



Other Books by E. Van Lowe

Boyfriend From Hell

Heaven Sent

The Zombie Always Knocks Twice

Never Slow Dance with a Zombie

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Earth Angel

e. van lowe



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“...If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. ²⁵ If a house is divided against itself, that house cannot stand.”

The New Testament

Mark 3:24



Chapter One

I thought if I arrived early that I would have a few minutes to get my thoughts together before all the unpleasantness began. But when I reached the top of the escalator, she was already seated in the food court where we always sat, the three of us.

Now there were two.

This was our old hangout spot. The Glendale mall. We'd been coming here since middle school, ever since our parents had given us permission to get on the bus and make the trip across town. Most of Glendale gathered here at one time or another. For Erin and me, it was a safe place to have fun and find adventure in the faces of cute boys.

"Thanks for coming," I said as I walked up.

Her eyes had been on me since I'd gotten off the escalator. Angry eyes. She was wearing a lot of black eyeliner which was new for her. It did nothing to improve her looks. It seemed to highlight her anger.

"You're welcome," she said without the hint of charm.

The mall had been remodeled, and the food court renamed *the dining terrace* to go along with all the fancy new, upscale restaurants. But they still served our favorite, curly fries.

“Wanna get some fries?” I asked. It was an ice-breaker line. One I hoped would chase the anger from her eyes and put a smile on her face. “We love curly fries,” I added, now smiling.

“Used to.” *Ouch!* “So, what’s up? What’s so important it couldn’t wait?” The anger leaked from her eyes and onto her lips, which, by the way, were slathered in dark maroon lipstick. Very Goth.

I hadn’t seen Erin in three weeks, since Matt’s funeral. We used to see each other every day. We used to meet at our lockers in the morning, and gossip about boys and teachers, and share clothing, and had all our AP classes together. We used to be inseparable.

It was Sunday afternoon and the mall was packed. The spring warm-up brought people out of their homes, flooding the streets, the parks, the mall.

“I miss you,” I said, taking the seat across from her. She stiffened as if I had violated an invisible barrier.

I pretended not to notice and reached across the table touching her hand. It was ice cold. The saying goes *cold hands warm heart*, but judging from the look in her eyes, her hands and her heart were on the same page.

“Why do you want to see me?”

She gently removed my hand from hers. *OUCH!*

“Matt wouldn’t want this. He’d want us to be closer than ever now that he’s gone. I’m sorry you transferred to another school, but I still want us to be friends.” My voice cracked. I got the feeling I might cry. “Remember that night he brought you over? I was mad at you and he wanted us be friends again. Now you’re mad at me, but there’s no Matt to bring us together. We have to do it on our own.”

“How dare you bring up Matt’s name?”

“Huh? He... was my best friend.”

“You’re the reason he’s gone!” Her voice was rising. Heads were turning in our direction. “You’re the reason he killed himself. My boyfriend killed himself because of you!” She was practically screaming, making a scene. All eyes were on us.

“That’s not true,” I lied, trying to get her to lower her voice. “It... it was an accident.”

She stood, her eyes glowing hot yellow, irises shrinking to narrow slits. I'd seen eyes like these before on the devil himself. "Youuuuu." The voice coming out of her was thick and guttural.

"Umm, Erin? Are you okay? Do you have a cold or something?" I was starting to get scared. People were flocking to the food court as if we were a reality show. *The Real High School Girls of Glendale Union.*

A crack appeared in Erin's forehead. Yellow vapor, like steam, seeped from the crack. "You shall pay for what you have done!" The words were coming out of Erin's mouth, but it wasn't Erin who was saying them. It was the voice of a monster.

"Um... in case you haven't noticed, there's a crack in your forehead."

The crack proceeded to spread, extending down the bridge of her nose and chin. The yellow vapor came spilling out. Erin was splitting in two.

Somebody screamed.

Erin's body fell away like a mascot's costume. When the vapor cloud cleared, standing inside the shell of what once was Erin, piled up on the floor like discarded fabric, was a monster, its greenish-hued skin percolating with festering sores. "You shall pay for what you have done!"

Somebody else screamed. I think it was me.



"Sweetheart... Sweetheart... Sweetheart."

I opened my eyes to my mother gently rubbing my arm. I was in my room, in my bed. Safe.

"You were having another bad dream." Lines of tension were around her eyes.

I sat up, looking around. The horror of the dream was so vivid I was trembling. I fingered the silver crucifix I'd taken to wearing around my neck as I reassured myself I was safe in my room.

"I think we should get Dr. Kahn to have a look at you."

“It’s just a bad dream, Mom.” I swung my legs over the edge of the bed, digging my feet into the carpet. *Safe*. I repeated the word over in my mind, trying to get my heart rate back to normal.

“Do you remember what this one was about?”

“Nope. Nothing. It’s gone already. Just a bad dream, Mom,” I hastily replied.

