

Liz's Proposal

Wes

If a raccoon in a suit and tie – with a tiny little briefcase in his tiny little paw - had been standing on the porch when I opened the front door, I would've been less surprised than I was to see Liz. I mean yes, she lived next door, and yes, she'd yelled at me from her car an hour ago, but we didn't do things like ring doorbells.

Our modus operandi was sarcastic mockery and shouts across the yard.

But there she was.

On my porch.

My heart instantly switched into *what is happening* panic mode as the smell of her perfume swirled around my head and her green eyes met mine. *Liz is here. Liz is here. What in the everloving hell, Liz is on my porch.* Her hair was wet and her eyebrows were screwed together like she was already irritated with me, yet I felt punched-in-the-chest by the sheer power of her face.

Somehow, Liz Buxbaum managed to be prettier *every single time* I saw her than she'd been the time before.

Fucking witchcraft, that.

“Well, well.” I was impressed by how relaxed I sounded when something akin to the THIS IS FINE fire meme was going on in my brain. *I’m wearing pants, right?* “To what do I owe this honor?”

“Let me in,” she said as the rain poured down on her. “I need to talk.”

She was in Bossy Liz mode, which forced me to keep the door mostly closed and say, “Yeah, I don’t know – are you going to hurt me if I let you in?”

“Come on,” she said, and I swear to God her teeth were clenched. “I’m getting drenched out here.”

I wasn’t a jerk. If it were anyone else, I’d be holding the door open because it was pouring and I was a nice guy.

But that wasn’t how things worked for us. Our love language was playful torture.

“I know – and I’m sorry – but I am seriously afraid you’re going to junk-punch me for stealing the spot if I let you come inside.” I opened the door a little further (once my brain catalogued that I was indeed wearing pants) to spike the ball that I was warm and dry as I said, “You’re a little scary sometimes, Liz.”

“Wes!” My mom popped up behind me, nearly giving me a heart attack. I hadn’t heard her coming, like, at *all*, which meant either she was in stealth mode or I’d been so Liz-focused that the rest of my senses had shorted out entirely. *Were other things happening in the universe besides Liz’s appearance on my porch? Impossible.* I could tell my mother was embarrassed when she said, “For the love of God, open the door for the poor girl.”

“But I think she’s here to kill me.” I said it to get a reaction out of Liz, but before she could respond, my mom took over.

“Get inside, hon,” she said, grabbing Liz’s arm and pulling her into the house. “My son is a nuisance and he’s sorry.”

“No, I’m not.”

“Tell me what he did,” my mom said to Liz, who was smiling back at her sweetly, “And I’ll help you punish him.”

That made Liz’s eyes land on me – *Dear God, those eyes* – as she pushed back her wet curls and professed, “He stole my spot when I was trying to parallel park.”

Lizzie, you little shit.

“Oh, my God, you told my mom on me?” I closed the front door as my mother ushered Liz further into the house. I followed but felt the need to add, “Well, if we’re randomly tattling, Mom, I should probably tell you that Liz was the one who called the cops on my car when I had pneumonia.”

“Wait, what?” Liz stopped and turned around, looking up at me with squinty eyes. “When were you sick?”

Ummmmm. Liz Buxbaum asking about my well-being, even if it was just a simple question, felt different. New. Uncharted territory that I wanted to explore.

Kind of like the rain drops that were scattered across her cheeks.

But I just said, “Well, when did you call?”

She peered at me like she was trying to figure out whether or not I was lying.

Which made me put my hands on my chest and cough dramatically. “I was too ill to even move my car.”

That part was actually true; it was the sickest I’d ever been.

I'd felt like shit for two weeks, coughing and exhausted 24/7, but my delightful father had insisted it was a cold and that I needed to "nut-up and power-through" my workouts, regardless of the over-100-for-days-on-end fever.

It wasn't until I literally passed out in the gym that I was finally sent to a doctor, who immediately diagnosed me with pneumonia and prescribed total bed rest. It took a full week of feeling close to death before I finally started getting better.

Which was right about the time Liz called the authorities.

Such a brat.

"Stop." Her voice was quiet and absent of its usual snark when she asked me, "Were you seriously sick?"

I don't want to answer that question.

I didn't want to answer because I knew my words – any words from me whatsoever – would end that unexpected half-second of Lizzie's concern. It was nothing and everything, her worry, and I wanted to lounge around in it for just a heartbeat. I let my gaze tumble over her damp curls and pink lips before managing to ask, "Would you seriously care?"

Our eyes met and held, and I stopped breathing as she looked up at me like she might actually care. *Wait – why is she here?* Maybe I'd—

"Knock it off, you little brats!" My mom swooped in and waved her arms, destroying the moment, gesturing like we should follow her into the living room. "Sit on the couch, eat some cookies, and get over yourselves."

I wanted to bang my head against the wall as Liz followed my mom and forgot about me entirely.

Why are you here, Liz?

I was dying to know the answer to that question, but I also didn't want to know, which was insane, right? But as long as my mom was fetching milk and rambling about God-only-knows-what, all the possibilities in the world still existed. Maybe Liz was here because she needed a ride somewhere, maybe she was here because she wanted to discuss getting to know me better, or maybe she was going to confess that she'd been crushing on me since that day in first grade when she punched me and I told her mom on her.

They were all impossible scenarios, but until she told me otherwise, they were still technically *possible*.

Now, the reality was that she probably came over to scold me for the tape job on her car or my too-easy snag of her parking spot, but I was enjoying the sweet spot between dreams and reality.

It was kind of my happy place.

My mother finally ran off after reminding me I had to pick up Sarah at 6:30, leaving me face-to-face with an Elizabeth Buxbaum who was towel drying her hair in my living room.

Drying her hair. In my living room.

Were we in slow motion?

Because it *felt* like we were in slow motion. She rubbed the towel over her long hair, and God help me, I couldn't away. There was something wildly intimate about knowing *how* she dried her hair (soft but efficient, so on-brand for Liz), and a gun to my skull couldn't have convinced me to avert my eyes.

"Oh, I love this movie," she said, looking toward the TV while still rubbing the towel over her waves.

And I thought: *I know*.

Because I could watch any movie – ANY movie at all – and instantly know if Liz loved it or not; it was like my superpower. So when my mom was watching this when I walked in after school, I'd immediately thought - *I bet Liz loves this stupid movie.*

"Of course you do." I grabbed a cookie. "So what do you want to talk to me about?"

"Okay, um," she replied, looking nervous. She was blinking fast and her cheeks were pink as she sat down on the couch. "Here's the thing. I kind of need your help."

There was no fucking way I could have held in the smile that those words elicited.

Which made her put up a hand – perfectly pink fingernails – and say, "Nope. Listen. I know you're not one to help out of the goodness of your heart, so I've got a proposition for you."

"Ouch. Like I'm some kind of mercenary or something. That hurts."

"No, it doesn't," she replied, rolling her eyes.

"No, it really doesn't," I agreed, wondering why she'd always thought of me as such a colossal asshole.

"Okay. But before I tell you *what* I want you to help with, I want to go over the terms of the deal."

She took a deep breath, like she was about to jump off a cliff, and tucked her hair behind her ears (Lizzie's *this-means-business* move). "First of all, you have to swear to secrecy. If you tell *anyone* about our deal, it is void and you don't get payment. Second, if you agree to the deal, you have to actually help me. You can't just do a little and then blow me off."

Wait - what the hell is this? It sounded like her deal was more than just me promising not to tape her car again. It sounded like...shit, it sounded like *something*. I calmly asked, "Well, what's the payment?"

She swallowed – *this plan had my girl crazy nervous* – and said, “The payment will be uncontested, 24/7 access to the parking spot for the duration of our deal.”

“Whoa.” I walked over, needing to sit, because *duration of our deal* meant that whatever this was, it wasn’t a one-and-done situation. I dropped into the chair across from her and said, “You will give me THE parking spot?”

Her teeth were nibbling on her bottom lip when she nodded and said, “That’s correct.”

“I’m in. I’m doing it. I’m your guy.”

Honestly, a scenario didn’t exist where I would say no. Liz could suggest I lie down in the middle of the street and wait for a truck to crush my bones, and this guy right here would probably inquire as to exactly where she would like my body to rest.

I was a fool for my neighbor.

“You can’t say that yet,” she said, looking like a little kid with her eyebrows all squished together. “You don’t even know what the deal is.”

“Doesn’t matter. I’ll do whatever it takes.”

Her eyes narrowed to a squint. “What if I want you to run naked through the commons during lunch?”

“Done,” I said, knowing this casual acceptance would drive her to madness.

She grabbed the couch blanket and wrapped it around her shoulders. “What if I want you to turn naked cartwheels through the commons during lunch while singing the entire *Hamilton* soundtrack?”

“You got it,” I said, struggling to concentrate when the blanket that I napped with *on a daily basis* was now curled around her body. “I love ‘My Shot.’”

“Seriously?” She smiled, then, her eyes on me as she grinned in a way that made my chest pinch. “But can you even do a cartwheel?”

“Yup,” I said on autopilot, hypnotized by the way she was smiling at me. There was no mockery, no dickery whatsoever, and it would now be tattooed on my brain forever.

“Prove it,” she replied, tilting her head just a little and giving me that sass that I fucking loved, holy shit.

“You’re so high maintenance.” I stood, kicked the coffee table out of my way, and did a cartwheel. I knew it was bad, but I grinned like an Olympic gymnast when I stuck the landing and saw her laugh.

She tried holding it in, but I’d made. Her. Laugh.

A unanimous 10 from all judges.

Her green eyes moved over my face, like she was trying to find answers, and then she said, “Okay, but I swear on everything holy that I will hire a hitman if you blab about this.”

“I very much believe you.” Liz took a bite of her cookie as I said, “Now spill it.”

“Um.” She held up a finger while she finished chewing, but then instead of looking at me, her eyes went down to her lap. It was obvious she was avoiding further eye contact, but why? Whatever this was, she was *very* nervous to tell me. Which, for no good reason at all, gave me some kind of optimistic thrill.

Because what could she be so scared to share with *me*?

