



B I G
B  n e D

a novel

M e G
C a B O T

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Chapter One

You're not fat

Though you could get toned

But it's not your fault—

You're just big boned

“Big Boned”

Written by Heather Wells

“You came!”

That's what Tad Tocco, my remedial math assistant professor, says as I walk up to him that morning in Washington Square Park.

He doesn't kiss me, because our relationship is totally illicit. Professors—especially tenure track assistant professors in the math department—aren't allowed to have romances with their students.

Even students who, like me, are practically thirty, work as an assistant director in one of the college's dormitories, and are taking the course pass/fail anyway.

“Of course I came,” I say, trying to sound like there'd never been any doubt. Except, of course,

when I'd rolled over a half-hour earlier and looked at the clock, and seen the big hand on the twelve, and the little hand on the six, all I'd wanted to do was pull the covers back over my head and hunker down for another two and a half hours of blissful sleep. I mean, isn't that the whole point of living two blocks from where you work? So you can sleep in until the absolute last minute?

But I'd promised.

And now I'm glad I'd dragged myself out from beneath my cozy comforter. Because Tad looks great. The early morning sunlight is glinting off his long blond hair—pulled back in a ponytail that's almost longer than mine—and off the golden hairs on his bare legs, as well.

And I can see a lot of those golden leg hairs, thanks to the tiny running shorts he's wearing.

Hello, God, are You there? It's me, Heather. Just wanted to say thank You. Thank You for the bright sunshine and the clear cool air and the pretty spring flowers, bursting into bloom.

Thank You for tenure track assistant professors in

tiny running shorts, as well. These things really are worth getting up two and a half hours earlier than I need to. If I had any idea, I'd have started getting up this early a long time ago.

Well, maybe.

“So I figured we'd take it slow,” Tad informs me. He's doing stretches on a park bench. His thigh muscles are lean and hard, without an ounce of fat on them. Even when in a relaxed position, Tad's thighs are firm as stone. I know this because I have felt them. Even though we are forbidden by our mutual employer, New York College, from having romantic relationships with students, Tad and I are sneaking around behind everybody's back.

Because when you're both in your late twenties to early thirties, and you're taking a remedial math class pass/fail just so you can take real classes later anyway, who even cares?

Besides which, it's been approximately forever since I've gotten any. What was I supposed to do, wait until May, when my course is over, before jumping his bones? Yeah. Like that was going to happen.

Especially considering Tad's bones. I mean, the guy is fit--partly due to his athletic lifestyle (he runs, swims laps over at the sports center, and plays on a killer Frisbee team), and partly due to the fact that he eats extremely healthfully.

If you consider not eating meat healthy, which I am not completely convinced I do.

When I am in a relaxed position, my thighs feel spongy. This is partly due to the fact that I don't run, swim, or play Frisbee of any kind, and also due to the fact that I will eat anything if it has chocolate sauce or ketchup on it.

Or even if it's just plain, as in the case of Krispy Kreme doughnuts (which Tad will eat, too, because they are fried in vegetable oil, not animal lard.

Although I notice that when Tad eats Krispy Kremes, he enjoys just one and seems satisfied, whereas I have to consume the entire box, as I cannot stop thinking about them until I know all the Krispy Kremes are gone. What's up with that?).

Wait. Why am I thinking about Krispy Kremes?

We're supposed to be exercising.

“You want to stretch out?” Tad asks me, as he is pressing the back of his heel into his butt. I know that Tad’s butt is as rock hard as his thighs. My butt, on the other hand, is even spongier than my thighs. Although it’s big enough that I can touch it with the back of my heel quite easily. It’s hardly a stretch at all.

“Sure,” I say.

As I stretch, I notice that all the runners in the park are wearing shorts, like Tad. I’m the only one in leggings. Or, should I say, yoga pants. Because no way am I putting on a pair of leggings. Let’s face it, Ellen Pompeo I am not.

That’s why I was so glad when I found a pair of yoga pants that are almost bell bottomed. They’re what I’m wearing instead of leggings or running shorts. I’m hoping the bell bottoms will balance me out, so I don’t look, you know, like a Weeble.

“Okay,” Tad says, smiling down at me. He is wearing his gold-rimmed glasses, which make him look especially professorial. I love his glasses, because you really can’t tell that behind those lenses,

he has the most beautiful blue eyes ever. Until he takes them off. Which he only does at bedtime. “Four times around is a mile. Five kilometers is about three miles. So I usually go around about twelve times. Does that sound all right? We’ll take it nice and slow, since this is your first day.”

