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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Audra Supplee lives in Southeastern Pennsylvania with her husband, numerous juggling props, a drum set, an electric guitar, keyboards, and a bird puppet named Bingo. She also performs at senior centers as a blue-haired clown named Bloozy Blue. I ALMOST LOVE YOU, EDDIE CLEGG is Supplee's first novel for Peachtree.

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SUPPLEE
I almost Love You, Eddie Clegg
OR

I almost Love You, Eddie Clegg

Last night I dreamed I was a little kid, maybe four or five. I was standing alone in an amusement park, feeling scared. I heard a roller coaster rattle on its tracks. People laughed in a loud, scary way. Crowds hustled by but all I saw were long legs, gliding past.

My heart pounded harder. I shouted a name over and over.

Nobody came to me. Nobody answered. I woke up with tears on my cheeks.

The name I had called was "Daddy."

AUDRA SUPPLEE

I almost Love You, Eddie Clegg



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I almost Love You, Eddie Clegg

For thirteen-year-old Asa, life has suddenly gotten a lot more complicated.

At school she struggles to find her way through the social minefield, juggling her comically high social aspirations and a budding romance with Domino, the boy next door.

I rarely wrote notes to Eddie. It put me back in the dilemma of what to call him. "Dear Guy Who Married My Mom."



Back at home, Asa's musician stepfather Eddie can be sweet, funny, and even... well, *useful* when Asa needs something. But after years of living in the same house, she still thinks of him as her mother's husband, not a dad.

Then Eddie, a recovering alcoholic, loses his job—and he begins drinking again. Asa battles to keep her family together by covering for him. Soon she is telling so many "little white lies" that she has trouble remembering exactly what, in fact, is true. But Asa does discover one very important truth: all these deceptions are not helping any of them. Not her mom, not herself, and especially not Eddie...

PEACHTREE ATLANTA

almost
I Love You,
Eddie Clegg

AUDRA SUPPLEE



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*For Mom and the Fabulous Four:
Brian, Sharon, Joel, and Eric*

Chapter One

The first Wednesday in August is always Back-to-School Shopping Day at my house. And shopping with my mom is worse than getting your teeth drilled without Novocaine.

Mom means well, but she always ruins everything by following me into every store. Then she tries to talk me out of buying the clothes I really want. Her favorite line is, “Are you sure you want that shade of orange, Asa Marie?”

Just because there’s a hint of red in my hair, she thinks I’ll clash. But *she’s* the one with the bright red hair and the clashing problem.

I had no appetite at breakfast. On shopping days nothing tastes good. Not even chocolate frosted Pop-Tarts. That’s why I made myself the king of bland cereals, cream of wheat. My stomach already felt miserable so it didn’t care if it got food with no flavor.

My stepdad sat at the end of the table. He ate Lucky Charms. My insides knew better than to feel jealous that he got the fun-tasting cereal.

Mom bustled into the dining area, kicking up a cloud of sugary perfume.

“Change of plans, everyone,” she said. She plopped into her seat across from my stepdad and smiled at him. “Custody

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emergency, honey. Looks like Rodger needs me at the office after all.”

An eager pulse whooshed through my ears. Maybe Mom would let me shop with my friends this year. After all, I was thirteen. This was my last year of middle school. Shouldn't that earn me a few maturity points?

Mom took an apple out of the fruit basket in the middle of the table. “Eddie, you're off today,” she said casually. “Why don't you take Asa shopping?”

He choked on a mini marshmallow. “Who, me?” he rasped.

Even though we've been a family for almost six years, Eddie and I don't do many things together. Whenever we do, one of us usually gets mad. Then we don't speak to each other for days.

“Can't I just shop on my own?” I asked. It was Eddie's turn to stop speaking. I didn't feel like getting snubbed today.

Mom ignored me. “Make sure she doesn't buy anything trashy. I don't want her going to school looking like a tramp.”

Trashy? Tramp? Where did she get these ideas? Tramps wore short leather skirts and skin-tight spandex pants. Mom knew I was a jeans and sweater person. Did she think I'd had a personality change overnight?

I wanted to argue, but no one would have heard me. Eddie was making too much noise, hacking and thumping his chest. Mom leaped up and gave him a glass of water. She rubbed his back while he drained the glass in two swallows.

