

# RULE #1

*It's Important to Try Not to Hurt  
Someone's Feelings  
If You Can Help It*

"Is that the one you're going to wear?" I stared at the red spangled body suit Erica's older sister Missy had on.

I could hardly believe how beautiful she looked in it. Usually when I saw Missy, she had on sweat pants.

Sweat pants and a really mean expression as she was slamming her bedroom door in my face.

It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that Missy hated my guts.

But then Missy hated the guts of all of Erica's friends, so I didn't take it personally. Missy hated Erica, too, even though Erica refused to believe it, and was always trying to do nice things for her big sister.

Like right now, for instance, Erica had enlisted our help in getting Missy to decide which of her six fanciest baton twirling costumes she should wear for the seventh annual Little Miss Majorette Baton Twirling Twirltacular, middle school division.

"I think you should wear the blue one," Rosemary said.

“The blue one doesn’t have as much glitter,” Sophie said, from Missy’s bed, where we were sitting all in a row, while Missy was putting on her fashion show for us. “Only sparkly fringe.”

This was the first time we’d ever been invited into Missy’s bedroom after school, so it was truly a huge occasion, and we were trying very hard not to break the rules Missy had explained to us before she’d allowed us to come in.

The rules were 1) Do not touch anything, 2) No talking unless Missy said you could talk, and 3) Leave the minute Missy said so.

Break the rules, and Missy would break you.

“I know,” Rosemary said. “That’s why I like the blue one.”

“The red one is definitely sparklier,” Caroline said. “Although sparklier isn’t a word.”

Caroline would know. She was our class spelling champion, even though she lost the district spelling bee.

“I just can’t decide,” Missy said with a sigh, as she fluffed out her blond hair and stared at herself in her full length mirror. “I do look amazing in all of them, don’t I?”

“Yes,” we all said in unison.

Always agree with everything Missy says if you want her to stay in a good mood. This was another rule.

Being friends with Erica was very good training on how to deal with teenagers. Also how not to act when I become one. Because Missy was really moody. Also rude. At least most of the time. She was being nice to us today, though, because she wanted our help deciding what to wear to the Little Miss Majorette Baton Twirling Twirltacular.

I won't lie: I wanted to go to the Little Miss Majorette Baton Twirling Twirltacular more than I had ever wanted to go anywhere in my whole entire life. At least, ever since I'd heard about it (a half-hour earlier).

Because Missy and Erica and Mrs. Harrington (who had hand-sewed all of Missy's costumes for her) had told us about it while we'd been eating after-school snacks of fruit and graham crackers in the kitchen of their house.

And it sounded like the most exciting thing in the world.

First of all, twirlers (that's what the people who spin and toss batons are called. Twirlers. Also majorettes, but twirler is more correct because a twirler can be a boy or a girl, whereas majorettes are only girls) come from all over the state—possibly even from outside the state—to participate in the Twirltacular, which lasts a whole weekend.

At the Twirltacular, there are events in dance, strut, teams, showtwirls, solos, multiple batons, flags, hoops, and duets/pairs.

I don't exactly know what any of that means, but I totally want to see it. In fact, the more I heard about it from Erica and Mrs. Harrington and Missy, the more I thought I would die if I didn't get to see it.

And I was really lucky because the Little Miss Majorette Baton Twirling Twirltacular was happening right here in my very own town.

Missy said if we didn't act like ingrates, which means an ungrateful person, we could come watch her compete.

So there was a chance I might actually get to see her perform

at the Little Miss Majorette Baton Twirling Twirltacular, middle school division. My friends Sophie, Caroline, and I decided that we were going to go with Erica on Saturday, in order to show our support for her sister.

Our friend Rosemary wasn't sure if she wanted to go or not. She thought twirling sounded very boring, despite all the sparkles.

But of course she didn't said so in front of Missy, because that would hurt Missy's feelings.

It's important to try not to hurt someone's feelings if you can help it. That's a rule.

It's especially important to try not to hurt Missy's feelings, because she is much bigger than we are and when you do something she doesn't like, she'll tackle you and sit on you and then spit in your face. She's done this to me before and it was really gross.

Missy's parents, Mr. and Mrs. Harrington, were going to the Little Miss Majorette Baton Twirling Twirltacular, of course. So was John, Erica and Missy's older brother. At first, Erica said, John didn't want to go. Like Rosemary, John thought twirling was boring.

But then after John saw Missy's leotards, he asked if there'd be any girls his own age at the event, and Mrs. Harrington said yes there would be, since the competition went from sixth to eighth grade, which was John's grade.

So then John said maybe he might like to go after all.

The grand prize winners in each event at the Twirltacular, Missy said, get a trophy that's as big as me. At the top of the trophy is a statue of a little gold lady, twirling a baton (if you're

a boy twirler, you get a little gold man, Missy said, although she doubted there would be any boy twirlers at the Little Miss Majorette Baton Twirling Twirltacular).

