

## A Higher Standard

**E. F. Dodd**

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*In the lighthearted romance novel A Higher Standard, a horse rescuer and a real estate developer feel that they shouldn't be together, though they can't help but want to be.*

In E. F. Dodd's charming romance novel *A Higher Standard*, a woman who believes that she doesn't have time for love meets a man who seems to have no interest in it either.

Everest hopes to expand her horse rescue charity, Second Chances, using land that despised real estate developers also have their eye on. Gideon is part of the development team that has grand plans for her hometown, Mimosa. He is intrigued by Everest, a workaholic and the mayor's daughter; he worries that she might kill his project before it's started. But as Everest and Gideon spend more time together, hoping to discover each other's secrets, they develop a mutual attraction. They begin to open up to each other at a gradual pace.

Everest and Gideon trade narrative duties, making their feelings and motivations clear in the process. Even when they are in denial, a sense of what's behind their decisions emerges. But when it comes to revealing their pasts, balance is lost. Everest's backstory is present and factors into understanding who she is; Gideon's past, conversely, is hazy, left to be discerned from hints regarding his happy childhood (he attributes his love of classic movies to his grandmother, for example). As the relationship develops, it seems that Gideon knows Everest better than she knows him, undermining their love story. And a reference to Gideon being on bad terms with his exes is at odds with his presentation as a kind, easygoing man who wins people's approval with ease.

Sarcasm permeates the novel. Everest's sarcasm is biting; Gideon's is subdued and wry. Their banter is engaging, and their romance is involving. Nonetheless, the book's ending is too rushed. It ties up the story's loose ends, but the book's final conflict is handled with unconvincing tidiness in the span of a few pages that cover a single conversation. Still, Everest and Gideon's actions in the book's final scenes make a good case for the durability of their relationship.

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CAROLINA CIUCCI (March 13, 2023)

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