

#1 NATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR

MEG CABOT



Pants on Fire

Chapter Three

Okay, why?

That's all I want to know.

Why did Tommy Sullivan have to come back now, just when everything was going perfectly, to mess it all up?

The summer before your senior year is the last summer when you can actually have a good time. No stresses yet about college apps and transcripts. No freaking out about extracurriculars or Chemistry.

And this was shaping up to be the most outstanding summer of my life: I'm best friends with the most popular girl in school. I've got a job I love, where I make good enough money to have (almost) fully paid off the camera I really want. I've got a fantastic boyfriend, and an even hotter guy to mack with behind the emergency generator when that

boyfriend isn't around....

And okay, I know it's wrong to make out with other guys when you have a steady boyfriend, but whatever. I'm having fun. FUN, for the first time in my life. Isn't that what high school is all about?

So why does Tommy Sullivan have to come back to town NOW, and ruin it all?

Liam wouldn't give me any details last night, after he dropped his little bombshell, because he was mad I wouldn't get off the phone with Sidney to listen to him. Liam's fourteen and starting his freshman year at Eastport High, and his new height totally attracted the attention of Coach Hayes, who spied Liam towering over everyone at freshman orientation, and asked him if he was trying out for the Quahogs.

Since Liam-like every other guy in Eastport--practically lives for Quahog football, this totally

went to his head. He's been impossible to live with ever since. And tryouts aren't even until Friday.

But I knew from experience that I'd wear him down eventually, and get him to spill the details of his Tommy Sullivan stunner. Liam can't keep a secret to save his life.

Which is why, when I saw what time it was when I woke up the next morning, I said my best swear word, rolled out of bed and, without even showering first, threw on my clothes (and, okay, a tiny bit of makeup, because a girl running for Quahog Princess really shouldn't be seen in public without her mascara on), hopped on my bike, and pedaled over to the Y, where Liam's been going every day to lift weights in the hope of bulking up for the Quahog tryouts.

Oh, yeah. I'm like the only seventeen year old in Eastport who doesn't have a car. I'm not one of those vegan environmentalist types who hang out

with Morgan Castle over at the Oaken Bucket, or anything. I totally love meat. I just think if you live in a small town-and Eastport's only got twenty-five thousand full-time residents (though May through August, the population rises to thirty-five thousand, on account of the Summer People)-you should ride a bike around, and not drive. It's better for the environment, and better for you physically, as well.

Sidney thinks it's weird I'm saving my money for a camera and not a car, like everyone else we know (although, to be truthful, everyone else we know got a car for their sixteenth birthday. I asked for-and received-a Power Mac G5, along with a full color printer so I could print my own photos-although I still take my film in to Eastport Old Towne Photo if I want something really professional looking), but there's nowhere I need to go that isn't within biking distance (except the city, but I can take public transportation there), so why waste fossil fuels when I can just use pedal power?

And, unlike Sidney, I don't have to spend hours in the gym every week, since I get all my exercise from biking around.

Besides, I like having the wind in my hair (well, in my face, I guess, my bike helmet covers my hair), and being able to dart places cars can't go, like onto the bridle path along the beach, instead of taking the busy, often traffic-jammed Post Road to downtown Eastport, like everybody else.

Plus, I can always find a parking space, especially now that the town has put decorative bike racks every twenty feet along the sidewalk in what they like to call the historic "Seaport District."

And, also unlike Sidney-and Seth and Dave and Martha and everyone else we know-I have never once gotten a speeding ticket from the Eastport traffic cops.

Oh, fine. Okay, true confession time: I get car sick.

In fact, I get everything sick-sea sick, air sick, train sick, car sick, even raft sick (from floating on a raft in a pool) and swing sick (from swinging on a swing set).

The only time I don't feel sick? When I'm walking. Or riding a bike.

Whatever. My mom blames it on the inner ear infections I had as a kid. My dad-who has never been sick a day in his life, and won't let any of us forget it-thinks it's all psychosomatic, and that as soon as I fall for a cute enough guy, I won't get sick at all when he's driving me around, and I'll even want to get a license. For instance, so I can drive with the guy in a Ferrari through the Alps. Because, Dad says, no one can function as an adult without a driver's license.

