



Other Books by E. Van Lowe

Earth Angel

Heaven Sent

The Zombie Always Knocks Twice

Never Slow Dance with a Zombie

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For my son, Latif, who is one of the best friends a guy could have.

Boyfriend from Hell

e. van lowe



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Chapter One

She was laughing.

That's what I remember most about that night. It was Saturday. The sun had recently gone down. It was still warm in our old house, but once the sun had finished setting, I knew we'd be slipping into our snuggies. That's how Januaries are in the desert—hot in the day, freezing at night.

We were seated at the chipped oak dining room table with the mismatched chairs she was so embarrassed for company to see. We were polishing the silver, and my mother was laughing.

We love polishing the silver. It's a mother-daughter bonding thing we've been doing as far back as I can remember. When I was younger we did it in the summer, but since I'd been in high school, we'd been doing it over winter break.

Ours is an antique set dating back to the early nineteen hundreds that my mother got for a steal at an estate sale when I was seven. We go to lots of estate sales, and yard sales, and garage sales. Glendale calls itself the antique capital of Arizona. This distinction allows anyone with anything festering in their attic or garage to drag it out onto their lawn on Saturday mornings and try to palm it off as an antique.

Since my mother loves antiques, you can find us on any given Saturday inside some cowboy's grungy garage, rummaging through his crap, looking for the real deal. She has an eye for

the real stuff, so no one can cheat her out of a bargain. She works for an art dealer. She is also one of my best friends. Well... she was before our lives went to hell in a hand basket. Guess I shouldn't use that word too freely around here. Hell, I mean.

As we sat polishing away, she casually said, "What would you think of me going on a date?"

"Umm, you mean with a guy?"

"Of course with a guy. A man," she said, the beginnings of a laugh bubbling out of her. "I don't have any prospects yet, but I've been seeing all these dating sites on TV and thought, why not?" She looked at me trying to read my face.

It was the first time she had mentioned another man since my father had left ten years ago.

"Yeah, why not?" I said through a thin smile, although what I was feeling was... *why?*

"Why not?" she repeated, soft laughter spilling out of her, like there was some new, long awaited happiness to be discovered, and she was brimming with the possibility of what that happiness might be.

Why not?

#

"I can't believe your mother's going on a date," said Erin.

It was Sunday afternoon. The next day. We were seated at the food court in the Glendale mall, digesting my problem along with a double order of curly fries.

"She hasn't found one yet," I countered. "She's just talking about it."

I swirled a curly fry into the glob of ketchup on my Styro-foam plate. "Hasn't she read any of those books or articles about single parent dating? Rule number one clearly states: *sneak out behind your kid's back*. Keep us in the dark as long as possible. It's a good rule." I popped the curly fry into my mouth.

"In Suze's defense, she's just trying to keep the lines of communication open. If she meets someone, it's going to affect your life, too."

All my friends call my mom Suze, never Ms. Barnett. That's how she likes it. I call her Suze, too, but not to her face, never to her face. I tried that once when I was ten, and if looks could kill,

I'd currently be pushing daisies. I think it's cool having a mom everyone can call by her first name—just not me.

"I know you're only trying to cheer me up, Erin. But telling me my mother might meet somebody is not going to do it." I swirled another curly fry.

"Hey, your mom's kind of hot. I'm sure she'll find lots of dudes who want to go out with her." This revelation came from my other best friend, Matt. I've known Matt since kindergarten, four years longer than I've known Erin. He was tall and slender, with a ready smile and shock of fuzzy red hair. He was also an idiot.

"Matt," Erin said patiently. "Megan doesn't want her mother going on a date. That's why we're having this little meeting. Duh?"

"Oh," said Matt. He looked from Erin to me, letting her words wash over him.

Matt was not the kind of boy you'd normally expect us to be hanging out with. Aside from the fact that he was IQ-challenged, Matt was a card-carrying member of our school's in-crowd, dubbed The Poplarati. He was on the varsity football team and the track team. Erin and I were on the debate team and the math team. We were card carrying members of our school's leper colony. Yet ever since Suze and I arrived in Glendale and moved next door to the Dawsons, Matt has always been a part of my life. I can't recall a memory that doesn't have him in it.

"Why don't you want Suze to go on a date?" he asked.

"Are you kidding? First off, if anyone in my family should be dating, it should be me. I'm fifteen, primo dating age. How's it going to look if my mother has a boyfriend and I don't?"

No one answered. The three of us sat in silence, considering my problem.

The mall had recently been remodeled. Several upscale restaurants had been added to the food court, which they now called *the dining terrace*, as if by changing the name people would forget they were at the Glendale mall. But you could still get a good burger and curly fries, so the change was just fine with me.

“Then why not get your own boyfriend?” Matt said all of a sudden.

That was a no-brainer. “Gee, Matt, let me see. Maybe it’s because it’s social suicide for anyone at school to date a mathlete. And guess what? I’m a mathlete!”

“But you’re cute,” said Matt. Then realizing he’d committed the cardinal sin of complimenting a girl, he looked away awkwardly. “I mean you’ve got the blue eyes, and... the one dimple in your left cheek, and...” His awkward eyes found Erin. “And you’re cute, too. You’ve got... the thing with your hair.” His voice trailed off as he attempted to be the equal opportunity looks-evaluator.

“Yeah, well, at G.U., geek trumps looks,” I said, disgusted with my situation.

“And that thing with my hair is called bangs, thank you very much!” Erin was equally disgusted, but hers was aimed at Matt.

“Then maybe you should go out with someone on the math team.”

Erin and I stared at him. Matt knew good and well I wasn’t ever going out with anyone on the math team. And it’s not that I’m an elitist or anything like that. I’d just like to go out with a cool, popular guy for once. And if he happens to look like Taylor Lautner, so be it.

The Poplarati have no idea what the rest of us go through. I mean, just because we’re lepers doesn’t mean we’d ever *date* a leper. Those of us who occupy the lower links on the social food chain have standards too—even higher than The Poplarati—because our boyfriends not only have to be cute, but they also need to have an IQ higher than that of a titmouse. Unfortunately at Glendale Union, hitting the Dating Daily Double (looks and intelligence), is a near impossibility.