It was in my mother’s hospital room when I had done battle with Satan. He had weakened her and had threatened to take her life if I didn’t become his bride. She witnessed some of the battle, but was delirious at the time with a high fever. She’d convinced herself that what she’d seen that night was the result of the fever.

I’m actually glad she doesn’t know the truth. I want her to believe it was the fever. She has always been one of my best friends. I don’t want to sound like an old movie, but I’m not sure she can handle the truth.

“All these bad dreams that you can’t remember. I’m sure it has to do with Matt.” She gently lobbed his name out there. She didn’t say *Matt’s death*. That would have been too much.

“Me, too. But I’m not having as many. Time is making the bad thoughts go away.” I brightened my smile. “Go back to bed. You have to get up early.”

She had missed nearly two weeks of work while I nursed the injuries I received in my battle with Satan. The party line on my injuries was they occurred during a freak earthquake. Right.

She looked at the digital clock on my night stand. Three forty-five. “Maybe I should bunk with you the rest of the night.”

“No way! I’m not a little kid afraid of the boogey man, Mom. Besides, you snore.”

“I do not snore!” She was smiling now.

“Well, whatever that breathing trick is you do while you’re sleeping, it keeps me up. So, go back to bed and close your door.” I knew I was lucky having a mother I could talk with so freely.

“Seriously, Hon, you going to be okay?” she asked, the smile fading.

I nodded, keeping up the cheery exterior. “I’m good.”

A few minutes later she was gone. I turned off the bedside lamp and sat, staring into darkness. It was the third time in a week I'd had a similar dream. They all ended with Erin turning into a monster. I knew they were more than just dreams. It was an omen. I needed to fix my relationship with Erin. The dreams would not end until I did.

I lay down, resting my head on the pillow, my eyes wide. Erin's words from the very first dream I had three weeks ago emerged from the depths of my mind: "This isn't over, witch!"

I believed her words to be true.



"It looks like an invitation."

Maudrina Salley, my new best friend, was pointing to the tiny envelope taped to my locker. "Open it!" She snatched it off the locker and pushed it at me. "It's The Explosion. You've been invited to The Explosion. I'm sure of it!"

My hands were full with my book-bag and purse, so I couldn't take the envelope right away. A hatch of butterflies released in my stomach, as I wondered if the envelope had something to do with the danger I'd been feeling the past several days. One thing was certain—I had not been invited to The Explosion.

I leaned my book-bag against the bank of lockers, took the envelope and opened it. There was an invitation inside.

"Am I right?" Maudrina was on pins and needles, mostly because the invite to my mother's birthday party was the first she'd received since she was a little kid. Maudrina never got invited to parties. Come to think of it, neither did I. I pulled the invite from the envelope and read it.

"Well? Don't keep me in suspense."

I looked at her, my face awash with disbelief. "I've been invited to The Explosion."

Maudrina started dancing around me. “We’re going to The Explosion! I knew it! I knew it!” She stopped. “It does say plus one, doesn’t it?”

I nodded, staring at the invite, still dumbfounded. She went back to dancing.

The Explosion was a ditch day tradition. Every spring the Poplarati got together and threw the biggest daytime party of the year. If you were invited to The Explosion, it meant you were somebody.

“This has got to be a mistake,” I said, rereading the invite. “Or a prank.”

Maudrina stopped dancing again. “Why can’t you be happy? I’m happy!”

“Because I wasn’t invited.”

I looked around. It was ten minutes before first period, and the area was teeming with arriving students. I spotted envelopes taped to some of the other lockers.

Jimmy Calderon walked up, pulled the tiny envelope from the front of his locker, read it and stuffed it into his pocket, practically in one motion. But of course Jimmy Calderon would be invited. His father owned Calderon’s Liquor, making Jimmy the go to guy when it came to supplying beer and wine for underage parties.

“Look, that’s Ashley Scott’s locker,” I said wagging my finger at the locker with no invite. Ashley Scott was the gold standard, the girl every girl at G.U. wanted to be, every guy at G.U. wanted to have. “How come there’s not one on her locker? She’s a member of the Poplarati. And she’s got a Chanel purse and it’s not a knockoff. This was probably meant for her.” I stuffed the invite back into the envelope, diving into my purse in search of a fresh piece of tape.

“Meagan, isn’t your name on the envelope?”

“Oh. Yeah.”

So, there it was. I’d been invited to The Explosion. I knew I should have been feeling giddy about it. I am on the debate team and the math team, which makes me a bona fide member of the school’s geek squad. Geeks do not get invited to cool parties. And yet, somehow I had been. I couldn’t help but wonder why.

The answer came at lunch.



Chapter Two

Ever since the funeral, my habit at lunch had been to stop by the cafeteria, grab something portable to eat, then join Guy in the football field bleachers for lunch and whatever else might be on his mind.

While I enjoyed the time with Guy, the reason I started taking lunch away from the cafeteria was because I could no longer handle the looks. It seemed every time I picked my head up from talking, or eating, I would catch someone looking away. I knew they were whispering about Matt.

Poor thing. Her best friend committed suicide.