“Okay, here’s the thing,” she said, still staring down at her knees. “Michael is back in town, and I was kind of hoping to, y’know, *touch base with him*. We were close before he moved away, and I want to get that back again.”

Aaaand my brain exploded into a thousand tiny pieces.

Because Michael.

This was about Michael Young.

I mean, of course it was.

Fuck. What else could it possibly have been about, right?

I scratched my eyebrow, suddenly feeling a little sick again. “And I can help with that how, exactly?”

She still wouldn’t look at me. “I don’t have any classes with him, so there’s no way for me to talk to him naturally. But you and Michael are already friends. You hang out. You invited him to a party.”

She finally raised her eyes, eyes filled with doubt about me and my willingness to help her. Her voice was almost shy when she said, “*You’ve* got the connection that I want.”

I looked into those wishful green eyes and wanted to scream – or punch a wall - because I was screwed. The last thing in the world I wanted to do was help her fucking “touch base” with Young, but I hated even more the way she expected me to destroy her over this.

She was never going to stop seeing me as the dick next door unless I showed her that I wasn’t.

Dammit.

“So let me get this straight.” I shoved a cookie in my mouth so my unhappiness wouldn’t be broadcasted in my voice when I said, “You are still starry-eyed over Young, and you want me to drag you along to Ryno’s party so you can get him to like you.”

She opened her mouth to deny it, but then she shrugged and said, “Basically.”

I didn’t want to hurt her, but I told her the truth. “I heard he’s kind of interested in Laney.”

Her lips tightened before she faked like she didn't care. "Don't you worry about that."

God, I love her bristles. "How positively scandalous of you, Elizabeth."

"Shut it."

Somehow, messing with her made this marginally less painful, like a downgrade from a groin-kick to a nose-punch. "You can't think that just showing up at a party is going to make him notice you. There's going to be a ton of people there."

"I only need a few minutes," she said, raising her chin in that way that told me she was trying her damndest to seem confident.

"Pretty confident, are we?"

"I am," she said, then added, "I have a plan."

Of course you do, honey. "And it is...?"

She tucked her legs underneath her and I had to force my eyes to stay on her face as she said, "Like I'm telling you."

"Nah." I stood and went over to the couch, plopping down beside her. "Your plan sucks."

"How could you possibly know that," she said, wrapping the blanket tighter around her shoulders, "when you don't know my plan?"

"Because I've known you since you were five, Liz," I said, a thousand percent certain that she had an actual written plan somewhere in her room. "I'm sure your plan involves a contrived meeting, an entire notebook's worth of silly ideas, and someone riding off into the sunset."

"You're way off base."

"Bet."

That made her sigh and roll her eyes. "So...?"

“So...?” I said, crossing my arms and drinking in the adorable irritation streaking across her face.

“Oh, my God, you’re torturing me on purpose. Are you going to help me or not?”

If she were standing, she’d be stamping her foot.

So I scratched my chin, as if this was a difficult decision for me. “I just don’t know if The Spot is worth it.”

“Worth what? Allowing me to be in your presence for a few hours?” She swiped a wet curl behind her ear. “You’ll barely even know I’m there.”

Wait.

She wanted me to take her *with me* to a party.

I was starting to get confused by my whiplash reactions.

Because as much as I didn’t feel like helping her with Michael – *just kill me, universe* - she was asking me to take her to a party.

“What if *I’m* trying to hit it off with someone? Your presence might mess with my mojo.”

She laughed – *that’s two* – and said, “Trust me, you won’t even notice me. I’ll be too busy making Michael fall wildly in love with me to even touch your mojo.”

“Ew. Stop talking about touching my mojo, you perv.”

“Are you going to say yes or *what?*” she asked, rolling her eyes in exasperation yet again but also still laughing.

I kicked my feet up on the coffee table. “I *do* love watching you take the walk of shame from Mrs. Scarapelli’s. It’s kind of my new favorite hobby. So I guess I’ll drag you along to the party.”

She squealed, “Yes!”

“Settle your ass down,” I said, grabbing the remote and raising the volume. “Wait – this movie? You love *this* movie?”

“I know it’s a weird premise, but I swear to you that it’s great.”

I couldn’t let that comment fly because it was ridiculous. “I’ve seen it. This movie is trash, are you kidding me?”

Liz went off, then, passionately defending the absurd time-travel rom-com while I watched her expressive face and responded with just enough sarcasm to ensure she didn’t think I was into her.

But I was shocked by the entire debate, to be honest, because even though we absolutely disagreed and I was full-on trying to get her riled up, we were *both* having fun. For once, instead of exchanging gunfire bursts of snarky sarcasm, we were debating something harmless in a very normal way.

Her feet were up on the coffee table, beside mine, and it was *comfortable*.

Almost like we were friends.

I wanted to pause this moment and rewind it.

Over and over again.

“Enemies-to-lovers is a classic trope,” she was saying, looking enamored by the concept.

“Oh, good God, you think it’s awesome,” I said, patting the top of her head like she was a silly child. “You poor, confused little love lover. *Tell me* you don’t think this movie is remotely connected to reality in any way.”

She smacked my hand off – *yes, Lizzie* - as she came back with, “Yeah, because I believe in time travel.”

“Not that,” I said, shaking my head. “Time travel is probably the most *realistic* part. I’m talking about rom-coms in general. Relationships never-ever-ever work like that.”

“Yes, they do,” she defended.

“They *do*?” I pictured my parents and mentally called bullshit. “Correct me if I’m wrong, but it didn’t seem like it worked that way with Jeremiah Green or Tad Miranda.”

That made her mouth kind of hang open for a minute as those green eyes moved over my face. *Yes, Liz, I know every person you’ve ever been romantically linked to; sue me.*

“Well, they *can*,” she continued, pushing her hair out of her face. “It’s out there, even if the jaded, cynical people like you are too, um...*cynical* to believe.”

“You said cynical twice,” I said, wondering if she realized that she was having fun with *me*.

She just sighed.

I asked her, “So you think that two enemies – in the real world – can magically get over their differences and fall madly in love?”

Carefully consider your answer, Elizabeth.

“I do,” she said, and if there was a God, he was underlining, highlighting and bookmarking her response for future follow-up.

“And you think that plotting and planning and trickery is no big deal if it’s done to spark some sort of true love?”

She nibbled on her bottom lip as she thought through her answer. “You’re making it sound ridiculous on purpose.”

“Oh no – it’s just ridiculous.”

“*You’re* ridiculous,” she teased, and I wondered what it’d be like to watch an entire movie with her. Would she talk through the entire thing – *possibly* – or would she quietly watch while that romantic brain of hers ran wild?

“Have you thought about the fact that if your little love notions are valid,” I asked, “Then Michael is actually *not* the guy for you?”

That made her focus settle on my face. “What do you mean?”

“At this point, you and Michael aren’t mad at each other, so it’s doomed. Every rom-com has two people who can’t stand each other in the beginning but eventually bang it out.”

“Gross.”

“Seriously.” I started listing off rom-com titles to prove my point, but that didn’t work.

Because she smiled a secret smile and said, “You’re a little impressive with your rom-com knowledge, Bennett. Are you sure you aren’t a closet watcher?”

She couldn’t know what her usage of my last name did to me - *dear Lord, call me Bennett again* - and I calmly said, “Positive.”

“I won’t tell anyone if you secretly fangirl over romance flicks,” she teased around a giggle.

“Shut it,” I said, physically incapable of doing anything but smile. “So what trope works for you and Michael, then? The followed-him-around-like-a-puppy-but-now-he-sees-the-puppy-as-a-potential-girlfriend-even-though-he-already-has-a-potential-girlfriend trope?”

“You are an obnoxious love *hater*,” she said, laughing.

“Who is apparently taking your ass to a party,” I added, waiting for her reaction.

“Yeah, um.” Liz looked a little flustered as she said, “So should I just walk over, or--”

“I’ll pick you up.” My voice was scratchy when I said, “At seven.”

God only knew when I'd have the chance to take Buxbaum anywhere ever again, so I was damn sure going to pick her up. I wanted to hear her voice coming from my passenger seat, see her painted fingernails switching my radio stations, and smell her floral perfume as it danced with the A/C in my air vents.

I didn't *want* to drive her to Michael, but I was damn-sure going to make the most out of the bumpy ride.



The Party

Wes

“Where is he?” Liz asked, looking a little shell-shocked as she stood by the keg and watched the sights and sounds of Ryno’s basement. I had no idea what she did with her friends on the weekends, but I also knew I’d never seen her at a party.

So this was probably jarring.

And even as part of me wanted to laugh at how out-of-place she seemed in her yellow church dress, clutching her cup so damn tight I half-expected it to pop out of her pink-polished fingers, the other part of me fucking loved it.

Because it was *so* Liz Buxbaum.

Her chin was raised and she was wearing her *I'm fine* smile, but I could tell by the way she kept chewing on her bottom lip and tucking her hair behind her ears that she was nervous as hell.

“We’ve only been here ten minutes—chill,” I said, wondering if she had any clue what her Chanel No. 5 did to my brain. “He’s here somewhere.”

She didn’t say anything, but just kept blinking those long lashes and looking around for Michael. It was irritating, the way she thought he was fucking God-tier, but I wasn’t too concerned because I knew they weren’t a match. He would never see her for what she was – he never had – and she’d be bored with him in five minutes if she ever got close.

“Maybe you should relax and try having fun.” I pulled my phone out of my front pocket and checked for messages. Three from my dad, asking how I’d pitched at practice, but nothing from Liz’s dream dude. “You do know how to do that, don’t you?”

“Of course,” she said defensively, and I had to bite the inside of *my* lip so I didn’t laugh when she took a sip of beer and immediately crinkled her nose in disgust. I was pretty sure she thought she was pulling off *cool*, tossing back a cold one, but anyone with eyes could see the girl hated whatever was in that red Solo cup.

“Wesley!”

Shit, shit, shit. It was Ashley Sparks, who I liked, but she tended to get out of hand when she drank and I didn’t want her to scare my next-door neighbor. I wasn’t sure why, but I really wanted Liz to have a good time with me and my friends.

