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Cast of Characters

The characters exist in three realities/locations.

Stage Right:

ANNIE, likable and lovestruck, narrates the play as...
JESS, her smart-aleck brother, disrupts and drives...
STAGEHAND, once silent, into irate, improvisational rants.

Stage Left:

ANNIE TWO, affably awkward, asks advice from...
FRAN, her quick-witted friend, to win the love of...
DUSTIN, her dream guy, but inadvertently attracts...
DORKBOY, whose nerdy flirting increasingly angers...
SWEETIE, his severely short-tempered girlfriend.

The Audience:

REAL ANNIE, arrives to rescue the play along with...
REAL FRAN, who may or may not have secretly invited...
REAL DUSTIN, who will declare his true feelings if...
REAL DORKBOY, still hopeful of a hookup with Annie, and...
REAL SWEETIE, still hateful, don't destroy things first.

Setting

A nearly empty stage.

Production Notes

Actresses and actors who play different versions of the same character do not necessarily need to resemble each other physically. Costuming them in similar outfits and/or colors, however, will strengthen the relationships.

Listing the performers' names as an ensemble in the program will keep the arrival of the audience members a surprise. An insert for the program, crediting specific roles may be made available after each performance.

THE REAL ME

by Ken Preuss

(ANNIE steps through a closed curtain, stands center, and addresses the audience:)

ANNIE. Have you ever had the feeling that your life is following some kind of script? That there are people watching your every move? I get that feeling a lot. *(She smiles as she looks over the crowd.)* I'm kind of getting that feeling right now. No matter what I do, I always feel like I am living my life on a stage.

(She spreads her arms dramatically, and the curtains behind her start to open. It is a perfectly choreographed moment that lasts about five seconds. There is a thud backstage to the right, and the curtains come to an abrupt stop just a few feet apart. ANNIE freezes, smiling awkwardly at the audience. STAGEHAND peeks out from the right curtain. ANNIE, still holding her pose and her smile, addresses him from the corner of her mouth:)

ANNIE. The curtain is stuck.

STAGEHAND. *(Looks around, trying to figure out what went wrong.)* Hmm.

(He notices something behind the curtain, up and to the right. He smiles and disappears. The curtains begin to open again. ANNIE sighs, drops her arms, and addresses the audience:)

ANNIE. *(Crosses left.)* That's how things go for me. Perfectly planned moments...that just don't quite work out. They happen all the time. In my home life...my school life...my love life...if you call "staring at a guy from a distance and wishing you had the guts to talk to him," a love life. *(Crosses right.)* Wherever I am, I feel like I'm outside of myself...watching my life like it's a play. Sometimes I wonder which one is the real me: *(Points to self.)* The one who overanalyzes everything that happens or the one who blunders through my daily existence? *(Stops far right, points left.)* This is me at the movies just last month.

(Lights come up left. Three chairs sit in front of two others, representing rows in a movie theatre. A trash can stands down right. ANNIE TWO enters left, dressed in an outfit similar to ANNIE.)

She looks around a beat before FRAN enters. Still far right, ANNIE sits in a chair to watch the action.)

FRAN. *(Calling out as if searching for her:)* Annie?

ANNIE TWO. Fran?

FRAN. Come on. I see some seats.

ANNIE TWO. Are you sure Dustin said he was going to be here tonight?

FRAN. Actually, he said he was going bowling. I just really wanted to see this movie.

ANNIE TWO. *(Startled:)* He isn't coming?

FRAN. *(Sits in the front left chair.)* He's coming. I was kidding. Just relax.

ANNIE TWO. *(Sits to FRAN's right.)* How can I relax? I'm going to spend the whole time looking for him.

FRAN. We're way in the back. If he comes in, we'll see him.

ANNIE TWO. What if he sits behind us?

FRAN. We're in the second to the last row. Only dorky people sit in the back.

DORKBOY. Aha!

(DORKBOY pops up from behind the girls, startling them. He has been there the whole time, but had been leaning over out of sight.)

(Kindly:) Sorry. Didn't mean to frighten you. I was just picking up my popcorn box.

(He shows them a box then settles in the back row, far right chair.)

FRAN. *(To ANNIE TWO:)* See what I mean about dorky. *(The girls laugh and peek back. FRAN frowns.)* At least he has money for snacks.

ANNIE TWO. I'm sure I have something to eat in my purse. *(She digs through it.)*

FRAN. *(Looking over:)* Mint-flavor dental floss is not food.

ANNIE TWO. Here! What did I tell you? *(She hands FRAN a small box.)* Candy hearts!

FRAN. This box has been in your purse since Valentine's Day...of last year!

ANNIE TWO. *(Takes box and looks inside.)* Think we should risk it?

FRAN. Not without a guinea pig. *(Points behind them.)* Hey! Ask Dorkboy to try one.

ANNIE TWO. What? *(Sneaks a peek.)* We don't even know him.

FRAN. So strangers can't be hungry? Get him to try one. If he eats it and doesn't die, we know they're okay.

ANNIE TWO. What if he does die?

FRAN. We move to another seat and eat the dental floss.

ANNIE TWO. What am I supposed to say? "Can you try this piece of candy and see if it makes you deathly ill?"

FRAN. Just make up something! Jeez. Let me do it. *(Looking back:)* Excuse me.

DORKBOY. Huh?

FRAN. My friend, Annie here, is doing a science project for school, and she was wondering if you could help her out for a second.

DORKBOY. *(Nervously but politely:)* Um. I don't think so. I'm just waiting for...

FRAN. The movie? So are we. I hear it's great. Anyway. She's doing an experiment about the relationship between taste and sight. All you need to do is eat a piece of candy with your eyes closed, and give her your opinion.

DORKBOY. No thanks. I have some popcorn. *(Tilts box. A piece falls out.)* Had some popcorn.

FRAN. *(Amused:)* You ate a whole box before the movie started?

DORKBOY. *(Distraught:)* I...didn't mean to.

FRAN. (*To ANNIE TWO with enthusiasm:*) He's like the ideal specimen! (*To DORKBOY:*) Annie's been searching for someone just like you. Could you sit down here for a minute?

DORKBOY. I don't know...

FRAN. (*Flirty:*) She'd love to get a little data from someone with such a manly appetite.

DORKBOY. (*Blushes a bit.*) Well, I *do* love to snack.

FRAN. You'll help her then?

DORKBOY. (*Stands and laughs.*) One piece of candy couldn't hurt, right?

FRAN. (*Under her breath:*) We hope not. (*To ANNIE TWO:*) He's all yours.

DORKBOY. (*Sits right of ANNIE TWO. Smiles eagerly.*) Ready!

ANNIE TWO. Okay. Close your eyes and let me have your hand.

(ANNIE TWO places a heart in his hand and closes his fist. SWEETIE enters and clears her throat angrily. DORKBOY's eyes pop open. He jumps out of the seat with a nervous squeal.)

DORKBOY. Sweetie! You're back.

SWEETIE. I thought you were saving my seat.

DORKBOY. I was. I *am*!

SWEETIE. (*Smiling to conceal her anger.*) Kind of hard to do when you're sitting in a different row...with another girl...holding hands.

DORKBOY. (*Nervously:*) You don't understand. This is all just an experiment.

SWEETIE. I'm gone for five minutes and you *experiment* with another girl?

DORKBOY. No. No. Let me explain. It's all about the relationship...

SWEETIE. And what's wrong with the *relationship*? I'm not good enough for you? Is that it?

DORKBOY. No. I mean, yes! It's just that Annie's been searching for someone like me...

SWEETIE. Fine! She can have you!

ANNIE TWO. (*Defensively:*) But I don't want him!

DORKBOY. She was just giving me this... (*He opens his hand. His eyes widen.*) ...heart.

(*SWEETIE stares suspiciously and reads the words aloud:*)

SWEETIE. "U R HOT."

DORKBOY. (*Quickly, to ANNIE TWO. Pleased with the compliment:*) Why, thank you.

(*ANNIE TWO slumps in her seat. FRAN laughs.*)

SWEETIE. (*To DORKBOY, slow and angry:*) I'm going to find another seat. I suggest you follow me. If you want to salvage the tiny bit of trust that still remains, you will do everything in your power not to make me angry again. (*She storms left.*)

DORKBOY. (*To ANNIE TWO:*) I better go.

SWEETIE. And bring the popcorn! (*Exits left.*)

DORKBOY. Uh oh! (*He grabs the empty box and quickly exits after her.*)

(*ANNIE TWO and FRAN settle into their seats. Across stage, ANNIE stands.*)

ANNIE. (*Points left.*) Do you see what I mean about things not working out? And that was actually the *good* part of the night. (*Sighs.*) When things settled down, I settled in and started watching for Dustin. Dustin Bradley. I'd been watching him all year. On the bus. At P.E. At lunch. For some reason, we always seemed to end up in the same places at the same time. That night wasn't much different. I mean, I'd gotten the name of the movie from an eavesdropped conversation, looked up show times on the Internet, traveled across town to a theatre I rarely attended, and hidden in the back to spy... but it wasn't like I was stalking him. Looking at it now, it really wasn't my most brilliant plan. I had no idea what I was going to do if I saw him. I was scared to death to talk to him. I'd basically paid eight dollars for a chance to stare at the back of his head...in the

dark. I was starting to doubt he was actually going to show when Fran convinced me otherwise. (*She sits to watch.*)

FRAN. Annie! I just saw Dustin!

ANNIE TWO. Where?

FRAN. He came in and went back out again.

ANNIE TWO. Sure he did.

FRAN. Why would I make that up?

ANNIE TWO. Because you always make things up.

FRAN. I swear I'm not lying. Cross my heart and hope to die.

ANNIE TWO. (*Testing her. Smiles and holds up a candy.*) Eat a heart and hope to live?

FRAN. (*Sees something and points.*) Look! There he is again!

ANNIE TWO. (*Thrilled to see him.*) Oh my gosh! It's Dustin!

FRAN. (*Flatly.*) I mentioned that.

ANNIE TWO. Look at him. He's so... (*Closes her eyes searching for the perfect adjective.*)

FRAN. ...Wishy-washy.

ANNIE TWO. (*Opens her eyes. Looks at FRAN.*) What?

FRAN. He's gone again. (*Settles back.*) I hope the movie's this entertaining.

ANNIE TWO. Where'd he go?

FRAN. Bowling?

ANNIE TWO. Funny.

FRAN. He's probably looking for someone. Ooh! Here he is again!

ANNIE TWO. (*Covers her eyes.*) Tell me he's not with a girl.

FRAN. He's not with a girl. (*A beat.*) He's with two of them.

ANNIE TWO. (*Drops her hand to look.*) What?

FRAN. I'm kidding. He's alone. (*A sudden idea:*) You should get him to sit with you!

ANNIE TWO. No way! He makes me too nervous.

FRAN. Well, you better get un-nervous. He's about to come up here.

ANNIE TWO. (*Points.*) He just sat in the front row.

FRAN. Oh. (*Stands and yells:*) Hey Dustin! (*Waves arms.*) Dustin Bradley! Up here! (*Points next to ANNIE TWO.*) We saved you a seat! (*Sits and smiles.*) Told you he was coming.

ANNIE TWO. (*Panicked:*) I can't believe you did that. You know how I feel about him!

FRAN. Now you can let him know.

ANNIE TWO. I have no idea what to say!

FRAN. (*Laughing.*) Maybe the hearts can help. They worked wonders with Dorkboy.

ANNIE TWO. Good idea! (*She dumps some into her palm.*)

FRAN. I was kidding.

ANNIE TWO. Help me pick one out. I'll slip one to Dustin when the movie starts.

FRAN. (*Picks one and reads:*) "I Miss You."

ANNIE TWO. He's going to be sitting right next me.

FRAN. You could throw it at him when he walks out again.

ANNIE TWO. (*Ignores her. Reads another:*) "Be good."

FRAN. (*Playfully suggestive:*) It's going to be dark. You don't want him to be *that* good. (*Looks at a heart.*) Oooh! I like this one!

ANNIE TWO. (*Tries to read it.*) What's it say?

(FRAN pulls it away then drops it in Annie Two's shirt pocket.)

FRAN. It's a secret. Save it for the end. Just in case.

ANNIE TWO. This is ridiculous. Why can't I be brave? I should just look him in the eye and say "Dustin. I like you."

(DUSTIN enters left. He arrives to ANNIE TWO's right just in time to hear this.)

DUSTIN. What did you say?