I wanted Missy to get one of these trophies. I wanted her to get one very, very much.

And I wanted to be there when she gets it. I wanted to be there to help support her, to cheer her on and to eat the popcorn that Erica said they always sell in little paper bags at the middle school whenever they had these events. Good News!, the local cable television news show where my mother does movie reviews, might even be there to report on the event. They came last year, Erica said.

“I think you should wear the lime green one with the rhinestone fringe,” Erica said to Missy. “And the rainbow one with the purple glitter.”

“That’s my favorite,” Sophie said, sounding as if her heart was aching because she wanted to have a rainbow colored leotard, covered in sequins, with purple glitter dangling down from the leg holes.

I knew how Sophie felt, because I felt exactly the same way. I wanted one of those baton twirling costumes, even though I don’t know how to twirl a baton (although I’ve practiced a bit in the front yard with one of Missy’s old batons that she doesn’t use anymore. The problem was, the baton fell down from the tree where I accidentally threw it, and hit me in the head. After that I decided to just stick with ballet, which I do on Saturdays and also Wednesdays after school, and softball on the Girls Club team in the summertime).

“Yeah,” Missy said, thoughtfully baring her teeth and examining her electric blue braces in the mirror. “I think you guys are right. I’ll wear the rainbow one for my dance routine, and the green one for my solo.”

Then Missy signaled to Erica to turn on her CD player.. And so Erica did, and Missy’s song for her twirling solo came on, and Missy started practicing it in the mirror. The song was called “I’m Gonna Knock You Out,” and it was playing very, very loud.

So loud that I’m sure Sophie thought Missy couldn’t hear her when she leaned over to whisper to us, “You guys, we have to go see Missy perform on Saturday.”

Erica looked over at her sister, whose back was to us as she performed in front of the mirror. “Shhh,” she said, in a panicky way. “She’ll hear you! She said no talking, remember?”

“I know,” Sophie said. “But I just think it’s really important we all go on Saturday. To support Missy. I think she has problems with her self-esteem. That’s why she’s so bossy. Allie, are you sure you can go? Don’t you have ballet on Saturday?”

I had forgotten I had ballet with Madame Linda on Saturday. My parents pay in advance for my lessons, too.

“That’s okay,” I said. “I’m sure I can skip my lesson this one time.”

This was a lie. But it was just a very small lie. I was sure it didn’t matter. Very much.

“That’s good,” Sophie said. “What about you, Caroline?”

“Oh, I can go,” Caroline said. “I have my Mandarin lesson, but it’s just with my dad. I can do it anytime.”

“You guys,” Rosemary said, when she saw we were all looking at her. “I don’t want to go. And I don’t think anything is wrong with Missy’s self-esteem. She’s just a brat. And baton twirling is boring.”

“It’s not boring,” Sophie said, looking offended. “It’s a very beautiful form of self-expression.”

“Missy is kind of bossy,” Erica admitted. “But she doesn’t have very many friends. She could really use our support.”

“Teenage hormones,” Caroline said, knowingly. “I’ve read about this. You’re right. We have to support her.”

It was kind of funny that right at that moment Missy turned around and, looking enraged, yelled, “I said no talking!”

We all knew what was coming next. We jumped from Missy’s bed and ran for her bedroom door before she could leap on any of us, knock us down, and sit on us.

Thinking about what might happen after that was too terrible even to contemplate.

Fortunately, we all made it out into the safety of the hallway, where Mrs. Harrington happened to be walking by with another of Missy’s twirling costumes, which she had been hemming down in her studio, where she also made fine collectibles, such as dollhouse furniture and miniature felt toadstools with tiny lady dwarves sitting on them, to sell in her shop downtown.

“Good heavens,” Mrs. Harrington said, when we all came tumbling out of Missy’s room at the same time. “What’s going on?”

“Nothing,” we chimed together, coming to a halt right in front of her.

When Missy saw her mom, she pointed an accusing finger at us, and said, “That’s not true! I was performing my dance routine for Saturday, and they started talking! It broke my concentration.”

“Well, honey,” Mrs. Harrington said, looking completely unruffled, though Missy looked as if she were about to cry. Really! She had tears in her eyes, and everything (except that they were fake tears, if you ask me). “I’m sure the girls didn’t mean any disrespect. And you’re going to have to get used to people talking during your performances, Missy. There are going to be all sorts of distractions this weekend. People talking, other girls and boys doing their routines at the same time yours is going on.” Also, people eating popcorn. “You’re really going to need to learn how to focus and block them all out, sweetie.”

Our eyes wide, we all glanced over at Missy to see how she’d handle this information. She narrowed her eyes at her mother, then fixed each of us with a glare that could have melted snow.

Then, she turned around and stormed back into her room, slamming the door behind her.

“Excuse me,” Mrs. Harrington called after her. “But we do not slam doors around here, young lady!”