Probably because I knew she made assumptions about who she thought I was.

It'd be nice if Ryno's little get-together didn't make things worse.

Ash let out a squeal and wrapped herself around me, *very* tightly, and when I glanced over her shoulder, Liz rolled her eyes.

She rolled her eyes.

I knew it didn't mean anything, but I also knew I didn't hate Liz being irritated by a pretty girl hugging me.

"What took you so long?" Ashley yelled over the music, pulling back from the hug. "I've been looking for you everywhere."

"I had to pick up Liz." I said, pointing toward Buxbaum. But Ash didn't even look. She just scooted closer and slurred into my ear, loud enough for half the basement to hear, "You look really hot tonight."

"Uh, thanks, Ash," I said, stepping back from her while trying not to be too obvious about it. She was nice when she was sober, so I didn't want to make her feel bad, but I also had no interest in...whatever she was interested in that night.

"I probably shouldn't tell you that," she yelled again, closing the distance between us. Her breath smelled like it was 100-proof as she drawled, "But what the hell, right?"

I was opening my mouth to answer when Liz stepped forward and tapped Ashley on the shoulder.

She tapped. Ashley Sparks. On the shoulder.

What is this?

Ashley turned around, smiled at Liz like they were best friends, and said, “Hey.”

Liz leaned closer to Ash – *what the hell is this* - and I had to really strain to hear her when she said, “Don’t tell anyone, but Wes and I are kind of...y’know...”

And she trailed off.

Suggestively.

I caught Liz’s smirk as she glanced at me for a half-second, and it was my turn to be shell-shocked.

What was she doing? *What the hell was happening?*

“Together?” Ashley asked, looking confused, but then she seemed to understand Liz and yelled excitedly, “I had no idea—I’m so sorry!”

“Shh.” Liz’s eyes darted around the basement, probably looking for Michael to make sure he hadn’t heard. “No worries at all, we’re just keeping it quiet.”

“I mean, I was going after him hardcore,” Ash said, waving her hand at herself and laughing. “I did *not* mean to make a move on your man!”

It was impossible not to smile as Liz shook her head frantically, desperate to shut Ashley up. “Shh . . . no biggie. He isn’t my man yet so—”

“He will be, girl.” Ash smiled at me. “You go get it.”

“Oh my God,” Liz muttered under her breath. “Shh. Um, okay.”

I watched Liz’s face as Ash stumbled away, and she was biting her lip again and intentionally *not* looking at me. I knew without a doubt that she hated I’d heard her, but I *loved* it and just couldn’t bring myself to let her off the hook.

It was too perfect. I lowered my voice and said, “Did you just tell her that—”

“Yep,” she interrupted, cutting me off and continuing to avoid eye contact.

God, is there anything better than messing with Liz?

I bent my knees, so our faces were level and she *had* to look at me. Green eyes met mine and I asked, “Why would you do that?”

“Well,” she said, pursing her lips together before looking down at her beer and murmuring, “I was trying to save you, um, from her amorous clutches.”

Her amorous clutches.

I shook my head in disbelief. Her *amorous clutches*? Who even thought, much less said, things like that?

Liz Buxbaum protecting my virtue had *not* been on my Ryno’s-party-bingo-card.

And as I stared down at the sprinkling of freckles on her nose, I couldn't hold back a laugh because she was being just *so* classic Liz. Her refusal to look at me was one hundred percent from the Little Lizzie playbook.

But what should've come next was her lifting that stubborn chin and glaring at my laughter. I would've expected her to be wildly defensive of her own behavior.

And perhaps a little mean.

Instead, her eyes met mine, her lips turned up, and she started laughing.

With me, like we were partners in crime.

God, she was so pretty.

I wasn't sure if it was the sound of her laugh or the memory of her face when Ash had been yelling, but once I started laughing, I couldn't stop.

And neither could she.

We both kind of lost it, cackling like friends who laughed together all the time instead of neighbors who snarked at each other on a daily basis. It felt like some sort of breakthrough, like forward progress on something that'd been stuck for a really long time, and I wondered--

"Hey, y'all."

Damn. It.

“Hey. Michael.” I looked away from her just to be irrationally irritated by the sight of his face. He was so *nice*, like a genuinely great guy, but all I wanted was for him to disappear. “You made it.”

“Brought you some Lone Star,” he said, looking around at the packed basement. “It’s in the bathtub.”

“Nice. Thanks.” I glanced back at Liz, but now her face was like a goddamn billboard for lovesickness as she stared at him, our moment already forgotten. Her green eyes were soft, her mouth in a tiny smile, and I wondered what it felt like to have Liz Buxbaum look at you like that.

Like she thought you could walk on water.

“Did I see Kyle Matthews here?” he asked. “Over by the keg?”

“Probably,” I said, still watching her watch him. “He said he was coming.”

“Does he still play ball?”

“Um. Yeah,” I replied, noticing there was a tiny red heart on each of her fingernails. *Liz core.*

As if sensing my focus, Michael shifted his attention to her and asked, “So how have you been, Liz? You look exactly the same. I would’ve recognized you anywhere.”

“Same,” she replied, and there was something about the way her cheeks got pink and her voice got breathy that annoyed the shit out of me.

“So where do you work?” he asked, waving a hand and gesturing to her body.

“What?” Liz kept smiling, but a tiny wrinkle formed in-between her eyebrows.

Michael gestured to her dress again and said, “Your uniform . . . ?”

Her *uniform*?

Her. Uniform.

It took me a second to realize what he meant, and then -- *ohhhhhhh, Liz.*

Michael thought her yellow dress was a work uniform.

To be fair, it did have a waitresy vibe to it.

Liz’s eyes shot to me for the quickest of seconds, like she was checking to see if I’d heard, and then she blinked fast and said, “My uniform. Yeah. Um, I, uh, pick up hours sometimes at the diner.”

The diner?

Michael asked, “What diner?”

I could see a million thoughts crossing her panicked face, all at once, and it took everything in my power not to laugh at her inability to lie. Her lips rolled inward and her eyes narrowed before she stammered, “The, uh, *The Diner*.”

“I love *The Diner*,” I said, grinning while she looked like she wanted to stab me.

“I barely ever work there,” she said, presenting Michael with the worst fake smile I’d ever seen.

And as much as I was enjoying the spectacle of Little Liz crashing and burning, I didn’t like the unease in her eyes. I didn’t like that she looked trapped.

Michael asked, “Where exactly—”

“I wish you’d moved back into your old house, Young,” I interrupted, compelled to stop the bleeding even though I was staunchly opposed to the Liz-Michael agenda. “Because we could totally re-up our last epic game of hide-and-go-seek.”

Liz’s eyebrows scrunched together, like she didn’t understand why I was helping her, and then she looked down at her cup.

I’m just as confused as you are, honey.

“Can you imagine?” Michael said, smiling, and it was kind of surreal that he was oblivious to everything going on with Liz at that moment.

“I prefer not to,” she interjected, grinning at Michael and ignoring me completely. “When our hide-and-seek games turned ‘epic,’ that usually meant that Wes and the twins were terrorizing me.”

“How many times do you think I snuck over and warned you?” he asked her, smiling in a way that I didn’t like. Like he was seeing her. “God, I saved you from so many bugs and frogs down your shirt.”

Yeah, you were fucking Prince Charming.

We get it.

“The twins used to get so pissed when you helped her.”

“I just couldn’t let you do that to Liz,” he replied, grinning and shaking his head as we three walked down memory lane. “Every time I see a cheesy movie on TV, I still think of Little Liz.”

She was back to watching him with the enamored smile that made my jaw hurt.

He said, “Remember how she always watched *Bridget Jones Diary* and got *so mad* if we made fun of it?”

I *did* remember that, and I also remembered the day I realized why. Liz had been so devastatingly broken on her pink bike when she’d realized her mom’s movies were gone. Her face had been red and splotchy and she’d cried to *me*, for God’s sake – that was how I knew it was the worst.

She’d come to *me*. She’d let *me* help her.

“Do we have to rehash the past?” Liz pushed her hair behind her ears, still looking amused as she said, “I heard—”

“Can you get me a beer?” Ashley appeared beside Liz and yelled to Michael, “I’m bad with the keg and always end up with too much head.”

I *think* she was trying to flirt with Michael, though it was tough to tell.

But Michael, the consummate good guy, took her cup and said, “Sure.”

As soon as he turned away and reached for the tap, Ashley asked me, “Are you going to prom, Bennett?”

Liz was watching me, so I raised my eyebrows and met her gaze while I answered, “I haven’t decided yet.”

“Dream on,” she replied quietly, for my ears only, grinning before looking away.

Damn, but I loved when she gave me shit.

“A whole bunch of us are going as a group,” Ash slurred, her voice getting louder with every word. “You two should come. We’re getting a limo and everything.”

My eyes returned to Liz, but *her* eyes were once again on Michael.

Christ. Was he really that interesting to look at?

Ashley hiccupped, and the girl looked sweaty and kind of like she was ready to pass out.

“Did we do a little pre-gaming before the party?” I asked, already knowing the answer.

“At Benny’s—his mom was gone,” she said, giggling.

“I see. How about some water?” I grabbed a bottle from the cooler of ice by the keg and opened it for her, but she muttered something under her breath that sounded like *limosheen* as she grabbed it and took a drink.

“Well, I do love me some limo,” I said because she clearly wasn’t going to let it go, “So I’ll have to think about prom.”

But I *wasn’t* going to think about prom.

Well, not unless there was someone else who wanted to go.

“When *is* prom?” Michael asked.

Everything stopped for me as Liz’s eyes widened like all of her wishes were about to come true. I inhaled through my nose, not wanting to tell him for some idiotic reason, but then I answered, “In two weeks.”

“It’s so bizarre,” Michael said in the drawl that I couldn’t decide if I hated or not (it only bothered me when Liz was present, to be honest), “switching schools two months before graduation. Senior prom is supposed to be this really big deal, but I don’t even know any girls here yet except for Laney.”

I didn’t have to look at Liz to know her smile slipped at the mention of Laney’s name.