ANNIE TWO. *(Turns to him:)* Dustin! I...like you...in that shirt. It's blue...like the sky.

(ANNIE TWO buries her head in her hands from embarrassment.)

DUSTIN. Um. Thanks. *(Glances around.)* Look, I'm not sure if I should sit here.

FRAN. Why not?

DUSTIN. I was supposed to meet Vinnie in the lobby, but he never showed up. I think I'm going to sit by the entrance in case he comes in late. *(He starts off, looks at ANNIE TWO, steps back. To FRAN:)* Is she okay?

FRAN. *(Thinking fast:)* Actually. She's not. It's my fault really. See, we got to the movies and I realized I forgot my glasses.

DUSTIN. I've never seen you wear glasses.

FRAN. Right. Because I'm always forgetting them! Anyway. We tried sitting down front so I could see, but the angle of the screen gave Annie this terrible tension headache. *(FRAN lifts ANNIE TWO's head.)* She looks tense. Doesn't she?

DUSTIN. I guess.

(ANNIE TWO turns to FRAN and stares as if to say, "What are you doing?" FRAN returns a wink as if to say, "Trust me." DUSTIN notices.)

DUSTIN. Were you just winking?

FRAN. Winking? *(Covers quickly:)* No. You see, I found an old contact lens in my purse so we didn't have to sit down front. We came back here, but since I only have one contact, I can't really see unless I go like this. *(She over-emphasizes a wink.)*

DUSTIN. Right. Well, I hope that works out for you. I should go look for Vinnie. *(He touches ANNIE TWO's shoulder.)* I hope you feel better.

(ANNIE TWO's head pops. She looks to FRAN. FRAN won't let DUSTIN go.)

FRAN. Come on. Stay. With her headache and my bad eye, we might need someone to explain what's going on. *(She senses his uncertainty.)* Besides, Annie wants to tell you something.

ANNIE TWO. I do? *(She sees FRAN's look. Realizes this is her chance.)* I do! I...

(The lights dim. A light flickers to show the movie has begun. DUSTIN seems trapped, uncertain if he should stay. After a beat, he pulls off his jacket, sets it on back of the seat and sits. FRAN elbows ANNIE TWO and gives her a "thumbs up.")

ANNIE. *(Stands.)* The lights went out. Dustin sat down. It was time for me to make my big move, so I waited for the perfect moment. The previews started. I waited. The movie started. I waited.

FRAN. *(Leans over to ANNIE TWO.)* It's not a double feature. Stop waiting!

(ANNIE TWO turns toward DUSTIN. She chickens out, turns away, and slumps.)

ANNIE. Fran was right. I was too nervous to hold a conversation, but I did hold the conversation hearts. I decided to let them do the talking for me. Candy hearts don't chicken out when you're nervous. Unfortunately, they do kind of stick to your hand.

(ANNIE TWO looks at the hearts in her left palm and grimaces.)

ANNIE. I started going through them, reading the words in the dark. I tried to be as subtle as I could.

(ANNIE TWO lifts a heart to her eyes with her right hand, elbows DUSTIN.)

ANNIE. Unfortunately, I wasn't very good at it.

(DUSTIN looks at ANNIE TWO. She hides the hearts and watches the screen as if nothing happened. DUSTIN returns to watching the film.)

FRAN. You realize that when you hit on a guy, you don't actually have to hit him?

(ANNIE TWO gives FRAN a dirty look and returns to the hearts. She leans to her palm, reading them silently, reacting as ANNIE narrates.)

ANNIE. Before I knew it, the movie was half over and I was still searching for the perfect message. "Love Me." Too demanding. "Marry Me." Too Desperate. "Star Dust." I have no idea what that one even meant. Then, just when I was about to give up, I found it! "Be Mine." Simple. Romantic. Perfect!

ANNIE TWO. *(At the same time as ANNIE's last line.)* Perfect! *(Takes a beat.)* Dustin?

DUSTIN. *(Answers without taking his eyes off the screen.)* Yeah?

ANNIE TWO. I have something for you.

DUSTIN. What is it?

ANNIE TWO. This. *(She places the heart in DUSTIN's hand.)*

DUSTIN. Thanks.

(DUSTIN's eyes remain on the screen. He takes the candy, closes his fist, and brings it to rest upon his knee. ANNIE TWO looks on in panic waiting for him to read it.)

ANNIE. *(Points left.)* I make the most important move of my life during the most important scene of the movie. We sat there for what seemed like forever. His eyes on the screen. A lump in my throat. My heart in his hand. The suspense was killing me. I couldn't take it. I just wanted it to be over.

FRAN. *(To ANNIE TWO:)* It's over.

ANNIE TWO. Huh?

FRAN. It's over. *(Points forward.)* The movie. Say something before it's too late.

(The lights brighten. DUSTIN stands. ANNIE TWO stands with him.)

DUSTIN. Well, thanks for letting me sit with you.

ANNIE TWO. So, what did you think?

DUSTIN. Of the movie?

ANNIE TWO. Of the candy.

DUSTIN. Candy? Oh! The candy. I forgot. (*Glances down at his hand then back at ANNIE TWO.*) It's a little bit mushy.

ANNIE TWO. (*Thinks he means the message:*) Well, yeah. I didn't really...

DUSTIN. (*Holds it up.*) I mean look at it. It must have melted in my hand. No big deal.

(He pops the candy in his mouth and turns to get his jacket. ANNIE TWO is in shock.)

ANNIE. No big deal? I spent an hour and a half choosing the perfect phrase and he pops it in his mouth without even reading it! It was the worst thing that ever happened to me in my entire life! (*DUSTIN lets out a little cough.*) Until this. (*DUSTIN coughs again.*)

ANNIE TWO. Are you okay?

(DUSTIN clears his throat as if trying to get something out.)

FRAN. (*To ANNIE TWO :*) What's going on?

ANNIE TWO. (*Over DUSTIN's noise.*) I gave him one of the hearts!

FRAN. You used Dustin as the guinea pig?

ANNIE TWO. I was trying to tell him I liked him! (*DUSTIN coughs even louder.*) Do you think he's choking?

FRAN. I think he's leaving.

(ANNIE TWO turns and watches as DUSTIN sprints to the trashcan. He sticks his head in, gags loudly then slowly lifts his head out.)

ANNIE TWO. (*Calling out:*) Are you okay?

DUSTIN. (*Looking back:*) I...I gotta go!

(DUSTIN runs and exits left. ANNIE TWO falls back into her seat.)

ANNIE TWO. Did you see that? I nearly killed him.

FRAN. He's fine. If he was really hurt, he couldn't have run away so fast.

ANNIE TWO. I bet he never talks to me again.

FRAN. Well, he never really talked to you before.

ANNIE TWO. (*Turns to FRAN dramatically.*) I gave him my heart and he trashed it!

FRAN. Don't be stupid. That is not what happened. (*A beat.*) He took your heart. He chewed it to pieces, and he spit it out.

ANNIE TWO. That makes me feel much better.

FRAN. Look on the bright side. I bet Dorkboy still likes you.

(*The lights fade on stage left. ANNIE TWO and FRAN exit.*)

(*STAGEHAND enters right. He removes a script from his back pocket, looks at it, and moves left to rearrange the set. He slides two chairs down right facing front and two up to their left facing back. He moves the trashcan down stage between the two pairs then pulls the final chair to the far left. ANNIE begins her monologue midway through his moves.*)

ANNIE. That's my life for you. The whole night was a complete mess. I try to tell a guy I like him and he ends up fleeing for his life. Things like that don't happen to normal people.

(*JESS enters from the right, overhearing her final comment.*)

JESS. Maybe you're just not normal.

ANNIE. (*Startled.*) Jess! What are you doing here?

JESS. I thought I'd check out your play.

ANNIE. Why aren't you sitting in the audience?

JESS. I'm your brother. That makes me a V.I.P.

ANNIE. Very Ignorant Person.

JESS. (*Fake laugh.*) Funny. Hope the rest of your script has the same sparkling wit.

STAGEHAND. (*Finishes the set. Brushes sweat from his brow.*) Whew. (*Exits right.*)

JESS. (*Looks left.*) Wow! Fancy scenery. You must have spent a fortune in set construction.

ANNIE. It's not supposed to be a realistic set. It's...evocative.

JESS. And by "evocative," you mean "cheap," right?

(*ANNIE TWO enters left and sits in the far left chair.*)

JESS. (*Points left.*) Who's the girl?

ANNIE. It's me.

JESS. What?

ANNIE. It's me in math class.

JESS. I don't understand.

ANNIE. The left chair is my math class. The other chairs represent the lunchroom.

JESS. I'm not worried about the set. I just don't understand how that can be you.

ANNIE. Well, you should have been here at the beginning.

JESS. Was there only one of you back then?

ANNIE. There is only one of me! That's how I see myself. A little taller. A little braver.

JESS. A little prettier.

ANNIE. Can I get back to my play, please?

JESS. Sure. I didn't mean to interrupt. Don't let me bother you.

ANNIE. You're already bothering me.

JESS. I'll just sit back here and watch. You won't even know I'm here. *(He sits in the chair. ANNIE turns to address the audience.)* Psst.

ANNIE. What?

JESS. Do you have a program or something?

ANNIE. You're ruining my play!

JESS. *(Innocently:)* I just want to know what it's called.

ANNIE. It's called, "The Real Me." Okay?

JESS. Got it. *(Sits for a beat then comes forward.)* Wait a second. Your play is called, "The Real Me," but the girl being you is not the real you?

ANNIE. She is me! There are two parts of me. *(Points to herself:)* A part that analyzes things rationally *(Points to ANNIE TWO:)* and a part that acts things out physically.

JESS. *(Mulls it over a minute.)* Is this a whole "Left Brain/Right Brain" thing?

ANNIE. *(Losing patience.)* There's no brain involved!

JESS. Ahhh! So it is the "real you."

ANNIE. *(Calls off right:)* Can I get a little help out here?

JESS. Who are you calling?

ANNIE. My stagehand.

(STAGEHAND enters right. JESS backs away a little wary.)

JESS. *(To ANNIE:)* You're not going to have this guy throw me out, are you?

ANNIE. I will if you won't get quiet. *(Points to the script in Stagehand's back pocket.)* May I borrow that for a moment? *(STAGEHAND stares blankly.)* I'll give it back in a bit. *(He hands it over and exits. ANNIE holds it out to JESS.)*

ANNIE. Here.

JESS. What's that?

ANNIE. It's the script of the play. (*Points to a page.*) I'm about to make this speech right here. Instead of interrupting with so many questions, you can just read along.

JESS. Cool.

ANNIE. (*Steps downstage. To audience:*) After the fiasco with the candy hearts...

JESS. (*Reads aloud at the same time:*) After the fiasco with the candy hearts...

ANNIE. (*Angrily to JESS:*) Read to yourself!

JESS. Right!

ANNIE. (*Takes a deep breath and starts again:*) After the fiasco with the candy hearts, I decided it would be best to avoid Dustin for a while. I made it to my third period math class without seeing him then I just couldn't take it anymore. (*ANNIE TWO grabs a spiral notebook and begins writing frantically.*) I grabbed a spiral notebook and just started writing down my feelings. By the end of class, I had a poem. I also had an F for not completing my fractions worksheet. It was worth it, though. That poem was the first thing I ever wrote that I really liked. (*ANNIE TWO smiles and closes the notebook.*) The math class poetry sessions became a daily ritual. Another day. Another poem. Another F. (*ANNIE TWO opens the spiral notebook and writes again.*) My grades got worse, but my writing got better. Then, one day, it happened. I got the lowest test grade I'd ever seen and I wrote the greatest poem I'd ever heard. It captured my emotions perfectly. It said everything I ever wanted to say. I decided to put it in Dustin's locker and tell him once and for all how I felt. (*ANNIE TWO tears a page out of the notebook and folds it up.*) It was a bold plan. It wasn't as bold as looking in his eyes and confessing my feelings face to face, but it was definitely a step up from expressing myself through mass-produced, pre-printed, confectionary wafers. (*ANNIE TWO exits left.*) I snuck off to Dustin's locker then hurried to the lunchroom to tell Fran.

JESS. (*Looking up from his script:*) Who's Fran?

ANNIE. She's my best friend.

JESS. Why don't I know her?

ANNIE. I want to keep her as my best friend.

(FRAN enters from the left and heads for the pair of chairs to the right.)