But as I've informed Dad numerous times, there is no guy in the world cute enough for this to happen.

And besides, it's totally possible to function as an adult without a driver's license: it's called New York City, where all the great photographers in America live and work.

And guess what? They have bike paths there, too.

Anyway, I locked up outside the Y, and went inside to find my brother lying on a padded bench, pulling on some kind of cords that caused all these weights behind him to raise up a few inches. Not unusually, there were a cluster of fourteen-year-old girls gathered around him, giggling excitedly. Because, since word got out that Coach Hayes himself had approached Liam about trying out for the Quahogs, every fourteen-year-old girl in town has been calling the house at all hours of the day, asking if Liam's there.

Clearly, all of the Tiffanys and Brittanys I've been taking messages for have figured out where Liam spends his free time-when he isn't at Duckpin

Lanes.

“Excuse me, ladies,” I said to them. “But I need to have a word with my brother.”

The Tiffanys and Brittanys tittered like I’d said something funny. I’ve seriously never seen so many tanned bellies in my life. Do these girls’ mothers really let them out of the house dressed that way? I was betting they left wearing real clothes, then whipped them off as soon as Mom wasn’t looking anymore.

“Not now, Kate,” Liam said, his face turning very red. Not because he was embarrassed, but because he was lifting way more weight than he probably should have been, to show off in front of the girls.

“Oh, yes, now,” I said, and pulled on one of his legs hairs.

CRASH! Went the weights behind him.

Liam said a number of very colorful swear words, and the girls scattered, giggling hysterically, but really only retreating as far as the water cooler over by the desk where they hand out the towels.

“You didn’t really see Tommy Sullivan at Duckpin Lanes last night,” I said, to my brother. “Did you?”

“I don’t know,” Liam snapped. “Maybe not. Maybe it was some other guy who came up to me and asked if I was Katie Ellison’s little brother, and introduced himself as Tom Sullivan. Why’d you have to do that? Pull my leg hair like that? I hate when you do that. I could have seriously injured myself, you know.”

“Tom Sullivan?” For the first time since I’d heard the news that Tommy Sullivan was back in town, my heart lifted. Tommy never called himself Tom. He’d always been Tommy, since kindergarten-when I’d first met him.

Maybe whoever Liam had met last night wasn't Tommy Sullivan-my Tommy Sullivan--after all!

“Maybe it was someone else,” I said, hopefully.
“Some other Thomas Sullivan.”

The look Liam gave me was very sarcastic.

“Yeah,” he said. “Some other Thomas Sullivan who told me he'd been in your class at school and wanted to know how you were doing...and has red hair?”

My heart totally stopped beating. I swear, for a few seconds, I couldn't even breathe. I could hear the rock music the Y plays over their sound system-they had it on the local pop station.

But it sounded really distant.

Because there's only one Tommy Sullivan I know

of who's ever been in my class at school.

And only one Tommy Sullivan I know of who has red hair.

That hair! How many times since eighth grade, when Tommy finally left town, had I seen a guy-a tourist, usually--with red hair, and done a double-take, my heart hammering, certain it was Tommy, and I was going to have to look into those weird hazel eyes of his, which in certain lights were as green as the sound during high tide, and in others, amber as leaves on an autumn day, sometimes even gold, like honey--only to have the guy turn around, and end up not being Tommy at all.

Phew, I always told myself when this happened.

But could what Liam be telling me possibly be true? Could my luck--where Tommy Sullivan is concerned, anyway--finally have run out?

“What did you say?” I asked, sliding onto the bench beside Liam. Which was a mistake, since the cushion was slick with sweat. But I didn’t care that much, since I hadn’t showered yet anyway.

“When he asked how I was doing,” I demanded. “What did you say?”

“I told him you were good,” Liam said. “I told him you were going out with Seth Turner.”

My blood went cold. I couldn’t believe it. Liam had told Tommy Sullivan that I’m going out with a Quahog?

“You told him that? Why’d you tell him that?”

“What else was I supposed to say?” Liam, getting up from the bench to reach for his bottle of Gatorade, looked annoyed. “He asked what you were up to. I told him you were working at the Gull ‘n Gulp, and that you were running for Quahog

Princess, too.”