“Are y’all going?” he asked, pointing to Liz and me.

“*Us?*” Her voice was weirdly high-pitched and she waved a hand between us while making an exaggerated face. “Wes and I? Oh my God, no. Are you kidding me?”

Are you kidding me?

I knew it was how she felt, but that didn’t mean I liked it.

“Yeah,” I said, shaking my head and adding, “We are not going anywhere together. Trust me. I wouldn’t go to the gas station with this one.”

“Well, I wouldn’t invite you to the gas station, so you can just shut your big mouth,” Liz said around a smile, following it up with a fake arm punch. “Believe me.”

She hit harder than I expected, which didn’t actually surprise me because I’d never been able to completely figure her out. I could read her face and guess her reactions, but she always had some little detail tucked away that usually shocked the hell out of me.

I loved that about her.

“Oh. I thought I heard you were a thing,” Michael said, and Liz got that *don’t-make-me-sick* look on her face again.

Yes, my girl was a real ego-check.

“Yeah, well, you heard wrong,” she said, looking horrified at the realization that she might’ve ruined her own chances by showing up at the party with me.

And even as she insulted me, I couldn’t stop myself from springing into action when those green eyes weren’t happy.

Fucking simp, I was.

I reached out a hand to mess up her hair and convincingly proclaim, “Way off base, dude. No Little Liz for me.”

“Nope,” she agreed, making a face and slapping my hand.

“Oh.” Michael appeared to be deep in thought as his eyes moved between us, and then he said, “Two weeks, huh?”

Now, *I* knew he was thinking about Laney, but Liz’s face was a wide-open book that screamed *I will go to prom with you*.

I wanted to mess up her hair again.

“So tell me what’s happened since I moved.” Michael was oblivious to the havoc he was wreaking inside of our little Miss Buxbaum and just kept talking. “Do y’all still hang out? How about the twins and Jocelyn?”

Liz leveled me with a look, a nonverbal transmission that begged me not to embarrass her, so I said nothing.

“Wes and I see each other long enough to fight over the parking spot in front of our houses, but that’s pretty much it. And Joss is actually my best friend now, which even I find hard to believe.”

“I can’t find my phone.” Ashley popped up from behind me, grabbing my arm. “Have you seen a purple iPhone?”

“Sorry,” I said, wondering who she’d come with because she was officially shitfaced and needed to retire. “I haven’t.”

As I checked over her head to see if Carolyn – her best friend - was nearby, I heard Liz say to Michael, “I don’t know if you knew it, but when we were little, I had the biggest crush on you.”

My head whipped around so fast at that because I honestly couldn’t believe she was just shooting her shot the very first time she talked to him. *What the hell are you doing, Buxbaum?*

But *shiiiiit*, Liz was giving Michael the same lovesick smile she had been all night and he was grinning back at her like he was interested.

He wasn’t interested, was he?

I fucking hated the way they were looking at each other.

Ash grabbed my arm again and whined, “I don’t feel so good.”

And then she threw up.

Immediately, and with great force.

While Liz stood directly in the line of fire.

Holy, holy *shit*, she vomited all over Buxbaum.

Liz gasped – loudly – and looked frozen, holding out her arms like someone had just doused her with a bucket of ice water. There was chunky vomit in her hair, covering her dress, all over her *legs* – Dear God, she was covered in it.

And her eyes were huge, like she had no idea what to do.

“I’ve got clean clothes in my trunk, Liz,” I heard myself say, stepping closer and grabbing her elbow. “Let’s get you up to the bathroom, and you can clean up while I run to my car and grab them.”

She didn’t argue, so I led her through the gawking crowd. I was sure she was dying of embarrassment as everyone watched, so my prime focus was getting her out of the basement and into clean clothes as quickly as possible.

So much for not reinforcing her preconceived notions about me and my friends.

Liz still hadn’t uttered a word, so when I finally got her to the bathroom upstairs and turned on the lights, I bent my knees to make sure she heard me. “Get out of these clothes and clean up, and I’ll be right back, okay?”

She just nodded, looking like she might vomit, too.

I ignored everyone as I sprinted out to the car for my baseball bag, and when I got back to the bathroom door, I knocked and said, “Liz, do you want me to hand the bag through the door, or should I just leave it here on the floor and go downstairs?”

“If you could leave it, that would be great.”

Finally she speaks.

And then she said, in the softest voice, “Thank you.”

“No problem.” I cleared my throat and wondered when I’d become so pathetic that a mere *thank you* made me emo. “Everyone is downstairs, so if you just reach your hand out the door and swipe the bag, no one will see anything.”

“Okay,” she said, and it occurred to me that she was likely naked at that moment.

Get it together, idiot. She’s covered in vomit, for Christ’s sake.

I cleared my throat again. “There’s a Target bag in the side pocket that you can put your dirty clothes in. And I’ve got your purse downstairs—do you need it?”

“No.” Her voice was a little louder when she said, “Um—thanks. So much, Wes.”

“No problem,” I managed, and when I heard the sound of my own *it’s-okay-baby* voice – *was I fucking crooning?* - I realized I needed to clear out and quit acting like a pathetic dipshit. “I’m going downstairs, then.”

Michael was talking about roadrunners when she came back.

He was telling me that the bird actually existed in real life – in Texas - and that it looked nothing like the one in cartoons. He was feeding me this mind-blowing information that would forever change my DNA when her wave caught my eye.

And then I died.

I swallowed my tongue, had a heart attack, and might've blacked out for a second, all at the same time.

Because there Liz stood, barefoot on the basement step, looking like *that*.

Her hair was wet – I fucking *loved* her curls holy shit – but instead of wearing the hoodie in my bag or some floral concoction of a shirt I'd half-expected to see because that was her default, she was wearing a tank top.

A plain tank top and a *lot* of smooth skin.

I inhaled through my nose as that tank top became my instant obsession, the garment most likely to merge with the Liz Buxbaum avatar that already existed in my brain.

But worse than that shirt were the sweatpants she was wearing.

My sweatpants.

My sweatpants.

The sight of her in my clothes – *she was wearing my clothes what the hell was going on in the universe* – made something inside of me burn. It was a Neanderthalic reaction that I wasn't necessarily proud of, but at that moment I wanted to drop every piece of clothing I owned at her feet and beg her to wear them for the rest of her life.

Only – God help me - it got worse.

Because my pants (*mine*) were huge on her, so baggy that even though she'd rolled them at the waist, they hung low and showed off her belly button and what appeared to be a tiny flower tattoo on her hip.

A daisy.

A. Daisy.

Holy hell. A daisy.

I was dizzy – it was fucking dizzy in there, wasn't it? Someone needed to open a window or something because I was having trouble getting air. How did she have a tattoo? *Liz has a hip tattoo*. Liz had a hip tattoo and I had no idea how I would ever convince my brain to move on and think about anything else.

A daisy.

Fuck.

I swallowed and wondered how she could be standing there looking like *that*, like...shit...*that*, when she was supposed to be covered up with flowers so no one knew.

I pulled out my keys and walked over, suddenly in a hurry to get her far away from my friends and that party. "I'm assuming you want to go?"

Why the hell did my voice sound like I'd just eaten glass?

"Yeah," she said, but her eyes were on Young, not me.

Her cheeks were blazing as she ran a hand through her wet curls, looking nervous, and when I glanced at Michael, I clenched my jaw and wanted to push him.

Into a wall.

Because who the hell did he think he was, leering at her naked stomach like she was some...I don't know, someone who wasn't Liz? Like she was just there for his...his...corneal pleasure or something. I liked him, but he was an asshole to look at her like that.

As if hearing my thoughts and wanting to piss me off even more, he grinned and drawled, "I really like your tattoo."

No shit, Sherlock.

"Oh. Thanks," she said, and I watched in frustration as she tugged at the bottom of her shirt but also *smiled* at him.

Smiled at him in a way that made my chest hurt.

"You ready?" I gritted my teeth, hating that Michael was still eyeballing her body. If he'd been blind to her for the whole of our lives, then he didn't deserve to suddenly wake up and gawk at her skin like she was on display just for him, right?

Nope. He couldn't see it anymore.

Enough.

I grabbed her waistband in my hand, yanking it up to cover everything that Young didn't get to see. I tried to sound chill – *I was anything but fucking chill* - when I said, "Liz's clothes are falling off so it's time for us to leave."

I think Michael said goodbye, but I only half-heard him because my brain was incapable of focusing on anything but the fingers that were holding up her clothing. Liz's gaze trailed over my face, registering what I was doing, and I was surprised she didn't comment.

Because her green eyes told me she was very aware of my knuckles on her stomach.

My knuckles are on Liz's stomach.

My knuckles. Were on. Liz Buxbaum's. Belly.

I swallowed and waited for her to jerk away from me, but she didn't.

"Come on, Buxbaum," I said, "Let's get you home before you flash anyone else."

But even after she took over the pant-holding responsibilities, I could still feel the warmth of her skin on my fingers. I flexed my hand as we exited the house, but the movement did nothing to erase the imprint of *her* on my flesh.

My knuckles were forever tattooed with the soft skin of Liz's stomach.

And I was totally fine with that.



Sabotage

There was obviously something wrong with me.

Because there I stood, sweating in the practice gym, giving Liz two thumbs-up and a supportive wingman smile when all I really wanted to do was kick things over. I waggled my eyebrows suggestively as Michael looked down at her like she was buck-naked and wrapped in a bow, but every voice inside my head was actually bark-screaming the word ‘NO!’ and setting shit on fire.

NO!

He said something in that accent of his – *y’all kill me, please* – that made her smile. Only she didn’t just smile. No, Lizzie smiled up at Michael from her spot on the floor as if he were everything her little love-loving heart had ever dared to wish for.

Y’all kill me, please.

I dribbled and took a shot, but missed because I couldn't avert my eyes from Liz as she grabbed Michael's extended hand and climbed to her feet. He let go as soon as she was standing, *praise Jesus*, but my chest got pinched when I saw her flex her fingers at her side.

Because I knew exactly where her romantic mind was.

