



a novel by
Victoria Michaels

*Boycotts
& Banflies*

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"Love isn't something you find. Love is something that finds you." — Loretta Young

*To my husband who inspires me and makes me laugh,
to my kids who love me, and to my family and dear friends
who encourage me to try new things.*

I have been truly blessed to have all of you in my life.

Also, to everyone who knows what vjgm means . . . thank you.

Chapter 1

Grace Park found herself on yet another bad date... the story of her life, or so it seemed. The Italian restaurant was dimly lit, with the smells of garlic and tomatoes filling the air around her. The clanking of dishes rang in her ears as she intently studied the red and white checkered tablecloth underneath her fingertips. She pushed the crumbs that fell from her breadstick into a small pile, all the while wondering just how much longer she would have to endure this torture. The long black waves of her hair hung around her face, providing a veil of privacy as she escaped into her own little world, trying to pass the time. She glanced up when she heard her name called and saw her date, Tony, looking at her with an irritated expression on his face.

“Sorry, I zoned. You were saying... something about that new computer program at work? I’m listening, I swear.”

Tony worked for an insurance company—not the most exciting of careers to discuss over dinner. He had been driveling on endlessly about accident rates in the Pacific Northwest since they had arrived at the restaurant. There was nothing particularly attractive about the man; his brown hair was cut very short to his scalp to hide just how much it was starting to thin at the crown, even at his young age. His brown eyes were hidden behind thin, wire-framed glasses that looked a bit too small for his face, and his skin was so pale that with his narrow build, one might wonder about his health. Work consumed his every waking hour, and to him, it was utterly fascinating. To the rest of the world, however, Grace included, it was boring as hell.

Grace casually glanced at her watch and realized she had only been there for thirty minutes. It only felt like an eternity. She silently cursed herself for not having the nerve to make up another excuse when she ran into him outside the elevator of their apartment building. Unfailingly persistent, Tony had asked her out for the fifth time in a month, and even though it shouldn't have, the question caught her completely off guard. It had been a really long day and she hadn't seen him coming quickly enough to be able to prepare a believable lie. Before she knew what happened, the word "sure" had slipped out of her mouth, and now, as a result, she was enduring the longest and most boring night of her life.

She shifted uncomfortably in her seat and again glanced at her watch, wondering how long it would be until she would get her reprieve. *It shouldn't be much longer*, she told herself. Like an answer to her unspoken prayer, Grace's cell phone rang in her pocket. She peeked down at the small, silver object and noticed the caller ID.

Thank God! I'm almost free...

"I'm so sorry; I need to get this. I told Meg not to bother me unless it was an absolute emergency."

Yes, Grace was using one of the oldest tricks in the book: having her girlfriend call midway through the date with an "emergency" so she could bail if it was a disaster or the guy was creepy. This date qualified on both counts. Unfortunately for Grace, these bail outs seemed to be happening a lot on her dates lately; so much so, in fact, that she made sure she went to church regularly so God wouldn't be tempted to actually give her mom a real illness as a punishment for all of the lying that she had been doing about her mother's health.

"Meg, I told you not to call unless it's an emergency. I'm on a date with Tony." Grace gave an apologetic smile and mouthed the word "sorry" to him for extra effect.

He shrugged like it was no big deal and took a sip of his wine, watching the waitress in a low cut sweater bend over and pour wine at the table next to them.

"So, does he suck as badly as I said he would?" Meg giggled into the phone. Grace heard Bianca scream in the background, "I warned you!"

"I had no idea," Grace answered vaguely, trying not to burst into laughter and tip off Tony that the call was anything but a serious emergency.

"Oh, come on! He practically has 'dull' tattooed across his forehead, and he's the worst dresser. So, you need a rescue, right? What story are you going

to use today? Mom's in the hospital, Mom took a nasty fall, or Mom got hit by a bus? You know those would require extra prayers this week," Meg teased.