I groaned. I could only imagine what Tommy must have thought about my running for Quahog Princess, an honorary title with absolutely no benefits other than that the Quahog Princess gets to ride in a convertible Chevrolet with the mayor during the annual Eastport Town Fair parade (I fully intended to take a Dramamine beforehand if I won), and open the Quahog Festival, which takes place on the third Sunday of August.

Which happens to be at the end of this week.

Oh, yeah: she also gets fifteen hundred dollars cash in prize money, to spend on whatever she wants.

Which, I’ll be frank, is the reason I’m running for Quahog Princess.

And, okay, I know have zero chance, with Sidney running, too (she could care less about the money.

She's in it for the tiara).

But at least I have a better chance than Morgan Castle. I mean, Morgan Castle can barely open her mouth in public, she's so shy.

Although she has a much better talent than I do. I mean, for competing in a beauty pageant.

And yeah, I realize beauty pageants are sexist, and all of that. But come on. Fifteen hundred bucks? Even second place is a thousand. Third is five hundred.

So even if both Sidney and Morgan beat me (which is likely), I'll still be five hundred more dollars up than I would have had if I hadn't entered (the only other entrant is Jenna Hicks, who has multiple nose and eyebrow piercings, only wears black no matter how hot it is outside, and whose mother is making her enter in order to make her socialize more with girls her own age who don't list KAFKA as their

answer to Interests on their Myspace page. Which, not to be mean or anything, doesn't exactly make Jenna Quahog Princess material).

Which is good because my parents are making me cut back my hours at the Gull 'n Gulp to one night a week once school starts up again next month, so I will totally need the scratch.

“What did he say?” I asked. “When you told Tommy about Quahog Princess?”

Liam shrugged. “He laughed.”

I felt the hairs on the back of my neck rise.

“He laughed?” I did not like the sound of that. At all. “Laughed like how?”

“What do you mean, laughed like how?” Liam wanted to know.

“Like did he laugh like he thought it was funny,” I asked, “or like an evil genius? Was it ha ha ha? Or MWA ha ha?”

“What is wrongg with you?” Liam asked me, loudly enough to cause the Tiffanys and Brittanys to burst into a fresh batch of giggles, over by the towel desk.

Whatever. Let them laugh. What do fourteen year olds in belly-baring tanks and yoga pants know about pain? Not just the kind you get when your belly-button piercing you got illegally in the city gets infected and you have to tell your mom so she can take you to the doctor, and then she grounds you.

I mean real pain, like trying to figure out what Tommy Sullivan could be doing back in town. He and his parents had moved away-to Westchester, outside of New York City, a whole other state-the summer before our freshman year. They had never said they were moving because of what happened the year before. In fact, my mom, who was their

realtor and sold their house for them, said Mrs. Sullivan had told her they were moving so Mr. Sullivan could have a shorter commute to his job in Manhattan.

But everyone had always sort of just assumed that what had happened with Tommy-and the new Eastport Middle School gymnasium wall--was a large part of why they left.

So why had he come back? It's true his grandparents still live here-we see them sometimes when Mom and Dad make us eat at the yacht club, which they belong to not because we own a yacht (Dad's boat is strictly for fishing; it doesn't even have a bathroom on it. Which isn't the only reason I won't get on it, but it's one of them), but because belonging to the local yacht club is good for schmoozing if you're in the real estate business, like they are.

And okay, I suppose Tommy must come and visit

his grandparents sometimes...although truthfully it never occurred to me before. Why wouldn't they just go to see him in Westchester? I mean, Eastport could hardly have good memories for him. Why would he want to come here?

But even if he just happened to be here because he was visiting his grandparents, why would he go to Duckpin Lanes, which is where every guy in town hangs out? That would be the *LAST* place you'd think someone as universally despised as Tommy Sullivan would go.

“Katie?”

I looked up and saw Seth grinning down at me, all melting brown eyes and sleek biceps, clearly fresh from a workout.

“What are you doing here?” he wanted to know.

“You never come to the Y.”

