

A BFF NOVEL

The Guy Next Door

CAROL CULVER

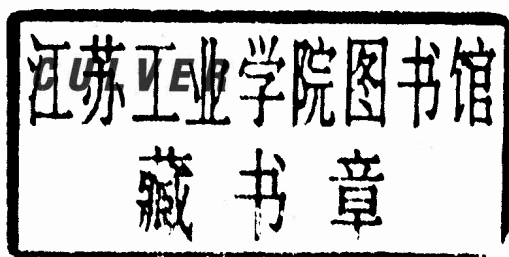
AUTHOR OF *RICH GIRL* AND *MANDERLEY PREP*



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It was a dark and stormy night when Maggie and her mother left their McMansion in Monte Vista and moved to a small rental house in Carlmont. Six months later, the weather had improved, but not much else. Maggie's parents' divorce was under way and the house she grew up in was for sale.

"Listen to this," her mother said, rattling the pages of Silicon Valley's newspaper's real estate section. "'Classic Spanish villa in prime Monte Vista, eat-in kitchen with granite countertops.'" She looked up, her eyes blazing. "*My granite countertops. My eat-in kitchen.'*"

Maggie grabbed her backpack and looked over her mother's

shoulder. “‘Private tree-studded setting,’” she read. A pang of nostalgia hit her between the ribs. Tree-studded was right. Tree-studded with a *tree house*. Or had her father taken down the tree house after she’d left, along with the volleyball net and the tetherball pole?

It didn’t matter. She was way too old for backyard sports or for the tree house where she’d once played with her best friend, Ethan Andrews. She picked up the duffel bag full of her fencing gear. That was her sport now. Fencing was fast, athletic and challenging. Just what she needed to take her mind off her other problems. “Gotta go. I’ll be late for school.”

Her mother said nothing, not even good-bye. Her face was blocked by the newspaper, but Maggie knew how she’d look. The way she’d looked for the past year: brow furrowed, eyebrows knitted together, her mouth in an angry frown.

Maggie could have reminded her that the sooner the house was sold, the sooner there’d be a settlement, but her mother had sunk too far into depression to be cheered by anything Maggie could say.

It was a relief to get to school, away from her mother’s despair, which hung over the house like a blanket of San Francisco fog. At least they didn’t live in an apartment. Maggie shuddered to think how that would affect her mother, who’d once had a gardener, a cleaning service and a personal

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trainer all come to her house in the private, tree-studded setting.

While everything else in her life had changed, Maggie was still at Manderley Prep, the most expensive, most exclusive high school in the Bay Area, maybe in the whole state of California. Let her father take up with a new girlfriend; let him complain about the way she and her mother spent his money. As long as he kept paying her \$28,000 tuition, she wouldn't say a word against him.

If she were being completely honest, she'd admit that one of the big reasons she loved the school was not the spacious campus, the small classes, the ten-to-one student/faculty ratio or even the snob appeal of rubbing elbows with the spawn of Silicon Valley's famous movers and shakers. It was the opportunity to see Ethan every day.

And this must be her lucky day. There he was, tossing a Frisbee across the lawn to one of his friends. So casual, so incredibly effortless. She didn't even have to wait until sixth period chemistry class or Mixed Chorus to get her Ethan fix for the day. Not that they ever spoke or hung out anymore. Except for one night when he'd come by the ice-cream store where she worked, he never even looked in her direction. Not in the classroom or the cafeteria or out there on the grass. That hurt.

She didn't expect him to be her BFF the way he had been when they were kids. Or take pictures of her fencing competitions for the school paper the way he did of other girls in more popular sports. Just a simple "hi" would be nice, considering . . .

She set her bag on the ground and watched him from under a blue jacaranda tree that Gertrude Manderley herself had imported from South America one hundred years ago. Maggie hoped to blend in to the scenery and not appear too awestruck at the sight of Ethan's tall, rangy body and broad shoulders.