JESS. (*Instantly attracted:*) She's a babe! (*He heads left.*)

ANNIE. (*Stopping him.*) Where are you going?

JESS. To talk to her.

ANNIE. You can't.

JESS. Why not?

ANNIE. It's one of the rules. The characters on that side of the stage are in a separate reality. We know they're there, but they don't know we're over here.

JESS. Huh?

ANNIE. The characters over there really believe they are in the lunchroom.

JESS. With such an evocative set who could blame them?

ANNIE. They can only communicate with people over there. If you cross into that reality, it'll be chaos. (*Pointing left:*) Look. Here I come. (*Ushers JESS back to the chair.*) Read along or watch. Just be quiet.

(ANNIE TWO enters and sits to FRAN's left, eager to share her news. FRAN picks through her lunch bag, unaware of her friend's excitement.)

ANNIE TWO. (*Trying to get her attention:*) Hey!

FRAN. You're late. What did you get on the math test?

ANNIE TWO. (*Evasively:*) I don't remember.

FRAN. Well, what did we do in class today?

ANNIE TWO. I have no idea.

FRAN. (*Looks over:*) You were there, right?

ANNIE TWO. Yeah, but I wasn't doing math. (*Waves notebook.*) I was writing a poem.

FRAN. Another one? If you don't stop writing those in class, you're going to fail.

ANNIE TWO. I haven't written that many.

FRAN. You've written one a day...five days a week...for a full month.

ANNIE TWO. That's like *fifteen* poems.

FRAN. (*Correcting her:*) *Twenty!* (*Laughs.*) Man, you really *are* going to fail.

(FRAN returns to her lunch. ANNIE TWO is eager to tell her the news. She tries again:)

ANNIE TWO. (*A loud sigh.*) You know, after today, I'll probably never use this notebook again. (*Waits a beat.*) You know why?

FRAN. Because you filled up all the pages?

ANNIE TWO. (*Coyly:*) Actually, I tore a page out.

FRAN. The poem was that bad, huh?

ANNIE TWO. It was that *good*. It was the best thing I ever wrote. You'll never guess what I did with it!

FRAN. (*Suddenly interested:*) Don't tell me!

ANNIE TWO. (*Feigning nonchalance:*) Well, if you don't want me to.

FRAN. Tell me!

ANNIE TWO. (*Nervous excitement:*) I slipped it in Dustin's locker just before I came here! He's probably reading it right now! (*A beat.*) Do you think he'll like it?

FRAN. How would I know? You've never let me read any of these things. (*Grabs notebook.*)

ANNIE TWO. It's too embarrassing. (*She pulls it away. A folded paper slips out.*)

FRAN. What's that?

ANNIE TWO. My math test. That's even more embarrassing. (*She picks it up, holding the paper out towards the trashcan.*) If any else saw this, I would die.

(*DORKBOY and SWEETIE have entered left. As SWEETIE sits upstage, DORKBOY moves to trash can, sees the paper, hears ANNIE TWO, and believes she is passing him a note.*)

DORKBOY. (*Taking the paper:*) It will remain our little secret then. (*Checks that SWEETIE is not looking, then leans in.*) I'll read it later when I'm alone. (*Puts it in a pocket and turns.*)

ANNIE TWO. (*Jumping up:*) Hey! Come back!

DORKBOY. Shhh. (*Points to SWEETIE.*) I don't want her to see us together. (*Smiles.*) I'm glad you wrote me, though. I've been thinking about you non-stop since your first message.

ANNIE TWO. My first message?

DORKBOY. The candy heart. "U R HOT." (*Leans in and flirts.*) Ditto.

FRAN. (*Frames the two of them with her hands.*) Dorkboy and Candy-girl. Has potential.

ANNIE TWO. (*To FRAN:*) You're NOT helping. (*Turns to DORKBOY. Kindly but firmly:*) Look. That wasn't a message. That was a piece of food. I didn't mean to give you the wrong idea.

DORKBOY. (*Peeks in his upper pocket.*) Then why did you pass me this note?

ANNIE TWO. (*Gently:*) That's not a note. It's a math test. And you just sort of took it.

DORKBOY. (*Realizing his error:*) You didn't pass it?

FRAN. (*Leans over.*) She hasn't passed a math test since the seventh grade.

(*ANNIE TWO gives her a look. DORKBOY pulls the paper from his pocket and stares at it.*)

ANNIE TWO. It really is a test. I swear. (*A beat.*) Can I have it back? Please?

DORKBOY. Oh. Yes. Sorry. (*Holds it out, embarrassed.*) I feel stupid taking it.

ANNIE TWO. (*Trying to lighten the moment:*) I felt stupid taking it, too. (*Points as she moves toward him.*) If you look inside, you'd understand how I feel.

(*SWEETIE has moved from her table and arrived in time to hear ANNIE TWO's last line. SWEETIE steps between them and snatches the paper.*)

SWEETIE. (*Angrily:*) Why don't you let me look? I'm very understanding!

DORKBOY. Sweetie!

SWEETIE. (*Turns on him:*) I warned you about taking things from other girls and you have the nerve to do it right in front of me?

DORKBOY. (*Nervously pointing back:*) Actually, I thought you were looking the other way.

SWEETIE. Oh! So you were doing it behind my back?

DORKBOY. I wasn't doing anything.

SWEETIE. (*Waves the paper.*) Are you saying you didn't take this from her?

DORKBOY. I wasn't supposed to take it.

SWEETIE. And yet you did.

DORKBOY. Yes. But it was a mistake.

SWEETIE. It certainly was! (*Unfolding it:*) Let's take a look and see what we have here.

ANNIE TWO. It's just a math test.

SWEETIE. (*Turns to her sarcastically:*) Oh! Good cover story!

ANNIE TWO. It's not a story!

SWEETIE. (*Looks at the paper.*) You're right. It's not a story. (*Holds it out.*) It's a poem!

ANNIE TWO. What?

SWEETIE. (*Reading aloud:*) "I've waited so long for this romance to start. Since the day at the movies when I gave you my heart."

(SWEETIE gives ANNIE TWO the evil eye. ANNIE TWO looks like she might faint. FRAN leaps up to steady her. SWEETIE reads a bit more silently, stops, and looks up fuming.)

SWEETIE. (*Barely containing her anger:*) This is incredible!

DORKBOY. (*Smiling as he reads over her shoulder:*) It really is good, isn't it?

(SWEETIE tears the poem into pieces, storms to the trash can, and throws it in.)

DORKBOY. (*To ANNIE TWO:*) Think you could e-mail me the rest? I only made it through the second stanza before she tore it up.

SWEETIE. (*Slow and scary:*) Leave with me now or I'll tear you the same way.

DORKBOY. Uh-oh. (*Scurries after her. They both exit left.*)

ANNIE. (*To audience:*) And there you have it. I ditch the candy. I try the poem. And my feelings get trashed again.

JESS. That's pretty bad.

ANNIE. (*To audience:*) It gets worse.

(ANNIE points left. ANNIE TWO stands at the trashcan, frowning.)

ANNIE TWO. I can't believe she did that.

FRAN. No big deal. It was just a rough draft, right?

ANNIE TWO. There was no rough draft. That was the poem!

FRAN. I thought you put the poem in Dustin's locker.

ANNIE TWO. I thought so, too. (*Suddenly:*) Oh my gosh! (*She hurries to her notebook.*)

FRAN. What?

ANNIE TWO. (*Flipping through it:*) My math test! I put my math test in Dustin's locker!

FRAN. (*Holding back a laugh.*) When I said you should exchange digits, that's not exactly what I meant. (*She moves to the trash can to look in.*)

ANNIE TWO. (*Falls into her seat and buries her head.*) This is terrible!

JESS. (*Jumps out of his seat. To ANNIE:*) This is great!

ANNIE. What?

JESS. (*Points to the script.*) The math test in his locker! I did *not* see that coming! Well, actually, I did. (*Points to the script.*) I peeked ahead a couple lines. (*He starts to flip ahead again. ANNIE snatches the script.*)

ANNIE. Stop that!

JESS. (*Defensively:*) It's an interesting situation. I just want to see how you get out.

ANNIE. (*To JESS:*) Why don't *you* get out?

JESS. Hey! I'm not going to stand here and let you insult me.

ANNIE. You're going to leave?

JESS. No. I'm going to sit down. It's much more comfortable. (*He takes the script back and smiles sheepishly.*) Carry on. (*Looks at the page as he returns to his seat. He whispers loudly as if giving her the cue:*) "I felt like I was going to be sick..."

(*ANNIE sighs, turns to the audience, and gestures left.*)

ANNIE. I felt like I was going to be sick. This wasn't the first time I'd felt this way in our school lunchroom, but it was the first time that didn't directly involve "Tuesday's Tuna Surprise." I didn't have a lot of experience in the flirting department, but I was pretty sure that slipping Dustin a math test that I completely bombed wasn't a great move. I had no idea what I was going to do. Unfortunately, I didn't have much time to think about it.

FRAN. (*Glances left. Runs to ANNIE TWO.*) Annie! Dustin just came in!

ANNIE TWO. (*Looks up.*) What's he doing?

FRAN. (*Points left.*) Leaving. (*Looks back.*) The guy just can't enter a room and stay, can he?

ANNIE TWO. (*Jumps up.*) Do you think he found my math test!

FRAN. Even if he did, he's not going to know what to think.

ANNIE TWO. He's going to *think* I'm an idiot.

FRAN. Come on. How bad can the test be?

ANNIE TWO. I only got twenty-five right.

FRAN. There were only twenty-five questions.

ANNIE TWO. I only got *number twenty-five* right. I missed the first twenty-four! (*A beat.*) I can't stand this. I'm going to break into his locker.

FRAN. How are you going to do that?

ANNIE TWO. I'm going to try every three-number combination until I find the right one!

FRAN. You just got a four on your math test. I don't think numbers are your strong suit.

ANNIE TWO. A strong suit! That's what I need. One of those big, metallic armor things. Then I can just crash into the locker and...

(ANNIE TWO turns and demonstrates as DUSTIN enters. They collide. DUSTIN staggers a bit. ANNIE TWO backs up rubbing her head, suddenly noticing whom she has hit.)

ANNIE TWO. Dustin!

DUSTIN. Hey. (*Watches her straighten up.*) Are you okay?

ANNIE TWO. Yeah. I was just going out...

DUSTIN. (*Rubs his arm.*) ...for the football team?

ANNIE TWO. (*Smiles awkwardly.*) No. To get something. I'm sorry. I didn't see you.

DUSTIN. It's okay. (*Playfully.*) Maybe I should just go out and come in again.

FRAN. (*Leaning over:*) Lord knows, he's had plenty of practice.

DUSTIN. Look. You seem to be in a hurry. I won't stand in your way. (*Smiles.*) Not unless I want to get knocked down. (*He steps aside and gestures for her to pass.*)

ANNIE TWO. (*Blushes.*) Thanks.

(*ANNIE TWO is unsure what to do. She glances back at FRAN then takes a few steps left.*)

DUSTIN. Oh! Before you go...

(*ANNIE TWO stops and cringes. DUSTIN takes a folded sheet of paper out of his pocket.*)

DUSTIN. I...found this in my locker. (*He unfolds it as if double-checking. ANNIE TWO's eyes go wide in horror.*) It looks like it's one of your math tests or something.

ANNIE TWO. (*Faking surprise, unconvincingly:*) Really?

DUSTIN. Yeah. I thought you might need it back. (*He holds it out.*) I didn't mean to look at it. I was just trying to figure out what it was.

ANNIE TWO. This is embarrassing...

DUSTIN. Don't worry about it. I've seen lower grades.

ANNIE TWO. (*Takes it tentatively.*) You have?

DUSTIN. Well, no. (*Trying to cheer her up:*) But, that's the best grade I've ever seen on a math test in my locker that belonged to someone else.

ANNIE TWO. Thanks.

DUSTIN. No problem. I... (*There's an awkward beat.*) I...better go.

ANNIE TWO. (*Surprised yet relieved he is leaving.*) I...guess I'll see you later.

(*ANNIE TWO and DUSTIN look at each other a moment. FRAN pops in between them.*)

FRAN. I'm sure you'll run into each other again.

(DUSTIN *heads left*. ANNIE TWO *watches him go then turns to FRAN.*)

ANNIE TWO. I can't believe he didn't ask how my test got in his locker.

(DUSTIN *reenters suddenly*. He *calls out as he crosses toward them.*)

DUSTIN. I'm sorry. I wasn't going to ask, but do you have any idea how your test got in my locker?