I hated all the sympathy coming my way, partly because I was still digesting a heavy dose of guilt over Matt's suicide. I also hated being a sideshow attraction.

At least I didn't have to eat in the bleachers alone. I had a boyfriend. I still had to pinch myself when I realized I actually had one. What was even harder to believe is that my mother didn't put up a stink about it, even though I knew she didn't like him. I was free to see Guy with some restrictions.

Obviously I could see him in school. But no dating—and no riding in his car. Since Guy's wings had been clipped—literally—he'd acquired a white Mustang

convertible. Even though I had lost my ride to school, I was forbidden to ride in it.

The only time I was allowed to see Guy outside of school is when he came over to my house on Saturday evenings, sat on our living room sofa, and watched TV, with Suze always hovering somewhere nearby.

I am sure the only reason she allowed the relationship was because of how much we'd been through already this year—her illness, then me being hospitalized, along with Matt's death. The restrictions made my bleacher time with Guy even more special. It was our only alone time.

I stopped off in the cafeteria and was on line getting ready to pay for a bag of Fritos and a soda when I noticed Jeremy Bowen staring in my direction. He was smiling. I started looking around uncomfortably. *He couldn't be smiling at me.*

Jeremy was a tall senior, bulging with muscles like an NBA basketball player. He wore his shirts a size too small so everyone would notice. Jeremy was the star of the basketball team and the track team, with a scholarship to Arizona State. He was also a jerk, and one of the biggest snobs at G.U.

Jeremy Bowen has never spoken to me. He has never so much as acknowledged my existence. When Matt would bring Erin and me to sit at the jocks table Jeremy didn't frown or protest, he did us one better—he pretended we weren't even there.

I continued looking around, but didn't see anyone else he could have been smiling at, so I smiled back, giving a weak wave. His smile widened. He came over.

"How're they hangin', Barnett?"

Famous pick-up lines of the eighties.

"Um, Hi, Jeremy."

His voice lowered. "You get the invitation?"

I squinted. "Invitation?"

"To The Explosion. Ashley Scott was supposed to pin one to your locker. If that dumb chick didn't—"

"Oh! Yes, I did get it. Um... thanks."

"Well..." his voice lowered even more. "Sorry about Dawson's Creek. He was one of the good ones." He gave my shoulder a fragile pat.

“Um, yes. He was.”

“Hope to see ya there. It’s gonna be a blast,” he said before jogging across the cafeteria to join the other jocks at their table.

I stood staring after him, frozen to the spot. Matt, aka Dawson’s Creek, was the reason I’d been invited to The Explosion. The Poplarati felt sorry for me.

Jeremy knew that Matt and I were best friends. He knew that Matt’s death was shrouded in a cloud of controversy. Everyone at school was whispering about it. This was his way of reaching out to me, of letting me know the Poplarati were closing ranks around Matt, and that I was included in the circle. I suddenly felt sorry for all the times I’d called him a jerk—even though he was... but still.

A tear I didn’t realize was coming drizzled down my cheek. Matt had been invited to The Explosion last year, but he didn’t go. I knew it was some kind of solidarity thing he was doing for me, even though he didn’t say it. On ditch day last spring we went to a movie—me, Matt and Erin.

Now there was just me.



When I got outside I spotted Guy making his way across the field. He moved with the grace of a gazelle, his Carolina blue hoodie slung across the back of his shoulder, as if he didn’t have a care in the world. On his left wrist he wore the braided three color friendship bracelet I’d made for him to replace the gum wrapper bracelet. Black, pink and white. I figured now that I had a real boyfriend, he deserved a real bracelet. A matching bracelet, signifying our togetherness, was on my right wrist.

“Aren’t you going to grab something to eat?” I said, catching up to him. I was a bit breathy because running is not my thing.

“You know I don’t eat.”

Right. I keep forgetting my boyfriend is an angel who had been sent to earth to guard me, but instead, fell in love with me.

“You eat at my house,” I countered, even though I knew the answer.

“That’s for Ms. Barnett’s sake. She already doesn’t like me. If she met a teenage boy who didn’t like to eat, she’d be even more suspicious.”

Everyone calls my mom Suze. All of her friends and all of my friends. Everyone but me. She wouldn’t have it any other way—except when it came to Guy. The first time Guy called her Ms. Barnett she didn’t correct him as she’d done with all my other friends. She was sending me a message. Message received.

We reached the bleachers. Despite the gorgeous day, the bleachers were deserted. We had them all to ourselves. With no one around, my mind and eyes wandered to Guy’s lips. They were gorgeous lips.

“There’s something up with you today,” he said, as we sat in our favorite spot at the very bottom. I opened the Fritos, not because I was planning on eating them. It was busy work for my hands. I had other plans for my lips.

“I had another dream. I wish you could have been there to hold me.” I inched closer, gaped at his mouth.

He pulled back, staring at me for a few seconds, his head cocked to the side. “No. That’s not it. Normally you’d be freaking out about the dream. There’s something else on your mind.”