“I don’t see what’s the big deal about Suze dating.” Matt was now giving me the stink eye.

“Oh? Would you like to listen to your mother talking about French kissing?” He screwed up his face as the image invaded his thoughts.

“Exactly.”

His expression softened. “But you and Suze are so close. I don’t have that kind of relationship with my mom. I wish I did.”

“Me, too.” Erin was looking at me with the same expression I used on her when I was trying to make her feel guilty about something.

“Come on, guys, she’s my *mother*,” I said with an exasperated sigh. “Can I really tell her that while we’re snuggled up on the sofa watching *Spider Man Three*, I’m secretly undressing James Franco with my eyes? Of course not. These things I keep from her for her own good. And likewise, there are things she should keep from me. I don’t care if she wants to go on a date. I just don’t want to know about it.”

That wasn’t exactly true. I did care about her going on a date. But if I told them how I really felt, I’d appear selfish.

Erin reached for the ketchup. “It’s just that you’re lucky to have a mother who’s your friend. The only time my mother ever talks to me is when she’s telling me to clean my room, do my homework, or stay away from boys—not necessarily in that order.” She squirted a big red blob onto her plate.

It was then the answer I was looking for came to me, triggered by something Erin had said. “Hey, remember when your mom didn’t want you riding in cars with boys? She told you horror stories about what could happen.”

“Yeah. That was so lame.”

“Why don’t I do the same thing? I’ll tell her a graphic horror story about some parent at our school who went on a date and was never heard from again. That’ll scare her off dating forever.”

“I don’t like it,” said Erin.

“Me, either,” said Matt. “I think Suze getting a boyfriend is a good idea.”

I ignored both their responses. “Then it’s settled. I’m doing it.”

“Megan,” Erin’s tone turned serious. “If you’re uncomfortable with your mother dating, maybe you should just tell her?”

I shook my head. “You guys have a lot to learn about open relationships.”

Chapter Two

Pythagoras, the famous Greek philosopher, is known for being the first person to demonstrate the theorem that with any right triangle, the sum of the squares of both sides is equal to the square of the hypotenuse: $A^2+B^2=C^2$. What most people don't know is Pythagoras also stated: "It is evil to eat beans."

The sad fact that this useless bit of information resides in my brain is one of the many contributing factors as to why I do not have a boyfriend. I'm a trivia junkie. I can't help myself. Put a useless piece of information in front of me and I will gobble it up like a double cheeseburger with a side of curly fries.

Cute boys like girls who are into fashion magazines and lip gloss, not mathematical equations and trivia. So imagine my surprise when our first day back at school after winter break, a really cute boy walked into the Math Lab.

Don't get me wrong, cute boys walk into the Math Lab all the time. However, as soon as they discover they're in a room crawling with geeks, they realize their mistake and make a hasty exit.

I was at the chalkboard with Erin, working through a problem using a logarithm [and trust me, I am well aware that my use of logarithms has solidified my place in the annals of geekdom forever, but humor me here].

“Hottie at three o’clock,” whispered Erin, digging her elbow into my side.

I turned, and there he was, a cute boy standing just inside the doorway. This cute boy was different from all the others who’d come before him. This cute boy was acting like he intended to stay.

“I’m looking for the Math Lab,” he said as he surveyed the room. There were seven of us in all, not including Mrs. Brewster in the back. Five boys who followed the geek dress code to the letter, all the way down to the black socks they wore with their uncool sneaks, Erin, and me.

“Who wants to know?” asked Erin. I swear that girl could go from zero to flirt in six-point-five seconds.

He smiled. It was a confident smile. He had a lot to be confident about. He was basketball-player tall, with jet black hair, and the kind of dark, dreamy eyes you could look into forever. It was obvious from the way he carried himself that he’d been flirted with before. Erin’s question, “Who wants to know?,” would have sent most male mathletes scurrying for cover, but not this boy.

“The future captain of The Glendale Mathletes,” he said in response. His smile widened.

Geoffrey, Tran, and the other math geeks stared up at him from behind their glasses, their faces twisted into tight little knots. G.U.’s male mathletes were very protective of Erin and me—not that they’d ever try flirting with us themselves. They had enough trouble just standing next to us without sweating out their undershirts.

“Tran is captain of the mathletes,” I said, adding my two cents, and then I smiled. It was supposed to be a mysterious, seductive smile, but my mouth froze into a toothy grin. I have practiced that seductive smile in the mirror like a zillion times to perfection, and the first time I try using it on a real boy, I wind up looking like the Joker.

The new boy looked at me. “Interesting smile.”

Is that laughter in his eyes? Is he laughing at me?

“You must be Guy,” Mrs. Brewster called from the back of the room. “Welcome to the Glendale Union Mathletes. Come on, I’ll introduce you around.”

“Righteeo.”

At the time, I was happy that a cute boy was joining the mathletes, especially since I was in the market for a cool, cute boyfriend. I didn't find it strange that a boy so handsome and sure of himself would be hanging around geeks. My mistake.

Chapter Three

With my mother working every day, and me off with the mathletes and the debate team after school, weekday dinners at our house were usually catch-as-catch-can. Take out was the norm. Or sometimes I'd make burgers, or enchilada pie, which was my specialty. But on some evenings, Suze would bring in the fixings for something a bit more elaborate, a meal we could prepare together.

That's what she did Monday evening. We converged on the kitchen around six-thirty to prepare chicken paprikash, which really isn't *that* elaborate. It's just sautéed chicken in a paprika sauce over noodles.

I knew the reason for this together time was so she could ease into the dating thing again. While I pretended to happily work away, all I could think is that mother-daughter activities like these would come to an end if she found a boyfriend.

"Are you sure you're okay with me dating, hon?" She said it casually as she sliced the chicken breasts. But there was nothing casual about it.

"Sure? *Sure?* Sure I'm sure. Why wouldn't I be sure?" The only thing I was sure of was that I wanted to put an end to the dating conversation.