Pemberley 2005. *#KillMeNow*

I tried distracting myself with basketball, but my eyes kept going back to the two of them on the other side of the gym. *Never wished to be parted from them*, apparently, because I couldn't look away. Michael was shooting around while they talked – *that was a lucky shot, asshole* – and then he gave the ball to Liz.

I watched her toss up an atrocious airball, but when she started laughing, I had to clench my jaw to keep myself from growling. Because her giggles made me crazy. Her giggles gave me this stupid desperate desire to be the one sharing the laugh with her. I wanted to run over there with my ball and beg her to play with *me*.

Young was smiling like she was adorable – *yeah, she is, you fuck* – and it was insane how knotted up the scene was making me.

Get a grip, dipshit. They're playing basketball, not making out.

I inhaled through my nose and might've actually succeeded in turning away, but then.

But.

Then.

Young moved behind her, his hands covering her hands as he raised the ball for a better shooting angle. NO. His body was *right behind* her body, so close that it was impossible to tell

where she ended and where he began. NO. Her cheeks were pink and his face was close to hers and suddenly my ball was on the ground, forgotten, and I was headed toward them.

There was a roaring in my ears as I charged in their direction, seeing nothing but his mouth, so close to her face, and his fingers, resting on top of her fingers. NO NO NO. My body was moving of its own accord and the only thought in my head was NO.

But then she took the shot.

I stumbled to a halt as Michael stepped back from Liz and she smiled as the basketball went through the hoop.

Get a grip, dipshit.

“Did you, uh, teach her that, Young?” I said, my voice cracking as I attempted to sound like someone calm, like someone who hadn’t been just about to do...*something*. Liz’s eyes shot to mine as I added, “Because she damn sure didn’t know how to do that before.”

Of course, I had no idea if that were true because she’d never played basketball with *me*.

As if reading that thought, she picked up the ball and said, “How would *you* know?”

“I know all, Buxbaum.”

She rolled her eyes and walked away. Just turned her back and dribbled in the other direction, obviously disappointed by the reality that I still existed and had ruined – yet again – what she surely considered some sort of meet-cute.

As if that wasn’t irritating enough, Michael chose that moment to talk to me about his hair. Yes, that’s right – his *hair*. I was trying not to be a dick, because it wasn’t *his* fault that he was destroying my soul simply by being himself, but why would I care about his hair?

Did I look like someone into hair?

I didn't even own a brush, for God's sake; I just ran a hand over my head when I got out of the shower and called it good.

So *why*??

But when I glanced over at Liz, she was watching us with guilt all over her freckle-sprinkled face. Her eyes were squinty as she tried her hardest to overhear Michael's ridiculous follicular rhetoric, and I knew she had something to do with this.

"You can be your *own* hair hero," Michael was saying to me, and he patted my shoulder.

Hair hero?

Yeah, something was definitely up.

"Michael!" Liz interrupted, very-nearly yelling as she tried changing the subject. "Have you given any more thought to prom? If you're going to go with someone? Maybe a friend or whatever."

I crossed my arms and looked at her face.

"What about you, Wes – are you going?" She was talking too fast and blinking too much. "It just seems like a lot of people are skipping this year. I heard."

I knew she didn't care if I went to prom (which was ironic because I'd had a *very* vivid dream two nights ago about Liz showing up on my porch in a white flowered dress and begging me to take her - to prom, among other things), so why was she asking?

"Well," Michael said, looking at Liz in a way made my stomach hurt, "I'm still—"

"Heads up!" Noah yelled from the other side of the gym, and before I could even register the warning, a basketball slammed into Liz's face and knocked her flat on her ass.



Feelin' Alright

The next twenty minutes were a blur, like reality was being played at 3x its normal speed.

Because the second I saw Liz's big green eyes looking to me for help as her hands covered her face, my brain left my body. My thoughts became a series of disjointed fragments, with some staying inside my head and some escaping out my mouth.

Holy shit, there's blood all over her.

"You're okay."

We need a towel.

"Where the hell is a towel? Shouldn't there be towels in a goddamn gym?"

Are there tears in her eyes?

God, her eyes are so pretty.

"Here - use my shirt."

What if her nose is broken? What if her face is ruined because she went to a game with me? What if she never forgives me for bringing her here?

“You okay, Buxbaum?”

How the fuck were there zero towels anywhere?

“You okay?” I asked for what was probably the fifteenth time, but what else was there to say as she held my now-bloody shirt against her probably-broken nose?

Before answering, Liz reached over and squeezed my hand.

She. Squeezed. My hand.

Liz Buxbaum squeezed my hand, and suddenly the world returned to its normal speed.

My eyes found hers and they were soft – like she wanted to make *me* feel better, which didn’t make a damn bit of sense.

“I think it’s fine,” she said matter-of-factly, as if her shirt didn’t look like a crime scene.

“As soon as the bleeding stops, we’ll probably be good.”

“She’s so much tougher than you, Bennett,” Adam laughed.

“No shit.” I barely heard him – or anyone or anything - because Liz’s hand was on mine. *With* mine. *Against* mine. I squeezed back, hypnotized by the sight of those long, slim fingers on my skin. A line from the poem we’d studied in Lit landed in my head as I stared down at the perfect tiny mole on her middle finger.

Not even the rain has such small hands.

It was outrageously ridiculous that I was thinking in poetic verse because she’d dared to touch me, but then again, that had always been the way of things.

Liz Buxbaum made me outrageously ridiculous.



Paradise

“By the way,” Liz said, putting her phone away. “Thanks a lot. You didn’t have to escort me.”

I nudged her shoulder with mine, needing the touch as we walked toward the hospital building. She’d always brought out the physicality in me, the urge to lay hands on her in some way, shape, or form, and tonight was no exception. “My luck, you’d bleed to death and then my guilt wouldn’t allow me to enjoy the Forever Spot.”

“Wait – you’d still take it,” she said, grinning and giving my arm a little punch, “Even after having a hand in my untimely demise?”

I caught her fist in my hand, and when she let out a squeak of shock, I laughed and let go. “Well it’s *right there*, Buxbaum – how could I not?”

I knew it was wrong that I was having a good time when Liz's face had just been crushed by a basketball, but I couldn't help it. It felt like we were in a new place, a new place where – God help me - *not smiling* was proving to be a tiny bit challenging.

It began with the discovery of her 'hair hero' nonsense on my phone when we were walking out of the gym. Little Liz had tried pranking me, *the shit*, and I could tell she was proud of herself. I'd laughed my ass off when she admitted it, that stubborn chin high and cocky, and now she was punching me.

And laughing.

Who were we right now?

I was in love with this version of us.

We stopped at the corner red light, and when I looked down at her, she smiled. It was small and inconsequential, *polite*, really, but I almost forgot how to speak for a minute because it was *mine*. There was no one else around, so that look was just for me.

Not Michael.

"So were you making any headway with Young before you got bashed?" I asked casually.

Whyyyyyyyyyy? Why would you mention him, you idiot?

"You know, I think I was," she said. "He was being a little flirty before you walked over to the small court—"

Yes, I saw and it was disgusting.

"And he physically moved my arm to help me shoot better."

God, I hated my good friend Michael.

I also hated *five-seconds-ago* me for bringing him up.

"Sweet Lord, he *touched* you?" I teased.

“He *did*,” she said excitedly, totally missing the sarcasm. Her face was all lit up like an excited child, and I was torn between wanting to applaud her joy and wanting to pull her hair.

Also was it weird that I thought she looked cute as hell with a swollen nose?

“Like, *how* did he do it?” I asked dramatically, gasping. “Was it coachy and clinical, or...?”

“It was like this.” She was almost squealing as she reached over and moved my elbows, literally showing me exactly how he’d touched her.

Like I haven’t been replaying it in my mind since it happened, honey.

“Only maybe lighter and more fingertippy,” she added.

“Holy shit, Liz,” I said loudly – obnoxiously - knowing I was being an asshole but *fuck*. “That’s huuuge.”

“It *is*?”

“Oh, my God, no. It isn’t.” I put my hands in my pockets and started walking when the light changed, annoyed by her desperation to make Michael happen. “That was sarcasm. I thought you knew until you said ‘fingertippy.’”

“Oh.” She blinked fast and cleared her throat. “Well, it *felt* like something.”

“Like something *fingertippy*?”

She was quiet as we approached the ER, *so much for our new place*, and just before we hit the main doors, I couldn’t stop myself. I asked, “You don’t seriously think his fingertippiness was a thing, do you?”

“How should I know?” She shrugged and looked hopeful. “It could’ve been.”

I groaned and wanted to bang my head against a wall. “How are you so bad at reading signals?”

Shit.

Shit shit shit.

What the hell was that, you idiot?

Liz's eyebrows crinkled together, and I knew I'd blown it. She was either seeing what a jealous dick I was, or realizing that I was the walking manifestation of SIGNALS.

"Liz!" Her dad ran out through the hospital doors at that moment, like he'd been watching for her arrival through the window. "We were literally at the theater across the street. How's the nose?"

He whisked her inside, wrapping his arms around her, and she was immediately surrounded by the love and concern of her parents. Helena was nice to me – *howdy, neighbor* - but her focus was on Liz's comfort, and Mr. Buxbaum looked like he wanted to bawl his eyes out as he repeatedly asked Liz how badly it hurt.