"That's terrible," Grace quipped back, biting her cheek to keep from laughing. A giant smile would not sell an emergency to Tony, and right now she was desperate to get out of this dinner. She sucked it up and prepared for an Oscar-worthy performance.

Tony looked confused as he watched her, trying to decipher her end of the conversation and get some idea of what the call was all about.

Grace sighed into the phone and pressed the receiver more tightly to her ear to hide Meg's cheery voice as much as possible.

"OK, it's that bad, huh? Going for maximum impact, ready to bolt immediately? Well, I don't know what you were thinking in accepting the date; he isn't even cute, Grace. Just because he lives in the building doesn't mean you have to go on a date with him. You should have just said no or told him we were lesbians... or something. God, we seriously need to discuss raising your standards when it comes to men when you get home. Put him out of his misery. Go with the naked mom story. The movie starts in fifteen." With that parting bit of advice, Meg hung up on her. Fortunately for Grace, Meg talked incredibly fast, so it only took her seconds to relay the entire message.

At the end of Meg's tirade, Grace dropped her head into her hands and prepared to sell her sad story to Tony.

"Of course I understand... No, thank you so much for letting me know, Meg. I'll meet you there," Grace said into the silent phone. Then she snapped it shut and tossed her napkin onto the table.

"Tony, I have to go." She proceeded to replay her favorite sob story of her schizophrenic mom who had forgotten to take her meds and was found naked in a phone booth downtown. Grace turned on the waterworks, a gift she had that came in quite handy at times like these. A few apologies and a doggie bag later—no point in wasting perfectly good food when there were starving people in the world, not to mention the fact that leftovers were Meg's required payment for saving her—and Grace ran out of the restaurant into the chilly Portland air. *Free at last, free at last*, she thought with a smile on her face as she happily jumped into her car and cranked the radio. With new-found excitement, she made her way home to join her two best friends and get as far away from Tony as possible.



Grace smelled the popcorn as soon as she stepped off of the elevator.

Meg and Bianca must be close to starting the movie, she thought as she rushed down the hall, not wanting to be late.

“Hi, honeys! I’m home.” Grace came through the door and gently tossed her keys into the wicker basket on the counter.

Meg and Bianca were perched on the couch, remote control and popcorn in hand. “Grace,” they squealed in delight, “you escaped!”

Bianca, Meg, and Grace had been best friends for nearly four years. They met during their sophomore year of college, and after a horrible time living with insane roommates in the dorms, they decided to get an apartment together their junior year and had been living together ever since.

Bianca and Meg graduated with undergraduate degrees in interior design and currently worked at Baker Design House in downtown Portland. They had been there for the last year and a half, and even though they were only twenty-four years old, they had started to make quite a name for themselves. They were becoming two of the most highly sought after young designers in town.

Grace was the same age as her friends, but she was still in school and would be graduating in June with her Master’s in Literature. In the meantime, she was teaching English Lit classes at the local community college. The classes she taught didn’t make her a ton of money to live on, but her parents were very supportive of her education and were helping her financially until she finished her degree and could get a full-time job at the university.

Even with successful jobs and graduate level educations, the girls still found themselves failing with men. These days, they were in the midst of a “dating drought” as they liked to call it. It seemed none of them could find a decent guy for any sort of long term relationship. They had been going on a series of random dates that ranged from bad to disgusting on the date scale. Lately, their Friday nights involved one or two of them ending a bad date early, a big bowl of popcorn, and a “chick flick” to take their minds off of their misery.

Grace glanced over at the couch and saw the leggy redhead stretched out there, flipping through a magazine. “Bianca, what are you doing home already? You had a date, too. How’d you get home before me?” Bianca had left for her date at the same time as Grace, but she had already been home and screaming in the background when Meg called Grace at the restaurant.