“Maybe you should reschedule, Lynn timer,” he said, puffing for breath. “I don't know what tramps wear these days. I might not know if she's—”

“Edward,” Mom said, flashing her green eyes at him.

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“You’re going.” She set her jaw in the I-mean-business position. Nobody argued with that jaw, not even Eddie.

He rubbed his cheek a couple times.

“And don’t forget underwear,” Mom said on her way out the door.

“Mom!” I squealed.

Eddie’s eyes bugged out. “*What?*”

After she left us, the house turned dead quiet. I saw the wrinkles coming out in Eddie’s forehead. It looked like he dreaded this shopping trip as much as I did.

“Um,” I began. “Maybe you could—” I hesitated when his long-lashed eyes focused on me. I peered into my cream of wheat. “—just drop me off?” I crossed my fingers under the table.

“Your mother wants me to supervise,” Eddie said. “Although I don’t know where she gets the idea I could possibly know anything about...”

I looked up. He glanced away.

“...girl shopping,” he mumbled.

“That’s why you should let me do it,” I said. “I know all about girl shopping. Plus, I promise not to buy any tramp clothes.”

Eddie tapped his chin and gazed at the ceiling. Finally he looked at me. “Here’s how we’ll do it,” he said. “We’ll go to the mall and separate. You get your non-tramp clothes on your own, but I’ll be nearby. Check in with me so I’ll know you’re buying the right things. Then we can have pizza at Rollo’s for lunch.”

“Yes!” I squealed. I almost hugged him. Instead, I jumped up and toasted myself a chocolate frosted Pop-Tart. It tasted delicious.

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At the mall Eddie handed over the credit card. “You’ll know where to find me if you need me,” he said.

I nodded. Eddie loved music shops. That’s because he was a music-head. He taught music at Ram’s Head College. He was also the conductor for our community orchestra. I left him to his music quest and scurried to my first store.

Who would have guessed how easy it was to shop alone! Nobody told me to try stuff on to be sure it fit. Nobody made faces at the patterns on the shirts I liked. Nobody complained about the prices. Since I was using a credit card, it was almost like it was free anyway. But to keep Mom happy I shopped at the cheaper stores and made sure I bought clothes on sale.

I was practically done when I saw two popular girls from school breeze into The Sophisticated Miss. That shop is so expensive Mom won’t even let me breathe the air in there. The girls didn’t notice me, but I didn’t mind. They’d notice me in September when I turned popular too. I’d gotten the idea over the summer to become popular because this was my last year at Wollerton Middle School. Why not go out with a bang?

The quickest way to popularity was to join The Fad. Every fall at Wollerton the popular girls started a new one. Two years ago they tied colored ribbons to their left wrists. I didn’t feel like joining that year. The ribbons reminded me of when parents tie balloon strings to their little kids’ wrists so they won’t fly away. The balloons, I mean. Not the little kids.

Here’s the thing about fads: Anybody can join. Even people at the outer fringe of the popularity circle (which is where I was, unfortunately). All you had to do was figure out what the fad was. I don’t know why nobody else on the outer fringe had thought of doing it. My latest scheme had been to take a

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baby-sitting job at the house next door to Jennifer Terrell. She was the girl in charge of fads.

Joining wouldn't be easy, though. The clique changed the rules so fast you could turn unpopular again in the blink of an eye if you didn't keep up. During "ribbon" year Angela Rush fell out of the loop. All because she wouldn't let a girl we call Snooty Ella copy off her paper during a math quiz. Somebody—probably Snooty Ella—told Angela that the next day's ribbon colors were green and gold. Everybody else wore pink and maroon. Angela spent hours crying in the girls' room because everybody started calling her OT. That's a shortened version of OTWCW, which means "Out of Touch With the Cool World." Everybody knows you can't be popular if you're OT.

Last year the girls wore neckties as belts. I almost decided to try out for popularity then, but I couldn't join that fad. Eddie owned the wrong kind of ties. Mom wouldn't even let me buy my own ties at the Salvation Army. She said I should want to be my own woman. That was her polite way of asking the age-old question: if all your friends jumped off a cliff, would you want to jump too? Mom doesn't get it sometimes. It's a lot easier to be your own woman when you're thirty-five, like she is. Especially when you follow your own drumbeat, which my mom does—literally. She practices the drums all the time in our basement when she isn't studying to be a paralegal.

