

Megan Meade's Guide to the McGowan Boys

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Prologue

“Megan, we need to talk.”

Megan Meade swallowed a mouthful of root beer and let the bendy straw fall from her lips. Her heart dropped with it. She squeezed her eyes closed. What were her parents doing back from the base this early?

“This is my first soda of the day, I promise,” she said, spinning in her father’s leather swivel La-Z-Boy chair to face her parents. The moment she saw them, however, she knew they weren’t about to talk about her daily sugar intake. This was much more serious.

Megan’s parents stood before her in the living room of their cookie-cutter government-issue home, both wearing falsely excited smiles. They were also sporting their dress uniforms—her mom in an army green pressed skirt and jacket with dark panty hose, even though it was about a hundred and ten degrees in the Texas shade, and her dad with his collar buttoned so tight his neck was turning red.

“Oh God,” Megan said.

She placed her sweating soda glass onto the coaster next to

her and braced herself. She'd been an army brat her entire life, so it wasn't hard for her to figure out what was coming next. She just hoped it wasn't true.

"It's time to pack your gear, Kicker," her father announced, forcing a boisterous grin. "We're moving to South Korea!"

Yup. There it was. Megan went into free fall. Her internal organs turned weightless and started floating around inside her body cavity. She clutched the arms on the chair so tightly her knuckles turned white, just to keep from throwing up.

"What?" Megan blurted. Her voice sounded very far away.

"It's been a while since we were transferred, hasn't it?" her father said matter-of-factly. "This should be exciting."

Exciting? Had he been testing gas masks over at the base today? How could anyone think she would be excited about this?

Megan had been moving all her life. She had been born in Rammstein, Germany, at one of the largest American army bases in Europe. When she was five, right about the time she had made her first friend, her family had been transferred to Turkey. After a few years there playing soccer with the boys and learning Turkish from her best friend, Medha, another transfer had come through, sending Megan to the country she had always thought of as home for the first time in her life. All through middle school Megan had moved, from Fort Carson in Colorado to Fort Bragg in North Carolina to Fort Leavenworth in Kansas. She hadn't been in any of those places long enough to make any real friends.

But here, at Fort Hood, Megan had finally found a home. She had made it through three full grades here. She was on a state-champion soccer team. She had just gotten her learner's permit.

She had a real best friend, Tracy Dale-Franklin. And this year, on the first day of school, she was going to talk to Ben Palmer. Finally, finally talk to him. She even had the outfit all picked out and had practiced her greeting three hundred and fifty-one times in front of the mirror. This was supposed to be The Year of Megan. Why was this happening?

“Megan? Aren’t you going to say anything?” her mother asked.

Yeah, I’m gonna say something, Megan thought, standing up. She turned her back to her parents and stared out the window, hugging herself and gripping the sides of her T-shirt in her fists. This was so wrong. Megan had always been the perfect little daughter. She never talked back. She never let her parents know if she was depressed or upset or thought one of their many, *many* rules was unfair. She had never disobeyed them once in her life. And she was the only girl in school who wasn’t strutting around the base in a miniskirt and belly shirt like the pop star du jour. Didn’t her parents realize how good they had it?

As Megan glared out the window at the perfectly cut lawn, the impeccably kept flower beds, she felt like she always did right before she was going to throw up. And it was like an outside force was working on her; she knew there was no stopping what was about to happen.

She turned around and looked directly at her parents. She held her breath. “I’m not going.”

It took every ounce of courage she had just to say those three words, and once they were out, she couldn’t believe she had said them.

No one moved. Megan was having an out-of-body experience. Like last year when she had staggered over to the bench after suffering a concussion in the semifinal game at states. Like she was aware of what was going on around her but it wasn't really her that was there.

"Come again?" her father said.

"I'm not going. I'm not moving to South Korea," Megan said, still unable to believe the words had come out of her mouth.

Her mother and father exchanged a look. It seemed that they didn't think it was Megan in the room with them either.

"I'm sorry, Megan. We know this is hard for you," her mother said. "But we're only going to be there for two years and then you'll be back stateside for college anyway."

Two years. *Two years?* What kind of person put the word *only* in front of the words *two years*?

"No. I'm not going," Megan said, feeling braver every second her father didn't blow up at her. "You can't do this to me. This is my life and . . . and I want to live it *here!* With my friends! I mean, what about the soccer team? And . . . and the prom? And . . ."

Ben Palmer and his perfect dimples! her mind wailed.

"Megan—"

"I'm so sick of this, Mom! I hate moving. I just don't want to do it anymore. Why should I have to?"

Megan's father took a deep breath. His nostrils flared as he let it out. He and Megan's mother looked at each other again, silently communicating, as they so often did.

"Well, there is one other option," her mother said finally.

Megan barely dared to hope. "There is?"

"Your father and I—we have to go," Megan's mother said, fiddling with her wedding ring. "But if you really want to stay . . ."

"I can stay with Tracy?" Megan blurted.

"No . . . no," her father said. "The Dale-Franklins already have their hands full. You know that."

Megan knew all too well. Tracy's older brother, Joe, had graduated and was off at the Naval Academy, much to the chagrin of his "Go Army" dad. His moving out had freed up a bit of room in the Dale-Franklins' three-bedroom house, but Tracy still shared a room with her sister, Brianna, and the older of her two younger brothers was still bunking in the basement.