Bianca blushed furiously at the question. She had very high standards when it came to guys. To Bianca, chemistry with a guy was everything, and if she didn’t

feel it immediately, she wasn't going to wait around for it to blossom. That was Bianca. She was a strong, beautiful woman, and she needed a man that was her equal; that was just how she was wired. If it was a blind date, she always had the guy wear a red rose on his lapel so she could check him out before she actually went so far as to introduce herself to him, giving her the option to walk away if she wasn't attracted to him. Of course, even the good looks and chemistry would only get a guy so far. He'd better have a brain and a personality to back it up, or she would leave him the first chance she got.

Meg wasn't nearly as bad as Bianca, but she was a hopeless romantic, looking for her one true love, convinced she would know him on sight. Her personality was quirky and wonderful. She too went on many first dates, but very few second dates for just that reason. Sometimes Grace envied Meg's faith in true love and happy endings more than she cared to admit.

Bianca laughed darkly, and then launched into the story of her disastrous date as the previews played on the TV. "You know I hate blind dates. I did it as a favor to this girl at work, and after seeing this guy, I'm not sure I'm going to ever speak to Cindy again! He was this scrawny blond guy with a cheesy mustache! I mean really, when have I ever liked a guy with facial hair? Ugh! I gave the hostess twenty dollars to tell him I threw up in the parking lot," she said, completely unashamed of her actions.

Bianca was not one to waste her time with being nice; she always cut to the chase. Grace was glad Bianca liked her, because she wouldn't want to be on her bad side.

The girls joined Grace in the kitchen and plopped down onto the bar stools across the counter. Grace smiled as she looked at them, so opposite in looks but similarly dazzling.

Bianca's long, red hair hung down past the middle of her back, thick and straight. Her blue eyes were mesmerizing and framed with thick, lush eyelashes. Blessed with a wonderful metabolism, she had a curvy, womanly body to die for without ever going to the gym. Women were jealous of her; men were enamored instantly. Throw in a pair of killer legs that went on for miles, she was gorgeous.

Meg was average in height, but next to Bianca's long legs, everyone looked tiny. Her small frame and currently chocolate brown hair made her a much more exotic beauty. Always a work in progress, she changed her hair color as often as some women changed their nail color. Last month it had been platinum blond with pink highlights. No matter what, her deep blue eyes shone under the veil

of her thick hair, twinkling with life, just like Meg herself. While average in stature, Meg had one of the biggest personalities you would ever come across. Everyone she ever met remembered her. Her smile lit up a room, and people just naturally gravitated to her warmth and happiness.

Grace placed the foil swan with her leftovers in front of Meg. “Thank you for saving me from Tony the Dull,” she said with a bow as she stood across the counter.

“No problem, but next time, please listen to us when we tell you someone isn’t right for you. We’re designers, for goodness sake; we can tell when things go together and when they don’t. It’s what we do.” Meg rolled her eyes and dramatically snapped the neck of the swan, digging into the leftovers. It was her silliness that Grace loved most about her.

“So I guess we’re the big losers this weekend, Bianca. At least I got a decent appetizer out of it and Meg got a foil swan of lasagna.” Grace laughed, trying her best to be a “glass half full” girl.

Bianca shrugged her shoulders. “True, but that’s also an hour of your life you’ll never get back, an hour wasted—on a dork. I, however, spent my hour productively shopping! Look at these fabulous shoes I found.” She squealed as she threw her foot into the air revealing a sleek black stiletto.

After an extensive discussion about the versatility of black patent leather heels in one’s fall wardrobe, Grace let out a loud sigh. “Girls, what are we going to do about all these losers we’ve been going on dates with? Where are all the good guys hiding?”

Meg laughed. “If we just keep going, eventually we will have dated every loser in the greater Portland area, and then, by process of elimination, we’ll finally come across the nice guys.”

“Yes, but we might be eighty years old by then, in a nursing home, eating pudding, and making Popsicle stick sculptures,” Grace teased.