Some guys went through an awkward stage, either skinny and clumsy or short and pudgy. Ethan never had. He was a cute little kid who'd grown up to be impossibly good-looking, with dark curly hair and strong features.

"Enjoying the view?" Her friend Victoria Lee had come up behind her. As usual she was dressed in the latest skinny jeans, with leather sandals showing off manicured toenails and a fitted jacket right out of *Vogue* that she'd probably made herself.

"Who's the hottie over there?"

"Ethan Andrews. An old friend, that's all."

"Maggie, you're holding out on me. Old—how old?"

"Used to live next door to us. Or rather, we used to live next door to him. Our parents were best friends and so were we. Not anymore."

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“Oh, because of the divorce?”

“Because we grew up. Do you think guys and girls can really be friends after a certain age?” *Please say no. Tell me it’s not because he doesn’t like me. It’s just the way it is. Guys turn their backs on the past while girls hang on.*

Victoria shook her head. “I don’t know. I live next door to Gabe and if I didn’t I might never have gotten to know him.”

Gabe was Victoria’s housekeeper’s son, who lived above the garage on the Lees’ estate. No one thought they’d ever be a couple. But they were.

“When I first met him I didn’t want to be his friend and he sure didn’t want to be mine,” Victoria reminded her.

“And now you’re madly, truly, deeply,” Maggie said with a sigh.

If Victoria weren’t such a good friend, Maggie would have hated her for her exotic half-Asian looks, her clothes, her money and her boyfriend, but she didn’t. Victoria was modest and generous to a fault, and a good friend just when Maggie needed friends the most.

Ever since the divorce, Maggie’s old friends had drifted away just like her mother’s had. It wasn’t as if “divorce” was a dirty word around there or something to be ashamed of. Loads of kids lived half the time with one parent and half with the other. But for Maggie, it seemed like she was the one who had

gotten divorced—from her house, her friends and her former generous weekly allowance.

Victoria grinned at Maggie, showing perfect teeth. If only Maggie had her braces off she might grin too. But she didn't. She had a mouth full of metal, and she was stuck with it for at least another eight months, according to the orthodontist, which seemed like an eternity. Unless, of course, she replaced them with the costly invisible kind. But the braces weren't the only reason Maggie didn't smile these days. There was the constant tension between her parents, her mother's depression and the nonstop worries about money.

"It's your turn," Victoria said. "Cindy's got Marco and I've got Gabe. If you want Ethan, you need to go after him. Does he have a girlfriend? Because if so, Cindy and I will get rid of her for you." Her two new friends amazed her. Both of them vigorously pursued their goals. And it paid off. If only she had their tenacity and their confidence to go after what she wanted.

The idea of perfectly groomed fashionista Victoria snatching Ethan away from a girlfriend just because Maggie wanted him for herself was so touching and so completely ludicrous that Maggie had to smile, in spite of herself, and expose her braces.

Curious, Maggie asked, "How would you get rid of her?"

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“Oh, I don’t know, tie her to a block of cement and dump her in the Bay.”

Maggie grinned. Although, knowing how Victoria had the guts to live on her own while her parents lived in Hong Kong, she wouldn’t put anything past her.

“Who’re you dumping in the Bay?” Tall, red-haired Cindy Ellis appeared at that moment, her well-worn clarinet case under one arm.

“See the Greek god over there?” Victoria asked. “Maggie likes him, I mean she really likes him, and if he’s got a girlfriend, we’ve got to get rid of her.”

“Count me in,” Cindy said. “Spring Fling is coming up. Let’s all go together.”

“Look,” Maggie said with a hint of desperation. “I appreciate your advice and all, but there’s no frigging way Ethan will ask me to the dance. Besides, I’m scheduled to work at Ice Cold Creamery every Friday and Saturday night.” If she hadn’t had the job, she’d have to invent one to have an excuse for not going out on the weekends—besides being unpopular.

“Then ask *him*, and take one night off. Come on, you deserve it.”

