



The  
Love  
Code

METTE BACH

# Girl + girl = love

Astrid's life gets turned upside down when her family loses everything and has to move to a small apartment. She quickly learns that she now has very little in common with her old friends. When her girlfriend leaves her for somebody else, Astrid shifts gears and focuses only on getting into university and working as much as she can. To make her school application look better she joins a robotics club, where she meets Bernie. Bernie is unlike anyone Astrid has ever met before — driven, hardworking and passionate about robotics. Astrid quickly develops a crush on her. But Bernie is hard to read and already headed for university far away, so Astrid wonders if their love even stands a chance.

**METTE BACH** was born in Denmark and raised in Delta, BC. She is the author of Lorimer's teen novels *Femme*, *Killer Drop* (named a Best Book for Kids and Teens) and the Real Love books *Love is Love*, *You're You*, *Cinders* and *Charming*. She lives in Vancouver.



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*The Love Code was written on the unceded territorial lands  
of the Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), Stó:lō and Səl̓ílwətaʔ/  
Selilwitulh (Tseil-Waututh) and xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam)*

*Nations where I am grateful to reside.*

*It is dedicated to front line workers.*





# 01 *Life with Toppings*

ASTRID COULD TELL from looking. She was just barely going to be able to reach the glass of water. The guy had placed it at the innermost edge of the table, farthest from where she was. She leaned across — stretching, stretching — to get the glass so she could move them along. When she was standing straight up again, they all laughed. Sure enough, her shirt was wet right where her boobs had landed in the puddle of water in the middle of the table.

*When did my life get this crappy?* she wondered.

Astrid didn't even recognize herself anymore. A year ago, Astrid would have been coming here with her friends. Coming in with her girlfriend Ivy. It would have been some other chump serving these guys.

Astrid's T-shirt with its happy frozen yogourt logo was soaked. Her face went red. The heat of humiliation stung her cheeks. She turned on her heel and walked away. She pretended it was the most natural thing in the world. Nothing was getting to her. Everything was fine.

*Yeah, right, she thought. What an utterly depressing job. How far can one person sink?*

She dropped the dirty dishes into the dish pit in the back. She went to get her bag, hoping that maybe, just maybe, she had an extra shirt in there. She didn't.

"And *that's* why you wear an apron," her boss said to her.

*Everything is funny to him. Even my worst nightmare.*

"Got it," she said. "Thanks." She snatched the apron he passed her and put it on over the wet

patch down her front. She would have it for the next couple of hours. If she could crawl under a rock, she would. But instead she had to face the shop full of frozen yogourt fans. She tried to pull herself together by filling up the toppings. Nothing like moving mini marshmallows around with small tongs to make a person feel normal again.

“Let’s go, Carson,” said one of the guys. There was a smirk on his face.

Not for the first time, Astrid wondered if the guys made her life hard on purpose. The same group of guys came in every Sunday. And every time she ended up with a soaking wet shirt or feeling like she had just run a marathon.

Clearly, self-esteem was not a right in the world of yogourt retail.

## 02 Meet the Club

ASTRID GOT OFF the Commercial–Broadway 99 bus at the loop. Trying to make sense of the vast parking lot, she pulled out her phone to look for where she was supposed to be. It was cold and the wind made the rain whip against her face.

Slipping past grey towers, she finally found an old brick building. She felt like an imposter even opening the door. With each step she took, her stomach churned. She smoothed down her windswept hair.

Once she had her jacket off, she wiped the rain off her face with her sleeve. She took one deep breath and opened the door.

A small group of folks were all gathered at the far end of a room that looked like a workshop. It reminded her of Adam Savage’s workspace, with tools and machines everywhere. There was a metallic scent in the air and it was colder than a classroom would be.

Everyone looked over at her standing at the open door. She proceeded toward them.

“And you are?” It was a tall Black woman wearing coveralls and a confident air.

“Astrid.”

“Astrid. Welcome. I’m Aliyah. I run this thing. Sort of. I’m the official sponsor because I teach here at the University of British Columbia in Robotics. But this is a youth-led group, so I try my best just to offer guidelines and suggestions. And, of course, the workspace.”