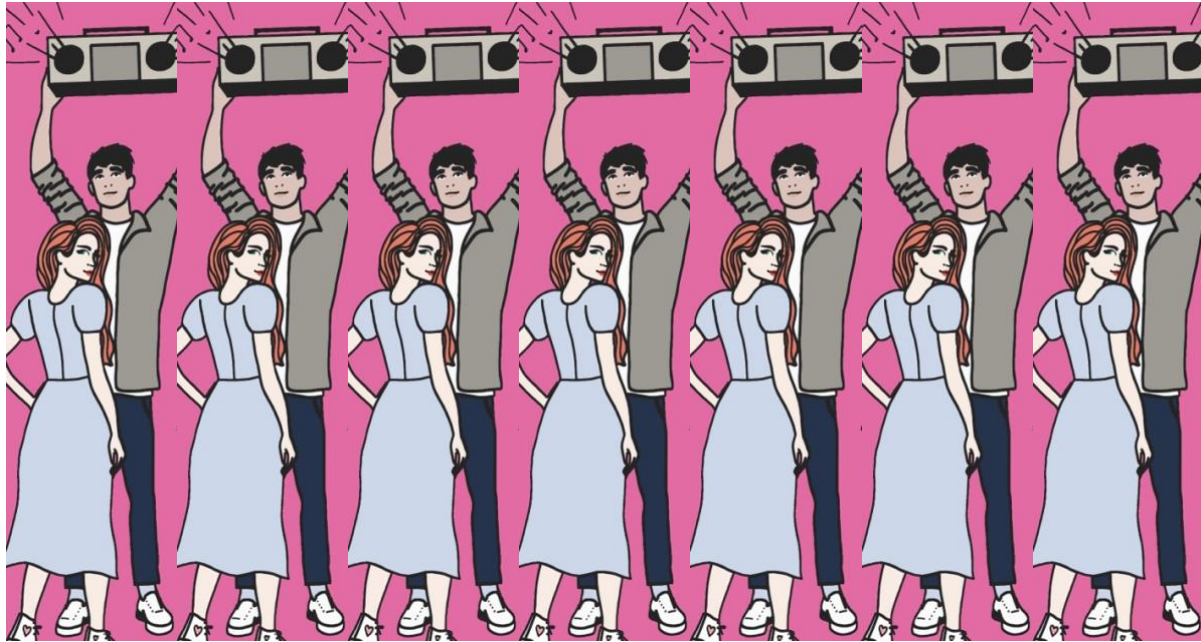
Something about the sweet scene, mixed with fingertippy bullshit and the reality of my own less-than-ideal family life, made me feel pathetically alone in that crowded Emergency Room.

Stupid lonely.

I swallowed and needed to get the hell out of there.

"Later, Buxbaum," I said, throwing up my arm in a wave and heading for the exit. She gave me a weird look, like she was surprised I was leaving, but there was too much going on for anyone else to really notice me.

I exited the ER without looking back.



Someone Like You

“The only reason I let you go to the game was because you promised to come straight home after.”

My dad was red-faced and full of hot air, still rage-lecturing me in his boxers an hour later. “You’ve got early training tomorrow and you need to be focused.”

It’s BP, for God’s sake; I can do it on zero sleep.

“As I’ve said *multiple times*,” I said through gritted teeth, wondering if he realized that *he* was the one was keeping me from getting the sleep necessary for “focused” training. “I didn’t plan on having a friend get hurt and need to visit the hospital.”

“Since when is she your friend, anyway?” He waved a hand in the direction of the Buxbaum house and said, “Someone else couldn’t have taken her?”

“Who?” Sarah walked into the kitchen, looking entirely unbothered by our dad’s midnight tirade. “Who’s the friend who went to the hospital?”

“Liz,” I said. “Now butt out.”

“Next-door Liz?” she asked, looking at me like I’d grown a second head.

“Go to bed, Sarah,” my dad barked. “It’s late.”

“It’s only midnight,” she said, rolling her eyes and walking over to the fridge. “And it’s the weekend.”

She was only two years younger than me, but my dad still saw her as a six-year-old.

“Listen, I’m sorry, okay?” I climbed to my feet and regretted ever making the shitty decision to visit the kitchen, where he’d been waiting for me. “Can I please go to bed now?”

He glared, his eyes narrowed on me as if I’d done something disgusting by being late.

“You can’t let anything – or *anyone* - fuck up your goals. Don’t you understand that, Wesley?”

Yeah, because Liz Buxbaum was definitely interested in “fucking up” my goals.

Joke’s on you, dad – she isn’t interested in me at all..

“Yes. I understand,” I said, just wanting to end this.

“Good.” My dad scratched his chin. “I’m going to bed. Make sure you eat some protein before you head up.”

“Will do.”

I didn’t exhale until I heard his bedroom door close, and then it was like all the breath left my body in a wave. The man’s obsessive focus on what he considered to be “my” goals was truly exhausting.

“I think I’d give myself a torn ACL if I were in your shoes,” Sarah said, grabbing a can of Coke and closing the fridge. “Just to piss him off.”

“Yeah, but then you couldn’t run away from his lectures.”

“True,” she agreed, giving me a commiserative nod. “I guess I’d have to break my own arm, then.”

“And be forced to navigate a life in the Bennett household where you required assistance?”

“Oof – nightmare scenario that ends in isolated starvation,” she agreed. Both of our parents were either hyper-aware of our existence because it fit into their plans of the moment, or absolutely disconnected and content to leave us to our own devices for days on end. “I guess this is why you’re stuck playing baseball.”

“I guess so. Go to bed, Sarah.”

“Kiss my ass, Wes.”

I went into the living room – *screw protein* – and plopped onto the couch, mindlessly flipping channels, looking for a mental vacation.

Miss Congeniality – bingo.

Liz would be shocked if she knew just how many rom-coms I watched on a regular basis. Not that I was anything like her, watching for the hope of it all, but I appreciated the escape. Nothing bad happened – or lasted, at least – in a rom-com, which was hella therapeutic sometimes.

My phone buzzed, and I was shocked to see Liz was calling. I propped my feet on the coffee table before raising it to my ear. “Hey, Libby Loo. What’s up?”

“Did I do something to piss you off at the hospital?”

“What?” I cleared my throat, feeling somehow busted, and said, “No.”

“Because you seemed...um, terse...? When you left?” She sounded like a nervous middle schooler when she said, “I’m sorry if I said something to upset you.”

And just like that, I was happy.

A smile was on my face – unexpected for sure – as Liz Buxbaum worried about upsetting me. “Wow. I had no idea you cared so much about making me happy.”

“Okay, stop *that*,” she said, giggling. “I just wanted to make sure we’re cool.”

“We’re cool, Lib,” I said, clueless as to why swallowing was difficult for me at that moment. “I promise.”

“Did you give Michael my number, by the way?” she asked, and even the mention of Her Cowboy didn’t ruin my newfound good mood.

I said, “Yeah, I did. He wanted to check on you.”

I’d damn near blocked my very good friend for requesting your number.

“And he did!” She squealed and said, “He texted me to see how I was doing.”

“And?” I asked, hoping to steer the conversation away from Michael. “How’s the honker?”

“It’s okay.” Her voice sounded sleepy and I swear to God I could listen to it for the rest of my life. “Sore, but I’ll live. I still look like a freak, but the doctor said the swelling will go down soon.”

“That’s good.” There was definitely something wrong with me, because in spite of everything, I wanted to make her happy. So like an absolute moron I told her, “If I tell you something, you have to promise not to ask me more than three questions.”

“What are you talking about?”

I sighed and said, “Just promise, Buxbaum, and I swear you’ll fall asleep smiling.”

Her voice got quieter. “Okay, I promise.”

“Okay, so when we were playing basketball earlier,” I said, hating the words even as I looked forward to her reaction to them. “Michael mentioned your look.”

“What did he say?” she said, her voice loud and excited in my ear. “What did he say?”

“I don’t remember his exact words--”

“Come on, Wes, you’ve got one job and it’s--”

“—but he essentially said that he could see why you’re so popular.”

It pissed me off a little, to be honest, the way it took a pseudo-makeover for him to notice how pretty she was. If he didn’t see her before, he didn’t deserve to look at her now.

“What did he say, exactly?” she asked.

“I already told you that I don’t remember his exact words, goofball. But the general sentiment was that he gets it. You’re no longer Little Liz.”

“Oh,” she said, sounding confused. Or disappointed. Was she realizing the same thing, that he should’ve noticed her sooner?

Then she asked, “Did he say it cute, like, ‘ooh, dude, I totally get it now,’ or was it more matter-of-fact?”

God, I love her brain.

“We were playing basketball,” I said, trying to spare her the realization. “So he was panting and grunting.”

“You’re terrible at this.”

“No, you’re just a weirdo.”

“Why didn’t you tell me about this earlier?” she asked. “There was plenty of time when you were walking with me to the hospital.”

Because I didn't want to, okay?

"I was distracted by your Potato Head face and the concern that you were going to pass out from lack of blood," I tried, hoping she'd accept the pathetic lie. "As soon as the image of your ginormo-nose left my mind, I remembered to tell you."

She didn't say anything, and my gut clenched as I stared at Sandra Bullock. Was Liz going to call me out for withholding information?

"Where's your room?"

Um. "What?"

"Total random curiosity," she said, her voice relaxed like she was in a good mood. "Your house is outside my window, and I just realized that I've never been upstairs, so I have no idea what side your room is on."

"Put the binoculars away." I leaned my head back against the couch pillow and enjoyed the fact that Liz was having total random curiosity about *me*. "Because my room faces the back. You've got no shot of a peep show."

"Yeah, because that's what I wanted," she said sarcastically.

"And I'm not in my room. I'm in the living room, watching TV."

"Oh. I can see your light."

"*Such* a creeper," I said, laughing as I pictured Lizzie peering out her window.

"What're you watching?" she asked.

"I think the proper line is 'What are you wearing?'"

I heard her laugh before she said, "Maybe if I cared it would be, but I'm actually curious about what you're watching."

"Guess."

“Probably a game of some sort. Basketball?”

“Wrong.”

“Okay, then is it a movie or a TV show?” she asked.

“Movie,” I said, loving that she was playing with me.

“Hmmm.” It sounded like she was walking, or squirming around, and then she asked, “Did you select it, or did you just happen to stop by when remote-flipping?”

“Remote stop-by.”

“Hm. That complicates things,” she said, and I was a little obsessed with the amount of thought she was putting into her guess. Liz was an all-in type of person, and apparently a silly guessing-game was no exception. “Um... *Gone Girl*?”

“Nope. But decent guess.” I couldn’t resist messing with her, so I added, “I thought Emily Ratajkowski was brilliant in that flick. Her scene with Affleck is still embedded in my brain.”

“You’re disgusting,” she said, which was exactly what I knew she’d say.

