

And for that reason not to mention the fact that really, I'd had no choice in the matter. I hadn't so much acted that day as **REACTED** I was glad I'd done what I had.

“Now that,” Dauntra said with approval, nodding at

my hair, “is what I’m talking about.”

“You like it?” I threw my backpack into my employee locker. Later, before I left, Stan would go through it, to make sure I hadn’t ripped off any DVDs. My backpack, I mean. Even though I was the store’s token goody-goody, EVERYONE’s bag gets searched before they leave. Even mine. It’s the Potomac Video way.

Although certain of its employees are trying to change that.

“I love the black,” Dauntra said. “It makes your face look thinner.”

“I don’t know if thin-faced was the look I was going for,” I said. “But thanks.”

“You know what I mean.” Dauntra, whose hair is two-toned, Midnight Ebony and Pink Flamingo, fiddled with her eyebrow ring. “What did your parents say? Did they lose it?”

“Not really,” I said, ducking back behind the counter. “They barely noticed, actually.” Just like they barely notice ME, most of the time.

Dauntra made a disgusted noise.

“God, what are you going to have to do to get their attention, anyway?” she wanted to know. “Have a baby at the prom?”

“Um,” I said, choking a little on the diet Dr. Pepper I’d bought at the convenience mart next door before my shift. Because, you know, considering recent events, my having a baby at the prom isn’t **TOTALLY** out of the realm of the possible. “Yeah. Ha. That would probably do it, all right. But, you know, there’s something to be said for maintaining a low profile. Right now they’re all over Lucy, on account of her SAT scores.”

Dauntra’s look of disgust deepened. “When are people going to get that that stupid test doesn’t mean anything? I mean, what does it measure? How well you paid attention in class the past decade of your life? Please. Like that can tell a college anything about how well you’re going to do for the next four years while you’re at their school.”

Dauntra, whose parents kicked her out of the house one night after she turned sixteen and got an eyebrow ring (and a twenty-year-old boyfriend),

is currently studying graphic design at a vocational college. She'd dumped the boyfriend, but kept the eyebrow ring, and opted out of the whole SAT trap by refusing to take them, or to enroll in a school that required them. Dauntra has a lot of opinions like that. I actually think that she and Lucy's boyfriend Jack have a lot in common that way.

"So what'd the rents do?" Dauntra wanted to know.

"About your sister?"

"Oh," I said. "They're making her get a tutor. And cut back on the cheerleading, to make time for it. The tutoring, I mean."

"Typical," Dauntra said. "I mean, them playing into the whole sick fallacy that those scores mean anything. Although if it means your sister spends less time in a miniskirt, undermining the feminist cause, I guess it's a good thing."

"Totally," I said.

I thought about asking Dauntra what she thought I should do about David and the whole Thanksgiving thing. I mean, she is more experienced than I am probably more than Lucy, too. I figured the advice

from a woman of the world like Dauntra might be really valuable, not to mention insightful.

Only I couldn't really figure out how to bring it up, you know? Like, was I just supposed to go, "Hey, Dauntra. My boyfriend asked me to spend Thanksgiving with him at Camp David, and you know what that means. Should I say yes or not?" Somehow, I just couldn't bring myself to do it. So instead, I asked her, conversationally, "So, how's the battle of the backpack going?"

Dauntra glanced darkly in Stan's direction.

"Stalemate," she said. "He said if I didn't like it, I could go work at McDonald's."

Dauntra's convinced that the video store's policy of having a manager go through employee backpacks before allowing them to leave after their shift is unconstitutional even though I'd asked my mom about it, and she'd said, technically, it wasn't.

Dauntra refused to believe this, but it's cool she even cares. Some people I know well, okay, Kris Parks, to be exact--only pretend to care about issues because doing so looks good on their college

applications.

“I was thinking about pouring Aunt Jemima all over the inside of my Jansport,” Dauntra went on, “so when Stan reaches inside it tonight, he gets a big handful of syrup. But I don’t want to ruin a perfectly good backpack.”

“Yeah,” I said. “I can see how that might hurt more than help. Besides, it isn’t Stan’s fault, necessarily. He’s just doing his job.”

Dauntra narrowed her eyes at me. “Yeah,” she said. “That’s what all the German soldiers said in their defense after World War Two.”

I didn’t think searching someone’s backpack for stolen DVDs was quite the same as killing seven million people, but I didn’t figure Dauntra would appreciate me mentioning it out loud.

“Anyway,” she said, changing the subject. “How was that new art class? The life drawing one?”

“Oh,” I said. “Kind of, um, startling.” I still didn’t feel comfortable bringing up the David thing, so I just said, “Did you know life drawing meant nudes?”

Dauntra didn't even look up from the manga she'd cracked open over the register's keyboard.

"Yeah. Of course."

"Oh," I said, slightly let down. "Well, I didn't. So I got to see my first you know."

That got her attention.

"The nude model was a GUY?" She looked up from the comic book well, really it was a comic novel, or graphic novel. I should start trying to get the terminology correct, since someday I hope to write and illustrate mangas of my own. "I thought nude models were always women."

"Not always, I guess," I said.

"You know, some guy dropped his pants in front of me on the Metro the other day," Dauntra said, incredulously. "For free. I had to call the cops. And, like, this Susan Boone lady, she pays some guy MONEY to do it?"

"Yeah," I said.

Dauntra shook her head in disbelief. "Did you feel violated? Because whenever a guy shows me his goods when I'm not interested in seeing them, I

feel violated.”

“It wasn’t really like that,” I said. “I mean, you know. It was art.”