Our kitchen was small, cozy she called it. But it was bright, with a big bay window over the sink that looked out onto our

eco-friendly backyard, and lots of counter space so we never got in each other's way.

She started placing the chicken slices into the pan of sizzling canola oil on the stove. "Just checking. I have to tell you, I'm excited. It's been so long, I don't even know my type." She stared off, a wistful look in her eyes. "I suppose tall, distinguished, and everyone likes a man with a nice butt."

La, la, la, la, la, la, la, la. Mentally I hummed as loud as I could, trying to blot out the conversation. I was in the midst of chopping veggies for the sauce. When I looked down at the chopping board, I was surprised to discover that if I chopped them any finer I'd have a nice puree. *Breathe*, I told myself as I eased up on the blade.

While it was always fun when Erin and I talked about boys and their butts, butt talk was not something I wanted to hear from my mother.

Then she giggled.

She giggled like a little girl. Thirty-nine-year-old Suze Barnett, who had tiny wisps of gray she was always adding highlights to, was giggling over the prospect of dating a man with a nice butt.

I had to put an end to this—now!

I cleared my throat. "I just want you to be careful out there, Mom."

"Thank you. I will," she replied, as she happily turned the chicken slices to brown on the other side.

The kitchen was filling up with a yummy fragrance that reminded me of my childhood, when she cooked every night when she got home from work.

"I mean, I definitely don't want what happened to Mrs. Tobolewski to happen to you."

"Mrs. Tobo..."

"Tobolewski. One of the girls at school's mom." I pretended to concentrate on the chopped veggies, scooping them into a bowl to be sautéed once the chicken was done. Yet through the corner of my eye, I was watching, as like a hungry fish she slowly rose to the bait.

"So..." She sniffed at it: "What happened to Mrs. Tobolewski?" And then *Bam!* She swallowed it whole.

“Oh, didn’t I tell you about her? She went on a date.” I let the word *date* hang in the air between us, heavy with harmful meaning.

“Really?”

This was too easy. Should I reel her in now, or play her for a while? I should probably practice in case this dating thing gets serious. I’ll play her. “Huh?” I said, shooting her my best blank stare.

“Mrs. Tobolewski’s date. What happened?” The sautéing was forgotten for the moment, as she urged me on with her eyes.

“It’s not important. I don’t want to worry you.”

“Megan Barnett!” she implored.

“Oh, all right.” I made a big deal out of stopping my chopping. I sighed. “Well, let’s see, the girl’s mother was about your age, attractive like you, and from what I can remember, it was her first date since the divorce.”

“Ooh. Bad date, huh?”

“Well, not for the guy who lopped her head off. I’m sure he had loads of fun.”

“Oh, my!” She nearly dropped a chicken slice on the floor.

“And it was their *first* date,” I repeated.

I could tell from her sickly pallor she was totally rethinking the dating thing. A pang of remorse shot through me. I really did feel bad fooling her this way. We were friends. But that’s exactly why I was doing it. She had convinced herself that dating was a good idea. It was up to me as a *friend* to point out the pitfalls.

“How did they meet?” She began placing the sautéed chicken slices on a paper towel to drain.

“Huh? Oh... they umm... met at church.” The answer was totally unplanned, and yet totally genius. I mean if you can’t trust a guy you meet in church...

“Where did they go?”

“Go?” What was with all of these questions? Was I not making myself clear? The woman was dead because she went on a date.

“On the date,” she repeated. “Where did they go?”

“Mom, does it really matter where they went? The man killed her!”

I was beginning to lose it. Not good. I needed to play it cool. I took a deep breath.

“Skiing,” I said. “They went skiing at a very posh ski resort. And did I mention it was their first date ever? The first date she’d been on since *all* those years ago when she went out with her husband.” Even an idiot could make the connection.

“Did they catch him?”

But not my mother. I lost it. “What difference does that make, Mom? She’s dead! Do I have to draw you a map? The woman is dead because she went on a date.”

“No. She’s dead because she didn’t screen properly.”

“Wha—?”

“Megan, this is sounding an awful lot like one of those urban myths. I mean, who goes on a ski trip on their first date? Really! First dates should be coffee in a public place.”

Okay, so she *has* read some of the literature on single-parent dating. Who knew?

I handed her the bowl of veggies and she began ladling them into the pan.

“You and I aren’t going to make that mistake, are we, hon?” She said this, and then she smiled at me. She smiled as if everything I’d said, rather than discouraging her, proved her point.

“Umm. No.” I was at a loss for words.

What just happened here? As I mentally retraced my footsteps trying to see where I zigged when I should have zagged, Suze wiped her hands on a towel and moved to the counter where she picked up a pamphlet.

“I appreciate your concern, Megan. But don’t worry. My first date will be an e-date,” she announced proudly. “Those bad guys can’t harm me in cyberspace, now can they?”

Should I tell her she could catch a deadly computer virus? Nah, she’d never go for that.

“This is the dating questionnaire they sent me. After dinner you can help me fill it out. No one knows me better than you.”

“That’s for sure.”

Suze moved to the cabinet where she kept the cooking sherry. “Don’t say it like that. It’ll be fun.”

Fun? That questionnaire was going to ask my mother questions about herself I did not want to know the answers to. What happened to the good old days when mothers wore knee length skirts and spent all their time in the kitchen baking bread? Those mothers didn’t care about dating, or questionnaires, or butts. All they cared about was how good their kitchens smelled. I suddenly had a taste for fresh baked bread.

She looked at me and smiled. She had the biggest, bluest eyes. A lot like mine. “What do you say?”

“Sure,” I replied weakly. “It’ll be... fun. But let’s order some cheesy bread.”

It was as close as I was going to get to the good old days.

#

Dinner was a disaster.

The meal was good, perfect, although I must admit cheesy bread is an odd complement to Chicken Paprikash. The disaster was that my thoughts kept drifting to the result of us filling out that questionnaire—and what I saw was not pretty.

A short time after we had eaten, cleaned the kitchen, and put the leftovers away, we seated ourselves on the high wooden stools at the kitchen counter with the questionnaire lying between us. That’s exactly how I felt. That stupid questionnaire was coming between us.