Kissing!

“Oh, right. I’ve been invited to The Explosion,” I said somberly. Guy was very intuitive about what was going on inside of me. He had been gifted with some kind of special angel sense to help him protect me when he was my guardian, although he didn’t seem to be getting the message about kissing.

“Someone’s going to blow something up, and you’ve been invited to watch?” His face was twisted into a big question mark.

I laughed. “No, silly. The Explosion is a ditch day party given by the Poplarati. Getting invited is an honor.”

“And yet you don’t seem honored.” He reached into the bag, pulled out a Frito and held it in front of my lips. “Eat.” Strong, masculine hands holding the chip so delicately were a definite turn-on. I nibbled the Frito, sucking the salt from his fingertips.

“They only invited me because of Matt. He was one of them. By accepting me into their ranks, they’re sending a message to the rest of the school to stop the gossip about his *supposed* suicide.” Guy pulled another Frito from the bag, held before my lips. “I can feed myself, you know?”

“Righteo.” He smiled his smile and I melted, nibbling the chip from his fingertips.

“I’m not sure how I’m supposed to feel. They don’t care about me.”

Guy pulled another Frito from the bag. I frowned. “How do you feel about them?” He popped the chip into his mouth, made a face. I couldn’t help but smile.

“I don’t feel anything. Jeremy and his jock friends are all jerks. And so is Ashley Scott and her crowd.”

“Sounds to me like you’re even. You don’t care about them, they don’t care about you.”

“Well, when you put it that way.”

He looked at me with his dreamy eyes and I almost forgot what we were talking about. “Do you want to go to this Explosion?”

“No. But Maudrina sure does. She talked my ear off about it all through English.”

“Well...” He munched another Frito. Made another face.

“If you don’t like the way they taste stop eating them!” I barked.

“A ditch day party is a daytime party, right?”

“Yeah. So?”

“We’ve never been out together. We’ve never danced together. I’d like to dance with you at least once before... the semester’s over.” His voice dropped.

I knew he wasn’t thinking about the end of the semester. He was too polite to say what was really on his mind. Guy was an angel who had been exiled to walk the earth because he fell in love with me. He wanted to

experience all he could with me before his exile came to an end.

“Geeks do dance, don’t they?” he teased, his words bringing me back to the moment.

“Yes, of course we do.” I could feel myself getting giddy inside. All of a sudden The Explosion was sounding like a good idea. Guy dancing in my arms all afternoon, without my mother hovering nearby. A very good idea.

“And it’s ditch day. So it’s not like you’re really ditching. Most students ditch all their classes after lunch anyway. Right?”

“For someone new at G.U. you sure know a lot about ditch day.”

“I am a master of ditching,” he said with a mischievous smile and a wink.

When I met Guy, he had presented himself to me as a bad boy to get my attention. It worked. But now he was towing the line, and making sure I did, too.

“What about Maudrina? She really wants to go. She’ll be crushed if I tell her I’m going with you.”

“If the Poplarati are bending over backwards to invite you, I’m sure they won’t mind if you show up with two dates.” He moved to pull another Frito from the bag, then thought better of it.

I inched closer, and he put his arm around me. I rest my head on his shoulder and we sat in silence, enjoying the warm spring air, and closeness. As much as I wanted to be kissed, I enjoyed Guy’s arms around me more. I could sit for hours, neither of us uttering a word, and yet communicating volumes through our touch.

The danger I had been feeling the past few days, along with the horror of this morning’s dream, faded away. I even allowed myself the luxury of ignoring the greater danger, the danger to my heart and soul that lurked at the edge of my consciousness. The end of exile.

I had promised myself I would take it slow, that I would enjoy the fact I had found a boy I cared for and who loved me, and that I wouldn’t ruin things by looking into an uncertain future.

Live for today. Enjoy the moment, is what I told myself. But when life is this good, it's hard not wishing the good days could last forever.



When I walked into the math lab that afternoon, everyone stopped what they were doing and applauded.

Tran raced over to greet me at the door and bowed. “Welcome, my queen.”

I was so caught off guard I started blushing. “Shut up!” I said trying to play it off. I gave him a playful shove, and he pretended to fall on the floor.

I hadn't been in the math lab since last semester when I got kicked off the team. It felt strange being back. It was good seeing Tran, Geoffrey and the other geeks smiling at me. I hadn't hung with them for so long. I missed my friends.

But there was someone missing. Erin and I had joined the mathletes together. Now that she had transferred to another school, there was just me. It was another reminder of how much my life had changed in such a short period of time.

“I don't know how we won the regionals without you,” Tran said, getting up off the floor. “But we're going to need your brain if we're going to win state.”

“It's good to be back. What are we working on?”

“You ready for this, Barnett?” Tran asked, turning serious. “No more playing around like last semester.” He was obviously talking about Guy.

I bit my tongue. “Yes. I'm ready.”

He turned to Mrs. Brewster who was seated in the back. “I told you! We gonna kick some serious butt!”