This was a rule.

“Sorry,” Missy called, from inside her room.

But if you ask me, she didn’t sound sorry at all.

“I’m sorry about that, Mrs. Harrington,” Rosemary said. Rosemary was very good about apologizing to adults. “We didn’t mean to make Missy upset. And those glittery costumes you made for her are awfully nice.”

“Why, thank you, Rosemary!” Mrs. Harrington beamed. “I’m very flattered you like them. If you’d like to take up twirling, I’d be happy to make you one, as well. Twirling’s such a lovely sport. I think any one of you girls would be very good at it.”

The idea of Rosemary, whose favorite sport was football—especially the part where you got to tackle people and hold them to the ground—daintily prancing around a dance floor while spinning a baton was so hilarious that for a minute it was all I could do to keep myself from bursting out laughing.

But I controlled myself.

“Thank you, Mrs. Harrington,” Rosemary said. “But that’s okay. In fact, I think I have to be going now. My mom’s going to be coming to pick me up soon.”

“Oh, I have to go, too,” I said.

“Why?” Erica looked disappointed.

“Because I have to ask my mom about skipping ballet on Saturday, so I can go to the Little Miss Majorette Baton Twirling Twirltacular.”

I knew my mom wouldn’t like my missing my ballet lesson. Neither would Madame Linda, who was super strict, and sometimes smacked us in the thigh if we didn’t properly turn them out during *ronde de jambe en l’air* (this used to make my ex-best friend Mary Kay Shiner cry, so she quit coming to Madame Linda’s. But then, everything made Mary Kay Shiner cry, so this was no big surprise).

But Madame Linda’s disapproval when I skipped Saturday’s lesson would be completely worth it.

Especially if I got to be there when Missy ended up winning one of those giant trophies she'd told us about!

"Mom," I said, as soon as I got home. I saw Dad first, sitting at the dining room table, which he uses as his office, grading tests from the computer science class he teaches.

But I knew better than to ask him if it was okay if I skipped ballet class to go to Missy's Little Miss Majorette Baton Twirling Twirltacular on Saturday. Because he would just say, "Fine," like he did about everything.

And it would seem fine. Until Mom found out.

And then it would turn out it wasn't fine. It was always better to ask Mom first. About everything.

"Mom," I said, when I found her in her bedroom, putting things in a suitcase. This was so startling—my parents never go anywhere—that I completely forgot what I'd been about to say, and went, "Where are you going?"

"Oh, honey," Mom said, brushing some hair from her eyes. "You know. I told you. Daddy and I are going to Cousin Freddie's wedding at Grandma and Grandpa's house this weekend in San Francisco. Pass me that shirt, will you?"

I passed her one of Dad's shirts, which sat folded on the bed. I'd forgotten that she and Dad were going to Cousin Freddie's wedding. I'd only met my mom's cousin Freddie once, at a family reunion at the country club where my grandma and grandpa on my mom's side live in California. Cousin Freddie had let me and Mark drive his golf cart, even though we weren't really big enough to reach the pedals.

It wasn't our fault we accidentally drove the golf cart onto the tennis courts of the country club. No one had been too happy about this, especially Grandpa, who'd yelled at Cousin Freddie for a long time.

"What is it you wanted to ask me, Allie?" Mom wanted to know.

"Oh," I said. "Well, Missy Harrington is going to compete in the seventh annual Little Miss Majorette Baton Twirling Twirltacular, middle school division, on Saturday, and I really, really, want to go. I know I have ballet that morning, but I promise I'll make up my missed lesson over the summer. Erica and Caroline and Sophie and probably Rosemary are all going. We think it's important that we go to support Missy, who is suffering from self-esteem issues, and hardly has any friends due to her teenage hormones. Also, I think I'll learn positive messages there about teamwork, camaraderie, and the spirit of competitiveness."

I had gotten that last part from a book I'd checked out from the school library about female horse jockeys. There wouldn't be any female horse jockeys at the annual Little Miss Majorette Baton Twirling Twirltacular.

But I thought the thing about teamwork and competitiveness sounded good anyway.

"Twirltacular?" My little brother Kevin looked up from Mom and Dad's bed where he was reading a fancy furniture catalog that had come in the mail. Kevin liked to collect fancy furniture catalogs. "I want to go to Missy's Twirltacular."

"Well, you're not invited," I said. Kevin was always trying to hang around with my friends. He thought they liked him as

much as they liked me, which wasn't true, actually.

"Oh, dear," Mom said. "Is Missy's competition is this coming Saturday?"

"Yes," I said. "But I'm sure Uncle Jay won't mind."

"Uncle Jay's not—" Kevin started to say, but Mom interrupted him, even though one of the rules at our house is, Don't interrupt people.

"Honey, I forgot to tell you," Mom said. "This Saturday is Brittany Hauser's birthday. And she's invited you. And I'm afraid I already told her mother that'd you'd go."