Our special bond began way back when I was five years old. That’s when, after six years of marriage, my father decided to move to Australia to find himself. I guess he figured if he took us with him, he’d be harder to find—so he split, leaving us high and dry. I haven’t seen or heard from him since. No biggy. Don’t get me wrong, I would love to meet him. I even tried looking him up on Friend Finder a couple of times.

The good news is, I was so young when he left I don’t remember him leaving. Since his departure, though, my mother and I have become, well... friends.

I mean for ten whole years it had been just the two of us, me and mom—the Two Musketeers. We had a great time doing everything together: movies, concerts, amusement parks, museums, and let’s not forget the tons and tons of garage and es-

tate sales. She took me to my dance recitals, and I accompanied her to art shows where she shared her love of sculpture. She sat up with me when I had the chicken pox, and after Erin's eleventh birthday party where I ate two dozen chocolate chip cookies on a dare, and spent the entire night throwing my guts up into a bucket... [By the way, if you're an eleven-year-old, you need to know that a dozen chocolate chip cookies should probably be your limit.]

Anyway, after all the good times we shared, she suddenly wanted to change things.

She picked up her pen and began to write. "Let's see," she said, thinking out loud. "Attractive single parent..."

I made a face.

"What?"

"It's that word, *attractive*."

"You think I'm ugly?"

"No, no, of course not. You're beautiful, Mom. But if you lead with *attractive* you sound vain. Think about it. The first thing you mention is your looks. You sound like one of those botox bimbos. *Ooh, look at me, I'm so cute.*"

Suze stared at me a moment and then nodded. "Hadn't thought of that. Good catch." She started over: "Intelligent..."

I made a face.

"What now?"

"You sound like a snob."

"Because I say I'm intelligent?"

"Mom, you know how boys are. They like to think they're the smart ones. I'd hate for you to miss out on a good date because Mr. Perfect was feeling a little insecure the day he read your questionnaire."

She started over again, and for the next hour and a half, I challenged every word she wrote: Sincere... *means insincere*; clever... *gay*; Sensitive... *crazy*; loves life... *loves sex*, industrious... *means you have no time for him*, caring... *means you have too much time for him*. After a while she became so frustrated, she threw up her hands and asked me to take over filling out the questionnaire.

Perfect, I thought. For the next ten minutes I carefully crafted a sentence that, while seemingly alluring, sent a subtle yet

firm message to men to stay away from my mother. Finished, I handed over the questionnaire and smiled proudly.

She read aloud: “Unattractive mother of five seeks man with money.”

She stared silently down at the questionnaire. A slight crease appeared in her brow. After a while, she took a few deep breaths then looked up at me with a confused expression.

“You know, Mom, I’m getting a sense you’re not fully appreciating the important message that statement is making.”

“You’re right, hon. I’m not. Care to explain?”

“Certainly. By saying you’re unattractive, you’re not going to get any of those shallow types who are only interested in a woman for her looks. And if five kids doesn’t scare him off, then you know he’s into children. What a pleasant surprise when he discovers it’s just me. And okay, maybe I went a bit too far with the money thing. I just don’t want a guy dating you for your money.”

“I don’t have any money.”

“Like I said, I probably went a bit far with that one.”

All of a sudden she began laugh. “Megan, Megan, Megan. For a minute there, you had me. But now I see. It’s a joke. I mean, if I wrote something like that, *nobody* would go out with me.”

“Really?” Okay, I guess I wasn’t subtle enough.

“Very funny, hon, but I think I’d better fill this out on my own. Are you sure this is all right with you?” she asked for like the thirteenth time.

I suppose that was the perfect opportunity to bring up how I was feeling about our open relationship being a bit too open for me, about how I didn’t want to hear that she admired men’s butts, or that she was going to go out on dates, and how if she ever went on a date, I did not want to hear the gory details. And then there were my darker thoughts, about how I liked that it was just the two of us and didn’t see why things needed to change.

Had I known what was coming, I would have told her my true feelings right then and there. But I didn’t know. So I said: “It was a joke, Mom. I’m cool.”

“Very funny,” she repeated, then she sat down and began filling out the questionnaire.

It was the beginning of the end.

Chapter Four

“You didn’t look like an idiot.”

Tuesday morning, Erin and I were standing by our lockers changing out our books for first period. She was trying her best to console me about my embarrassment the day before with the new boy. But I played the incident over in my mind a dozen times and idiot was all I could see.

“Okay, then what did I look like?”

“Hmm. You looked like someone who’d forgotten how to smile.”

“Perfect,” I rasped glumly.

“Who’s perfect... besides me?” Matt walked up stinky from track practice and not caring whom he offended.

“Not me, that’s for sure.” I explained how I had embarrassed myself in front of the new boy. “But that’s okay. Erin saw him first, anyway.”

“Erin?” Matt’s expression soured.

“That’s my name, don’t wear it out.”

Matt was not amused. “Megan needs a boyfriend right now. Tell her it’s okay.”

We were both stunned by what he’d said. I mean, I always knew Matt looked out for me, but something else was going on here.

“Excuse me,” said Erin. “Like *I* don’t?”

“Megan needs something to take her mind off Suze becoming man crazy.”

Okay, *man crazy* was stretching it a bit, but I liked the sentiment.

“Besides,” he said. “You can have a boyfriend any time you want.”

“I *can*? I’m glad you know it because I don’t see any boys beating down my door. And for the last time, I am not dating a mathlete,” Erin fired back.

“You make me sick!” Matt practically spat the words at her, then he stormed off.

We watched him in silence for a long, awkward moment.

“What was that all about?” Erin finally said.

“Maybe he had a bad track practice.”

“That’s no reason to take it out on me.”

“Yeah,” I said. “I don’t know what’s gotten into him.” But that wasn’t true. I was pretty sure I knew what was up with Matt.

#

The first person who responded to my mother’s e-profile was Miller David. *Miller*? What was his mother thinking naming him that? If she had just reversed the two he could have had a real name. She should’ve cut to the chase and just named him Punching Bag. Same end result, trust me. Yet for some strange reason, my mother was attracted to *Punching Bag*’s online profile.