(ANNIE TWO *is speechless*. FRAN *crosses to DUSTIN.*)

FRAN. I can explain that.

ANNIE TWO. You can?

FRAN. (*To ANNIE TWO:*) Of course. (*To DUSTIN:*) It's all my fault really. You see, Annie failed her math test and didn't want her parents to see it, but she promised she'd never throw a test away without showing them. So I said, "What if I threw it away for you?"

(FRAN *takes the test from ANNIE TWO's hand.*)

DUSTIN. (*Dubiously:*) Clever.

FRAN. It's a gift. What can I do? Anyway. Annie gave it to me, and I realized this was more than a test. It was a cry for help. She was asking me to do something she couldn't do for herself. She may have been talking about the test, but subconsciously, she was asking me to help the two of you hook up.

ANNIE TWO. What?

DUSTIN. (*At the same time:*) What?

FRAN. (*To both:*) Hook up. Academically. As study buddies! (*To DUSTIN:*) Annie's been thinking about you for a long time...as a potential math tutor, I mean. She's wanted to ask you herself, but she always gets too nervous. That's what she was going to ask you at the movies that one time, but she choked. Well, technically, *you* choked. (FRAN *turns and smiles at ANNIE TWO.*) You *are* still interested in him, aren't you, Annie?

(*Nervous and embarrassed*, ANNIE TWO *manages only a grunt and a nod.*)

FRAN. (*Turning back to DUSTIN:*) That was a “yes.” Maybe you should tutor her in speech, too! Anyway. I knew Annie was never going to ask you, so I decided to let the test speak for itself. I dropped it in your locker, hoping that it would somehow bring the two of you together. (*Turns to ANNIE TWO, feigning innocence:*) I hope you’re not mad, Annie. I only did it because I care. You know how difficult it is for me to be dishonest.

DUSTIN. (*Taps FRAN on the shoulder:*) How did you know where my locker was?

FRAN. (*Matter-of-factly:*) Your locker’s by the locker of the girl who dates the guy who mows my grandfather’s lawn. I saw you there once when I tracked her down to tell her that her boyfriend’s Weed Wacker chipped the nose off my grandfather’s garden gnome.

(FRAN crosses away and drops the test in the trash can. ANNIE TWO and DUSTIN watch her with confused faces. DUSTIN steps toward ANNIE TWO and breaks the silence.)

DUSTIN. So? Is what she said true?

ANNIE TWO. (*Still stunned:*) I didn’t even know her grandfather had a garden gnome.

DUSTIN. No. I mean about the tutor.

ANNIE TWO. What? (*Snapping out of it:*) Oh. Um...yeah.

DUSTIN. I could do that. Tutor you, I mean.

ANNIE TWO. That would be...great.

DUSTIN. So, when do you want to get together?

ANNIE TWO. I’m free any time. (*ANNIE TWO covers her face.*)

ANNIE. (*Covers her face the same way. Peeks up at the audience.*) “I’m free anytime?” I might as well have said, “I have no social life.”

DUSTIN. Look. I’m going to be in the library after school today. I usually stay there about an hour or so until baseball practice starts. You can come by then if you want.

FRAN. (*Places her arm around ANNIE TWO. To DUSTIN:*) I’ll make sure she’s there.

DUSTIN. Great. (*Starting out:*) I'll be there right about three o'clock.

FRAN. Why don't you look for her over by the big, fake, ficus tree?

DUSTIN. (*Unsure:*) Okay.

FRAN. It's a date then! (*ANNIE TWO's eyes go wide at Fran's choice of words.*)

DUSTIN. I guess I'll see you in a few hours. (*He starts to exit. Pauses at the trash can and looks inside. He reaches down and pulls out the test.*) I'm going to hang on to this. Maybe I can figure out where you went wrong. (*He glances into the trashcan again as if noticing something then exits. FRAN turns to ANNIE TWO who stands, staring off in space.*)

ANNIE TWO. (*Almost speechless:*) Giving him my math test actually worked.

FRAN. Yeah. And guys usually don't like it when a girl gives them a bunch of problems. (*Explains her joke:*) Math test? A bunch of problems? Get it? (*Waves her hands.*) Hello?

ANNIE TWO. (*Still a bit stunned:*) I'm meeting Dustin after school.

FRAN. I know. I was there.

ANNIE TWO. (*Smiling slowly.*) I'm meeting Dustin after school.

FRAN. (*Smiling back.*) That gives you a few hours to plan your next move.

ANNIE TWO. (*Smile vanishes. Panic sets in:*) I'm meeting Dustin after school!

FRAN. You'll be fine. Just meet me at the ficus tree right after sixth period.

ANNIE TWO. What's with the ficus tree? Is that a good place for us to meet and study?

FRAN. It's a good place for me to hide and watch.

(The girls gather their things and exit left. STAGEHAND enters right, crossing towards the chairs. He reaches into his back pocket for his script realizing that JESS still has it. He shoots JESS a look, thinks for a beat then proceeds to move the chairs from memory.)

JESS. He's going to turn the set into the library now, isn't he? (*With mock awe as the STAGEHAND tilts the two right chairs slightly towards each other.*) It looks so different! It's like magic! I can't wait to see the ficus tree!

ANNIE. He's going to drag it on stage in a minute. Right after he drags you off.

(STAGEHAND carries the trashcan right of the chairs. He smiles at JESS menacingly.)

JESS. No need for violence. We've got a third scene to finish. I'll sit and be quiet. Carry on.

(ANNIE waves the STAGEHAND back to work. He slams the trash can down then moves three chairs left, arranging them in an angled row, facing down right.)

ANNIE. (*To audience as he works:*) For the rest of the day, all I could think about was studying with Dustin after school. It was the first time I ever looked forward to doing math in my life. I was so distracted that I got in trouble in science, history, and Spanish. At least I think I got in trouble in Spanish. It was one of those days where we weren't allowed to speak any English. For all I know, Mrs. Gonzales could have been asking me, "Where is the window?"...in a very grumpy voice. There's my luck again. Dustin agrees to help me with my grades in one class and he causes me to bomb three others.

(STAGEHAND finishes the set. He exits right, glaring at JESS as he goes.)

JESS. (*Crossing downstage.*) Annie?

ANNIE. What?

JESS. I hate to interrupt.

ANNIE. You love to interrupt.

JESS. I know. I'm sorry. But can't we just go to the next scene?

ANNIE. The action can't start until the monologue's finished.

JESS. Don't you think the whole play would flow better if you cut out your part over here and just used the parts over there?

ANNIE. *(To JESS:)* You know, I actually thought about that. *(To the audience:)* I wasn't sure whether to make the play a traditional narrative or to go with the more experimental approach. Actually, it's an interesting dilemma...

JESS. *(Interrupting:)* Actually, it's not.

ANNIE. Then why did you ask?

JESS. I just wanted to see less of you and more of Fran.

ANNIE. Why?

JESS. I think I'm in love with her.

ANNIE. What are you talking about?

JESS. She's funny. She's attractive.

ANNIE. She's fictional.

JESS. Every relationship has its obstacles.

ANNIE. You don't have a relationship! You've never even talked to her.

JESS. Like you talked to that Dustin guy a lot before you fell in love with him.

ANNIE. That's different!

JESS. How?

ANNIE. I didn't talk to Dustin for three years. You've only not-talked to Fran for like fifteen minutes.

JESS. Fine. I see how it is. You're allowed to have your happy ending, but I'm not.

ANNIE. What makes you think I'm going to have a happy ending?

JESS. It's all right here on the last page. *(Opens the script and reads dramatically. He performs the male lines in a passionate soap-opera voice and the female lines with a breathy, melodramatic southern accent.) (Female:)* You're here. *(Male:)* Yeah. *(Female:)* Are you going to stay this time? *(Male:)* If you want me to. I'm sorry about leaving. I..wasn't sure what to do.

ANNIE. I'll tell you what to do. Give me the script! (ANNIE tries to grab it.)

JESS. (*Scurrying away:*) In a minute. Let me get to the good part. (*Scans script with his finger.*) Blah. Blah. Blah. Oh, here! (*Male:*) What's that? (*Female:*) Nothing. Well, something. Something for you. It's a piece of...

ANNIE. Jess! You need to stop! (*She tries to grab it again.*)

JESS. (*Slips past her and continues:*) I will. Soon as I get to the big finish. (*Finds his place in the script.*) (*Male:*) So what do we do now? (*Female:*) I have absolutely no idea. (*Male:*) Kiss me. (*Female:*) What? (*Male:*) Hey. It was your idea, not mine. (*Scans quickly.*) Blah. Blah. Blah. Blah. Bam! (*Turns his back, wraps his arms around himself and mimics a make out session.*)

ANNIE. (*Deflated.*) I can't believe you did that.

JESS. (*Turns back, unaware that she is so upset.*) I can't believe you wrote that.

(*STAGEHAND returns, dragging in the ficus tree. ANNIE stops him.*)

ANNIE. Forget it. It's over. (*STAGEHAND stops, confused.*)

JESS. What do you mean it's over?

ANNIE. (*To STAGEHAND:*) Take the tree off and clear the rest of the set.

STAGEHAND. (*Stares at JESS.*) Grrr. (*Turns and drags the tree back out.*)

JESS. What are you doing? There's a whole scene left.

ANNIE. You just told everyone the ending.

JESS. (*Realizes what he's done.*) Oh. (*Tries to make up for it.*) Well...I skipped over some of the good parts. (*Looking at the last page:*) Fran hiding! "Smiling, not laughing." Dustin reading the... (*Doesn't want to give too much away:*) thing.

ANNIE. (*To audience:*) Thanks for coming. Please drive safely. (*Lowers head and exits right.*)

JESS. (*Calls after her:*) Annie!

(JESS moves to follow her. STAGEHAND enters, crossing left, scaring JESS down stage.)

(To audience:) Hang on a second. Let me think. (Turns left.) Don't move anything yet.

STAGEHAND. (Grunts defiantly:) Hmph! (Stacks the two right chairs.)

JESS. (To audience:) It's so hard to find good help these days. (A beat as he makes a decision.) I'm going to try to get the last scene started for you. I just need to finish the monologue. (He flips back a few pages.) Let's see. (Reads aloud as he searches:) "Looking forward to math... where is the window..." (Finds the spot.) Ah! (Looks to the audience and reads:) "The bell rang to end sixth period. I wasn't sure if it sounded like wedding bells or chimes of doom. Next thing I knew, Fran and I were entering the library to look for Dustin."

(ANNIE TWO and FRAN enter, stopping far left. STAGEHAND has the first of the three left chairs in the air to stack it. He is trapped on the wrong side of the stage.)

ANNIE TWO. (Nervously:) Do you see Dustin?

(STAGEHAND lowers the chair and drops behind the row of three just as FRAN turns.)

FRAN. (Looking right:) Not yet.

ANNIE TWO. Good. (She moves left to leave.)

FRAN. (Stops her.) What are you doing?

ANNIE TWO. I'm too nervous.

FRAN. You can't just show up and then leave.

ANNIE TWO. Why not?

FRAN. Because that's Dustin's job.

ANNIE TWO. (Sighs.) Fine. I need something to do though. I don't want it to look like I've been waiting for him.

FRAN. You've been waiting for him since the sixth grade. It may be a little hard to disguise.

(STAGEHAND sees them talking slightly left. He tiptoes right, trying to escape.)

FRAN. Come on. You're supposed to meet him by the ficus tree.

(STAGEHAND stops. Realizing there is no tree, he jumps into the trash can, and spreads his arms like branches. As the girls draw closer, he closes his eyes, fearing he will be caught.)

ANNIE TWO. Scrawny little thing isn't it? (STAGEHAND's eyes pop open. Offended.)

FRAN. Yeah, but these leaves make great bookmarks. (Reaches towards STAGEHAND's fingers as if she is going pluck one. He winces. She stops suddenly.) A book! That's it! You should go check out a romance novel.

ANNIE TWO. Why?

FRAN. Dustin comes in. He sees you reading it. You strike up a conversation. Next thing you know, the two of you are recreating the front cover. Go ask someone at the desk for help.

(FRAN nudges ANNIE TWO to the row of three chairs. ANNIE TWO calls out.)

ANNIE TWO. Excuse me? I need something romantic!

DORKBOY. (Pops up and smiles.) Would you prefer candy, flowers, or jewelry?

ANNIE TWO. (Cringes.) Oh no!