“I’m just messing because I *knew* you’d know what I meant. My little Libby is just so easy to get riled up.”

She ignored that and said, “Well, the book was amazing, even without Miss Ratajkowski’s assets.”

“Agreed.” I was a huge fan of Gillian Flynn, and I liked the knowledge that Liz and I read the same book.

“Okay,” she said. “Um, maybe *The Hangover*?”

“Nope.”

“*American Pie*?” she guessed.

“Not even close.”

“In what era did this cinematic masterpiece come out?”

I was pretty sure she had me pegged as a dickhead jock who exclusively watched bro movies, so I said, “I feel like you’re assuming that I only like boob movies.”

“Yeah, that’s pretty much it,” she confirmed.

“Well I’m watching *Miss Congeniality*.”

“*What?*” She sounded like I’d just admitted to possessing superpowers. “But Bennett, that’s a rom-com.”

“Yup,” I said, hungry for more of the interest I could hear in her voice.

“So...?”

“So, I stopped because it looked funny.”

“And...?” She prodded excitedly, giving me what I wanted.

My good girl.

I said, “And it is.”

“I *love* that movie – what channel?”

Were we about to watch a movie together?

Ahem.

Get a grip, dipshit. “Thirty-three,” I answered. “You still have cable, too?”

She told me about how her dad was afraid to lose his boxing channels if they switched to streaming, which was funny because my dad was the same about soccer. Larry *loved* his English Premier soccer, though I imagined his angry rants about Liverpool were a far different viewing experience than the way her nicest-guy-in-the-world father watched his beloved boxing.

“Do you think we’ll be technology-challenged when we’re old, too?” she asked.

“Oh, for sure,” I said, grabbing the couch blanket that Liz had wrapped around her shoulders last week after getting caught in the rain. I raised it to my nose and *Dear God* it still smelled like her.

Vanilla, flowers, and romantic daydreams.

I’d intentionally left it on the back of the couch because it’d be creepy if I took the thing up to my room, but I’d be lying if I said I didn’t check for her scent every morning.

Yep – still there.

“You’ll probably be one of those old people who doesn’t even have a TV. Every day will be the same. You’ll play the piano, drink tea, and listen to records for hours, then take the bus to the movie theater.”

“You make aging sound incredible,” she laughed, and the idea of the woman she would become made me homesick for every era I wouldn’t experience. “I want that life now.”

“So do you sing when you play?”

“What?”

Yes, Wes, tell her what an obsessed creeper you are. Brilliant move. I cleared my throat and worked for casual when I said, “I’ve just always wondered if you sing when you play the piano.”

I’d never figured out what it was about Liz and the piano, why I found it so damn...compelling. *Magical*. It was just a girl and her instrument, but when Liz Buxbaum played the piano, my chest got so tight it was hard for me to breathe.

“It depends what I’m playing,” she said, her voice sliding into something softer, quieter, and somehow more intimate, like she was telling me a secret. “I don’t really sing when I’m

doing scales or warm-ups, and I definitely don't sing if I'm playing something super challenging. But when I play for fun, look out."

That made me laugh, the idea of her singing the shit out of a song. "Give me a song that makes you belt."

"Ummmm..." She trailed off with a giggle that I fucking loved.

"Um is not an answer, disphit."

She laughed even harder as she said, "I know, I know, I know."

Was this the best night of my life?

"I actually pretty much turn into Adele when I play 'Someone Like You.'"

Now it was the best. "You do *not*. For real? That's a big-voice song."

"Don't I know it. But when no one's home, it feels amazing to totally shatter glass with my pipes."

"I would pay money to hear that," I said, meaning every word as I pictured red hair, closed eyes and piano keys.

Vanilla, flowers, romantic daydreams.

"You'll never have enough."

"Then I'll die trying," I said, flicking off the lamp beside me because it was bright and my eyes were tired.

"How come you turned off the light?" she asked.

How come you turned off the light.

Record scratch, holy shit.

“I *knew* you were staring in my windows, Buxbaum,” I said, shaking my head in the darkness and grinning because Liz’s gaze was tracking my location fucking yes. “I never would’ve guessed someone so uptight would be such a pervert.”

“I’m not *that* uptight,” she said, sounding so much like Little Liz that I wanted to tousle her hair until she smacked my hand.

“I *will* say that you’ve been pretty cool about the disasters that have befallen you since you started hunting Michael.”

“Um...thanks? And I’m not *hunting* him, I’m just trying to...”

She was quiet for a long minute, and then she broke my heart when she said, “I just need to know that happily ever after really exists.”

My mother chose that moment to yell something down the hall to my dad - *turn down your goddamn TV, Larry* – and I knew Liz would never appreciate my personal opinion on the matter of happily ever after. So I just said, “I think your cat is out in my yard.”

“It isn’t Fitz,” she said. “He never goes outside.”

“Smart cat – my dog would probably use him as a chew toy.”

Fact: Otis would never. He was terrified of cats, but he had a reputation to protect and I’d never rat him out. Otis was my *boy*.

“As if Fitzpervert would let him,” she quipped. “So where are you? Did you go to bed, or are you sitting in the dark like a complete Patrick Bateman?”

She was still watching. “Oh, my God, you’re so obsessed--”

“Will you just shut up and tell me?” she said, laughing again, harder this time. “I need to go to bed.”

“And you can’t sleep until you know where I am. I see you, Buxbaum.”

“So delusional,” she said. “Just forget it.”

I turned the lamp on and off a couple times and said, “I’m still here, Liz, just messing with you.”

“Okay, well, goodnigh--”

“Your turn,” I interrupted.

“Huh?”

“Flash your lights,” I said, getting off the couch to get a closer look out the window. “It’s my turn to know where you are.”

The second I stepped in front of the window, I saw lights flash in the upstairs bedroom that I’d always known was hers. “So that’s your room, huh?”

“It is,” she said quietly.

Sleepily.

Perfectly.

I looked up at the window, squinting, needing to see some suggestion of her. Her face, looking down at me; her profile, standing behind the sheer white curtain; a wispy shadow – I’d take anything and everything. “Well, I’m not gonna lie, there’s something about knowing that that is where Mrs. Potato Head sleeps. I mean, damn, you know?”

And then I saw her.

There, in the dark rectangular space of her bedroom window, I saw the shape of her, like a willowy midnight ghost of Lizzie; past, present and future. A second later she was gone, but a smile was in her voice as she murmured in my ear, “Damn, indeed. Goodnight, disphit.”

I exhaled a startled laugh and stared at the spot where she’d been. “Goodnight, Elizabeth.”

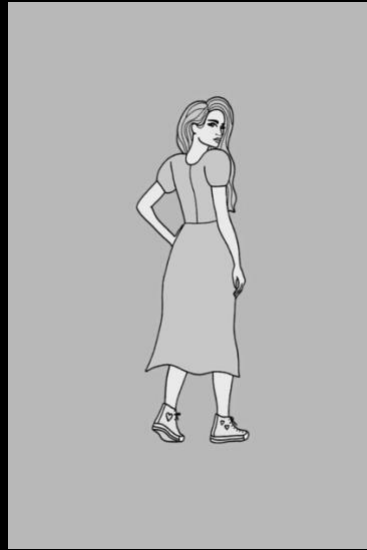
I tried going to bed after that, but sleep was elusive as my brain kept replaying our conversation - *How come you turned off the light? I'm sorry if I said something to upset you. Goodnight, dipshit.* – and my fingers kept replaying Adele on Spotify.

I hate to turn up out of the blue, uninvited

But I couldn't stay away, I couldn't fight it

I knew I shouldn't push my luck, but I sent Liz one last text before finally closing my eyes.

Make sure you add "Someone Like You" to the Wes and Liz playlist.



Dream On

“Hey, Wes.”

I was sitting on the porch steps, doing my assigned reading for American Lit, when I looked up and saw Liz.

“Buxbaum.” I let my eyes drift to her trench coat and said, “What’s up with the flasher outfit?”

She bit down on her bottom lip, the bottom lip that was drenched in the red lipstick that I fucking *loved*, and she seemed nervous. I was about to say something sarcastic because she wasn’t saying anything at all *and wearing a damn trench coat*, but then her hands moved down and started untying the belt.

I swallowed and climbed to my feet.

“I got a prom dress,” she said, her voice breathy as her eyes moved over my face, “And I want to know what you think.”

“Oh,” I managed, a little confused because I didn’t know she was even going to prom, but then the belt was undone and she was pulling off the coat. I watched as it fell to the snowy sidewalk – *wait, when had it started snowing* – and then there was just Dress.

Oh, dear God.

Liz was wearing a long white dress, a strapless dress that exposed her pale shoulders and smooth skin and made her hair look like long, dancing flames. She was a fucking ice queen as the flurries swirled around her, and my voice didn’t want to work when I managed to rasp out the words, “It’s nice.”

Her eyebrows scrunched together and her lips pursed, making her look like a displeased child. “Nice.”

“Yeah, uh, it looks really nice,” I muttered, not wanting to say anything that would tip her off to the fact that she could wear an inflatable T-Rex costume and I’d still find her to be the most attractive human on the planet.

“I bought it,” she said, stepping closer and lowering her voice, “Because I was hoping it would inspire a certain someone to ask me to prom. Do you think it’ll work?”

Did I think it’d work? I’d sign over everything I owned just to look at her in that dress for another five minutes, so yeah - I was probably too biased to answer that question.

I nodded, but way too emphatically – *dipshit* - so I had to look back down at the book of poetry in my hand and pretend I didn’t care.

“So...?” Liz took the book away from me, her pink-tipped fingernails covering the lines of *Somewhere I Have Never Travelled, Gladly Beyond* before she closed it and tossed it over her shoulder. *What is happening?* It was snowing harder, but I didn’t even feel the cold as those green eyes looked up at me with expectation.

Like she was waiting for me to *do* something.

“So...?” I repeated, feeling like I was missing something.

“So ask me, Bennett,” she said, near enough for me to see the tiny gold flecks in her emerald eyes. “I only wore this dress so you could take me to prom.”

