

QUEEN GEEKS IN LOVE - in bookstores October 2007

Pre-order now at Amazon.com: http://www.amazon.com/Queen-Geeks-Love-Laura-Preble/dp/0425217175/ref=pd_bbs_sr_1/103-8567815-1575069?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1176582597&sr=8-1

Chapter 1: The Big Date – Part I (or the Drag Queen Medusa)

I'm staring into the glass-smooth surface of my best friend's swimming pool. It is June, the most wonderful month of the year, the month in which school stops and summer begins. June, pool, best friend, swimming pool. How could anyone possibly have a problem?

And yet, I do. And the problem can be summed up in one other word: boyfriend.

Let's examine the word "boyfriend." What are its major components? "Boy"—an immature, underdeveloped youth of the male persuasion—and "friend", a word used to describe a companion, somebody with whom you share mutual affection and trust. Can those two things truly blend together?

Unfortunately, I am starting to find out. But let me start at the beginning: I am a self-described geek, I live with my dad (a *Star Trek* geek and scientist) and I was totally happy to keep to myself, play with my robot, and date any cute boy who thought he could talk me into sin. Most of them figured out that I was better at talking than they were, so the sin didn't happen, which was very frustrating for them and led to some hot rumors about me being a lesbian. This was mostly because I started to hang out with Becca Gallagher, a new girl who spikes her hair and tweaks the nipples of any guy who gives her grief. But the lesbian thing is not true, as my current boyfriend, Fletcher, will tell you. And there's that word again.

In our freshman year, Becca came to Green Pines High school, home of the Puking Panthers football team. I suspected that Becca was unique the minute I saw the huge dragon tattoo that covers the outside of her entire left calf, and I wasn't wrong about that; we started the Queen Geek Social Club because she wanted to "find others of our kind." Why? Because Becca has a thing for global domination, and she thought that if we started a club, we'd be able to amass enough girl bodies to storm the White House and effect great social change—okay, really, it was all about Twinkies. We collected Twinkies to send to super skinny super models, this got us on television, and from there we sort of took over the school dance, which went from being a lame event with papier mache palm trees to an unforgettable night of piracy, plunder, and one of those kisses that is simply etched in your memory. The kiss belonged to me, and to Fletcher, the aforementioned boyfriend.

I should clarify that the boyfriend thing didn't happen right away. Our relationship actually started with me beating him about the head and shoulders with a pillow. I know that sounds kind of mean, but actually, in context, it makes lots of sense. I had met a Norwegian guy at a bowling alley, dropped a ball on his foot, thought he liked me, but then, when we went on a date, he brought a girl. Fletcher happened to be in the car with all of us; he was just one of those casualties of war they're always talking about. I don't think the pillow thing inflicted any permanent damage, although he does twitch when we sit on the sofa.

My trauma involving the word "boyfriend" begins June 12, the day after senior graduation, the official start of my official sophomore year. Becca and I are at Becca's mansion (and I'm not kidding about that), lounging around her pool as the late afternoon

Southern California sun peeks out from behind a cloud. It's really too cold to be swimming, but it's the principle of the thing. It's summer. We've gotta swim, even if we look like we're wearing goose pimple bikinis.

"If you want my opinion—" Becca starts.

"I don't."

She ignores me as if her heavy-duty sunglasses block sound as well as light. "If you want my opinion, I think you're afraid."

I rub suntan lotion on my pasty legs even though I feel like I should be looking for a parka. "Afraid of what?"

She takes off the sunglasses, sits up in her lounge chair, and fixes me with an "oh, please" stare. Her short-cropped, bleached hair stands up in lots of individual spikes, and the tips are currently dyed royal blue, one of our school colors. "Afraid of actually being with someone who might be right for you."

"That doesn't even make sense," I mutter, trying to distract myself by vigorously rubbing lotion between my toes. Has anyone ever had sunburned toes?

"No?" She stretches and squints sideways at me. "Here's what I think. You like being a loner. You don't want some perfect guy messing that up."