DORKBOY. (Flirty:) Perhaps a shoulder massage in the silent reading section? (Lifts hands and wiggles his fingers.)

ANNIE TWO. I don't have time for this. I just need help finding a romantic book.

DORKBOY. How about *Romeo and Juliet*? Two teenagers, meeting secretly, risking it all in the name of love. (Smiles.) Sound familiar?

FRAN. (Steps over, eyes on the door. To ANNIE TWO, unaware of DORKBOY:) I'm going to go ahead and hide. I want a good view just in case the two of you kiss or something.

ANNIE TWO. (To FRAN:) Kiss?

DORKBOY. *(To self, thinking FRAN is talking about him:)* This is going better than I thought. Perhaps I should get a breath mint. *(He turns away, reaching into his pocket.)*

FRAN. *(Noticing him suddenly:)* Dorkboy works in the media center?

ANNIE TWO. *(To FRAN:)* He thinks I'm interested in him.

FRAN. *I'm* beginning to think you're interested in him.

ANNIE TWO. Get me out of this!

(ANNIE TWO pushes FRAN towards the desk. DORKBOY turns around puckering.)

FRAN. Easy there, Romeo. One girl at a time.

DORKBOY. What happened to Annie?

FRAN. You can't see her anymore.

DORKBOY. Sure I can. She's right over there by the ficus tree. *(He points.)*

FRAN. *(She lowers his hand.)* She wants you to leave her alone.

DORKBOY. *(A bit dejected:)* She's not having second thoughts about our relationship is she?

FRAN. *(Sighs then goes with it.)* Yes! Third thoughts actually.

ANNIE TWO. *(Moves left.)* What are you telling him?

FRAN. *(Quiets her with a look.)* The truth. It's the only way to get him to understand. *(She takes a breath and turns to DORKBOY.)* Annie liked you, and liked that you liked her, but she learned that someone else liked you, too. Now, even though it's likely Annie likes you the most, she knows you should be with the one who liked you first, whether she likes it or not.

DORKBOY. *(Looking past FRAN to ANNIE TWO.)* But...you wrote me that poem...

ANNIE TWO. That was a...

FRAN. ...*break-up* poem. Annie was hoping the rhyme would lessen the sting a little.

DORKBOY. It didn't sound like a break-up poem.

FRAN. Well, you didn't get to read the whole thing.

DORKBOY. (*Sighs.*) I should have gone back sooner.

ANNIE TWO. What?

DORKBOY. That was the first poem anyone had ever written for me. I snuck into the cafeteria and dug through the trash, hoping I could put it back together. I guess someone else got there first. All I could find was one piece. It was wedged in a yogurt cup.

ANNIE TWO. Was there anything written on it?

DORKBOY. (*Thinks a beat.*) "Low Fat Strawberry-Banana."

ANNIE TWO. The paper! Was there anything written on the paper?

DORKBOY. Oh. Yeah. (DORKBOY *pulls a torn paper out of his pocket and holds it up.*) It looks like the final two lines. (*Reads:*) "Will there be a perfect ending to a story like this? (ANNIE TWO *grabs it out of his hands. He closes his eyes and recites the final line from memory:*) "We'll never know until we share our first kiss."

(SWEETIE *enters behind him, overhearing last line.*)

SWEETIE. Try it, and it will be a kiss of death.

(ANNIE TWO *jumps back hiding the paper behind her back.*)

DORKBOY. (*Eyes pop open.*) This is not going to be pretty.

SWEETIE. Who's not pretty?

DORKBOY. (*Turns to her.*) No one!

SWEETIE. No one's pretty?

DORKBOY. You're pretty.

SWEETIE. Pretty angry.

DORKBOY. I can see that.

SWEETIE. Why are you talking to her again?

DORKBOY. She was just looking for a romance.

SWEETIE. And you thought you could give her one?

DORKBOY. No. I was just checking her out.

SWEETIE. You've been checking her out all month.

DORKBOY. *(Raises a finger to make a point.)* Actually, it's only been 27 days.

SWEETIE. *(Grabs his finger. Pulls him left.)* You need to let her go.

DORKBOY. *(In pain:)* Can you let me go?

SWEETIE. *(Twisting his finger:)* Are you going to break it off or am I?

DORKBOY. *(Pleading:)* It's over. I'll never talk to her again. Can I just get back to the desk?

SWEETIE. *(Releases him.)* Forget the desk. We're leaving.

DORKBOY. But I work here. I just can't walk out!

SWEETIE. Leave now or they'll have to carry you out.

DORKBOY. Uh-oh.

(SWEETIE storms out. DORKBOY runs after her.)

ANNIE TWO. She's going to kill him.

FRAN. *(Like a doctor:)* Time of death. *(Looks at clock on downstage wall.)*
2:59.

ANNIE TWO. 2:59! Dustin's going to be here any minute!

FRAN. *(Pointing off left.)* Here he comes!

(FRAN jumps behind the tree. DUSTIN enters, sees ANNIE TWO, turns, and exits.)

FRAN. And there he goes. You gotta give him credit for consistency.

ANNIE TWO. He saw me, and he left. That can't be good. *(Lowers her head into her hands.)*

FRAN. I'm guessing he'll be back any minute. *(She moves far left to peek.)*

ANNIE TWO. *(Head pops up.)* What do I do if he *does* come back? *(Crosses to tree unaware that FRAN has moved.)* I need a plan. I don't want to look stupid.

FRAN. Then you need to stop talking to the tree. *(Moves right.)* Here's your plan. When he comes back, show him the end of the poem. *(Reads the paper in ANNIE TWO's hand:)* "Will there be a perfect ending to a story like this? We'll never know until we share our first kiss." *(Puts a hand on ANNIE TWO's shoulder.)* This is the chance you waited for. You can do this.

ANNIE TWO. What if something goes wrong?

FRAN. *(Slowly and positively:)* What if it goes just the way you wrote it?

(ANNIE TWO thinks about it for a beat. There is a noise off left.)

ANNIE TWO. He's here!

FRAN. *(Moving to the tree.)* Be brave. It's all in your hands.

(FRAN hides. ANNIE TWO looks at her hands and sees the paper. She closes it into her fist and looks left as DUSTIN enters. He hides something behind his back.)

DUSTIN. Hey.

ANNIE TWO. You're back.

DUSTIN. Yeah.

ANNIE TWO. Are you going to stay this time?

DUSTIN. If you want me to. I'm sorry about leaving. I had to go and get something.

ANNIE TWO. What?

DUSTIN. These. *(He holds out his hand, revealing the torn sections of Annie's poem.)*

ANNIE TWO. *(Unsure how to respond:)* Wow. I was not expecting that.

DUSTIN. I went and got them earlier, but I forgot to bring them when I came in.

ANNIE TWO. I don't know what to say.

DUSTIN. You don't have to say anything. *(An awkward beat.)* I like what you wrote.

ANNIE TWO. Really?

DUSTIN. I do. *(Trying to break the tension:)* And I'm not just saying that because you wrote it about me.

ANNIE TWO. You figured that out, huh?

DUSTIN. *(A smile and a shrug.)* It wasn't too hard to piece together. *(Suddenly worried:)* You're not mad are you?

ANNIE TWO. No.

DUSTIN. Good. *(A nervous beat.)* I'd kind of like to know how it ends though.

ANNIE TWO. Oh. *(She glances nervously at the paper in her hand.)*

DUSTIN. What's that?

ANNIE TWO. *(Tries to hide it.)* Nothing. *(She thinks a beat and sighs.)* Well, something. *(Gathering her courage.)* Something for you. *(Holds it out.)* It's a piece of...

(She trails off as he moves toward her. He arrives, looking at her face to face. She clenches her fists around it. He waits a beat then lifts her hand.)

DUSTIN. *(Curious, but not pushy:)* Are you going to let me see it?

ANNIE TWO. Promise not to laugh?

DUSTIN. I promise.

(She unfurls her fingers. He stares for a beat, takes it, crosses right, and reads it silently. She watches nervously. He turns back and smiles.)

ANNIE TWO. You're laughing.

DUSTIN. I'm smiling. Smiling's not the same as laughing.

ANNIE TWO. Well, it's close.

DUSTIN. *(He takes a tentative step towards her.)* Close is good.

ANNIE TWO. *(A nervous beat.)* So...you know how I feel.

DUSTIN. I do.

ANNIE TWO. And?

DUSTIN. I...feel the same way.

ANNIE TWO. Kind of queasy and nervous like you're about to pass out?

DUSTIN. Exactly. *(They laugh, sharing a nice moment. The laughter fades into an awkward silence.)* So...

ANNIE TWO. So...

DUSTIN. We like each other.

ANNIE TWO. Seems that way.

DUSTIN. So what do we do now?

ANNIE TWO. I have absolutely no idea.

DUSTIN. *(Looks at the paper and smiles gently.)* Kiss me.

ANNIE TWO. What?

DUSTIN. *(Holds up the paper so she sees the words.)* Hey. It was your idea, not mine.

ANNIE TWO. *(Blushing:)* Right. *(An awkward beat.)*

DUSTIN. I like the idea though.

ANNIE TWO. You do?

DUSTIN. *(Feigns casualness:)* Well, I mean, you did all the work writing this thing. If a kiss will help you figure out the ending, it's the least I could do.

ANNIE TWO. (*Points towards the tree.*) You don't mind other people watching?

(*DUSTIN turns and sees FRAN peeking. She jumps out of sight. He smiles and turns back.*)

DUSTIN. (*Feigning ignorance:*) I don't see anyone else.

ANNIE TWO. (*Playing along:*) Me either.

(*They look at each other for a beat. ANNIE TWO leans her head left for the kiss, but is distracted by FRAN who pops out enthusiastically giving two thumbs up. ANNIE TWO pulls back then leans her head right. She is distracted again by FRAN who is now doing a celebration dance. ANNIE TWO pulls back.*)

DUSTIN. (*Kindly:*) You seem nervous.

ANNIE TWO. I'm not nervous. Just distracted. (*Takes a breath. Points to her eyes.*) I'm going to shut these, and I'll be fine.

DUSTIN. (*Playfully romantic:*) Let me get them for you. (*He brushes two fingers softly down her face, guiding her eyelids shut. His hand comes to rest, gently cupping her chin. He looks at her for a beat.*) You're laughing.

ANNIE TWO. (*Open eyes.*) I'm smiling. Smiling's not the same as laughing.

DUSTIN. Well, it's close.

ANNIE TWO. (*Tentatively flirtatious:*) Close is good.

DUSTIN. (*Leans in. Eager but nervous:*) We can wait if it's not okay.

ANNIE TWO. It's better than okay. It's...perfect.

(*They smile for a beat, close their eyes, and lean in for a kiss. It is a potentially perfect moment. JESS, who has slowly moved left to watch, taps FRAN on the shoulder.*)

JESS. I liked it better when I acted it out.

FRAN. (*Screams and runs left.*) Ahhh!

(*JESS runs right and hides behind his chair.*)

ANNIE TWO. (*Stops just before the kiss:*) What's wrong?

FRAN. (*Pointing left. Truly scared.*) Someone's over there! He just appeared out of nowhere!

DUSTIN. (*Turns and looks.*) Where?

FRAN. (*Moves right, tentatively.*) Over here. He was right behind the ficus tree. (*She looks at the tree for a beat. Realizes it is a person. Screams in STAGEHAND's face:*) Ahh!

STAGEHAND. (*Terrified at being discovered. Screams back into her face:*) Ahh!

(*STAGEHAND topples from trash can, runs right and exits. JESS peeks out from chair.*)

FRAN. (*Growing frantic:*) Another person! Did you see that? It's like people are coming out of the walls! (*She points downstage to indicate a wall. She sees the audience and screams:*) Ahh!

ANNIE TWO. (*Notices the audience:*) Ahh!

DUSTIN. (*Notices, too:*) Ahh!

JESS. (*Tentatively trying to quiet them:*) They're just people. It's not that scary.

(*STAGEHAND returns, pushing ANNIE back in. JESS turns and sees her.*)

JESS. Ahh!

ANNIE. (*Furious:*) Jess! What did you do?

JESS. (*Sits. Feigns casualness:*) I was just sitting here.

DORKBOY. (*Runs in from left.*) What's going on? I heard screams that weren't mine!

(*DORKBOY stops next to ANNIE TWO, FRAN, and DUSTIN who are still staring at the audience. He sees the crowd and stares, too.*)

SWEETIE. (*Storms in.*) If you came back to talk to that girl, I'm going to... (*DORKBOY directs her attention to the audience.*) What are all these people doing in the media center?