“We're doing a few warm-up exercises with different number bases. Join us,” Mrs. Brewster called.

And I did.



Ditch day at most high schools is a senior thing, a privilege the graduating class has bestowed upon themselves. But not at G.U. Sometime during the nineties, juniors began taking advantage of the day off, and before long it was a school-wide tradition.

The date for ditch day is always chosen by the senior class. They held onto that honor, holding secret meetings starting in December. Sometime after winter break, the date is announced. Once word is out, there is nothing teachers or administrators can do. They try to encourage students not to boycott school on ditch day. They request that parents talk to us. But it does no good. Even if you attended class on ditch day—which I usually did—there were so few students present after lunch, teachers couldn't follow the lesson plan. And so the teachers and administrators quietly went along, pretending as though ditch day didn't exist.

Local legend around The Explosion is another terrific piece of trivia. About ten years ago the Poplarati threw a ditch day party at some rich kid's house whose parents were out of town. Alcohol was served. A lot of people got drunk, and someone called the police. Parents and the administration were outraged that this had occurred on a school day, right under their noses. So the school decreed that if anyone was caught attending a daytime party on a school day, those persons would be expelled.

But the adults' plan backfired. The next year the Poplarati threw an even bigger party with an exclusive guest list. They called the party The Expulsion, flaunting their youth and bravado in the face of the school's administration. Since no adults were at the party, they couldn't prove who was there, and so no one got expelled. Eventually The Expulsion became today's Explosion.

I spouted this trivia to Guy over the next several days. He seemed to get a kick out of it. I liked having a boyfriend who was handsome and cool, and yet not intimidated by my brains, or the fact that useless data could come spilling out of me at the drop of a hat. From where I was sitting, our relationship was perfect.



Chapter Three

“So I’m not going to see you all weekend?”

“Don’t look at me like that,” said Guy.

It was Friday. Guy was walking me to first period English when he sprung the news on me. I wasn’t looking forward to English. We had recently started reading *A Raisin In The Sun*, which at least had brought us up to the twentieth century, but still.

“How am I looking at you?” I asked.

“Like I’m the Grinch who stole Christmas.”

I had to smile at that one. “Don’t flatter yourself. And when were you going to tell me anyway?”

“I’m telling you now.” There was something odd about his expression. I got the feeling there was something more he wasn’t saying. We arrived at my classroom.

“You never mentioned you had any friends before. Is Rocky an...” I didn’t say the word *angel*. The halls were packed this time of day. No telling who might overhear.

When he nodded his response, an emptiness welled in the pit of my belly. *The end of exile*, popped into my mind. *Is this what he isn’t telling me?*

“Rocky isn’t exactly a friend,” he said with a short, derisive laugh.

“So this non-friend says he needs your help with something that’s going to take all weekend, and you have to jump to his request?”

“Something like that.” He was avoiding looking me in the eye. The emptiness I was feeling spread into my chest.

“And you’re leaving before lunch?”

Another nod of his head.

“Will I ever see you again?” The words came out tortured. I didn’t want to ask. I didn’t want to seem needy, or greedy. But knowing what I knew, I had to.

He took me into his arms. “Of course I’m coming back. I wouldn’t even be going if I didn’t have to.”

Our faces were inches apart. I looked into his eyes. “This sounds important.”

“It is,” is all he said. No further explanation. He held my gaze. “I love you,” he said softly.

“I know you do. I’m just disappointed is all.”

“All right you two. I need to see a little space,” called Mrs. Madera, who had just stepped out of her classroom across the hall.

We moved apart.

“Tell your mom I’ll miss her hospitality.” We both started laughing at his sarcasm.

“Count yourself lucky. You are the only boy lucky enough to experience all her charms.”

We continued laughing until the first bell.

“See you Monday.” His kissed me gently on the lips, and headed down the hall toward his first period class. He didn’t look back.



Suze was thrilled that Guy wasn’t coming over. She tried pretending she wasn’t, that she was actually concerned, asking questions like: “Did something happen between you two?”

I knew she was hoping the answer would be *yes*. I have to hand it to her. When I told her things were fine and that he’d definitely be back on our couch next

Saturday, the look of relief on her face seemed almost real.

I was surprised how easily we fell back into our old Saturday evening routine. I had almost forgotten how close we were before Guy, and Armando, and all the mess.

We scouted out a romantic comedy we hadn't seen on Pay Per View, and planned to watch it after dinner. Then we converged on our tiny kitchen to prepare a light supper. My job was to pull a green salad together, and Suze would grill chicken breasts to be sliced into strips and placed on top.

I was enjoying spending time with her. I thought the evening would be torture, with me wondering what Guy was doing every second. But hanging with my mom lightened my mood. We laughed our way through dinner.

"Remember Miller David?" she asked. We were just about finished eating.

"Of course I do. You met him on a dating site."

Miller David was the first man she had gone out with since my father left ten years ago. He went out with her a few times and disappeared. He stopped calling, and he never returned any of her messages.