“Look at this, hon. He wants to meet someone he can talk quietly with over a glass of Chardonnay, someone who’d like to hold hands and take long walks...

...*off a short pier*, I thought, rolling my eyes.

“How charming,” she drooled.

How cheap! All that hand holding and walking sounded to me like the perfect excuse not to spend any money.

We were in her home office, which at one time was our tiny, sunny breakfast nook. It was just off the kitchen and looked out into our backyard. Little by little, over the years, her computer and files migrated there until now we don’t even think of it as a breakfast nook anymore.

“Come, see his picture,” she called with the excitement of a school girl. I glanced at the monitor. “Cute, huh?”

Suffice to say Miller David was not cute. Miller David was a loser with a capital L. He was the slightly balding office manager of an internet company who was studying for his law degree at night.

My goodness! Forty years old and he hasn't finished school yet. Does he plan to graduate when he turns sixty-five and pick up his diploma and retirement check at the same time? Pathetic.

Yet Suze saw things differently. In her eyes he was a man who'd done well for himself in business and who'd gone back to school to follow his dream.

Suddenly, she began tap tapping away at the keyboard, giggling as she typed.

“What are you doing?” I asked, hoping the alarm I was feeling hadn't crept into my voice.

“I'm sending him a message, letting him know I'm interested. Here, let me read it to you.”

La, la, la, la, la, la, la, la. I again tried humming mentally. Mercifully, this time it worked.

“What do you think?”

“Really good,” I replied with a smile, grateful I had no idea what she'd written. But I couldn't help notice, my mother was giggling as she passed e-notes to a loser.

#

On Wednesday morning I got up early.

My French teacher, Mrs. Ketchum, had decreed that anyone who missed the midterm she'd given just before Christmas and wanted a chance at passing her class needed to be in their seats at seven AM. Zero period. A full hour before we normally had to be in school.

I was sick with a bad cold the day of the original, so here I was, catching the cross-town bus to school. Normally I rode to school with Matt, who had just turned sixteen and had his own car, an old Corolla whose passenger door was jammed shut, so anyone riding with him had to slide over the console. But best friend or not, there was no way I was going to convince Matt to

get up an hour early on a school day (or any day for that matter), just so I could take a test.

There was a nip in the air as I waited for the bus. The desert sun was peeking over Camelback mountain and hadn't risen high enough to warm things up yet. I was a popsicle by the time the bus arrived five minutes late. Losing those five minutes meant I really had to hustle once I got to school. I loathe being late, especially for a big test.

I made a quick stop at my locker because I didn't feel like lugging my jacket and extra books around until third period. Four minutes to the first bell. There wasn't a soul in the locker area, which was odd for G.U., even at seven-fifteen in the morning. It was like I was in an alternate universe where everyone had mysteriously vanished. The sound of the band practicing "I've Got a Feeling" drifted down the hall, the only indication I wasn't in an alternate universe and that the building was indeed occupied.

A loud crash to my left obliterated the silence. I yelped, my head whipping in the direction of the sound. Standing by a locker several feet down was the new boy, Guy. I hadn't seen or heard him come into the area, but there he was, banging on a locker. He was fresh-scrubbed and gorgeous.

"Stupid!" He pounded on the steel locker with the heel of his hand. *Bang, bang, bang!*

Yesterday's embarrassment flashed through my mind. I started to slink off to class unnoticed. But something made me stay.

"Having a problem?" I heard myself ask.

His head turned in my direction. He looked at me as if he'd been waiting for me to say something. And then he smiled. It was the kind of smile you read about in stories. The kind of smile that makes a girl go all gooey inside. The kind of smile that made me forget about my earlier embarrassment.

"I'm sure I remember the combination, but this dumb locker still won't open." He turned his attention back to hammering.

Bang, bang, bang!

"Maybe that's because it's Manny Santos' locker."

“What?” He stepped back and surveyed the area, eyeing the row of lockers. “Oh,” he said.

“It’s perfectly understandable. You’re in a new school. I’m sure the lockers all look alike.”

Points for me for helping the new boy adjust to his new school. *Now, we’re even*, I thought.

He stepped back up to the locker and began fiddling with the combination. I could feel my cheeks starting to flush. The cute but arrogant boy was ignoring me.

“Umm, excuse me. Did you hear what I just said? You can fiddle with that locker all you want...”

The locker popped open.

“Yeah, I heard you,” he called, rummaging in the locker without looking in my direction. “What you said reminded me that I changed my combination when I changed schools.”

“Oh.” My voice was small as I realized I was enduring a second embarrassment at the hands of the new boy. There would not be a third. “Well... have a nice day.”

I started moving away from the locker area as fast as I could. Two minutes to the first bell.

“By the way, Manny Santos graduated end of last semester,” he called after me.

“Thank you.” My voice was even smaller. As I hurried off to take my exam I thought, *Erin saw him first. Thank God.*

#

They were scheduled to meet at a down town coffee shop.

Just relax, I told myself. My mother was having coffee with an obvious loser. No need to panic.

As soon as Miller opened his mouth, and started with the loser-talk, she’d be headed for the door. Heck, she may not even wait that long. She may walk in, see him sitting there looking all loserly, and duck out before he even notices her. I chuckled out loud at the thought.

Suddenly I froze. Oh, my goodness. When she gets back she’ll be crushed that her first date didn’t go as well as she’d hoped.

As much as I didn’t want to hear about my mother’s date, I knew when she returned home, I needed to be prepared to listen. It was important to be sympathetic, no matter how I felt.

I went to my room, where I decided to bone up for the mathlete challenge against Westview next week. Studying would take my mind off of the date, and by the time I was finished, she'd be home.

I looked at the first sample problem:

The sum of thirty-nine and twenty-one is forty-six more than a number. What is the number?

That's too easy, it's.... Lip gloss. Oh my goodness, did she remember to take her lip gloss? She'll need to freshen up before she goes into the coffee shop. And then once she starts drinking, the coffee will wash it right off. She'll need to freshen up at least once more.

My mother may have been going out with a loser, but that was no reason she shouldn't have moist lips.