DORKBOY. This is my fault! I knew I shouldn't have left early. (*Scans the audience.*) We are in serious violation of media center seating capacity code. (*Steps up and addresses the crowd.*) I need everyone to please stand and begin filing out in an orderly fashion.

ANNIE. I've got to stop this. (*Addresses audience:*) Everyone just stay where you are.

DORKBOY. Who are you?

ANNIE. I'm Annie.

ANNIE TWO. (*Turns slightly defensive:*) I'm Annie.

JESS. I'm leaving.

(*JESS moves right. STAGEHAND steps in front of him to prevent his exit. ANNIE TWO stares at ANNIE. DUSTIN joins DORKBOY looking back and forth between them.*)

DUSTIN. There are two of them.

DORKBOY. It's like a dream come true.

SWEETIE. Flirt with either one and it will be a nightmare.

ANNIE TWO. (*Steps tentatively towards ANNIE.*) Do I...know you?

ANNIE. Actually, you *are* me. A representation of me anyway. (*Gently:*) You're the "me" in a play about my life.

ANNIE TWO. That's crazy.

ANNIE. It's not crazy. (*Takes a breath and tries again. Points to self.*) I'm the narrator of a play. (*Points to the audience.*) This is the audience watching. (*Points to everyone on her left.*) You guys are characters.

FRAN. You mean "characters." As in, "You guys are *characters!*"

ANNIE. (*Almost apologetic:*) I mean "characters." As in, "You guys are *characters* listed on the second page of the script."

FRAN. (*To ANNIE TWO:*) She's making this up. She looks like you, but she lies like me.

ANNIE. I'm not making this up. Look around you. You exist on a set. It's not even a good set. It's cheap.

JESS. (*Correcting her:*) “Evocative.”

ANNIE. (*Shoots him a look. Continues:*) Your whole world is made up of five chairs and a trashcan. The stagehand over there moves them around for me. (*She points.*) Think about the movie theatre. There were only two rows of seats. The lunchroom? There weren’t any tables. This is supposed to be a library. There’s not a single book anywhere!

FRAN. (*Grabs the script from JESS and tosses it left.*) Ha! A book!

ANNIE. (*To FRAN. Correcting her:*) A script. (*Picks it up.*) I wrote this. (*Takes it to ANNIE TWO.*) It’s all in here. Everything you said and did. (*Opens it and points.*) Look. Here’s the first scene. You went to the movies to “accidentally” meet Dustin.

DUSTIN. (*Surprised to hear this. Smiles.*) You came to the movie on purpose?

ANNIE TWO. (*Blushes. Smiles at DUSTIN as she admits it:*) I did.

ANNIE. Actually, I did.

FRAN. She went to the movies a month ago. So what?

ANNIE. (*To FRAN:*) You were there with her. You picked out a candy heart and put it in Annie’s pocket. You told her to save it for the end, but she never got a chance to use it.

FRAN. (*Still doubtful:*) If you’re so smart, what did the heart say?

ANNIE. It said, “Kiss Me.” (*This quiets FRAN. ANNIE turns to ANNIE TWO.*) Look in your pocket. The heart’s still there.

(ANNIE TWO feels the outside of her pocket. She reaches in and removes the heart.)

ANNIE TWO. (*Confused:*) Why would this be in my pocket for a month?

ANNIE. Because it hasn’t really been a month.

DORKBOY. (*Excitedly:*) 27 days! Just like I said before. (*Crosses to ANNIE TWO.*) I kept my heart, too. I couldn’t bear to part with it. (*Takes it from pocket and reads:*) “U R...”

SWEETIE. (*Finishes it for him:*) ...dead!

(DORKBOY panics, eats the heart to destroy the evidence, and slinks back to SWEETIE.)

ANNIE. (To ANNIE TWO:) You still have the heart because time moves differently in the play. You get to skip over all the boring parts of my life. You only live out the big moments I had with Dustin.

DUSTIN. (Interested:) How many big moments were there?

ANNIE. Not as many as I hoped. (To ANNIE TWO:) I'm afraid you've only lived for a grand total of about 22 minutes.

FRAN. Annie's lived longer than that! We've been friends forever!

ANNIE. (To FRAN:) When did you meet?

FRAN. We met... (She doesn't know, but is unwilling to admit defeat.) ... earlier!

ANNIE. What's Annie's last name?

FRAN. Uh...

ANNIE. What's *your* last name?

FRAN. It's... (Grasping at straws. She crosses left and points to DUSTIN:) I know *Dustin's* last name! It's Bradley. Dustin Bradley! (Smiles triumphantly. Sees ANNIE TWO. Frowns.) Why do I know Dustin's last name but not yours or mine?

ANNIE. (Holds up script.) Dustin's last name is part of the play. You only have the information you need to act out the scenes.

ANNIE TWO. (Beginning to accept it:) You really invented me to act out your life?

ANNIE. (Kindly. Happy to finally get her point across:) I'm afraid so.

FRAN. (To ANNIE. A last effort:) Wait! Annie's a writer, too! Maybe she invented *you* to interrupt *her* life and express *her* thoughts!

ANNIE. That doesn't even make sense.

ANNIE TWO. (To FRAN:) I have to agree with her on that one.

FRAN. (To ANNIE:) Fine! If you're real and we're not, what's *your* last name, then?

ANNIE. It's... *(Unable to come up with an answer:)* in the script. *(Rifles through the pages.)* My last name is... *(Points, searches, looks up, stunned:)* not in here.

FRAN. *(Triumphantly:)* So you're not real either!

ANNIE. *(Flatly:)* I think you're right.

FRAN. Ha! *(Looks at both Annies. Her smile fades as she realizes the ramifications.)* Huh.

(There is a moment of silence as every one looks around, contemplating his or her existence.)

JESS. *(Sensing a chance to escape. Leans in to ANNIE.)* And you were afraid there'd be chaos. Things seem pretty quiet here to me. I'm just going to head out. It's been fun.

(JESS crosses right. Someone stands in the center of the audience. It's the REAL ANNIE.)

REAL ANNIE. Stay where you are!

JESS. Who are you?

REAL ANNIE. I'm the real Annie. I'm the one who wrote the play.

ANNIE TWO. *(To ANNIE:)* I thought you wrote the play.

ANNIE. I thought I wrote the play.

REAL ANNIE. I'm coming up there to straighten things out. Nobody move! *(Turns politely to the people sitting next to her:)* Okay, you're going to have to move because I'm not graceful enough to climb over you. *(Begins crossing to the aisle.)*

DORKBOY. *(Steps to DUSTIN:)* There are three of them.

SWEETIE. There are five of these. *(Rolls her fingers into a fist. He steps back.)*

REAL ANNIE. *(To audience as she crosses to the stage:)* Thanks for coming. All of you. I hope you liked the show.

DUSTIN. *(Extending a hand to REAL ANNIE:)* Here. Let me help you up.

REAL ANNIE. Thanks. You're just like I wrote you: A gentleman.

DUSTIN. (*Notices ANNIE TWO alone and sad:*) Gotta go. (*Rushes to ANNIE TWO's side.*)

REAL ANNIE. And wishy-washy.

ANNIE. (*To REAL ANNIE:*) So you're the one who wrote this play?

REAL ANNIE. I am.

ANNIE. And your name's Annie, too?

REAL ANNIE. Actually, she's Annie Two. (*Points to ANNIE TWO. Holds up two fingers.*) I dressed you similar so you'd appear to be the same character on stage, but I gave her a number after her name to distinguish your separate personas in the script.

FRAN. That's the craziest thing I've ever heard that I didn't make up myself.

ANNIE TWO. I don't understand why you made two of us?

REAL ANNIE. I wanted to show both sides of my personality. (*To ANNIE:*) You're the rational side that over-analyzes things. (*To ANNIE TWO:*) You're the emotional side that freaks out in tough situations.

FRAN. Why'd you wait so long to come up here when everything went crazy?

REAL ANNIE. I was overanalyzing and freaking out.

DUSTIN. So neither one of these Annies are real?

REAL ANNIE. They're both real in a sense. They're...me.

DORKBOY. But they don't exist.

REAL ANNIE. They exist...but only in the context of the play.

SWEETIE. What about the rest of us?

REAL ANNIE. You all exist in the same way. You're not alive like me, but you're not fictional either. You're based on people from the real world. (*Almost under her breath:*) Most of you.

JESS. What does that mean: Most of us?

REAL ANNIE. (*Nervously:*) Well...I'm a writer. I took a few creative liberties.

JESS. In other words, you made things up.

ANNIE. You didn't make up Dustin did you?

REAL ANNIE. No. Dustin's real.

ANNIE TWO. And the two of you guys are a couple in real life, right?

REAL ANNIE. Not exactly.

DUSTIN. (*To REAL ANNIE:*) Why not? (*Peeks and smiles at ANNIE TWO:*) I thought things were going pretty well.

REAL ANNIE. (*Sadly:*) Sometimes things go differently than you expect them to.

DORKBOY. Yes! I had a hunch I knew where this story was headed! (*Moves to REAL ANNIE:*) You and I end up together in the end, don't we?

REAL ANNIE. (*Taken aback:*) I'm afraid we don't.

DORKBOY. (*Disheartened:*) It's not because I'm fake, is it?

REAL ANNIE. (*Kindly:*) You're real. And you're sweet. We just don't become a couple.

DORKBOY. (*Cheerfully:*) You could always do a rewrite. It would be a great surprise ending. People love a twist!

SWEETIE. I've got your twist right here. (*Twists his arm and leads him up stage.*)

DORKBOY. (*To REAL ANNIE:*) Is she the one you made up?

REAL ANNIE. (*Calling out to him:*) She's real, too. Sorry.

DORKBOY. (*In pain:*) Not as sorry as I am.

JESS. (*An idea and a laugh.*) Oh my gosh! It's Fran, isn't it?

REAL ANNIE. Excuse me?

JESS. You made up Fran, didn't you? It's sad enough you wrote a play about a guy you didn't get, but you had to invent a best friend to help you strike out with him.

REAL ANNIE. I didn't invent Fran.

JESS. You don't have to be embarrassed, Annie. We all have imaginary friends at some point in our lives. Of course, we usually don't keep them when we're teenagers and share them with an audience of complete strangers.

(Another figure stands up in the audience. It is the REAL FRAN.)

REAL FRAN. We're not all strangers.

JESS. Who are you?

REAL FRAN. I'm Fran.

JESS. *(To REAL FRAN as he points to FRAN:)* You're her?

REAL FRAN. Close. But you've got that backwards. I'm not *her*. *She's* me.

(The REAL FRAN and FRAN look at each other. There is a smile, and a quick connection.)

FRAN. *(To REAL FRAN:)* I'll explain it. *(To JESS:)* She can't be me. I have to be her. I wouldn't exist if she weren't already there. She was the first Fran.

REAL FRAN. *(Moves towards the stage. Enjoying the back and forth:)* I was not the first Fran in the universe, mind you, but I was the first Fran to be friends with Annie.

FRAN. Now historically, there were likely dozen of Frans with friends named Annie, but she was the first Fran to be friends with this particular Annie.

REAL FRAN. *(Reaching the stage:)* Unless, of course, this particular Annie had another childhood friend named Fran whom she forgot about.

FRAN. But what are the odds of there being more than one Fran?

JESS. (*Mostly to himself:*) At this point, I'd say the odds are pretty good.

(The two Frans now stand face to face smiling and admiring each other.)

REAL FRAN. (*To FRAN:*) It's nice to meet you.

FRAN. It's nice to *be* you.

JESS. (*To REAL ANNIE:*) I know there are three Annies up here already, but I'm willing to meet as many of you as possible as long as you all come with attractive friends named Fran.

REAL FRAN. (*Overhearing:*) That's sweet, Jess. A little stalkerish, but sweet.

JESS. (*To REAL FRAN. Flirty:*) Let me ask you something. Do you think the real you and the real me would get along in real life?

REAL FRAN. (*Pretending to flirt back:*) The real Jess is totally cute. I've seen pictures. In real life, I think we'd have a lot of fun together.

JESS. (*Pumps fist.*) Awesome!

REAL FRAN. Of course, in real life, Jess is Annie's sister.

JESS. What do you mean by that?

REAL FRAN. The real Annie doesn't have a brother. She has a sister. The real Jess is three years old and female. She's probably at home right now playing with her dollies.