“Oh, right. How would that work? I call and ask him to the dance and he says, ‘Maggie who? The girl who wrestled all the boys to the ground in kindergarten? The girl who showed no

mercy in backyard volleyball games?’ See, I used to be a tom-boy,” she explained. “And he would never think of me as a date for a dance or anything.”

Her friends had obviously forgotten what life was like before they had boyfriends. Forgotten that sinking feeling in the pit of your stomach when *he* was in your class, the nervous tic in your eyelid when you ran into *him* unexpectedly on campus, the shaking hand when punching in a certain phone number then hanging up when you got *his* voice mail.

“Cindy, I remember when you had a crush on Marco. Don’t tell me you would have asked him to a dance then.”

“That’s different,” Cindy said. “I didn’t spend my childhood playing with Marco in my backyard. I didn’t know him. I was new here and so was he. He probably would have passed out from shock if I’d asked him to a dance. But it’s perfectly okay for you to do it. In fact, Ethan could be sitting around wondering why you haven’t asked him to the dance.”

“Yeah, right,” Maggie said. “I’m sure that’s what he’s doing.”

“No, she’s right,” Victoria said. “Sure, he might be surprised that you’re asking him. But it could be a good surprise. Ever think of that?”

Maggie shook her head. They just didn’t understand. If Ethan wanted to go out with her, he would have asked her. It was that simple.

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“Oh,” Victoria said, her face lighting up, “there’s Gabe. I need to talk to him. See you guys later.” With a wave to her friends, Victoria cut across the lawn to catch her boyfriend.

“I gotta run too. Later,” Cindy said, heading off to leave her clarinet in her locker before her first class.

Maggie went straight to Manderley Hall, the centerpiece of the school where founder Gertrude Manderley had once lived and hosted the rich and famous at her salons, and even hosted the poor, especially if they were outrageously bohemian and artsy enough to catch Gertrude’s attention.

Being childless, Gertrude had left her house to be turned into a school, and also left a scholarship fund for financially challenged smart kids like Cindy and Gabe. There were stories of how much Gertrude *hated* boring people, almost as much as she hated boring trees, like oak and redwood, which she had had removed and replaced, with exotic imports. Among other famous quotes, she’d supposedly said, “If you haven’t got anything nice to say about anyone, come and sit next to me.”

Maggie hurried down the stairs to the basement, the site of Gertrude’s private bowling alley, which was now used by the fencing club. There was just enough time to drop off her equipment and make it to first period English.

The light from the overhead fluorescent bulb was so dim Maggie could barely read the sign on the door with her glasses.

“Fencing Club cancelled until further notice.” It was signed *Newton Kavanaugh, Ret. Col, Headmaster.*

She dropped her duffel bag and reread the note. What did it mean? Fencing was her sport. Instead of spreading herself thin playing soccer in the fall, tennis in the spring and basketball in the winter, she was concentrating on fencing year-round.

They couldn't take it away from her. She loved everything about it—the lunges, the escape moves and the strategy. It was like chess with a sword. The hits were mere touches and scored electronically, but it felt real. More real than anything else she did these days. And it was a way to get noticed by college recruiters.

She heard footsteps. Someone else was coming. Maybe Greg Townsend, who taught history and coached fencing in his spare time. Now she'd get an answer.

But it wasn't Greg, it was Ethan. Her knees buckled. She licked her dry lips, snatched her glasses off and stuck them in her pocket. What on earth was he doing here?

“This the fencing room?” he asked. “Oh, Maggie, it's you.” He sounded disappointed, just as he would if she had the nerve to call and ask him to the dance. *Oh, Maggie, it's you*, he'd say.

“Hi, Ethan.” Why did her voice sound so high and tinny? “It *was* the fencing room. I don't know what's going on.” She tried the door and it swung open. The large, cavernous room

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was dark and damp. Just what you'd expect from a basement. Since there are no basements in the typical California house, no one expected anything from Gertrude's former bowling alley. There was a huge mirror on one wall, a must in fencing for determining what's wrong with your position. Looking down at your feet was a no-no. Just the mirror was left, that was all. No mats, no weapons or any other sign there was once a fencing club there.