"Hello?"

"Hey, Mom. How's it going?"

"Fine. I just pulled out of the driveway. Is everything all right?"

"Well... I was wondering, did you remember to bring your lip gloss? You're going to need it."

Silence.

"Sweetie, I'm not planning on kissing him."

"I know." *Thank God!* "But I just want you looking your best."

"That is so sweet. And yes, I do have my lip gloss. Thanks."

"Okay. See ya. And have a great date."

With the lip gloss disaster averted, I breathed a sigh of relief and went back to the math problem:

The sum of thirty-nine and twenty-one is forty-six more than a number. What is the number?

Okay, the sum of thirty-nine and twenty-one is sixty, which means... There are two Coffee Havens downtown. If she's sitting around waiting in the wrong place, she'll be devastated when he doesn't show up.

"Hello?"

“Oh hey, Mom, me again.”

“You’ll be happy to know I’ve made it to the corner.”

“Terrific. Say, did you know there were two Coffee Havens down town?”

“Yes, hon, I did. I’m meeting him at the one on Main Street.”

“Good choice. That one’s quieter. Well, just making sure. Have a great date.”

This is ridiculous, I thought as I hung up. She’s a grown woman; she knows what she’s doing. I’ll just concentrate on these math problems and before you know it... Oh, no!

“Hey, hon, I’m still at the corner. Long light.”

“Good thing. I noticed Miller’s picture lying beside your computer. You forgot to take it with you. I’d hate for you to get there and not know who you were dating. You could wind up with some imposter.”

“Thanks again, but I’m pretty sure I remember how he looks. And he has my picture as well. We’ll find each other. Now stop worrying. I’ll be fine.”

“Me? Worrying? *Please!*”

Chapter Five

It was seven-fifteen when I arrived in Erin's bedroom the next morning. I loved Erin's room. It was larger than mine, with a canopy bed to die for.

She was in front of the floor-length mirror trying to get ready for school, but every time she attempted to put on an article of clothing, I grabbed her arm, clutching it desperately.

"Megan, from what you're telling me, Suze just gave the guy a little peck on the lips."

She removed my clutching hand from her arm. There were four red marks where my fingers had pressed into her flesh.

"*Peck?* She never met the man before in her life. Do you know what kind of message she's sending? She may as well have ripped off her bra and danced topless on the table." I again clutched her arm.

"You're overreacting."

"I am *not* overreacting! That so-called innocent little peck is telling the world my mother is... *easy*."

The word nearly caught in my throat. The dreaded label of *easy* had destroyed the reputation of many a G.U. girl. Now it had its clutches on my mother.

Erin patiently removed my hand from her arm, looked me in the eye. "Megan, are you jealous?"

"Jealous?"

It was as if she'd stabbed me in the heart with a rusty sword. How could she think I was jealous? It's true, I didn't want to listen to my mother talk about her dates—what fifteen-year-old would? And it was also true that I didn't want her dating a loser—which Miller clearly was. And it was even truer that I didn't know why she was so anxious for things around here to change.

But jealous? *Moi?*

I stood staring at her, my mouth agape like a wounded fish. "That's a ridiculous thing to say." I could feel my temperature begin to rise.

"Is it?" Her eyes were searching mine. "Aren't you the one who said *how's it going to look if my mother has a boyfriend and I don't?*"

I released her arm as if it were something vile and disgusting.

"Maybe we need to concentrate on getting you a boyfriend," she said with a smile.

"I am not jealous!" I hissed. "This just proves you don't know anything about me. For your information, *if* my mother found the right guy, I'd be happy for her, no matter what."

I could no longer contain my emotions. They boiled over like a pot left on the stove too long.

"How *dare* you accuse me of being jealous of my own *mother?*" My words trembled with anger. "Later." I was heading for the door. I could stay in the room no longer.

"Megan, wait," she called.

I didn't stop walking until I was at school.

#

I avoided Erin all morning, which was hard considering we both had mostly AP classes. Not only did we have the same classes, but we usually sat together.

In English that day I sat next to dowdy Maudrina Salley, who no one wanted to sit near because her clothes smelled like she borrowed them from her dog. But today I didn't care. I plopped myself down right next to her. When Erin entered, I avoided her gaze, burying my head in *A Tale of Two Cities* by Charles Dickens, the book we had just started reading in class.

At lunch I normally sat with Erin in the cafeteria. Some days Matt would invite us to join him at the jocks' table, which was normally reserved for athletes and their girlfriends. Even Alonzo Briggs and Jeremy Bowen never complained, and they were the biggest jock snobs on campus. Matt's athletic prowess pulled that kind of weight.

Having the ability to walk in Matt's world elevated us. We were still geeks, but being friends with Matt put us a few rungs up from the bottom of the social food chain.

On the day of the argument, I sat alone on the quad. I didn't stop by the cafeteria to pick up something to eat. I was alone and hungry, but my anger would not allow me to join my classmates inside.

The quad was a ghost town, with the occasional student tumble weed racing across, late for class or lunch.

"There you are." Matt's voice from behind. I turned, thankful he was alone. "What are you doing out here?" he said, his words a soft probe.

"I'm not hungry. So I thought I'd get a jump on my homework."

"I see," he said, eyeing the doodle I was drawing on my notebook cover. I turned the book over.

"Besides, there's someone in there I don't want to see. But I'm sure you already know that."

"Yeah," he breathed softly. He took a seat next to me on the stone bench. "She's sorry." He lifted my chin with his thumb and forefinger. Our eyes met. "Megan, she didn't—"

"Do you think I'm jealous of my own mother?" I blurted.

"Course not. Although I *do* think you're a bit over-protective of her."

"Over-protective!"

"Hear me out, please, before you go jumping down my throat."

"Okay," I said through tight lips. "Talk." I did not promise to listen.

"Megan, I've known you since kindergarten. And it's always been just you and Suze. I think maybe you're concerned she's making a bad decision."

“She is making a bad decision. Matt, the guy’s a bonafide loser. I just want her to date the kind of guy she deserves. You know, somebody hip, and handsome, and worldly, and fashionable. The kind of man she can walk beside with her head held high. I don’t want to sound like a snob or anything, but she shouldn’t be dating beneath her. And Miller is definitely beneath her.”