"Yes, that's right. The one who dumped me the way a high school boy might do it." She was annoyed.

"Why are you bringing him up?"

"I saw him yesterday."

I was trying not to react. I wanted her to start dating again—partly for my own sake. I figured if she had a boyfriend, she'd be a lot easier on mine. But I didn't want her dating a jerk like Miller.

"How's he doing?" I tried keeping my voice cheery.

"I have no idea. We didn't speak."

"So, he didn't see you?"

"Oh, he saw me! I made *sure* he saw me. I was leaving the office to pick-up something quick to take back for lunch, and he was coming out of Subway. He started in my direction, but he was so busy talking to the big bosomed floozy he was with, he didn't see me. That is, until I got directly in his path."

"You didn't?" I said, smiling at my mother's bravado.

“I most certainly did. He finally looked up when he realized the person in front of him wasn’t going to let him pass.”

Now I was chuckling. “What did you say when he saw you?”

“Nothing. I just stood there, staring at him with the stink eye.”

“Go, Mom. What did he say?”

“Nothing. He stood there staring back. He had this look on his face like he’d been caught with his pants around his ankles. It was like an old western showdown. Finally I rolled my eyes, flipped my hair and walked right past him. I heard the floozy ask, *do you know her?* And he said *no*. Jerk.”

I gave her a round of applause. “Good for you.”

I began clearing away the dishes. I was happy she was getting her confidence back. Her last boyfriend’s sudden disappearance was a big blow. Of course, I knew he’d been sent back to hell, but still. It was time she got back on the old dating horse again.

Not that long ago I would have been happy she wasn’t dating. A man was the last thing I wanted in her life. Yet as much as I hated to admit it, with Armando in her life, my mother had been transformed. She was more than just my mother. She was a woman, full and complete. There was a time when I wanted to be all she needed to feel good about herself. Those feelings were immature, because just as I needed more in my life, so did she.

When I placed the salad bowl in the sink, I happened to glance out the big bay window into our garden. It was way past sundown, and the yard was full of shadows.

I thought I saw something move.

I told myself it was a rodent digging for grubs, but then the person moved between shadows, and I realized someone was in our backyard. My heart leapt into my mouth.

Without thinking, I took the flashlight out of the kitchen drawer and moved to the back door.

“Is something wrong?” called Suze.

“No. I just want to check on something.”

I grabbed my coat off the rack and exited out the back door. I know it was stupid. This could have been the answer to a burglar or molester's prayers. But I didn't think so. I thought I saw Erin hiding in the shadows in our backyard.



Chapter Four

I stepped out into the night. A mist was drifting down from the mountains leaving the air cool and damp. Ours was an eco-friendly yard of low water shrubbery, sand and succulents. I shined the light near the dracaena bush where I'd seen her. The beam cut through the mist, illuminating a small object lying on the ground by the bush. As I was about to investigate, I heard a rustling to my right.

I whipped the light in the direction of the sound, the beam ricocheting off sand and shrubs. My heart was thundering in my ears like a drum. "Erin?" I caught a flash of red fabric—her favorite hoodie—as she ducked into another shadow and ran from the yard. The flashlight was trembling in my hand.

When I'd made it a goal of mine to see Erin and fix the rift in our friendship, this kind of meeting was not what I had in mind.

"What's going on out there?" Suze was standing backlit in the doorway, pulling a sweater around herself.

"Nothing. I think it was a possum or a badger. Go back inside." I hoped my voice didn't betray me. I took a few deep breaths to get my nerves under control.

"You sure you're okay out here alone? I don't mind waiting. Badgers can be dangerous."

I forced a smile. “This is our own backyard, Mom. I’m fine. I’m just going to scare him off. Go back inside!”

“Okay, okay. Don’t chew my head off. I’m going to go queue up the movie. Don’t be long. And be careful!”

As soon as she went back inside, I moved to where I saw the small object Erin had dropped on the ground. The beam of the light landed on a dead bird. I think it was a blue jay, but couldn’t be sure. Its head was missing. Fresh blood was starting to congeal on the tufts of the bird’s neck and breast.

“Oh, my!” I could feel my dinner rising into my chest. I swallowed hard.

What in the world is Erin doing leaving a headless bird in my backyard? The girl’s going crazy.

I recalled the dreams I’d been having where Erin turned into a monster. Ripping the heads off birds and dropping them in your former best friend’s backyard didn’t exactly qualify as monster behavior. I tried laughing it off as a dumb prank by an old friend who was irrationally angry with me. As I kicked the bird behind a shrub to keep Suze from seeing it until I could discard it in the morning, tendrils of fear, nonetheless, gripped my belly.



Ditch day.

I left for school early because I didn’t want Suze to see me carrying the outfit I planned on wearing to The Explosion. I eased out the front door while she was still in the shower without so much as a good bye. I didn’t know what I would tell her about leaving so early, but I had all day to come up with a good lie.