“Oh,” I say. “Don’t worry about me. Go at your own pace. I’ll catch up.”

Tad’s golden eyebrows constrict. “Heather. Are you sure?”

“Of course,” I say, with a laugh. “I’ll be fine. It’s just a little morning jog.”

“Heather,” Tad says, still looking concerned.

“Don’t try to shrug this off like it’s no big deal. I know this is a big step for you, and I’m really proud of you just for showing up. The truth is, I care about you, and your physical health is really important to me. And race training is serious business. Do it wrong, and you could seriously injure yourself.”

Athletes! They’re so particular. Morning jog, race training. Who even cares? Anyway you say it, it still

spells death to me.

Wait...did I think that? I didn't mean it. No, really. This is going to be fun. I'm getting into shape. Because, like Tad keeps telling me, I'm not fat. I just need to tone up a little.

"You go ahead," I tell him, with a smile. "I'll be right behind you."

Tad shrugs, gives me a goodbye wink—I guess he knows as well as I do that he's going to leave me in his dust—and takes off.

Yeah. No way I'm going to keep up with that. But that's okay. I'll just go at my own pace. Nice and easy. Here we go. There, see? I'm doing it. I'm running! Hey, look at me! I'm running! I'm—
Okay, well, that's enough of that. Whew. I mean, a girl could hyperventilate from doing that. And seriously, it's my first day. Don't want to overdo it. Also, I think I felt something come loose back there. I'm not trying to overreact or anything, but I think it was my uterus. Honest. I think my uterus jiggled free. Is that even possible? I mean, could my uterus just come sliding out?

I seriously hope not because these yoga pants slash leggings aren't tight enough to hold it in. I got the extra large instead of the large because I figured, you know, no one would be able to see my cellulite through them if they weren't skin tight.

But now my uterus is just going to come out between my legs and I'm going to look like I'm walking around with an enormous load in my pants. Maybe it wasn't my uterus. Maybe it was just my ovaries. But that's okay, since I'm not really sure I want kids anyway. I mean, yeah, it might be nice, but what kind of mother would I make, really? If it weren't for my ex-boyfriend's family blacksheep of a brother letting me live rent-free on a floor of his brownstone in exchange for doing all the billing and bookkeeping for his private detective agency, I'd probably be living in a six-person share in Long Island City right about now, barely making it to work before noon every day, since I live approximately a two minute walk from where I work as it is, and I hardly ever make it there before nine.

How am I going to handle nurturing an actual living human being who is totally dependent on me for all its needs?

Look at my dog! I mean, I left my dog at home instead of bringing her here to the park with me for my morning jog because she was still sleeping and didn't want to get up when I got up. Even when I rattled her leash. What kind of mom would do that? What kind of mom goes, "Okay. Whatever" when her kids tell her they want to stay home and sleep instead of go to school?

I'll tell you what kind. The kind you see being led away in handcuffs on the evening news, going, "Git that camera outta my face!"

Namely me.

Seriously, though. That's how early I'm up. So early my own dog expressed no interest in getting up and joining me. That's really sad.

Especially since Lucy doesn't know about the big shock she's shortly headed for: Ever since Cooper let my father—the ex-con--move in, Lucy's been living the high life, thanks to Dad's habit of

whipping up gourmet dinners and taking her on long rambles all over the city (in exchange for the free room and board, Cooper had Dad tail a few of his clients' soon-to-be exes. Dad thought he looked less conspicuous hanging around outside the Ritz if he was walking a dog).

But now that Dad's reconnected with his old business partner, Larry, and the two of them have cooked up this new super-secret plot to get them "back in the music biz," he's moving on up... not so much to a deluxe apartment in the sky, but to the second bedroom in Larry's co-op on Park and Fifty-seventh, at least.

Which believe me, I'm not complaining about.

Sure, I'm sorry to see Dad go—it was kind of nice to come home to an already walked dog and home-cooked meal every night.

But how many nearly thirty-year-old girls do you know who still live with their dads?

Still, if Lucy knew how shortly her gravy-train was about to end, I bet she wouldn't have been quite so blasé about taking a walk with me this morning.

Excuse me. A race-training jog.

I think Lucy might actually have had the right idea though. Once you get past the part about ogling all the cute tenure track assistant professors in their running shorts, this jogging thing is lame. I think I'll just walk. Walking is excellent exercise. They say if you walk briskly for half an hour a day, you won't gain weight, or something. Which isn't as good as losing weight. You know, if you need to. But it's better than nothing.