If I wanted my last year at middle school to be huge, I had to join this year's fad. I'd heard a rumor that the fad might be special shoes. There was also talk around the pool at the Y about braiding different colored feathers in your hair. I hoped that wasn't it. My hair was too short for braids.

So far, my job next door to Jennifer Terrell had been a

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bust. Jennifer went away to equestrian camp the day before my baby-sitting job started. My only consolation was that she had to come home eventually. And when she did, I'd have to be ready.

But for now, I needed underwear. On the way to Sears, I spotted Eddie at the back of The Musical Box, where you can sample new CDs. I decided to duck inside for a second to leave my shopping bag with him. When I bought underwear, I liked to travel light.

A pair of black headphones covered Eddie's ears. His eyes were closed. His right hand swayed a little, like he was conducting. With him, it was almost a reflex. I just wished he wouldn't do it in public without any actual musicians playing. I glanced around to make sure nobody I knew was in the store. Then I moved closer to him.

Mom apparently hasn't noticed, but after six years I still don't have a name for her second husband. I couldn't call him Eddie to his face. That might sound disrespectful. And Mr. Clegg seemed way too formal. But even though he's my stepfather, I wouldn't dare call him Dad. He might not like it. And I'm not sure if I'd want to call him Dad, anyway. If we're in a crowd and I need to talk to him, I either tap his arm or wait till he looks at me. This time I touched his shoulder to get his attention.

Eddie's eyes snapped open. He blinked a few times as he came out of his trance.

"Hey, Ace," he said. He pushed the headphones back so they hung around his neck. Violin music whispered from the little speakers. "What've ya got?"

I opened my bag. I pulled out my new sweaters and pants one at a time.

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Eddie stared hard at a pair of black jeans. He wanted to know if they were tramp tight. I promised they weren't and showed him the rest of my non-tramp selections.

"Lynnie should approve," he said with a dimpled smile.

"Then let's tell her I can shop alone from now on," I said.

"No!" Eddie's smile turned into wide-eyed panic. "Let her think I helped, okay?"

I stared at the tangle of pant legs and sweaters in my shopping bag. I'd bought them on my own. Why couldn't we say I did?

"Just this once," he begged. "Please, Ace?"

I slowly raised my head. If I did him this one favor maybe we'd break the "no speaking" curse. I nodded.

Eddie grinned and thumped me under the chin. He went back to listening to violin music through the headphones. I set my bag by his feet and took off again.

It was time for the super-private part of my shopping: buying underwear. Now I was really glad Eddie wasn't tagging along. Thanks to the baggy shirts I always wore, not even Mom knew my bra size had jumped from zero to 34A over the summer. I know women are supposed to feel proud of their breasts, but I wasn't ready to show them off yet.

I ducked into Sears and slipped between the clothes racks to the intimate apparel department. Four sports bras and two packs of boy shorts later, I let myself breathe again. On the ride down the escalator I spotted Jennifer Terrell. *Aha!* I thought, *equestrian camp must be over for the summer*. Jennifer was sitting alone. She was almost hidden by the leaves of a tall tree, but I recognized her shiny black ponytail and poised posture. She's gorgeous and popular. She's also rich. Rich enough to go to private school, but she didn't. I heard a rumor that

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her dad had insisted that she go to public school since it was good enough for him when he was a kid.

My heart thumped. This was my chance to walk straight up to Jennifer Terrell and ask her about this year's fad.

Secret confession: I have never actually spoken to Jennifer. Not even to say, "Hey, you dropped this." I needed a creative entrance. Like...maybe a rolling orange. If I had a bag of oranges and one dropped and rolled past her, I'd have to chase it. Then, as I picked it up, I could turn to Jennifer and say, "Don't you hate it when oranges do that?"

Do malls even have fruit stands? I snapped my head left to right. My eyes zeroed in on the shop closest to me, The Drug Emporium. I went inside and stepped back out in about a minute. A can of Orange Crush sweated in my hand. True, it wasn't the fruit, but it was the right color. And it rolled.

I edged toward Jennifer's bench. Using the splashing of the nearby water fountain as cover, I laid the can on its side and kicked it. The can didn't roll past Jennifer. It turned and bounced against her shiny black shoes.

Jennifer looked up. That's when I noticed she was crying. The most popular girl in school with tears rolling down her cheeks! Now that was something you didn't see every day. It made her almost seem like a regular person. Like somebody who needed a friend.