"Then what?"

"Well, last night Dad was speaking with John McGowan," her mother said.

"John McGowan?" Megan repeated, dumbstruck. John McGowan was her dad's old friend from med school.

"He said he and Regina would be happy to look after you while your dad and I are in South Korea," her mother continued, as if she hadn't just sent Megan's head spinning. "We didn't think it would be something you would be interested in. After all, South Korea is such an opportunity for a new cultural experience. However, if . . . you feel strongly . . ."

"John McGowan," Megan said again.

"Yes. John McGowan," her father said flatly. "Are you all right?"

Were her parents cracked? Were they certifiably insane? First they wanted to move her to the Far East, then they suggested

shipping her off to the McGowan house in Boston, Massachusetts, to live with all those—

“The boys will take a little while to adjust, but I’m sure you’ll all get along,” her mother said.

Boys? Megan’s mind was flooded with images of boys. Boys with missing teeth, their faces smeared with red Popsicle goo, their beady little eyes laughing at her as they lured her behind their house to see their new “puppy” and then lassoed her to a tree and hung her upside down. Greasy-haired, chubby-legged, evil little *boys*. Boys with worms in their pockets who ate gum off the ground and pulled her hair.

“How many of them were there again?” Megan asked as she lowered herself shakily onto the edge of the couch.

Her mother and father pondered this. “Seven at last count, I believe,” her father said. “Quite a brood.”

Yes. Quite, Megan thought.

Of course, they wouldn’t be grubby-handed little mud-streaked munchkins anymore, would they? Most of them had been around her age the last time she saw them seven years ago, which meant that now they would be—gulp—*teenage* boys.

Megan started to sweat. Teenage boys were even worse. Mud-streaked munchkins she could clobber over the head with a wiffleball bat. That was how she had finally gotten pudgy, stringy-haired Evan—the worst of the pack—to back off the last time after the lassoing incident. But teenage boys—those she could not handle. Sixteen years old and she had yet to have a single functional conversation with a boy in her class. How was she supposed to live with seven of them?

“So, that’s the deal,” her father said. “You can either come to Korea with us or stay in the States, but if you stay here, you’re staying with the McGowans.”

“Do I have to decide right now?” Megan asked.

“No, sweetie, but soon,” her mother said, leaning over to run her hand over Megan’s strawberry blond hair. “We’re leaving in a few days.” She planted a kiss on Megan’s forehead and Megan looked into her eyes—exactly the same green as Megan’s own, with just a few wrinkles at the corners. “We’ll miss you so much if you decide to stay.”

Megan nodded numbly.

“But we just want what’s best for you, so whatever you decide, we’ll support you,” her mother added.

Megan swallowed hard. This morning she had woken up with nothing more important to do than practice her Ben Palmer speech and add half a mile to her daily run. Now the whole world had turned upside down.

“Thanks,” Megan said finally.

Her mother smiled, blinking back tears. “You think about it and let us know.”

Megan slumped back into the couch as her parents left the room. *All by myself with seven boys or with my parents . . . in Korea*, Megan thought. Suddenly, running away to join the circus seemed like a workable option.

TooDamn-Funky: miss u already!!!

Kicker5525: Tracy! Im not even at the airport yet.

TooDamn-Funky: cant believe ur leaving me . . . L

Kicker5525: Not by choice.

TooDamn-Funky: u better email me the sec u get there! 7 boyz!! u
r so lucky!

Kicker5525: Not lucky. Dead. Im dead.

TooDamn-Funky: well . . . tru. it IS u.

Kicker5525: Thx 4 the pep talk. Grrrr . . . HOW AM I GOING 2 DO
THIS??????

TooDamn-Funky: hey maybe u will FINALLY learn 2 stand up 4
urself!!!

Kicker5525: How many times r u goin 2 say that 2 me?

TooDamn-Funky: 5,345,654. or til u start doing it.

Kicker5525: HEY! I stood up to MOM AND DAD!!!!

TooDamn-Funky: its a start. ok. been thinking bout the boyz.
member last year my bro did that immersion thing in
venezuela?

Kicker5525: where he learned to speak Spanish???

TooDamn-Funky: yeah! u go for 2 weeks & talk nothing but
Spanish & u come back fluent.

Kicker5525: . . . ?????

TooDamn-Funky: well this is like a guy immersion program!!!

Kicker5525: so . . . what. Im going 2 b fluent in GUY?

TooDamn-Funky: xactlee! u will c what they talk about when alone. U will c how they r with each other. U will c how they THINK!!! AND WHEN IT'S DONE YOU'LL BE ABLE TO WRITE A GUY GUIDE BOOK!!

Kicker5525: u r deranged.

TooDamn-Funky: IM SERIOUS! U could break the guy code!

Kicker5525: Huh. Guy 101.

TooDamn-Funky: now ur getting it! and u WILL send me all ur notes so I can publish them on the web.

Kicker5525: i like it. im in. ☺

TooDamn-Funky: knew u wood b!

Kicker5525: Wish me luck!!! I soooooooo need it.

TooDamn-Funky: good luck! swak!

Kicker5525: swak back!



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