Yeah, walking is good. Of course, all these people are careening past me. Sporty people. Their uteruses clearly aren't falling out. How are they keeping theirs inside? What's the secret?

“Heather?”

Yikes. It's Tad.

“You okay?”

He is jogging beside me, pretty much in place, because I'm going so slowly.

“I'm fine!” I cry. “Just, you know. Pacing myself. Like you said.”

“Oh.” Tad looks concerned. “So...everything is all

right?

“Everything’s fine!” Except my uterus. Or ovaries. Whichever. I hope Tad doesn’t plan on having children. I mean, with me. Except through adoption. Because I think all my equipment fell out back there by the dog run.

“Um,” Tad says. “Okay. Well....”

“Go on,” I say, cheerfully. Because I’m very careful not to let Tad see my real morning persona. Because he’s not ready for it. Yet. “I’m good.”

“Okay,” Tad says again. “See you.”

He takes off again, fleet and golden as a gazelle, his ponytail bobbing behind him. Look at him go. That’s my boyfriend, I want to say to the size 0 who comes whipping past me, in her tiny running shorts and seventeen tank tops (seriously, what is the point of the layered tank top look? And you can’t tell me one of those tank tops is a sports bra, which, excuse me, she does not need, not actually having breasts. Me, I’m the one who practically suffered an eye injury back there, when I tried to jog a few

steps). Yeah. My boyfriend. He's hot, right? Oh, hey, look. I made it all the way around the park! Once. And okay, I walked most of the way, but still. Only eleven more times to go! Yeah, this 5K thing will be a cinch. I wonder why Tad's so hot for me to do a 5K with him anyway. It can't be just that he cares about me and wants me to be healthy, can it? Because I just went to the health center for a physical and I am totally fine. A little in the overweight zone with my BMI, but who says the BMI is an accurate indicator of health anyway? Except the US government.

Well, I guess a couple that runs together stays together....

Only not, because he's like five laps ahead of me. Make that six.

How did I let him talk me into this? Oh, wait, I know how...I just want him to like me. And since he's a fit, health-conscious person, I want him to think I'm one, too. It's amazing I've managed to keep him going this long...almost three months. Twelve weeks the guy and I have been going out,

and he still thinks I'm the kind of girl who runs 5Ks in the morning for fun, and not the kind of girl who takes baths instead of showers because I'm too lazy to stand up for as long as it takes to wash my hair.

This, undoubtedly, is due to the fact that he takes off his glasses before we go to bed.

Cooper tried to warn me, of course, in his own subtle way. He ran into us while Tad and I were grabbing lunch at Zen Palate one day. I've never brought Tad home because...well, Cooper never brings his lady friends home. And I'm pretty sure he has some, because there are occasionally messages on the answering machine that can't be explained any other way...a woman's voice, purring sexily, Coop, it's Kendra. Call me. That kind of thing.

But I hadn't been able to avoid making introductions at Zen Palate, which Tad goes to because it's vegetarian, and Cooper goes to because—well, to tell you the truth, I have no idea why Cooper was there that day.

Anyway, later, I hadn't been able to resist asking Cooper what he'd thought of Tad. I guess this part of me was totally hoping that, now that Cooper had seen me all happy with a killer Frisbee-playing hottie, he'd regret telling me I needed a rebound guy, and that he didn't want to be it.

But all Cooper had asked was, considering Tad was a vegetarian, what on earth we could possibly have in common.

Which I found sort of insulting. I mean, there's lots of stuff I care about besides food.

And, okay, Tad isn't really interested in any of them. Like, he's more into the Cartesian plane, and I'm more into the Cartoon Network. He likes Neil Young, and I like Neil Diamond (as an ironic pop culture figure, not to listen to. Except "Brother Love's Traveling Salvation Show," and only when I'm alone). I like movies with explosions in them. He likes movies with subtitles in them.

That kind of thing.

But still. Who goes around asking people that

kind of thing? What they have in common as a couple, I mean? How rude is that? I wanted to ask Cooper what he thought WE, as in he and I, had in common as a couple...until I remembered we're not a couple.

The scary thing is that Cooper and I have tons of things in common...we both like good food (such as Nathan's hot dogs, oysters on the half shell, and Peking duck, to name a few), and good music (such as blues, all jazz but fusion, classical, opera, R and B, any kind of rock except for heavy metal, although I have a secret soft spot for Aerosmith), and good wine (well, okay, I can't really tell the difference between a good wine and a bad one, but I do know the good stuff doesn't taste like salad dressing or give me a headache).