I walked over very casually. "You okay?" I asked.

She sniffled and nodded. "Allergies." She picked up my Orange Crush and handed it to me. "Yours?" she asked. Then she looked at me again. "I know you. Asa Philips, right?"

"You do?" I was so surprised I sat down right next to her.

Jennifer looked at me with big, brown eyes. The corners of her lips curled into a little smile. "Remember two years ago

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when we had trampoline in gym class? You wore a towel around your neck like a cape and kept yelling you were Super Something.”

“Super Amazing Towel Girl,” I said. That was one of the few times I’d tried to be funny on purpose. I even came close to turning popular that day. But that was sixth grade. Eighth graders didn’t get popular that way.

“You were sure gutsy to look stupid like that.”

I shrugged and looked away, embarrassed. “Or just stupid.”

We laughed together. A second later our smiles faded. I set down my soda can. “So, uh, why are you sad?”

Jennifer sighed. “My parents are on their way to France right now and I’m stuck here in boring Pennsylvania with my grandmother and our housekeeper.”

“If my parents left me alone with my grandma,” I said, “we’d have pizza every night.”

Jennifer sighed again. “Only Super Amazing Towel Girl would find a bright side like that.”

At first I wasn’t sure if that was a compliment or an insult. I didn’t have to wonder too long. Jennifer turned to me and said, “Want to get pizza at Rollo’s?”

I tried to sound bored when I said, “Sure,” but on the inside I was celebrating all over the place. Jennifer Terrell, the most popular girl at Wollerton Middle School, had just invited me to lunch at Rollo’s! This was bigger than fireworks at Disney World. This was even bigger than the time I rode the elephant at the Renaissance Faire.

Okay, technically, I was supposed to meet Eddie at Rollo’s, but he was probably still conducting to himself. At least I hoped he was. I wanted to eat lunch with Jennifer.

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At the counter Jennifer ordered a large pepperoni and drinks. I offered to pay for my share, but she just waved me off. We carried our paper cups, fizzing with cola, to a table. We had a perfect view of another fountain outside in the mall.

If I wanted to learn about The Fad, now was my chance. I took a swallow of cola for courage. "So, it's our last year at Wollerton."

"Yeah," Jennifer said. "Things sure will be different."

My stomach and my heart bumped into each other. It was time to ask the big question. But before I could open my mouth, Jennifer ducked under the table.

"Act natural," she said in a nervous voice.

The only natural thing I could do was frown in confusion and peer under the table at her. "What are you doing?" I asked.

"Don't look at me!" she said in a desperate whisper. "I just saw Lacy and Mindy. They can't catch us talking. No offense."

I shrugged, willing to play along. For now. Once I got popular this wouldn't be a problem. I watched two girls in short skirts and designer handbags whisk by. "They're gone," I murmured out of the corner of my mouth. I felt like a double agent.

Jennifer poked her head over the table. She let out a sigh and sat up. "Sorry about that. If you were part of the group..."

"Like somebody who knew the fad?" I said in a casual, hint-hint voice.

"That's it!" Jennifer clutched my arm. "You should join! This one's perfect for you. It's—" Then she suddenly cut herself off and looked straight ahead. "Hey, who's that?"

I looked up. Eddie was standing in front of the fountain,

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facing us. I choked on air. Fortunately, he looked younger than his actual age. Doubly fortunately for me, he didn't call my name. He didn't make any noise at all. He just stood there and acted like a mime, pretending to be stuck in a box. Jennifer had no way of knowing that was my shopping bag resting at his feet. If he ruined my lunch with the most popular girl in school, I'd never speak to him again. Less than an hour ago we were practically bonding. Why did he have to show up now?

"Doesn't he look familiar?" asked Jennifer. "I could swear..." her voice trailed away.

"Never saw him before in my life," I blurted.

"I'm sure I've seen him before," said Jennifer. "On TV, I think."

"I'm more of a reader, myself," I lied.

"Ages ago, on cable," Jennifer said. She snapped her fingers. "I know! The Looney Clooney Clown show! He was Looney's sidekick, Mr. Music! The mute musician. He couldn't talk. He just played musical instruments. Didn't you ever see it when you were a little kid?"

I let out a sigh. "Maybe once or twice."