“Cool,” Astrid said, “Sorry I’m late.” The faces looked at her. She didn’t know what to say back to them.

Aliyah pointed. “Bernie is the team captain. She was just explaining . . .”

Bernie wore flip flops in the middle of winter. She also wore sweatpants and a University of Waterloo scoop-necked shirt. “Eight weeks from now we will be unveiling our creation at the Robotics competition. It will go up against some fierce robots.”

Astrid was impressed with Bernie’s introduction and how she took charge of things. Bernie sounded like she knew what she was talking about.

“Ranj,” Bernie said to the guy wearing a plaid shirt and thick-rimmed frames. “You know all about ballast, so we’ll count on you for that.”

Ranj nodded.

“And, Azi,” Bernie went on to the other guy who was tall and thin. “You’re our math guy.”

“Yep,” he said.

Astrid wondered who she was, what part she had to play in the group. What special skills did she have? Especially with math being taken, she didn’t know what she could contribute.

The door opened again. In came a guy wearing full-on private school clothes. It was that Carson guy from the yogourt shop.

Aliyah said, “Late as usual, I see.”

The guy set his briefcase on a chair and joined the group. Astrid waited for him to say he was sorry for being late, the way she had. She waited for him to introduce himself. He didn’t do either.

“This is Carson,” said Aliyah.

“With a K,” said Ranj.

“And a y,” added Azi. Azi and Ranj seemed to have a thing, like they both found the same stuff amusing.

“Oh, no,” said Astrid. Then she covered her mouth. She didn’t mean to say the words out loud. But there they were. *Not Carson*, she thought. *Karsyn*.

One name had terrorized her thoughts for the past year. Karsyn. Finally being able to put a face to it, the image made perfect sense. Of course he went to private school. Of course he harassed workers at yogourt shops.

This was the guy who had stolen Astrid’s girlfriend, Ivy, from her.

Everything in her told Astrid to turn around and walk away. No way could she be in a club with this guy. Why was she here anyway?

“As I was saying,” Bernie said loudly. She was clearly trying to stop any drama before it started. “We’re taking a risk with the materials in the arms. But I think it’ll pay off in performance. The thing is, we have to be really precise.”

“That’s true in all the sciences,” Karsyn said.

Astrid rolled her eyes. She didn’t know either of them, but she was annoyed that Karsyn interrupted Bernie. She didn’t like that Bernie had to raise her voice to be heard over him.

Karsyn noticed the eye roll and shot Astrid a look.

Everyone in the club watched her and Karsyn. They felt the tension between them. They were waiting to see if things would escalate.

Astrid shook her head gently. This was not the time or the place. She tried to concentrate on what the team captain was trying to say. But she couldn’t help but fixate on how cruel fate was. There were



many reasons her life had fallen apart the April before. And she and Ivy were having their issues. But when this guy came along and swept Ivy off her feet, it was a real blow to Astrid. Before she could figure out what was happening in her own life, Ivy was in another relationship. The pain of it still stung.

But this was now. This was important. Astrid sucked her feelings into the pit of her stomach and forced herself to pay attention.

Bernie was still weighing the pros and cons of various materials. She and Aliyah got into a debate. No one else in the club voiced their opinion. To Astrid, Bernie looked like someone who was already in university. By the way she talked, it sounded like she was already there. Her long black hair was tied back in a ponytail, and she didn't seem like the sort who wore makeup. Her glasses framed dark eyes that were slightly tilted at the corners. Astrid wondered what it would look like if Bernie smiled.

Astrid forced her mind from wandering. She knew she was fairly good at math and the sciences.

But what was she doing in this group? Other than trying to get more extracurriculars for her college applications. She had relied on just doing well enough to get into a program. But now she really needed to impress. And these students were obviously really serious. Except for Karsyn.

Maybe it was feeling out of her league that made her want to stay. The past year, Astrid had started to see what she was made of. Robotics would not come easily to her, that was certain. Even following what Bernie was saying was hard.

But no one was going to come along and make things easier for her. She had to do it.