JESS. (*To REAL ANNIE:*) This isn't true, is it?

REAL ANNIE. Of course not. (*A beat. Then a feeble attempt to back up her statement:*) It's past her bedtime. She's probably asleep.

JESS. I don't believe it! Why would you do something like this?

REAL ANNIE. (*Points right.*) I needed someone for Annie to talk to on that side of the stage. Someone she was close to and could share her thoughts with. There were a lot of female characters in the script already so I made a few changes to balance things out.

JESS. (*Takes script.*) A few changes? You altered me completely.

REAL ANNIE. I kept your name the same.

JESS. *(To himself:)* I thought I was real. I find out I'm a character. I thought I was a teenage boy. Turns out I'm a little girl.

REAL FRAN. It could be worse. In the first draft, you were a *puppy*.

(JESS screams in frustration. STAGEHAND, standing to his right, laughs loudly.)

REAL FRAN. *(To STAGEHAND:)* Laugh all you want. It would have been your job to clean up after him. *(Casually:)* That's why Annie created you.

STAGEHAND. Created me?

REAL FRAN. *(A little cringe.)* I think I may have said too much.

FRAN. *(To REAL FRAN:)* We always say too much.

STAGEHAND. *(To REAL ANNIE:)* What does she mean, *created* me?

REAL ANNIE. *(Takes a deep breath and turns to STAGEHAND:)* I needed a way to rearrange the set so I invented an extra character.

STAGEHAND. *(Dead panned:)* You made me up?

REAL ANNIE. *(Putting a positive spin on it:)* I gave you *life!*

STAGEHAND. *(Bitter:)* You created me to do manual labor. Did you at least give me a name?

REAL ANNIE. Of course I gave you a name.

JESS. *(Pointing to script:)* According to the script, your name is *Stagehand*.

REAL ANNIE. *(Hopefully:)* Well...I gave you a couple of lines.

STAGEHAND. Lines? Right. My lines! I don't know how I could have forgotten about those. Let's recap them for a moment, shall we? *(Moves center.)* Scene One: I try to fix the broken curtain, and I go, "Hmm." Scene Two: I wear myself out creating the lunchroom, and say, "Whew!" At least I have a little hand gesture to go with that one. *(Mimics wiping his brow.)* Finally, Scene Three: My big moment. I say "Grr" when I'm dragging out the ficus and "Hmph" when I'm

stacking up the chairs. Grr and Hmph! Two lines in one scene! My reward? I get to stand in a trashcan and act like a tree!

REAL ANNIE. I'm sorry.

STAGEHAND. You call yourself a writer. Why not put a little effort into the exclamations! "Hmm. Whew. Grr. Hmph." Not exactly a Shakespearian monologue is it? There are mimes who speak more than I do! Think of all the cool words you could have used (*Quickly:*) Egads! Gadzooks! Jinkies! Jeepers! Whoopsiedaisies! Doh! The possibilities are endless.

REAL FRAN. So is this rant.

STAGEHAND. Well excuse me for speaking in complete sentences! Perhaps I can run off and carry something heavy out to the stage. I know! (*To REAL ANNIE:*) How about a thesaurus!

REAL ANNIE. I understand you're upset. I should have put more effort into your character.

STAGEHAND. Character? I have no character! I lug and I grunt. Giving me a character would have added some pizzazz to the play! I could have been...the foreign exchange student: "Que Lastima!" The elderly janitor: "Fiddlesticks!" The pop culture junkie obsessed with classic Television: "Whatchootalkin'bout Willis?" You had decades of characters to choose from! The 1950s innocent youth: "Gee, Golly, Gosh!" The 1960s spaced out hippie: "Far out, man! Groovy!" The 1980s valley girl: "Gag Me! Totally!"

JESS. Shut Up.

STAGEHAND. (*To JESS, thinking it's a suggestion:*) Thanks. (*Like a valley girl saying, "No way!":*) Shut-up!

JESS. No. I mean Shut-up. Seriously dude. You're giving me a headache.

REAL ANNIE. Look. (*To STAGEHAND:*) I'm sorry I didn't write you a better part. (*To JESS:*) I'm sorry I changed you from a sister to a brother. (*Takes script and turns to the rest:*) I'm sorry I brought all of you into this mess. It's my life and I should have tried to sort it out on my own.

REAL FRAN. The mess only happened because you didn't trust yourself with Dustin.

REAL ANNIE. The mess happened because I put my life into a play.

REAL FRAN. The play was a good idea. If you hadn't been so afraid, you would have been able to write it without changing everything.

REAL ANNIE. I didn't change *everything*.

REAL FRAN. You changed enough.

SWEETIE. (*Grumpy:*) Were any of the scenes we did up here real?

REAL ANNIE. They were all *real*...up to a point.

DORKBOY. The candy hearts in the movie theatre?

REAL ANNIE. That one happened just like I wrote it.

DUSTIN. The math test in the locker?

REAL ANNIE. That one was completely real, too.

ANNIE TWO. The tutoring session in the library?

REAL ANNIE. That one...not so much. (*She lowers her head.*)

REAL FRAN. (*To all:*) Annie never went to the library.

STAGEHAND. Oh snap! (*Everyone turns to look at him. He smiles.*) Just trying out a new character: (*Finger quotes:*) "Hip hop wannabe." (*Strikes a rapper pose.*) Word.

(There is an awkward beat. ANNIE TWO takes the script from REAL ANNIE, steps forward, and flips towards the back.)

ANNIE. So this whole final scene: Dustin showing up. Fran hiding. The two of you kissing. It never happened?

REAL ANNIE. (*Sighs.*) Only on the stage.

ANNIE TWO. Why didn't you meet Dustin for tutoring?

REAL ANNIE. I chickened out. I made excuses. I...

REAL FRAN. Failed math.

REAL ANNIE. (*To REAL FRAN:*) It was better than failing with Dustin. (*To all, but admitting it to herself:*) Look. I wasn't sure that it

would work out in real life, so I worked it out in the play. It wasn't brave, but it was safe. I wrote it the way I hoped it would go, and I got the ending I wanted.

ANNIE. It really is a great ending. (*Looking over the script.*) Dustin says he likes what you wrote. You hand him the piece that mentions the kiss. You laugh. You lean in. You live happily ever after. It's perfect.

ANNIE TWO. (*Moves to the left of ANNIE. Looks at script.*) But it's not real.

REAL ANNIE. (*Moves between ANNIE and ANNIE TWO.*) It felt real when I wrote it.

ANNIE. Like it could have happened?

ANNIE TWO. Like it *should* have happened?

REAL ANNIE. Like it *would* have happened.

(*There is a beat as all 3 ANNIES sigh. FRAN steps up, addressing REAL ANNIE.*)

FRAN. Okay. I know I'm just a character, but if I were real, I would have come up with a clever way to get Dustin here to see the play. The two of you would have fallen in love, gotten married, and lived happily ever after with five beautiful children named in my honor.

DUSTIN. Five?

FRAN. Fran, Franny, Francine, Francis, and Francesco.

REAL FRAN. That doesn't sound like too bad of an idea, does it Annie?

REAL ANNIE. Having five kids?

REAL FRAN. (*Correcting her.*) Getting Dustin to see the play. (*A little apprehensive.*) I mean, what if Dustin were actually here tonight? What if he showed up, saw the play, and found out how you feel about him. Would that be the worst thing in the world?

REAL ANNIE. (*Moves to REAL FRAN. Slowly and seriously.*) No. The worst thing in the world would be if my best friend told him about the play when I asked her not to. (*A beat.*) You told him about the play, didn't you?

REAL FRAN. (*Evasively defensive:*) I made you a promise, and I kept it.

FRAN. What was the promise?

REAL FRAN. (*Raises her hand as if in court.*) I, Fran, promise not to inform Dustin Bradley about Annie's play. I will not tell him in person. I will not tell another person to tell him. I will not notify him by telephone, telegraph, telegram, television, or telepathy. I will not communicate by Morse code, secret code, semaphore, or smoke signals. I will not leave him a note, write him a letter, mail him a postcard, or deliver a message by means of animal assistance, including carrier pigeons, talking parrots, or primates who understand sign language. I will not contact him by fax, text, E-mail, instant message, podcast, or any other form of electronic communication created before, during, or after the making of this pledge.

FRAN. So how'd you let him know about the play?

REAL FRAN. (*Caught by surprise:*) I placed an ad in the school paper.

REAL ANNIE. I knew it!

(*REAL FRAN grimaces. DUSTIN, ANNIE, and ANNIE TWO begin to scan the audience.*)

ANNIE. Oh my gosh! Dustin could be here!

ANNIE TWO. (*To DUSTIN:*) Do you see yourself anywhere?

DUSTIN. I don't even know what I look like.

FRAN. You'll be the guy coming in and leaving every five minutes.

STAGEHAND. (*Screams in panic and points to the back of the audience:*) Ahhhh!

(*Everyone is startled. They look back and forth between the audience and STAGEHAND.*)

REAL ANNIE. What is it? Do you see him?

STAGEHAND. (*Calmly:*) Oh. No. I was just trying out another character: (*Finger quotes:*) "Hollywood horror movie victim."

REAL ANNIE. Stop it with the characters! You nearly gave me a heart attack. I thought Dustin was out there.

REAL FRAN. Relax. Just because I took out the ad, doesn't mean he actually saw it. I have to admit it was a pretty good ad, though.

REAL ANNIE. I hope you didn't embarrass me.

REAL FRAN. Not at all. I was very subtle. *(Removes a newspaper page from her pocket.)* Check this out. *(Clears throat and reads:)* "The heart and the poem were for you my D.B. At the theatre tonight, you can see The Real Me."

JESS. D.B.?

REAL FRAN. Dustin Bradley.

FRAN. Wow. That's good.

ANNIE TWO. If Dustin saw that, he'd definitely be here.

ANNIE. Are you sure he'd know that "D.B." means Dustin Bradley?

REAL FRAN. What else could D.B. stand for?

DORKBOY. Dorkboy! *(Moves to REAL FRAN and reads the ad:)* "The heart and the poem were for you my D.B." *(To REAL FRAN:)* If I saw this ad, I would think it was for me.

FRAN. You think everything is for you.

REAL FRAN. This ad is obviously for Dustin. No one except you would get confused by it.

(REAL DORKBOY stands up in the last row. He is wearing a similar shirt to DORKBOY.)

REAL DORKBOY. I might. I mean, I *would*. I mean, I *did*.

JESS. Now, who's that?

REAL ANNIE. That's the real Dorkboy.

DORKBOY. *(To SWEETIE:)* Sweetie! It's the real me!

SWEETIE. *(Dryly:)* I can hardly contain my excitement.

DORKBOY. Look! We're practically wearing the same shirt! *He's* me.

REAL FRAN. *(Correcting him:)* I think you've got that backwards.

DORKBOY. Oh! I do that a lot. *(He pulls his arms in and rotates his shirt 180 degrees.)*

REAL DORKBOY. *(Moves down an aisle towards the left side of stage.)* Hi, Annie. I know it seems like I'm following you around, but I saw the ad in the paper and just had to see if you'd written it for me. Not only the ad, but the play, and of course, the poem you handed me at lunch that talked about the heart you gave me at the movies. *(Climbs onto stage.)*

REAL FRAN. *(To REAL ANNIE:)* You know, you've done a better job flirting with Dorkboy by accident than you have with Dustin on purpose.

REAL ANNIE. *(To REAL DORKBOY:)* Look. I'm sorry for the confusion. I really wasn't trying to mislead you. I hope you're not upset that I put you into the play.

REAL DORKBOY. Upset? I thought it was great. Of course, *(Smiles at DORKBOY.)* I was hoping for that twist ending.

DORKBOY. *(Excited:)* Did you hear that? He wanted to end up with Annie just like me. *(Sees SWEETIE giving him the evil eye. He changes in mid-thought, adopting a silly accent:)* Just like me good friend, Dustin. *(Drops accent:)* I was trying out a new character, too. *(Finger quotes:)* "Friendly Pirate Guy." *(Leaves one finger bent like a hook. A weak pirate imitation:)* Arr. *(SWEETIE grabs his finger and twists it.)* Argh!

DUSTIN. *(To REAL DORKBOY:)* Is your relationship like this in real life?

REAL DORKBOY. Things aren't quite that bad.

DUSTIN. Please tell me Annie wrote your girlfriend a little angrier than she is in real life.