I personally was not a fan. Years ago Mom had found the show by accident when I was sick. She was flipping through the channels on the remote and stopped when she saw this skinny guy, dressed in a white suit with piano keys and black music notes all over it. Mom had let out a whoop. "I can't believe it, that's Eddie Clegg!"

Talk about a small world. She knew the weird skinny guy from college.

Jennifer sprang from her seat and ran into the mall. I dashed after her.

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“You used to be Mr. Music, didn’t you?” Jennifer said to Eddie.

He just nodded. Then he gave me a suspicious stare like I put her up to this.

Jennifer beamed at him. “When I was little, my parents wanted me to play the violin. I hated it. Then I saw you play one on the Looney Clooney Show. You made it sound like magic.”

Eddie smiled back. “Did that encourage you to practice?”

Jennifer gaped at him. “You *can* talk! He can talk!” she said to me. “I didn’t think he—” She turned back to Eddie. “I mean, I didn’t think you could talk.”

“The character couldn’t talk,” Eddie told her. “But I’m—”

“—just a regular guy now,” I jumped in before he could say he was my stepdad.

Eddie gave me a baffled frown.

“You were so good on that show!” said Jennifer. “I loved it the time you made a guitar out of rubber bands and a shoe box.”

“Did you take up the guitar?” Eddie asked, sounding pleased.

She giggled. “Nope, I took up the shoe box and rubber bands. I’m Jennifer, by the way. This is Asa.”

“Asa,” he said, shaking my hand. “Have we met?”

“Don’t think so,” I said. I cringed inside, afraid he might not keep playing along.

Eddie turned from me and smiled at Jennifer. “It was nice meeting you. I was just on the way to my car. I’ll be waiting there exactly five minutes.” He held his watch under my nose and tapped the place where the minute hand would be in five

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minutes. “I sure hope the person I gave a ride to meets me then. I’d hate to have to come back.”

“We understand. Prior commitments,” I said. “See ya.”

He pivoted on his heel and toted my school clothes out the exit.

“He’s still kind of cute,” Jennifer whispered on the way back to our table.

“If you like old guys. He’s thirty-three.”

“How do you know him?”

“Uh, a friend of the family.”

I wanted to talk about fads. Jennifer talked about Mr. Music. She told me when she was a kid her dad spent so much time away on business that she sort of adopted Mr. Music as her imaginary dad. She loved it when Mr. Music drummed on his top hat. And wasn’t it funny every time he played the trombone and the slide kept getting caught in his suspenders?

Yeah, I thought. Real funny.

The seconds zipped by on my own watch. Pretty soon my time would be up. If Eddie came back to get me, would Jennifer like it that her big hero was my stepdad or would she be mad that I’d lied? Just in case she hated liars, there was only one solution: I had to vanish. Fast.

The pizza guy called out her number. As soon as Jennifer headed toward the counter, I ran out of Rollo’s. Stupid Eddie and his stupid time limits. Jennifer would never speak to me again.

I dove into Eddie’s back seat just in case Jennifer was looking out the window at the parking lot. “Go, go!” I squealed.

Eddie grunted and started the car. About a mile from the mall, he pulled over to the side of the road.

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“Get up here. I’m not the chauffeur.”

Never argue with a grouchy voice. I clicked into the shoulder strap in the front seat. Eddie pulled back onto the road. A tense silence bounced between us. He broke it first. “Would you mind explaining why you can’t recognize me in public?”

My mom’s second husband had a good profile. His nose was straight with the right amount of roundness at the tip. It didn’t turn up like a pixie nose the way mine did.

“I’m allowed to recognize *you*,” I told him. “ I just can’t recognize Mr. Music.”

I knew that was the wrong answer by the way Eddie’s jaw tightened. He acted like I was the bad guy when he was the one who’d ruined everything by being the ex-Mr. Music in the first place. Neither of us spoke again until I reached for the radio knob.

“Leave it,” he said. “I’m composing.”

He did that sometimes, wrote music in his head. But I didn’t think that’s what he was doing this time. He wasn’t speaking to me, that’s what he was doing. I knew at breakfast it would be his turn today. What Eddie didn’t realize was, I wasn’t speaking to him either.

Back home he stomped down to the basement and played depressing jazz music on his sax. I didn’t need any music to remind me how bad things were. I had just blown my one chance to become popular.