"Perfect!" I snort. "He's about as far from perfect as—well—as anyone." I don't know how anyone can be expected to defend bad dating choices while wearing a bikini in sub-Arctic weather. Instead of listening, I decide to count the number of tiles on the bottom of her pool.

Becca knocks on my head with a toy shark grabber stick. "Hello! Are you paying any attention?"

“Sure I am.” That’s a lie. I’m desperately trying not to pay attention, actually. Why would I do this to my best friend? Because I don’t want to have this conversation.

Becca grabs my shoulders and makes me look her in the eye. “Where are you guys going on your Big Date?”

I don’t answer.

She gives my shoulders a little shake. “C’mon, I know it’s tonight. Don’t pretend it’s not important. You have given me absolutely no details on this. Cough it up.”

“What are you, the Spanish Inquisition?” I manage to shake out of her grasp and think about diving into the pool, but I’m afraid I might hit a layer of ice and break my nose. “I don’t have to answer any of these questions. It’s none of your business.”

“It *is* my business.” She huffs back to her lounge chair and plops down in it, disgusted. “This whole Big Date thing has distracted you for two weeks, and I have things to do, and I need you, and you’ve just been this big, quivering ball of...of...”

“Sorry if I’ve put a dent in your fabulous life,” I snap at her as I bounce indignantly off the chair.

Becca has given up on the weather and has pulled on a sweatshirt; she tosses me one too. “So, what’s your strategy?”

“I don’t have a strategy.”

“Let’s eat ice cream.”

Becca is freakishly tall, and can eat pretty much anything without gaining weight. I, on the other hand, have always been pretty thin, but since I’ve been hanging out with her, I’ve noticed some unwelcome blobs of fat setting up camp in my butt, so I have to be

careful about eating like a giant. "I'm not hungry," I lie. I actually could eat a Baskin-Robbins, all 31 flavors plus the ice cream cakes.

She throws a towel at my head and trots into the house, snorting in disgust. She's right. I am pathetic. I always vowed that I wouldn't let a guy ruin my life, no matter what; I did fine, too, until I met Fletcher, and then I broke my own rule and now I'm obsessing about him, the very thing I said I wouldn't do. Maybe Becca is right. Maybe creamy-fat avoidance is the way out. I follow her into the massive kitchen.

"So, let's decide what our strategy is with this Fletcher Big Date thing," she says as she lifts a gallon bucket of ice cream from the walk-in freezer. Seriously, it's like they have a meat locker next to their fridge. When I first saw it, I asked Becca if they had Walt Disney's head in there, and she actually got the joke, which again cemented our friendship. (And if you don't know, Walt Disney supposedly had his head cryogenically frozen and stored in case he had to come back and sue Mickey Mouse for breach of contract. So far, it hasn't happened. But I'm watching Becca's freezer very carefully.) "Get the chocolate sauce," she says as she dishes out massive scoops of Butter Pecan into little delicate china dishes. "We really need bigger bowls."

"We shouldn't eat like this." I take the first bowl from her, pour a river of chocolate onto it and begin to dig in. "Starting tomorrow."

"Sit." She pulls a chair out from the cherry wood table, sits, and scoops spoonfuls of ice cream into her mouth all at once. "Sho, whasch you gonna do about Fletscher?" she asks, her words distorted by creamy goodness.

I shrug, mostly because my mouth is crammed full of Butter Pecan. "Let's talk about something else," I finally manage to say.

She studies me for a moment, the way a cat squints at a mouse to see which hole the little vermin is going to run into. I feel like the vermin, and there is a distinct lack of hidey holes. “Change of subject.” She puts her feet up, crossed, on the edge of the table and leans back in her chair. She cradles the gallon of ice cream in her lap and attacks it with her spoon. “We need a summer project.”

“Besides eating ice cream?”

Licking her spoon, she nods. “I don’t think this will keep us occupied for long. Not at the rate we’re eating. Nope.” She throws her spoon defiantly onto the table. “We need to create something. We need to branch out.”