“Oh, can we be roomies in the nursing home?” Meg asked excitedly. “Then we can wear our Juicy sweat suits and make all the other old people jealous of our fabulous style.”

“Enough about getting old and wrinkly, please. Let’s focus on the here and now, where we’re twenty-four and looking fit and fantastic. I’m with Grace; I’m tired of kissing frogs. I really want to make out with a handsome prince,” Bianca whined. “Is that really so much to ask? One sexy, gorgeous, mentally stable, gainfully employed guy with an amazing personality, that doesn’t smell

like mothballs or live with his mother?” Her eyes glazed over as she began to daydream about her perfect man.

Grace glanced over at Meg and found her deep in her own fantasy as she gracefully swayed with an invisible dance partner, probably named Mr. Right. Struck with an idea, Grace went to the refrigerator, took out three beers, and opened them, placing one in front of each of the girls. “I propose we go on a boy-boycott until the new year,” Grace said as she happily waved her beer in the air. “Who’s with me?”

Both of her friends considered the idea for a few seconds before smiles crept onto their faces. Meg, of course, had questions. “What are the rules of a boy-boycott? No dates, I assume, but what else? Can we kiss random boys? What if they kiss us? It doesn’t happen to me much, but Bianca gets that a lot, so I figured I’d ask...”

“Hold on a minute, Meg. Let’s make a list!” Grace dug in the drawer for a pen.

Bianca snatched a notebook off the nearby desk as Grace tossed her the pen she found. “OK, Boy-Boycott Official Rules,” she wrote across the top of the page.

Rule number one: No dates.

Rule number two: No tongue kissing with boys. Closed lip kissing is fine. If a guy crams his tongue down your throat unexpectedly, it doesn’t count, unless you kiss him back. (AKA Bianca’s rule)

Rule number three: No sex... of any kind. If you wouldn’t want to see your parents do it, that counts as sex and it’s off limits.

Rule number four: Each of us puts \$200 into the pot. If you break the rules of the boycott, you lose the money. The last person(s) standing gets the money to spend on a hot new pair of shoes to be worn on her first date of the new year and gets eternal bragging rights about her superior will power.

Bianca flipped the paper around so Meg and Grace could read it and check to see if they agreed with all of the rules. They quickly scanned the list; Grace was the first to sign the paper, followed by Meg, and finally Bianca. Grace ran into her room, her wavy black hair flowing behind her as she grabbed her wad of emergency cash. She slammed \$200 onto the counter. Meg and Bianca disappeared for a few minutes, and then did the same. They hid the winnings in the cookie jar and tucked it into the back corner of the counter.

“To the boycott!” Grace cheered as she raised her beer high into the air.

“To the boycott!” Bianca and Meg toasted in unison.



The smoke in the club was starting to burn Michael's eyes. He glanced to his left and found Jack and Ryan sitting on the nearby bench with a bleached blonde draped over each of their laps. Candy and Sandy were a set of twins from California with incredible bodies but about as much personality as a toilet seat.

"Mikey..." a voice whined in Michael's ear.

He turned to his right to see Donna, brainless friend of the twins and his date for the evening, pouting, inches away from his face.

"Mikey, why aren't you paying attention to me?" she asked as she snaked her way into his lap.

Because you're dull, dim, disgusting, drab, desolate, demonic... he thought to himself. *Nice use of the letter D, Michael.*

Michael flashed a dashing smile that he knew, from years of experience, would allow him to get away with anything and said, "Donna, my name is Michael, not Mikey. Please try and remember that; I'm tired of reminding you." Michael looked out the corner of his eye and saw Jack start laughing as Candy—or was it Sandy?—played with his hair.

"Come on, Michael, let's dance," Donna squealed as she jumped to her feet. "I love this song," she shouted over the music, pulling on Michael's arm.

"I don't dance, sorry."

Ryan raised his eyebrow suspiciously. He knew Michael was lying, and that he actually loved to dance, but obviously Michael didn't believe Donna was even worth the walk across the dance floor.