When I got to school, the locker area was near deserted. Seniors were taking the entire day off. The rest of the student body would not go back to class after lunch.

I was at my locker, hanging the capris pants and top in back where they wouldn’t get wrinkled, when Guy

ambushed me from behind, wrapping his arms around my waist. I hadn't seen or heard from him all weekend.

I had planned on pretending to be angry with him for not calling or texting, but when I felt his arms around my waist I lit up with a smile.

"Hey you," he whispered in my ear. "Miss me?"

"No," I replied. "I had the best weekend ever. I didn't even think about you until just now." I was laughing as I said it.

He spun me around. "Really? Because all I did was think about you."

And yet you didn't call or text, is what I wanted to say. "I missed you," is what I actually said. He pulled me closer. He smelled good.

"I missed you, too," he whispered. Then he kissed me without warning. It was a brief yet passionate kiss that took my breath away, right in front of my locker.

He took a step back and looked me up and down. "Man, I almost forgot how beautiful you are."

As curious as I had been about his mysterious weekend, once he called me beautiful, all thoughts of questioning him went out the window. I was overcome by a feeling of warmth and security. "Shut up," I said. I knew I was blushing.



It was nearly impossible to concentrate in class. I knew I needed to knuckle down because the sophomore AP exams were coming up soon. These were important tests because they would help decide our placement for junior year. The right placement in junior year was the key to getting into the best colleges. This is what we AP students were working so hard for.

Still, my thoughts kept drifting to the party and having Guy all to myself all afternoon. When the bell for lunch finally rang, I was tingling with excitement. By the time I had changed clothes, it had increased. As I walked past the cafeteria and out into the student parking lot, I realized I had never done anything like this before.

Maudrina was already waiting next to Guy's car. Her eyes were bulging with excitement. Ditching class was new for both of us.

A few minutes later, Guy arrived wearing a t-shirt, jeans, and a mischievous smile. "Hey there, ladies. Are we all ready to experience The Explosion?"

"Yes," we both replied.

"Righteeo."

The party was being held in a house on top of a hill that overlooked the valley. Mansion was more like it, with a beautiful, rolling, manicured lawn. There was a ten-foot wall surrounding the place so no one could see in. The gate had been left open. As we drove through, I felt as though we were entering the home of a big Hollywood star. The long drive that led up to the house was lined with tall evergreen trees. When we rounded the curve, ahead of us were wall-to-wall cars, like an overcrowded parking lot. People got as close to the house as they could, and just left their cars strewn across the drive at odd angles.

"Guess we'll have to hoof it from here," said Guy pulling in behind one of the many pickup trucks that crammed the drive.

When we started up the hill, we could see a small group walking ahead of us. The girls had on the same jeans and tops they wore to school. I started feeling uneasy. I didn't want to stand out like the geek who was trying to be cool.

"I think I'm overdressed," said Maudrina, a nervous lilt in her voice.

"That makes two of us."

"Nonsense, ladies. You both look lovely."

I appreciated that Guy was trying to put us at ease, but it wasn't working. "Thanks," I said. "But I don't think lovely is what those girls are going for."

"Yeah. They're doing the I-look-hip-and-cool-without-trying thing," added Maudrina.

"Relax. You both look hip and cool. No one is going to think you don't belong."

As we got closer, I spotted Ashley Scott and Heather McNamara in bikini tops and shorty shorts sunning

themselves on the lawn along with some other girls I'd seen but didn't know.

"Welcome!" called Jeremy. He was standing with a group of jocks under the white columned portico, pretending they weren't ogling the girls on the lawn. He separated himself from his friends and came over. He had a beer in his hand.

"How're they hangin', Barnett?"

"Hi. Thanks for inviting us." I was smiling. I couldn't believe I was actually here.

He looked at Guy. "I've seen you around."

"He's my boyfriend, Guy Matson. He's a junior."

They nodded at each other and did a fist bump that ended with a shoulder bump to prove how macho they were. I don't know why boys do that. It's ridiculous.

"And this is Maudrina."

Maudrina smiled. "Thanks for letting me tag along."

"No prob. You go to G.U.?"

Maudrina's smile vanished. "Yes, I go to G.U. We were in the same economics class last semester." She was annoyed.

"Oh, right." It was obvious he had no idea who she was.

People like me and Maudrina are invisible to the Poplarati. If I wasn't a friend of Matt's, Jeremy wouldn't have known who I was, either.

"Let me walk you guys in. A cooler with drinks is out back near the pool. Speaking of the pool, you can't go in with your clothes on. If you don't have a bathing suit, you've got to go skinny." A sly smile crossed his lips.

Fat chance I'd be taking off my clothes in front of all these boys.

"Whose house is this?" I asked as we walked.

"The house belongs to a fellow classmate who wishes to remain unanimous."

"You mean anonymous," chimed Maudrina. She was still annoyed.

"Isn't that what I just said?"

I shot Maudrina a knowing look, and she smiled. "My bad." We shared a laugh which seemed to cool her off.