“Your Mom’s smart. She’s probably just testing the waters.”

“Yeah, well, I think she should...” I was in the midst of a knee-jerk response when Matt’s words got through to me... And they made sense. “What was that again?”

“Huh?”

“What you just said.”

He thought for a moment. “Um, your mom is one of the smartest people I know—”

“No, no, something about testing the waters.”

“Oh, that. I think your mom is probably testing the waters with this guy. I’m sure Mr. Right hasn’t even shown up yet.”

I smiled. That had to be it. She was testing the waters. Miller was a warm-up boyfriend. My mother is no fool. She can spot a loser a mile away. She was using Miller for practice.

My spirits immediately brightened. “You are so right,” I said, throwing my arms around Matt’s shoulders. “I’m probably overreacting.”

“I think you’re overreacting with someone else, too.” He stood up.

“Erin?” My voice hinted shame.

“She’s been feeling horrible all day.”

“She should. She said I was jealous.”

“Did she say you were jealous, or did she *ask* if you were jealous?”

“Um, uhh...”

He held out his hand. “Come on. She wants to buy you an ice cream to make up.”

I gripped his hand and stood. “Um, maybe she could buy me a turkey sandwich. I’m starving.”

Matt’s laughter filled the quad.

Chapter Six

The word *boyfriend* is relatively new in the English language. It first appeared in print in 1909. I know that's a long time ago, but when you consider how long the English language has been around, 1909 is pretty recent. Originally when people used the word, it meant something negative, like a married woman might have a secret relationship with a *boyfriend*.

Boyfriend is one of the first words I became curious about when I developed my love of trivia. I wanted to know everything about the word. I figured the more I knew about *boyfriend*, the closer I would be to having one. Unfortunately, this flaw in logic has left me with a head full of trivia, and not one boyfriend.

However, a few days after Erin and I made up, she hit me with an interesting *boyfriend* proposition. We were once again in her bedroom, studying for a calc exam.

"So, how are things with Suze?" she asked, sipping a diet soft drink, which was something I'd never seen her do. Erin loved her sugar.

"Good." I didn't dare bring up Miller David and open *that* can of worms again.

"You know, Megan, once you have your own boyfriend, I'm sure Suze's dating won't seem so bad."

"You're right," I said. Then I sighed. "Too bad I don't even have a boyfriend prospect."

“Well... how about Guy Matson?”

My breath caught in my chest as I recalled my double humiliation. “B... but you saw him first.”

“That’s okay,” she reassured. “I’ve got my sights set on somebody else. Guy is all yours.”

But I didn’t want him. I couldn’t imagine putting myself through a third embarrassing situation with him.

It was then I realized Erin’s eyes were avoiding mine. There was something more to her giving up the handsome boy she had first dibs on so easily.

“Okay, spill,” I said, trying to get her to look at me.

“There’s nothing to spill,” she replied coyly.

“Nothing? There’s something going down between you and Matt, isn’t there?”

Her face brightened. “Yes!” she said with delight. “It all started that day when Matt was acting really funny about me having a boyfriend. I wasn’t sure at first, but he was talking about me and him.” That explained the diet drink.

“I knew it!”

“And then when you and I had the *misunderstanding*, we seemed to grow closer.” She looked at me seriously. “I mean... it’s okay with you, isn’t it? That’s the reason we haven’t acted on our feelings yet. We wanted to make sure it was all right with you first.”

“All right? It’s excellent.” A smile blossomed on my lips. “I have to admit, though, I am a bit surprised. I mean, I love Matt, but he isn’t exactly the brightest bulb in the pack.”

Erin laughed. “I know. But that’s what’s so cool about it. I never feel like I have to compete with him. And he doesn’t mind that I’m a mathlete.” Her face was suddenly serious again. “Are you *sure* you’re okay with this?” She took another sip of her diet drink and made a face.

“Please! Matt’s like a brother to me. You two are my best friends. Of course it’s okay. I’m happy for both of you.”

“And now you’re free to go after Guy. I know you like him, but you haven’t made a move because I saw him first.”

I could feel a knot forming in my chest. “He’s all right.”

“All right? I see the way you act when he walks into the math lab.”

Yeah. Like I want to crawl under a rock.

I hadn't mentioned my second embarrassing encounter to Erin. It was too embarrassing. "Guy's okay. But for now let's just concentrate on you and Matt. I should have you guys over after school. We can toast soft drinks to your new relationship."

"Ooh, that sounds fun."

"But not diet," I said.

She laughed.

#

"I think I've been dumped."

Suze and I were in the kitchen preparing a light supper. I was tossing a salad, while she was pulling together her southwestern corn chowder with poblano peppers.

"Please, Mom, dumped is such a strong word."

"What would you call it?"

"He's... just been really busy lately."

"Isn't that what guys say when they're dumping a girl?"

"You've got a point." She frowned. "I'm kidding. You haven't been dumped. I'm sure Miller really likes you."

"He hasn't called." Her voice was flat, as she put the lid on the pot to let the soup simmer.

"After dinner we should check your e-mail box to see who else has responded. Miller was okay, but you could do better."

There was a brief, awkward silence. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, he was nice enough, but I really didn't see him as your type." I was careful not to mention how pleased I was that the loser was gone.

She was quiet for a long, thought-filled moment. "I liked him," she finally said. "I thought he liked me."

I was surprised at the gloom that colored her words. *She just met the man.* I thought she'd be willing to move on... at least that's what I'd hoped.

Dinner was cloaked in painful silence. The light conversation we managed was surrounded by long, awkward gaps where neither of us said anything.

Afterwards, we drove into old town to browse the many antique shops that lined the narrow streets. Old town was a historic neighborhood of turn-of-the-century buildings. Going there and browsing the shops was one of our favorite pastimes.

I loved old town because it gave me the feeling I was stepping into the past, a simpler time when life was easy. It reminded me of Main Street, Disneyland, but real.