Michael looked at both Jack and Ryan and pressed two fingers to his temple which was their universal sign for "bail."

They both laughed and stood up somewhat abruptly, knocking Candy and Sandy off their laps. "Sorry, ladies, Michael has a migraine. We need to be going. Thanks for a pleasant evening. We'll... see you around," Ryan said as he gallantly kissed Candy's hand—or was it Sandy's?

They went through the motions of exchanging phone numbers, although the one Michael gave to Donna was to a local pizza joint, not his apartment. That was his signature way to end a bad date and he felt absolutely no guilt about doing it. He figured at least she'd end up with a great place to order pizza from.

A few kisses on the cheek later and they were in Jack's truck, flying down the highway.



“What the hell were we thinking, guys? If I had to listen to one more story about their ridiculous sorority, I was going to stab myself.” Michael shuddered at the memory. The evening had been filled with countless tales about rushing and pledging, things he loathed beyond words.

“Hey, man, it was twins! I had to go for it. You never know, sometimes twins can be a lot of fun. Of course this time, not so much... God were they stupid or what? You know Candy actually asked me if she was the first girl I’d ever picked up at work. Can you imagine?” Jack laughed. “So I said, ‘Of course, sweetie, only you,’ and she totally bought it.”

Ryan, Jack, and Michael had known each other for years. They met their senior year of college as they all finished their degrees in business management. About eighteen months ago, they’d started tending bar at a local nightclub to allow them to research a business venture they were interested in pursuing together. The Vault was a great place to work. They made easy money as bartenders, and working with their buddies was a major bonus.

On more than one occasion, the guys had taken out girls they met at work. They lovingly referred to them as the “barflies.” Some of their co-workers probably considered them major players for their free-wheeling ways, but they were twenty-six years old and good-looking, so they used what they had to their advantage. The funny thing was, even though they took out a lot of girls, very few of the dates turned into relationships. More often than not, the girls ended up being bubble heads, and the guys left them sitting in some nightclub, never to see them again. Tonight had been no different.

Since it was common knowledge that Michael always kept his refrigerator stocked, Jack and Ryan parked the car and followed him up to his apartment for a late night snack before heading back to their place. Jack and Ryan lived in your classic bachelor pad, with a pool table instead of a dining room table and more beer in the refrigerator than food. Michael, however, liked his privacy and had always lived alone. He loved Ryan and Jack; he just couldn’t live with them.

Three beers and a package of mini corn dogs later, they were sitting around Michael’s kitchen table, questioning if there were any decent girls in the Greater Portland area.

“Look at us. Just how lame are we? It’s not even midnight on a Friday night, and here we are, huddled around the table, eating junk food and drinking beer—alone,” Michael complained. Of course, hanging out together was a far better option than being out on a disastrous date with another brainless bimbo.

Deep down, Michael knew he needed something... something more in his life, someone special.

“We do look like losers, I’ll give you that. I mean, we’re good-looking guys! What’s wrong with us?” Jack asked with irritation as he ran his fingers through his dark spiked hair. Of the three of them, Jack had the most outgoing personality. He could probably talk a plant into coming back to his apartment if he put his mind to it; he was that charismatic. Girls loved his large frame and well-defined muscles, and Jack loved flexing them for anyone who was interested. He was the playful, big brother type, and everyone who met him wanted to be his friend.

Michael glanced over at Ryan, who was flipping through the Arts section of the newspaper, and smiled. In contrast to Jack, Ryan was more the strong, silent type—a real gentleman and a self proclaimed romantic. When he dated a girl, he often put her up on a pedestal, treating her like a queen, probably a result of being raised by his strong, southern mother. The girls swooned over his long blond hair with its natural highlights and his ice blue eyes. Where Jack was big and broad shouldered, Ryan was the tallest of the three men, and while muscular, his height made him appear exceptionally lean.