Either Jeremy didn't notice or he didn't care. He walked us through the front door past Alonzo Briggs who was checking invitations. It really was an exclusive affair.

The home was spacious and beautifully decorated, with oversized white chaise lounges that looked custom made. Artwork was tastefully displayed on white walls. I recognized an etching by Susan Dysinger. Her originals didn't come cheap.

There were clumps of students everywhere, laughing and roughhousing, enjoying ditch day. All of a sudden, I started feeling sorry for whoever lived here. If the Poplarati trashed the place, the student's parents would have his hide.

Jeremy walked us into the room where the music was playing. Some of the crowd were dancing, others lounging on the comfy couches. Most of them were drinking.

"It's my turn on the door. Enjoy yourselves," he said before heading back to the front of the house.

"Well. Here we are." I was still taking it all in.

"Yep." I noticed Maudrina was looking around like a deer caught in headlights. I was experiencing the same feeling. Now that we were here, I still felt like an outsider. I was in the midst of the Poplarati, at one of the most exclusive parties of the year, and yet I was feeling like I didn't belong. It's one thing to feel you don't belong, but it's far worse to be in the midst of things realizing you will never belong.

"I don't know what I'm doing here," Maudrina mumbled under her breath.

"Let's dance," Guy said, and yanked her out onto the dance floor before she could protest.

He started dancing around her as she stood motionless like a marble column. He smiled at her with his eyes, and gestured with his hands. "Please don't embarrass me and leave me out here all alone," he whined, making a pouty face.

She laughed, and her shoulders began to relax. After a few moments she started moving to the music, stiffly at first.

"Houston, we have lift-off," Guy called out playfully.

Some of the partyers on the dance floor laughed.

A very cute boy said, "Yes, we do." He danced over to Maudrina to give Guy a hand.

That's when Maudrina really got into it, doing the Dougie with the two boys as if she did it all the time, and who knows, maybe she did, at home alone with her dogs.

A warmth came over me as if my whole body was smiling. I was proud to have a boyfriend who was so considerate as to put my friend at ease. *How lucky am I?*

A slow song came on. Guy looked at me across the floor with his dreamy eyes. Without hesitation I moved into his arms.

"Thanks for cheering her up." There was a satisfied smile on my face as Guy held me close on the dance floor. Maudrina was dancing next to us in the arms of the cute boy. Her head was on his shoulder, her eyes were closed. "But I guess saving the day is what you're supposed to do since you're an angel."

"True. But I'm on vacation, so I will accept the kudos." He pressed his hands against the small of my back. A delicious warmth radiated off him, washing over me.

"You have an answer for everything," I said playfully. His touch left me breathless. I was trying not to let it show.

"I try." He dipped me at that moment for effect. I came up laughing.

"Where do angels come from?" I asked.

He drew back, looking into my face to see if I was pulling his chain.

"I mean, I know they come from heaven. I got that. But are angels people who died and were brought back to help?"

He laughed out loud. "You watch too many movies." He drew me in closer, lowered his voice. "God created angels long before he created man. We are a race of beings just like you."

"Ah. So, being as you're an angel and all, I suppose you have wings hidden somewhere under that jacket." I rubbed my hands playfully along his shoulder blades.

“I did have wings at one time.” There was something in his tone, a sense of loss that made me sorry I asked the question. I changed the subject.

“You seem so worldly. I was wondering, have you had a girlfriend before?” I honestly didn’t know I was going to ask. No doubt, I’d thought it. After all, I wasn’t the first person he’d been sent to watch over. I knew how much he didn’t like answering *angel* questions, but my mind was searching for something to get us away from the subject of wings, and it just came out.

“No,” he replied. It was a one word, straightforward answer to get me to back off. But I was at The Explosion, and in his arms. I decided to go for it.

“Then how did you become such a good kisser? That doesn’t seem to me to be the kind of thing they teach in heaven. Not the way *you* kiss.” I smiled, hoping to take the edge off.

“Well...” He hesitated a moment. “I have to win people over.”

“By kissing them?”

“Yes. But not loving them.” He was starting to squirm.

“Is the great Guy Matson sweating?” I teased.

“I love you, Megan. It’s thrown my entire existence into turmoil. I didn’t plan on falling in love, but I did. I love you. I always will, and I’m happy about it.”

I suddenly found myself hyperventilating. Could anyone blame me? I was at The Explosion, dancing in the arms of the boy I loved, and he had just expressed his undying love for me.

As I swayed in Guy’s arms, I was thinking of what a beautiful place the world was, of how this was very much like the story book moments my mother read to me when I was a little girl, and how just as in the story books, I wished it would never end.

I was luxuriating in these thoughts when I happened to catch something out of the corner of my eye. Even though we were near the back of the house, it was one of those homes where you could see straight through to the front. A group of scraggly-haired toughs had just entered. They were too old to be students at G.U. There were two provocatively dressed girls with them. One of the girls

was a teased-out platinum blond in a short jean skirt and thigh-high leather boots. The other was Erin.



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