As we shop hopped, I could tell her mind was elsewhere. I tried cheering her up by pointing to an outrageous outfit in a boutique window and saying: *You'd look great in that.* Normally this would have elicited waves of laughter. But this time she said, "Ya think?" as if I were seriously considering the ridiculous clothing.

The longer we browsed, the lousier I felt. *She really likes the guy.*

I'd done nothing but deride Miller. Oh, not to her face. But in my mind, I saw him as a loser. I thought she could do better. Now I realized no matter what I thought, she liked him. I wished I'd been more mentally supportive.

I tried pointing to good-looking guys: "Look at the butt on him, Mom." Yes! I was even willing to engage in butt talk, anything to get my mother out of her funk. But nothing worked.

Back at home, we sat on our high stools at the kitchen counter sipping green tea.

"Why don't you try calling him?" I said.

"I did." Again her voice was small and flat. "It either rings and rings or goes right to voice mail."

"Maybe I should call him."

"What? You'll do no such thing. I am not so desperate that my fifteen-year-old daughter has to call men for me."

"No, Mom, you're not desperate at all. But who knows, maybe a call from a friend could let him know what he's missing."

She looked at me long and hard. A warm smile appeared on her lips.

"Thank you, honey. You're the best friend a girl could have. You've been nothing but supportive."

I opened my mouth to protest, to tell her that I wasn't such a good friend. In fact, I'd been a horrible friend. I hadn't been supportive at all. I couldn't wait for Miller to be out of our lives. I wanted to tell her all this and beg for her forgiveness... But instead I said, "Maybe we should try again."

She let out a long, slow breath. "No," she replied softly.

We continued sipping tea in silence. I had no idea how noisy tea sipping could be, but with the lack of conversation in the room, the clanking of cups against saucers along with our slurps seemed to reverberate loudly off the walls. Finally she spoke again.

“I always thought I’d have more children.” Her voice was coming from a distant time. “Back when I met your father, I had my mind set on a large family. I thought you’d have three or four younger brothers and sisters.” She looked at me and smiled, as if she was seeing me for the first time. “You’d have made a wonderful big sister.”

Just when I thought I couldn’t feel any worse, my mother was revealing a side of herself I hadn’t known. I couldn’t believe how fragile and vulnerable she sounded. I had no idea she’d wanted more children. And the only reason she was telling me her most secret desires was because she was hurting so badly over being dumped.

I realized there was more to it than being dumped by a man she hardly knew. She was feeling she was no longer desirable. That maybe she was getting old.

Later that night I lay in bed, the entire evening haunting my thoughts. Fat tears flowed freely down my cheeks. I promised myself if I could do anything to make this right, I would. In the future, I would always support my mother no matter what. She needed to know she wasn’t getting old, and that she was desirable. I said a soft prayer for the right boyfriend to come along, and I drifted off into a restless sleep.

#

A few days later, when I got home from school, I found my mother’s Explorer in the driveway. This wasn’t such a big deal. She often got home from work early. But there was a Porsche next to her car. *A Porsche!*

That was a big deal. A Porsche in the driveway meant just one thing. There was a man in the house.

I walked into the foyer and saw them, my mother and the man. He was tall and ruggedly handsome, with thick waves of jet black hair. He was wearing an obviously expensive maroon cashmere sweater, dark slacks, and stylish loafers. He was hold-

ing in his hands an eighteen-inch statue of a reclining woman. They were laughing.

“Megan, you’re home,” my mother called when I walked in. There was joy in her voice, something I hadn’t heard in several days. “This is Armando.”

Armando looked at me. His eyes were deep pools of intensity that immediately gripped me.

“Hello, Megan,” he said. His voice was rich and creamy, like a decadent hot chocolate, with a sexy, Spanish lilt.

“Oh... Hi,” I replied, completely taken aback.

“Hon, Armando was nice enough to deliver the sculpture I bought from his art gallery this afternoon.”

“Sculpture?”

“Yes. I was strolling by his gallery at lunch, and I just couldn’t take my eyes off this beautiful Lynne Scott figurine.” She ran her fingers along the sleek curves of the small statue.

“Lynne Scott? We can’t afford her work.”

She looked at Armando self-consciously. “I know,” she said her voice lowering. “But it’s been so gloomy around here the past few days. I thought this might be just the thing to cheer us up. And well... I didn’t have my check book, but Armando said *no problem*, he’d deliver it and pick up the check at the same time.” She smiled at him gratefully.

My eyes again moved to Armando. I was riveted by how gorgeous he was.

“I’ll leave you two alone to enjoy the sculpture,” he crooned in a voice filled with music.

“You’ll do no such thing,” my mother said. “Stay for tea. It’s the least I can offer since you went so far out of your way for me.” She looked at Armando and batted her eyes.

Oh my goodness! She’s flirting with him... And badly, I might add.

Quickly, I scanned his left hand for a ring. There was a large, ornate ring on his right, but his left ring finger was bare. *Good*, I thought.

“Do you mind?” he inquired, turning his gaze to me, his eyes searching mine. It was as if he was looking into my soul. “I do not want to intrude.”

“No. Umm, that’d be great.”

“Then I’d be delighted to stay,” he said, turning his charms back on my mom.

“Super,” she said and giggled.

Super? Since when does she use the word super?

“By the way, I love your peace-sign ring,” she added.

Please don’t call it super.

He fingered the ring. “Yes. I bought this at a small antique shop in upstate New York several years ago. The carving is supposedly from a fence post from the original Woodstock farm.”

“You don’t say?”

“I can’t prove it. But it makes for a good story.” He laughed. She laughed.

“I love browsing antique shops,” she said. “And estate sales, and garage sales, and lawn sales.” They both laughed some more.

I regarded Armando laughing with my mother and realized he was everything I could have asked for in a boyfriend for her. He was tall, handsome, elegant, and he obviously spoke a foreign language; he was extremely sexy, well dressed—had a nice butt—drove a hot car, and when he looked at my mother, it was as if she were the most important person on earth. He was perfect for her. I know I should have been happy that she was finally getting over Miller, but there was something about this man I didn’t like, something creepy I couldn’t quite put my finger on. I hated him instantly.



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