“No. Not this again.” All last year, Becca insisted that we find other kids at Green Pines who were like us: weird, cool, funny. That’s why we started the club. But even then, I could sort of sense this desire to conquer the world in Becca, something I do not share. I just want to conquer my own little corner of it, not the whole thing. Who has the time?

“I know, I know.” She tilts the ice cream container toward me, and I signal I don’t want anymore, so she jumps up and heads for the meat locker. “You don’t want to keep the club going, do you?”

“Yeah, sure I do,” I lie. Actually, I would be happier if it just sort of faded away, which sounds weird, I know. I mean, we got lots of attention, and I met Fletcher, but besides that, I got to thinking that I wasn’t cool enough for Becca and her big ideas. I was hoping the whole thing would sort of go away over the summer, and we could just be normal friends. What was I thinking? Besides, I have a robot and a mad scientist dad, and

Becca's mom practices weird Eastern religions and her dad is a movie producer. Could we ever have a normal friendship? About as likely as me eating one helping of ice cream.

"So, I've been thinking." Always dangerous. "And here's my plan. We create a website." Her eyes wide, she waits for me to jump up and down in ecstasy. I don't. "Let me say it again: we create a website!"

"Yawn."

"What? Websites are it. Look at MySpace.com. Everybody goes on there. We could be the next MySpace!"

"Great. So we spend the whole summer cooped up in your room or mine, designing a website? Gee, that does sound fun."

She smiles slyly. "Of course, we'd need help."

"Oh no. I see what you're doing—"

She grabs my shoulder. "But he's perfect! Fletcher knows all about computers and web design stuff. You don't have to marry him. Just ask him to help us design it!"

"Listen." I carefully place my spoon on the tabletop and align it so it's parallel to the napkins. "Fletcher and I—we've had a great time since the dance."

"Right. You've been together almost every weekend, he calls you when he says he will, and he can even help you with homework. And now it's summer, and you know what that means!"

Oh boy, do I. That's the problem. Summer. That's when the dating thing that starts in high school either flops totally or becomes totally entrenched, like a virus that cannot be killed. Either way, it's deadly. She does not understand this. To Becca, having a boyfriend like Fletcher is the ultimate fulfillment of destiny, right up there with being

famous or having a sandwich named after you. She's really independent, of course, and being a Queen Geek, knows that boys are merely a distraction most of the time, but when it comes to a "serious" relationship, Becca totally does a 180 and sounds like somebody's matchmaking mother. She buys into this whole idea that a guy can be your partner in life, despite the fact that her mom and dad are divorced and spent more time arguing over who got custody of the Warhol print rather than who got custody of Becca.

"And so tonight, you're supposed to have the Big Date." She says it so matter-of-factly, like it's nothing, like it's having a pedicure or an orthodontist appointment.

"Right? So, where are you two going?"

I stare down at the floor, perfect and crumb-less, unlike my life. "I thought we changed the subject," I mumble.

Becca grabs my chin in her monster fingers and tilts my head so I'm staring straight into her maniac eyes. "I know you. You are trying to sabotage this thing because you think you don't deserve it or something."

"You've been sitting too close to your mom while she's doing her weird psychic yoga," I spit out, yanking my chin away. "All that far-out Far East stuff is fermenting your brain."

"So you can honestly tell me, after we've solemnly bonded over the sacrament of ice cream, that you are not planning to somehow ruin this evening and then blame Fletcher for it?"

"Ha!" I laugh a little too loudly. "Fletcher is great. Why would I mess it up?" Even as I say it, an evil little voice behind my ear is whispering something about guys and control

and heartbreak. “You are making way too big a deal out of this. We’re just going out for dinner, you know. Everybody eats.”

“Ah, but not everybody eats at Old Sicily. And especially not everybody who can barely drive.”

“How do you know where we’re going?”