Michael had always been described by people as the boy next door that every mom wanted her daughter to go out with in high school. He was very smart, did well in school, and was voted most popular guy in his senior class. In college, he always had girls throwing themselves at him, but of the three, Michael was the most picky when it came to dating. He was not about to waste his time with someone he didn’t feel a connection with no matter how beautiful she was, so he developed his routine of only giving his phone number to the girls that he felt something for, ones that intrigued him. The rest got the number to the pizza joint. His blue eyes made the girls melt, and they loved to run their fingers through his dark brown hair, which he always kept on the long side and purposely messy.

Ryan looked at Michael over the top of the newspaper and shrugged in response to the question, but Jack was right. They *were* good-looking, and tons of girls hit on them every night at work. Unfortunately, they weren’t girls a guy could have a conversation with that lasted more than three minutes. Their skills were more in the physical realm, rather than the intellectual. Definitely not the kind of women they’d ever dare take home to meet their mothers, that’s for sure.

Ryan thought about it for a second as he chewed on his last corn dog. “You know, I don’t think there’s anything wrong with us. What’s that one song?”

'Looking for Love in all the Wrong Places.' I think that's our problem. I mean, my mom keeps bugging me that I'm never going to meet a nice girl at the bar. According to her, nice girls wouldn't be caught dead picking up a guy in a bar because they're off at the museum or the library. Maybe she's right."

Jack's mouth fell open in shock. "You're not seriously suggesting we go trolling the library for chicks? Or a museum... Wait. Like an art museum, or are we talking a history museum? I could tolerate the dinosaur bones and war relics, but modern art will just give me a headache. A red dot on a white canvas isn't 'a representation of a woman's struggle in a male dominated society,' it's a red freakin' circle!" Michael and Ryan nodded their heads in agreement with Jack's artistic tirade.

Michael considered Mama Bartlett's point for a minute. Most nice girls didn't hit on bartenders at the bar; it seemed like a reasonable assumption. It only followed suit that libraries and museums wouldn't be filled with bimbos and brainless twits. Sure, one or two would probably sneak in from time to time, but you had to actually know what a book was to be at the library, and you had to be able to appreciate art to be at a museum.

Slamming his hand on the table, Michael said, "I think we should give it a try. What the hell do we have to lose? Let's go look for the nice girls in town. No more barflies. If we meet them at the bar, they're off limits." He glanced back and forth between Jack and Ryan, trying to gauge their reactions to his unorthodox suggestion.

Jack was more interested in chugging his beer than answering the question. Ryan, however, looked deep in thought.

"I'm with Michael, no more barflies. Bring on the smart girls," he said with great enthusiasm. "Jack?"

Both Michael and Ryan knew it was an all-or-none proposition. The only way it would work was if Jack agreed and they were all in this together.

A grin came across Jack's face. "Care to make it a little more interesting... say, with a small wager?" His eyebrows arched up playfully, daring the guys to accept the challenge.

As childish as it sounded, the guys loved making bets. They'd bet on the weather, how much snow they'd get over the winter, if Jack would go home with a blonde or a brunette. If there was something to bet on, they definitely found it.

"What's the bet, Jack?" Michael asked, his interest now piqued by the possibility of a little friendly competition.

“Well, don’t they say sex ruins a relationship? And we are looking for quality girlfriends, right? So, we each put a couple of nights’ worth of tips in a pot, and the last guy to have sex wins the money. That helps make sure none of us cheat or go have some meaningless quickie with a barfly. Sound reasonable?” Jack offered.

“Sure, let’s do it,” Ryan and Michael agreed. They both knew that this probably wouldn’t be easy, and that they were all going to have to be out of their element by looking for nice, intelligent girls, but they were all ready to give it their very best effort.

Michael, for one, loved a good challenge, and this was sure to be just that. Smart girls were... well, smart. He just hoped they weren’t smarter than he was. Besides, who knew what they may find if they actually looked for love in all the *right* places.