And, of course, really bad TV. Which I hadn't known Cooper liked, too, until recently. I'd come across him in a moment when he'd clearly thought he was alone in the house. He'd reached hastily for the remote, attempting to switch to CNN before I

got a look. But I saw. Oh, I saw.

“Shame on you, Cooper,” I’d said...though inwardly, of course, I’d been thrilled. “The Golden Girls?”

“Shut up,” he’d replied, affably.

“Seriously,” I’d said. Because who doesn’t love The Golden Girls? Well, except for Tad, who doesn’t own a TV (I know. I know, okay?). “Which one are you?”

He’d just looked at me like I was insane. But not for the reason I’d thought. Because it turned out he knew exactly what I was talking about. “Dorothy, of course.”

My heart had nearly stopped. “Me, too,” I’d murmured. And then I’d settled onto the couch beside him, to watch.

Cooper and I have a lot in common—even down to the fact that we both can’t stand to see a social injustice go unpunished (or a crime go unsolved), even when we might have to risk our own lives in order to make things right. Not to mention, we are

both somewhat emotionally estranged from our families.

But that doesn't mean I'm not totally into Tad. I am.

I'm just maybe not into running with him.

Which was why, when Tad passed me for like the eighth time, and slowed down to ask, "Heather? Are you doing okay?" I suddenly developed a limp. "Um," I said. "I might have pulled something. If it's okay with you, I was thinking maybe we could call it a day, and go back to your place and take a shower. Then I'll take you out to breakfast. They're serving Belgian waffles in the caf today." It turns out you should never underestimate the appeal of Belgian waffles to a vegetarian killer Frisbee-playing tenure track assistant professor. Even one who is trying to get his girlfriend to embrace physical fitness.

Then again, it could have been the shower. Tad is convinced it is environmentally unsound for two people to waste water by showering separately when

they could shower together.

I have never been a big fan of the shower until now. And the fact that Tad has to take his glasses off before he gets in, so I don't have to huddle against the wall in an effort to hide my cellulite? Well, that's just an added plus.

Especially when Tad, as we're soaping each other's chests, asks, a little diffidently, "Heather. There's something I've been meaning to ask you."

"Oh?" It's hard to keep your voice neutral when a guy is massaging your naughty bits with a washcloth. Even if he can't really see said naughty bits due to being extremely myopic.

"Yeah. Do you have any, er, plans this summer?"

"You mean, like...for a weekend share, or something?" Is he asking if I want to split a rental on the shore with him? Well, this is awkward. I am so not a beach girl. Because beach means bathing suit, and bathing suit equals sarong, which equals social awkwardness when it comes to everyone asking, When are you going to take your sarong off so you can join us in the water?

“No,” he says. “I meant...could you maybe take a few weeks off?”

“I don’t know,” I say, slowly. A few weeks at the beach? How can I plead disfiguring case of heat rash and therefore cannot remove sarong for a few weeks? “I’ll only have accrued about a week of vacation time since I started....” Would he believe me if I say I’m allergic to sand fleas?

“This’ll take longer than a week,” Tad murmurs, as his hand moves even lower. “What about a leave of absence? Do you think you could wrangle one of those?”

“I guess I could ask.” What’s going on here? I mean, I know what’s going on down there. But what’s going on up there, in my boyfriend’s head? This is sounding less and less like a weekend beach share and more and more like....I don’t even know.

“How long are we talking about? What have you got in mind? Cross country road trip?”

Tad smiles. “Not exactly. And actually....Forget I said anything. I want to ask you when the timing’s right. And right now, the timing is definitely...

not...right.”

The timing was perfectly right, if you asked me. Just not for anything other than...well. Good clean fun.

Still, I couldn't help feeling a little bit flustered.

What on earth could Tad want to ask me—but only when the timing's right—that would require me taking a significant amount of time off from work this summer?

Hmmm...what...no....

No. Definitely. Not. Not that. It couldn't be.

We'd only been dating for twelve weeks!

On the other hand...I did go running with him this morning. If that's not a sign of commitment, I don't know what is.

Still, it's the little things that count most in life. It really is.

Looking back, it's funny (strange funny. Not ha ha funny) that at the exact moment I was thinking this, my new boss was taking his first sip of morning coffee....

And dying.