Which isn't strictly true. The Y is where I took my first photography class, the one that got me into cameras in the first place, even though the instructor-crabby Mr. Bird, proprietor of Eastport Old Towne Photo-had hardly been encouraging.

But I let that slide, because, hello, hot guy. Who happens to be my boyfriend. Well, one of them, anyway.

“Oh, I just came by to see how Liam's doing,” I said, as Seth slipped an arm around my waist and gave me a kiss. Which made me glad I'd put my mascara on. It was bad enough I still had bedhead.

“I've been trying to call you all morning,” Seth said. “Don't you have your cell on?”

Oops. I'd managed to snap all the pieces of my cell phone back together, and had plugged it in to charge. But I'd forgotten to turn it on. I pulled it out of the pocket of my shorts and pressed

POWER. A second later, I saw my screensaver—a picture of Seth, looking dreamily at me over an order of quahog fritters.

A second later, the phone rang.

“What happened to you last night?” Sidney asked, after I’d answered. “We got disconnected. I tried to call you back a million times and just got your voicemail.”

“Right,” I said. “Dropped my phone. I had to recharge it.”

“Oh. So. Who was it?”

“Who was what?”

“Who’d your brother see at Duckpin Lanes?” Sidney wanted to know.

“Oh,” I said, thinking fast, watching as Seth started

showing Liam how to use another nearby machine, while the Tiffanys and Brittanys gathered round, looking more worshipful than ever. Because, hello, Jake Turner's little brother. "That. It was nobody. Just this guy Liam knew from football camp."

"Why would he think you'd care about that?"

"I don't know," I said. "Because he's let this Quahog thing go completely to his head, maybe?"

"Oh, right. Well, where are you?"

"The Y," I said. "With Seth." I didn't mention the whole part about having come to the Y to see my brother, not Seth, let alone the thing about Tommy Sullivan being back in town. I mean, it's not like I can tell anybody that. Any of my friends, I mean. They've all managed to forget that I ever even used to consort with Tommy Sullivan. I don't want to do anything to remind them of that fact.

“Oh, good,” Sidney said. “Grab Seth and go home and get in your swimsuit. The wind’s up, so Dave wants to kite-surf. We’re going to The Point.”

The Point is the private beach that belongs to the Eastport Yacht Club. Nobody in Eastport goes to the public beaches, because of not wanting to hang around with a bunch of tourists. Also, in the paper they’re always reporting finding traces of e. coli in the water down at the public beach (caused by tourists with RVs, illegally emptying their toilets into the water).

Still, given the whole Tommy thing, I wasn’t exactly in the mood for the beach. I sort of wanted to hide in the house. Because, I mean, what if he was still around? I didn’t want to run the risk of bumping into him, especially in public.

“I don’t know,” I hemmed. “I was sort of thinking of going home and practicing--”

“For the pageant?” Sidney sounded disgusted. “Oh, whatever.”

“-and I’ve got the dinner shift at the Gulp tonight.”

“So? Bring your work clothes. You can change at the club. You need to work on your tan more than you need to work on that gherkin thing--”

“Gershwin,” I corrected her. “It’s ‘I’ve Got Rhythm,’ by George Gershwin.” I love Sidney, and all, but really--gherkin?

“Whatever,” Sidney said, again. “Get your stuff and get to the club.”

Which is why, later that afternoon, I was stretched out on a blue and white Eastport Yacht Club beach towel, listening to the water lapping the shore (I wouldn’t like to mislead anyone by saying I was listening to the sound of waves, because of course there are no waves on the Long Island Sound), and

watching my boyfriend and Dave Hollingsworth struggle to get a kite-sail into the air.

“Hottie alert,” Sidney, stretched out beside me, said in a desultory voice, as a yacht club waiter staggered by through the hot sand, holding a tray of drinks for some rowdy young moms sitting under a beach umbrella while they watched their kids build sandcastles.

I barely lifted my head. Sid was right. I really do need to work on my tan. Compared to her, I looked positively cadaverous.

Sidney was also right about spending the day at the beach. It was gorgeous out-seventy-five degrees with a cool breeze coming in off the water, cloudless sky, and aching hot sun. The sound sparkled in front of us like a blue-green sapphire. We wouldn't have many days like this left. School would start in a couple of weeks, and then it would all be over. Our last summer break before we all left

for college.