“Gotta pee,” Becca squeals as she jumps up and scampers to the bathroom down the hall. “But Old Sicily! It’s so exciting! I just know he’s going to do something special there. Oh, but I’ve already said too much...never mind!” The door slams and I’m left alone with my nagging, whispering evil twin behind my ear and a feeling of deep gray dread lumped in my stomach.

Now, admittedly, most normal girls don’t flip out when they’re asked to dinner. But two weeks ago, I saw Fletcher at the graduation ceremony, the last big event for the school year (everybody goes, even if they’re not graduating.) All of us were there, Becca, all our friends from school, and Fletcher and me. He and I sat next to each in the hot sun, out on the football field, and he held my hand, and it felt totally normal. When I looked down at our intertwined digits lying innocently between us on the bleachers, I felt this cold fear, because I couldn’t tell which hand was mine. Well, I mean, I could, because I had on pink nail polish and stuff, but the point was that it felt like it was one big hand.

So then Fletcher looked up at me, really serious, and he said “There’s somewhere special I want to take you in two weeks. I mean, if you’re free. I’ll have the car! And I think,” he grinned then, and nodded knowingly, like I was supposed to understand some secret code of the hand-stealers, “I think it will be well worth your time.”

When guys say stuff like that to girls in public, it's like all the other girls in a 10-mile radius suddenly pick up a signal, stop what they're doing, and become huge ears with one solitary purpose: to butt in on your conversation and then gossip about it. Becca had immediately squealed and said "Where are you going? You've got the car!?! Wow!" and then Amber and Elisa, two of our other friends, picked up on it. Amber made a disgusting leering face and then graciously replayed our conversation with Elisa, sprinkling it generously with wet, disgusting kissy sounds.

Becca returns from the bathroom, humming some '80s love song (I think it was Blondie, *Heart of Glass*. How appropriate.) "Much better. Now. What time are you going out tonight?"

"Seven. But listen. I don't know if this is such a good idea. He shouldn't be spending all his money on dinner at some fancy restaurant. I mean, he has to save for college, and pay for his car—"

"Right. One plate of pasta will probably keep him from going to Stanford." She checks her watch. "Well, it's 4 now, so we'd better get to your house so you can start getting ready."

"It's three hours from now!"

"I know. We should've started earlier," she mumbles as she grabs my arm and yells for her mom, Thea, the only pierced parent at our school. Thea is also the only mother I know who is called only by her first name. It fits her, though; she's like an artsy beatnik from the '60s who got stuck in a time warp and doesn't realize the years have marched on.

Thea runs dramatically into the kitchen, blobs of blue and green paint covering her arms up to the elbow. “Mom, take us to Shelby’s. We have date prep.”

“I’m right in the middle of Water Torture.” When I frown at her kind of strangely, she laughs and says, “No, that’s not what I’m doing. It’s the title of my piece. It’s for a client in Palm Springs.”

“Well, that’s fantastic and all, but Shelby has the Big Date tonight, so Water Torture will just have to drip without you for a couple of minutes.” Becca is shoving her toward the sink so she can wash her art off.

Thea frowns at me, and then at Becca as she scrubs. “Is this a Big Date?”

“The biggest,” Becca says, nodding.

“Hmmm.” She wipes her arms with a towel, and then grabs her keys from a hook on the wall. “Well, love is almost as important as art. Let’s go.” All the time we’re riding in the gut-grinding bumpy Jeep, I’m wondering if my stomach hurts because of the ice cream, the bad suspension, or the nerves.

We get to my house and thankfully Dad is not home. Euphoria, my robot, is home, though, and that’s almost worse. She hovers.

“Oh Shelby, this is so exciting!” she squeals as she rolls after us into my room.

“Euphoria, could we be alone?” I ask. I immediately regret it, because if a robot had a face and that face could fall, hers just did. “Oh, never mind. Come on in.”

She emits a high-pitched squeak-whine indicating, I guess, joy. “Can I help pick out her dress?”

Becca rolls her eyes and throws open my closet door. “I’ll narrow it down first.” She swishes through my wardrobe, rejecting one outfit after another. “Too black, too old, too loose. We need something that says ‘alluring,’ ‘unavailable’ and ‘expensive.’”