REAL DORKBOY. No, she pretty much hit the nail on the head.

SWEETIE. If your girlfriend catches you up here, she's going to hit you on the head.

REAL DORKBOY. See. That's where things are a little different. I think Annie may have exaggerated my character for comedic effect. In real life, I stand up for myself a lot more.

REAL ANNIE. Sorry if I wrote you a little wimpy.

REAL DORKBOY. (*Quickly;*) No! I'm sorry. I didn't mean to offend you. I've insulted your writing. (*Drops to knees.*) Please accept my apology?

JESS. (*To REAL ANNIE;*) Yeah. He stands up for himself pretty well.

REAL ANNIE. (*Embarrassed. Looks down at REAL DORKBOY.*) You can get up. I accept.

(A door slams behind the audience. The REAL SWEETIE appears and calls out;)

REAL SWEETIE. That better not be a proposal!

REAL DORKBOY. (*Still on knees, looks back to SWEETIE;*) Please tell me you just threw your voice to the back of the room.

REAL SWEETIE. When I get up there, I'm going to throw you to the back of the room.

REAL DORKBOY. (*Pops up. Calls out;*) Sweetie! It's you! How did you know I was here?

REAL SWEETIE. (*Holds up a newspaper.*) I found the invitation Annie wrote you in the paper.

REAL ANNIE. Actually, I didn't write that.

REAL FRAN. (*Trying to help;*) I wrote it for her.

REAL SWEETIE. Who circled it with a red crayon and doodled all the smiley-faced hearts?

REAL DORKBOY. (*Meekly;*) That would be me.

REAL SWEETIE. That's what I thought.

REAL DORKBOY. (*Nervously;*) So, how long have you been here?

REAL SWEETIE. Long enough to see you on your knees.

REAL DORKBOY. I was just begging for forgiveness.

REAL SWEETIE. (*Moving towards the stage;*) Well, you better start begging for mercy.

REAL DORKBOY. Now, now. It's not what you think.

REAL SWEETIE. I *think* you lied to me then came here to see her. (*Points to REAL ANNIE.*)

REAL DORKBOY. Okay. It *is* what you think. But I didn't just come to see Annie. I came to see the play. (*An idea. Points to SWEETIE.*) And look! You're a character in the play, so technically I came to see *you*.

REAL SWEETIE. You told me you were going to the hospital to visit your sick grandmother.

REAL DORKBOY. I'm going to the hospital after the show.

REAL SWEETIE. Oh, you're going to the hospital all right. (*She climbs up, stage right.*)

REAL DORKBOY. (*Backs left as she draws nearer.*) Can someone get me out of this?

ANNIE. Out of the situation?

ANNIE TWO. Out of the relationship?

REAL DORKBOY. Out of the *theatre!*

REAL ANNIE. (*Points off stage left.*) There's a back door through there. Go!

REAL DORKBOY. (*To REAL ANNIE:*) Thanks! (*To REAL SWEETIE just as she reaches him:*) Catch you later! (*He turns and sprints off left.*)

REAL SWEETIE. (*Steps left and yells after him:*) No. I'll catch *you* later!

DORKBOY. (*To DUSTIN:*) I would *not* want to be him right now.

FRAN. Um, technically, you *are* him right now.

REAL SWEETIE. (*Crosses to DORKBOY.*) So, *you're* Annie's version of my boyfriend?

DORKBOY. (*Barely able to speak:*) I...am.

REAL SWEETIE. This does not make me happy.

SWEETIE. (*To REAL SWEETIE:*) We both date a guy named Dork-boy. How happy can we be?

REAL SWEETIE. (*Crosses to REAL ANNIE.*) Let me get this straight. You try to steal my boyfriend with candy and poetry, and when that fails, you write a play about him?

REAL ANNIE. (*Exasperated:*) I didn't write a play about him. He just happens to be in it. (*Crosses and points off left.*) If you hadn't scared him away, he would have told you that. I wrote this play about Dustin Bradley. (*Crosses to DUSTIN.*) Look! This is Dustin, right here. He's the only boy I've ever liked. Every romantic gesture I have ever attempted in my entire life has been for him. (*Quickly:*) Well, not for this particular Dustin, but for the real one. (*Paces as her emotions and frustration bubble to the surface:*) I gave him candy and it nearly killed him. I wrote him a poem and delivered my math test instead. I created this play to finally show him how I feel then I chickened out and didn't invite him to see it. (*Turns to REAL SWEETIE:*) I'm sorry if it looks like I'm trying to mess up your relationship. I promise you I'm not. I've been a little too busy messing up my own. (*Embarrassed by her outburst, she smiles awkwardly, sighs, and lowers her head into her hand.*)

REAL SWEETIE. (*Unmoved. Calmly sarcastic:*) Dustin Bradley, eh? Well, good luck with that. (*Starts left. Stops. Turns.*) You know, I saw Dustin a few minutes ago. Not the imaginary one from your fantasy world, but the *real* one. (*Points behind audience.*) He was running out that back door when I came in. (*REAL ANNIE looks up.*) Guess I'm not the only one who scares people away. Difference is, I'm going to get my man. (*Makes a fist.*) I'm going to get him good. And if I can't get him, (*Turns to DORKBOY, menacingly:*) I'm coming back to get you.

(*DORKBOY jumps behind SWEETIE for safety. REAL SWEETIE laughs and exits left.*)

REAL ANNIE. (*Staring at the back door.*) Do you think she was serious?

DORKBOY. (*Nervously, stepping from behind SWEETIE:*) I hope not.

SWEETIE. (*Gives DORKBOY a little shove.*) She means about Dustin!

REAL ANNIE. Do you think there's a chance that Dustin came in and left?

REAL FRAN. Well, there's no chance that he came in and *stayed*.

ANNIE. (*Excitedly:*) Do you think he could still be behind the door right now?

ANNIE TWO. We should send someone to look!

DUSTIN. I'll go! (*Darts down center to jump off the stage. He stops and points left, telling himself that stairs are a better route. He sprints left, stops, and turns back.*)

FRAN. Maybe we should send someone else.

REAL FRAN. (*Taking control:*) We don't need to send anyone. Dustin's wishy-washy. We know this. (*Indicates DUSTIN.*) We just saw a perfect example. (*Calmly:*) If he was here and then left, (*Points to door:*) he's going to come right back through that door any minute.

STAGEHAND. (*Slowly. Verbally punching each letter:*) O.M.G.N.W! (*Everyone looks to him. He shrugs and makes finger quotes:*) "Audible text message abbreviator?" (*Drops arms, dejected by their silent stares.*) I'll just go back to grunting.

JESS. (*Fed up. Points right.*) Why don't you just go backstage?

REAL FRAN. That's a great idea!

JESS. It is?

REAL FRAN. Yes. But I want everyone to go. (*To all:*) We need to clear the stage right now.

REAL ANNIE. What are you doing?

REAL FRAN. I'm getting everyone out of your way. If Dustin comes back, you're going to have a chance to show him once and for all how you feel. Remember that perfect ending you were hoping for? If it happens, it should be a private moment between you and Dustin... (*Notices the audience.*) and all of these people out here.

REAL ANNIE. You're really going to leave me up here alone?

REAL FRAN. (*Points right.*) Well, I'll be hiding behind the chair over there, but you don't need anyone else. (*Gently. A hand on her shoulder.*) You created these characters to help you sort out your feelings. They've done what you needed them to do. It's time to let them go.

REAL ANNIE. (*Still unsure:*) Maybe you're right.

REAL FRAN. (*To all. Suddenly, like drill sergeant:*) Okay people! You heard her. Get out!

(STAGEHAND and JESS start right.)

REAL ANNIE. (Crossing after them.) Wait!

(They stop. REAL ANNIE addresses STAGEHAND with JESS upstage between them.)

REAL ANNIE. I just wanted to thank you for your help.

STAGEHAND. (Raises his thumbs above his ears, wiggles his fingers, and sticks out his tongue for a loud raspberry:) Pffft! (He turns snootily and exits right.)

JESS. (To REAL ANNIE as he wipes spit from his face:) I'm not sure I get that last character.

REAL ANNIE. (Shrugs and makes finger quotes:) "Disgruntled Butler?"

JESS. Right. That makes more sense. All I could come up with was (Finger quotes:) "Angry Moose." (Places thumbs above ears and sticks out tongue to recreate the gesture.)

REAL ANNIE. I hope you aren't angry, too.

JESS. Nah. This was kind of fun. Sorry for all the mocking...and the whining...and the whole 'messing stuff up and creating chaos' thing.

REAL ANNIE. (A forgiving smile.) Hey. That's what family's for.

JESS. (Smiles.) Glad I could do my part then. (Begins backing right.) Good luck, Sis.

REAL ANNIE. Thanks. (A beat and a smile.) Sis.

(JESS laughs and exits. REAL ANNIE turns left. FRAN gestures like a flight attendant.)

FRAN. Keep it moving people. We don't have all day.

DORKBOY. (To REAL ANNIE:) If Dustin doesn't show up, will you think about that rewrite?

REAL ANNIE. (Unsure but polite:) I guess it couldn't hurt.

SWEETIE. (Leans to DORKBOY from behind. Chillingly:) I think it could hurt a lot.

DORKBOY. (*Looks back nervously.*) Right. (*To REAL ANNIE:*) I guess this is good-bye, then. (*He opens his arms to hug her. SWEETIE clears her throat causing him to shift awkwardly in mid-motion. He grabs REAL ANNIE's hands, brings them together, and begins shaking them.*) Just wanted to shake the hands that brought me to life!

SWEETIE. (*Grips his shoulders tightly.*) Let go now or *these* hands will bring you to *death*.

DORKBOY. (*Lets go instantly.*) It's getting late. I better run.

SWEETIE. You better hide, too. (*She cracks her knuckles.*)

DORKBOY. Uh-oh. (*He exits quickly.*)

SWEETIE. (*To REAL ANNIE:*) I hope he comes back.

REAL ANNIE. Dorkboy?

SWEETIE. (*Her first hint of kindness:*) Dustin. (*She exits right.*)

FRAN. (*To REAL ANNIE:*) If Dustin likes you half as much as Dork-boy does, he'll be back.

REAL ANNIE. I have no idea if he likes me or not. I've never been alone with him to find out.

DUSTIN. (*Genuinely:*) I may not know the real Dustin, but I know the parts of him that you put into me. And the parts of *him* that you put into *me* are crazy about the parts of *you* that you put into *her*. (*He points to ANNIE TWO. She smiles and takes his hand. To REAL ANNIE:*) If my feelings are this real, I'm sure his feelings are even stronger.

REAL ANNIE. You think he'll come back then?

FRAN. He'll be back any second. Trust me.

REAL FRAN. (*Interested in her counterpart's conclusion:*) How do you know?

FRAN. I took the number of times all three Annies confessed their feelings then I added the number of times both Dustins left and came back.

REAL FRAN. What did that tell you?

FRAN. Nothing.

REAL FRAN. Then how do you know he's coming back?

FRAN. *(Holds a hand out in front of her eyes, raising her fingers one at a time.)* I was adding on my fingers and I saw him peek through the door. *(She points out.)*

REAL FRAN. *(Suddenly.)* Clear out people. This is not a drill!

REAL ANNIE. What do I do?

ANNIE. Don't overanalyze!

REAL ANNIE. I can't help it.

ANNIE TWO. Don't freak out!

REAL ANNIE. I already am!

ANNIE. You were the brain behind this. *(Hands her the script.)* You'll know what to say.

REAL ANNIE. *(Catching her breath.)* What if I don't?

ANNIE TWO. Do what feels right. *(Hands her the candy heart.)* Follow your heart.

REAL ANNIE. What if I can't?

FRAN. You can. Have courage.

REAL FRAN. Brain. Heart. Courage. I love the whole "Wizard of Oz" vibe here, but Dustin's going to be back any second. Click your heels already and go!

(ANNIE, ANNIE TWO, FRAN, and DUSTIN head right. DUSTIN pauses and looks back.)

DUSTIN. If you want to win the real me, just show him the real you.

(He exits with the others. REAL ANNIE and REAL FRAN are left alone. REAL ANNIE takes a deep breath. REAL FRAN puts a hand on REAL ANNIE's shoulder. The remaining dialogue matches the library scene word for word.)

REAL FRAN. This is the chance you waited for. You can do this.

REAL ANNIE. What if something goes wrong?

**THIS PLAY IS
NOT OVER!**

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