It helped that Seth, when he'd seen me in my bikini, had purred approvingly, "Hey, hot stuff."

Oh, yeah. I'm all about the beach today. Who cares what Tommy Sullivan was doing at Duckpin Lanes last night? Who cares why he was asking about me? He was probably just in town to visit his grandparents after all. He was probably asking Liam about me for old times' sake, nothing more. I mean, why else would he be asking about me?

"I'm over the waiters here," I said, in response to Sidney's hottie alert. "Did you hear about that guy Travis? He was giving real Coke to everyone who ordered diet. Shaniqua told me he was bragging about it down at the Sea Grape. That's so wrong."

"Not the waiter, dufus," Sidney said. "That hottie over there."

I turned my head to look where she was pointing. It seemed as if there were guys everywhere-hot ones, and some not-so-hot ones--in their baggie swim trunks, struggling to lift windsails, or tossing around a football, or playing killer Frisbee. That's the thing about guys, I've noticed. They are completely incapable of sitting still. Unlike me. I could lay in one position, and not move, for hours.

If I didn't have to go to the bathroom all the time from all the Diet Coke I kept consuming.

“Not that one,” Sidney said, noticing the direction of my gaze. “That one, coming out of the water right now. The one with the freestyle board. The red-headed one.”

My head swiveled around so fast I heard the bones in the back of my neck crack.

It couldn't be. It couldn't.

Because what would he be doing here? I mean, it was possible his grandparents belonged to the yacht club. In fact, it was more than likely that they did, since everyone in Eastport seemed to.

But that didn't mean he'd have the nerve to show his face here.

And even if he did, the guy coming out of the water couldn't be him, red-headed or not.

Because the guy coming out of the water was over six feet tall-almost a foot taller than Tommy had been, last time I'd seen him-with a golden tan. The guy coming out of the water was also totally cut. Not in a muscle-bound meathead kind of way, like some of those guys I'd seen over in the weight room at the Y, but with a lean, athletic body, nicely defined biceps, and a set of abs that would have made an actual six-pack jealous.

Whereas Tommy Sullivan, when I had last seen

him, had had a sunken chest, skin as white as milk (where it wasn't covered in freckles), hair the color of a new copper penny, and arms as skinny as toothpicks.

Well, okay, I might be exaggerating a little. Still, he hadn't exactly been anything much to look at.

Not like this vision before us, who was shaking water out of his slightly overlong reddish-brown hair as he leaned over to lay down his board (revealing, as he did so, the fact that beneath his baggy swim trunks—so weighted down with water that they had sunk somewhat dangerously low on his hips—lurked what appeared to be an exceptionally well-formed gluteus maximus).

Sidney, who seemed no more capable of tearing her gaze away from this example of a god in human form than I was, said, “I think I've died and gone to Hottie Heaven.”

“Dude, you’ve got a boyfriend,” I reminded her, automatically.

“Dude, so do you,” she reminded me back, failing to mention-because she didn’t know it-that actually, I’ve got two boyfriends.

But it was really hard to remember either of them when Windsurf Boy straightened up from setting down his board, turned around, and began to stride towards the clubhouse...and us.

Sidney’s hand shot out to seize my wrist in a grip that hurt-mostly because she was digging her French manicure into me.

“Dude, he’s coming this way,” she breathed.

As if I couldn’t see that for myself. Windsurf Boy was moving through the sand directly towards us... not quite the most direct path to the clubhouse. I was glad the lenses of my Ray-Bans were polarized,

so I was able to take in the fine details that might otherwise have been impossible to see, considering the glare from the water...the golden hair coating his legs...the sliver of matching hair snaking up that lean, flat belly from the waistband of his swim trunks...the square jaw and wide, slightly smiling mouth...the laughing amber eyes, squinting in the strong sunlight, because his sunglasses were dangling from a cord around his neck....

Wait. Amber eyes?

“Hi, Katie,” Tommy Sullivan said to me in a deep voice.

Then he went right on past us, climbing the steps to the clubhouse deck, and disappeared through the double doors into the cool, air-conditioned lobby.