“Does your clothing talk?” Euphoria’s green face lights blink, puzzled.

“No...oh, never mind. Here.” Becca pulls a cobalt blue jersey mini-dress from the closet, then grabs a gauzy fitted bolero top in a lighter blue to go over it. “This will make your eyes like the ocean,” she says poetically.

“Wet and polluted?” Euphoria pipes in, then snickers. Robots shouldn’t be able to make jokes. It should’ve been one of those prime directives or something.

“Go dance with the lawnmower,” Becca snaps at her. To me, she says, “Now, try this on. I think it’s going to be perfect. Then we’ll worry about accessories, hair, makeup, shoes. Plus, we need to do your nails. Oh, and your toes! We should’ve scheduled a pedicure.”

“I’ve got to take a shower first.” I grab the dress and jacket and stomp off to the bathroom. I don’t want to go on this stupid fancy date. I really prefer sitting at home with Fletcher, watching bad science fiction movies or eating pizza or playing games or something. I realize that any dream I never had of becoming a high fashion model is absolutely not going to happen. The fact is, I don’t like getting dressed up.

After a long shower during which I fantasize about turning into a bug and disappearing down the drain, I start to turn pruny, so I get out and towel off. I pull the dress over my head, adjust it, then tie the little jacket. I look good, actually; the blue sets off my eyes, which look like dark-blue marbles with white swirls in the center. My hair

needs brushed, but I figure I should wait or Becca will just do it over. She's kind of a control freak.

The clock reads 6:00. How did time go so fast? We just left her house. Sixty minutes until D-Day. Why does it feel like I'm heading to prison or something? I must have some deep psychological issue. Anybody else would be excited and happy about it. I'm kind of excited, but I am not happy. I am terrified. Why? What is my stupid problem?

"Hey," Becca knocks on the door. "Did you fall in?"

"No, sorry." I open the door and smile weakly. "My hair looks like red seaweed."

"We can fix it, no problem!" She grabs my hand and pulls me into my room, where Euphoria is set up to be a hair dryer.

"What's this?" I tap on the chrome dome fastened to one of her inputs.

"Surprise!" She sends off static. "We rigged this up just for tonight. I'll dry while Becca styles. Isn't that great?"

"Great," I mumble as Becca leads me to a bar stool they've dragged in for the great beautification ceremony.

"Geez, you act like you're going to a funeral or something," Becca complains as she pulls a brush through my tangly hair.

"Maybe I am. Ow! Euphoria, please don't touch me with the metal parts. It burns!"

"Sorry, honey." She blips in remorse. "I'm still kind of new at this."

This torturous effort continues until my hair is done, my makeup is done, my jewelry is chosen, my nails are done, my toes are done, and I have shoes on. By that time, it's nearly seven.

“Wow!” Becca wipes sweat from her forehead. “Some effort, but totally worth it. Check it out!” She hands me a mirror, and I check it out.

I am stunned. My hair is looping around my head like the Medusa, and my makeup looks like a drag queen with palsy tried to make me the living image of ‘70s Cher. “What did you do to my eyelashes?” They are sticking together like centipede legs and I’m having a hard time opening my eyes.

“Well,” Becca smiles apologetically. “I’ve never really done anybody else’s makeup. It’s kind of different when it’s another face.”

“Well, this is definitely another face.” There is a big black spot on my chin. “Why is this here?” I ask, pointing to the big black spot.

“It’s a beauty mark,” Euphoria says proudly. “I read some magazine about fashion, and all of them said a real beauty queen has to have a beauty mark.”

“Yeah, what year were those magazines written?”

“Um...” Euphoria whirs for a moment. “The 1940s.”

The whole weird hair-do makeup thing kind of makes me feel better, actually. Maybe I can pretend it’s somebody else having dinner with Fletcher. Cher’s 1940s male cousin who likes to dress in drag and pretend to be a dead Greek monster. Yep. This is surely a fashion statement that is going to work for me.