“Art.” Dauntra nodded. “Sure. I can’t believe a guy gets paid to show off his goods, and people call it art.”

“Well, not the showing off his goods part,” I said.

“But the drawings we make of it.”

Dauntra sighed. “Maybe I should take up being a nude model. I mean, you get paid just to sit there.”

“Naked,” I pointed out.

“So what?” Dauntra shrugged. “The human form is a thing of beauty.”

“Excuse me.” A tall guy in a beret no, really, a French beret, although he didn’t happen to be French approached the counter. “I believe you’re holding a film for me. The name is Wade, W-A-D--”

“Yeah, it’s right here,” I said quickly. Because the guy in the beret is a regular, and even though I’d only been working at Potomac Video for two months, I knew that if you didn’t head Mr. Wade

off at the pass, he'd go on for as long as he could about his film collection, which is extensive, and mostly in black and white.

“Ah, yes,” he said, when I showed him the DVD we'd been holding for him. “The Four Hundred Blows. You know it, of course?”

“Of course,” I said, even though I had no idea what he was talking about. “That will be fourteen seventy-nine.”

“One of Truffaut's finest,” Mr. Wade said. “I have it on video, of course, but it's really the kind of film you can't own enough copies of--”

“Thank you,” I said, bagging the DVD, then handing him the bag.

“A truly powerful work,” Mr. Wade went on. “A masterful piece of suspense”

“Just how big were the guy's goods, anyway?”

Dauntra asked me, in a sweetly innocent voice.

Mr. Wade, looking suddenly alarmed, snatched up his bag and fled the store.

“Come again,” Dauntra called after him, and the two of us practically collapsed, we were laughing so

hard.

“What was that all about?” Stan, the night manager, came out from behind the Westerns and eyed us suspiciously.

“Nothing,” I said, wiping tears of laughter from my eyes.

“Mr. Wade was so excited to get his new DVD, he wanted to rush home to watch it, that’s all,” Dauntra said, in a convincingly sincere voice. Stan looked as if he didn’t believe us.

“Madison,” he said. “Some anime fans were in here earlier, and got the Neon Genesis Evangelions all out of order. See what you can do about that, will you?”

I said I would, and ducked out from behind the counter to go check on the anime section.

Later, after the post-dinner rush, Dauntra was reading another manga while I pulled out the materials the White House press secretary had given me the other day to prepare me for my big speech, and was going over them.

“What IS all that?” Dauntra wanted to know.

“Stuff I gotta talk about on MTV next week,” I said. “At the town hall meeting, at my school.”

Dauntra looked as if there were a bad taste in her mouth. “That stupid Return to Family thing?”

I blinked at her. “It’s not stupid. It’s important.”

“Yeah,” Dauntra said. “Whatever. God, Sam. Don’t you ever resent it, being used that way?”

“Used? How’m I being used?” I asked.

“Well, the President’s using you,” Dauntra said, “to spoon-feed his fascist new program to America’s youth.”

“Return to Family isn’t fascist,” I said. I didn’t mention that, even if I DIDN’T approve of it, I couldn’t exactly quit being Teen Ambassador. Not without making things exceedingly awkward with my boyfriend’s parents. “It’s a program to encourage families to spend more time together. You know, to take a night off from soccer practice and TV and just sit around and talk.”

“Yeah,” Dauntra said, darkly. “On the SURFACE, that’s all it is.”

“What are you talking about?” I waved the papers I

was holding. “I’ve got it all right here. That’s what it is. The President’s Return to Family initiative, to--” “--encourage people to take a night off from mindless sitcoms and talk to one another,” Dauntra finished for me. “I know. But that’s just the part of the Return to Family plan they’re TELLING you about. What about the rest of it? The parts they don’t want you to know about yet?”

“You,” I said, “are paranoid. You’ve seen that Mel Gibson movie too many times.”

Conspiracy Theory is one of our favorite movies to watch in the store. Stan hates it, because whenever Mel and Julia Roberts kiss, or are about to, Dauntra and I find ourselves incapable of doing anything but stare at the screen.

“Well, didn’t he turn out to be right?” Dauntra asked. “Mel, I mean? There WAS a conspiracy.” She glanced over at the two-way mirror that separated us from the back office. The two-way mirror is supposedly so Stan or whoever is back there can catch shoplifters. But Dauntra is convinced it’s really so the owners or whoever can spy on the

employees. “It’s never good,” Dauntra added, “when the government starts putting its nose in our personal business, like how much time we spend together as families. Trust me on this one.”

I turned back to my paperwork with a sigh. I love Dauntra, and all, but sometimes I’m not so sure she’s all there, if you know what I mean. Who has TIME to worry about the government and what it’s up to when there are so many REAL problems out there? Like my boyfriend, for instance, apparently thinking we are going to have sex over Thanksgiving weekend.

I thought once more about asking Dauntra you know, about David and me, and what she thought about the possible Turkey Day divestment of my virginity.

The thing is, I knew she’d be all for my losing it. I also knew that, if I told her, it would help dispel my good girl image at the store, an image I couldn’t quite seem to shake, even with my newly dyed hair. But telling my sister was one thing. Telling my fellow Potomac Video employees was something

else entirely. I mean, in spite of my affection for the movie Conspiracy Theory, I don't actually BELIEVE in conspiracies like that Dauntra is really a spy for Us Weekly or whatever, and the minute I let some intimate detail of my relationship with the First Son slip, she's going to report it.

But still. Maybe Dauntra was right about one thing: It's better not to let the government or your fellow employees at Potomac Video put their noses in your business. Some things really are better left private.

At least, that's what I thought then. Funny how quickly your opinion on that kind of thing can change.