"The lacrosse coach sent me to sign up for fencing."

"You mean Greg? Why?"

"He said it would be good for footwork and balance and hand control. My dodging and protection could use some work too, if I'm going to play lacrosse for one of the big schools."

"Like your father." Maggie remembered Ethan's father had played football for UCLA. Loyal alumni, his parents hosted a tailgate party at their house before every game. Naturally Maggie's family was always invited. Not anymore. Maybe her father still saw the Andrews socially, but they'd dropped her mother like she had a communicable disease.

"Like my father? I'll never be like my father," he said. "I hope. You fence?"

"Yeah, I do. I mean, I did. But if there's no after-school club anymore, I don't fence." Sure, there were private clubs; that's how Maggie had learned to fence. But those days of

country clubs and private lessons of any kind were gone for good.

“Bet you’re good at it. You were always a stellar athlete.”

If only he remembered something else about her. But that was too much to ask.

“So what’s the big deal with fencing?” he asked. “How come you do it and not . . . I don’t know . . . swimming or tennis? You really like swinging from chandeliers and jumping off balconies?” He grinned. Even in the dim light she saw his teeth were perfectly straight and dazzlingly white. It was something she couldn’t help noticing. Everybody at Manderley had a big, bright smile. Everybody but her. If you went to Manderley, you had enough money for an orthodontist and by the time you were a junior, all traces were gone.

If Maggie hadn’t had those Ugly Betty braces, she would have smiled back. “It’s not like that. It’s more like two people doing a dance. I don’t know why I can’t dance, but I can fence. It’s really fun if you do it right. For me it’s a challenge and it’s a good workout too. You know the fights in *Star Wars* with the lightsabers? That’s what fencing is supposed to look like.”

“Knowing you, you’re not afraid of getting hurt,” he said, looking at her with narrowed eyes. He must be remembering how she was always game to jump out of the tree house or

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somersault off the diving board at his pool. She wasn't even afraid of spiders in the garage. No wonder he'd never think of her as a girlfriend. She'd never been a girly-girl and it was too late to start now.

"Not with the right equipment," she said. "Fencing's actually safer than football or lacrosse. You just have to project a calm, confident image. That's a big part of fencing. Same with all sports, I guess."

He nodded. "Look tough, act tough. Stare down your opponent."

"Right. Even in fencing, when you have a mask in front of your eyes." She pointed to her duffel bag. "Glove, jacket, plastron, breast protector, mask . . . That's the kind of stuff you need."

"Where do I get it?"

"I can give you the catalog. But wait, there may not be any fencing at Manderley anymore."

"Well I gotta find a private coach then. Who's yours?"

He thought she still lived the privileged life of personal trainers and coaches. He had no idea what was going on in her world. Once she moved away, she was out of sight and out of mind. No, if she was honest with herself, it was over way before she moved, even before junior high. All of a sudden, for him, she didn't exist.

“I haven’t got a coach now, but I did. I’ll get you his name and number.”

“Thanks,” he said.

Maggie closed the door and they walked up the steps together in awkward silence. She had a dozen questions, but none she had the nerve to ask.

Things like: *Do you have a girlfriend now? Is it your blonde bimbo chemistry partner or one of those girls in chorus who’re always falling all over you?*

Do you remember when we used to run naked through the sprinklers on your back lawn?

What did you get on your last chemistry test?

How did you do on your PSATs?

Why don’t your parents ever call my mother?

Finally she came up with something less personal. “Are you still writing articles for *Manderley in Motion*?” He’d once told her he wanted to be a photojournalist like his uncle, who was a foreign correspondent. But that had been years ago.

“I had an article in last week’s issue,” he said. “I guess it made a big impression on you.”

“Oh, sorry, I didn’t see it.” Good one, Maggie. How had she missed it? “What was it about?”

“The new SATs. I can’t tell you what a black hole that fell