“Wait. *Me?*” I asked, lowering my head just enough to sniff the side of her exposed throat. “How do you always smell like vanilla, honey?”

“It’s you,” she whispered on a breath, setting her palms on my chest. “I’m not even wearing perfume. Those are my just my natural Bennett pheromones.”

“No shit?” I managed, rubbing my nose over her skin.

“No shit. Now ask me, Wes.”

I needed to slow down and enjoy this moment, because Liz wanted me to take her to prom *what the hell*, but slow wasn’t possible. Especially when her pheromones were giving me a contact high. My hands squeezed her waist and my words fell all over each other as I murmured into her ear, “Will you go to prom with me, Liz?”

“Yes,” she said, and I lifted my head because I had to see her face. *Was this real?*

I looked down at her and she smiled, her ruby red lips sliding wide in a Liz Buxbaum classic that made me feel *everything*.

Victorious.

Sublime.

Like I’d won every-fucking-thing.

“So should we practice our prom kiss now?” she asked, her long lashes fluttering as her eyes went to my mouth.

“What?” I didn’t know what that meant, but I also knew the answer was unequivocally,
“Yes, of course.”

She laughed a soft, whispery giggle that fired each and every neuron in my body. Her hands slid up to my shoulders as she said, “The only way for us to make sure our prom kiss is perfect is for us to practice, right?”

Was this real?

“Right,” I agreed, so incredibly committed to working my ass off at practice.

“But we can’t do it on the porch. Come on.”

Liz took my hand and pulled me behind her as she went into my house and led me up the stairs to my room. I couldn’t keep my gaze from her skin as I followed, from the exposed expanse that stretched between the waistband of my low-hanging Emerson sweatpants - *Damn, but I loved her body in my clothes* - and the bottom of her cropped tank top. *So much perfect skin.*

My heart was pounding in my chest as she closed the door behind us.

“We have to lie down,” she said, her mouth mere inches from mine. She was correct – *you couldn’t kiss standing up, right?* – but when her eyes squinted around a mischievous little smile and she stepped away from me to climb on top of my bed, I was in serious jeopardy of fainting.

“True,” I mumbled in agreement, but then my brain proceeded to melt into a puddle. Because Lizzie got comfortable. She stretched all the way out. On my bed. Her hair was on my pillow, her body on my sheets, her lips waiting for mine as she grinned at me.

Dear God, that tattoo.

I could write an entire book of poetry about the daisies on her delicate skin.

I stood there for a second, frozen and alarmingly dizzy, and then I was crawling over her body. I was too scared this wasn't real or that she'd change her mind, so I wasn't wasting a minute.

I needed to kiss Liz like I needed to breathe oxygen.

"Hurry," she said, her hands grasping at my shirt, and then it was happening. Liz's mouth found mine, *my fucking beautiful instigator*, and she kissed me like it was the only thing she'd ever wanted to do. She was a wild attacker, my frenzied Elizabeth, and I growled as she whimpered into my mouth, a sound that I felt everywhere.

"Wes," she whispered, and I loved hearing her say my name as she kissed the hell out of me, as her fingertips trailed over the ridges of my back, as her gorgeous body cradled mine in the softness of my bed.

Everything was right in the world.

"You need to get up," she said, but she didn't stop kissing me.

"Sorry," I said, turning our bodies so we were on our sides but still meeting her kiss-for-kiss. "I didn't mean--"

"Wes, you need to get up!"

"Okay--"

"Wesley!"

GAH!

I opened my eyes, my heart pounding, and saw my bedroom ceiling.

"Do you hear me?" My mom yelled from down the hall. "It's quarter after!"

I blinked, staring at the space above me, slowly registering the disappointing truth that it'd just been a dream.

God, it'd seemed so real.

I closed my eyes.

I could still see her in the long white dress, smiling at me with red lips in the falling snow.

I rolled over and pulled the sheet up to my shoulders. *It's not over.*

“Are you up?” my mother yelled, pissed off now.

“I don't have first block today, Ma,” I lied, burying my face in my pillow. “So I start late.”

I knew sleep was a stupid reason to be tardy, to potentially end up with detention, but I didn't care. That dream had been so real that I could still smell the vanilla of her skin and feel the warmth of her soft body underneath mine.

It couldn't be over. Not yet.

The odds weren't in my favor that it would ever happen for real, so I was damn-sure going to try my hardest to get back in the dream and have a few more minutes with Liz.



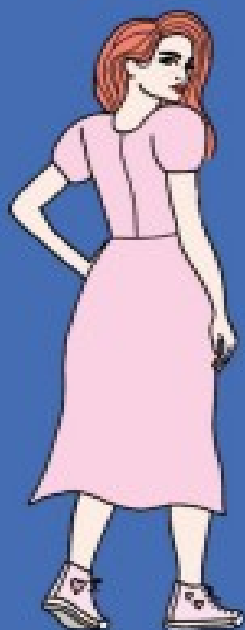
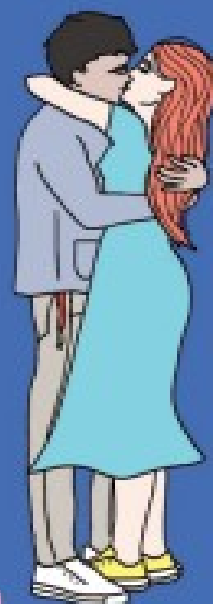
BETTER

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01.5 BETTER THAN THE PROM

Lynn Painter

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Synopsis

Prom night is here and Wes Bennett couldn't be less excited.

Not only will she not go with Liz, the girl she has loved all her life, but Liz will go with Michael, the boy she has loved all her life. Speaking of nightmares.

They manage to avoid each other at the event, but every glance she steals from him in that dress, smiling at her date, feels like a punch to her solar plexus.

But when she is waiting for him after he leaves the dance, he realizes that nothing about the prom matters.

Because Liz Buxbaum, in Chuck Taylors and a sweatshirt under the street light shining over her place, is actually a lot better than prom.

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Graduation dance

Wes Bennett

Holy *shit*.

I don't know if it was some kind of sixth sense or just an unfortunate coincidence, but by the time Alex and I were finally laughing at our pathetic situation (her obsessed with a clueless Adam and me blindsided with my next door neighbor) and dancing under from that stupidly huge Mardi Gras baby, something made me look toward the doors.

And there was Liz.

With Michael.

I felt like I couldn't breathe in an instant. It was like everything in my upper torso had seized up and was eating itself or something. My heart was racing and my stomach was churning and every muscle in my body was stiff with tension as I watched her smile and say something to her.

Nope.

When Liz smiled, everything disappeared into a blurry, out-of-focus backdrop as she became clarity personified. I had always thought that Liz's smile made the rest of the world shut up, but when I saw her give it to Michael, my thoughts were the opposite.

A dull buzzing vibrated in the back of my skull as he smiled and said something back to her.

No no no.

She wasn't allowed to smile at him like that.

He wasn't jealous (*okay, he was so jealous he wanted to take down that papier-mâché super-infant and beat the shit out of him*), but God , Michael hadn't *earned* his smile.

It was not fair.

I saw her first.

Liz Buxbaum had always been *my* secret. It was the incredible thing that he knew, but that everyone else seemed to miss. The treasure hidden in plain sight, the fortune of a lifetime that was somehow only visible to me.

But now Michael had seen her.

He was an asshole for wanting to hit him, wasn't he? Michael was a good boy, but right now he really wanted to punch him in the face. Which was stupid in and of itself, since he firmly believed that guys fighting were idiots.

Alex kept talking about Adam, about the way he listened to Disney soundtracks in his car, and I was doing a good job of smiling and laughing at the right times. Alex was funny, especially when she talked about the person she liked.

But then...

Really, universe?

As I was working hard to give my date the attention she deserved, a Taylor Swift song came on. I could hear the notes of "*New Years Day*," the combination of a melodious piano and Taylor's soft voice, and I held on as long as I could. I stood my ground for a few minutes, but I *couldn't help but* glance back at Liz.

Because it was *Taylor* .

Liz was still talking to Michael, still oblivious to my existence, so I took advantage of the moment to devour her even as the sight of her made my heart pound in my throat.

Her hair had been smoothed down so it looked long and smooth, and my fingers itched to tug at it. Images of those copper strands wrapped around my fingers slammed into me like a sharp hook, but that was nothing new. Ever since he kissed me in my car, a continuous loop of fantasy scenes with Liz had been playing in my head as if my brain was no longer a functioning organ but a stylized TikTok dedicated to Elizabeth Buxbaum.

Her dress looked just as amazing as the photo she had sent me, but I felt, like, *angry* when I looked at it. Not mad at *her* , but mad that she had become a completely different dress.

of *him*.

Now it was the dress she'd worn for Michael, the dress that would be in all the photos her dad and Helena had surely taken. It would be archived forever as what she wore to prom with Michael Young, and she longed for the *before* , when it was the dress she had tried on because I told her white was her color.

The dress she had sent *me a picture of, not Michael*.

As I watched her talk intensely with him, their faces close, he smiled at her and I thought they were going to kiss. *Nonononononono...* my breath caught in my lungs as I watched them, unable to look away.

But then he leaned down and hugged her, which was worse.

It's okay, maybe not worse, but it's still terrible.

Was it possible to literally throw up on a girl? Because my stomach lurched when she wrapped her arms around his shoulders.

I gritted my teeth and forced my attention back to my date (God, he was such a jerk), but she was still talking about Adam and completely unaware of the fact that my internal organs were malfunctioning massively.

I shifted my gaze back in Liz's direction, totally masochistic, but...

She was looking at me.

Liz had always had an expressive face, so easy to read, so I felt the blood slow in my veins as she blinked up at me with her big green eyes, a tiny crease between her brows.

I was sad.

I was devastated by his departure from my life, could I be dealing with the same emptiness? I dared to hope, like a bloody fool, but then his face changed.

He met my eyes, and then Lizzie raised an eyebrow.

He tilted his chin.

To anyone else, it was just a look.

But not for me.

I knew that look intimately, because I had been on the receiving end of that look my entire fucking life. That was the way Liz had always looked at me; impassively, lacking in warmth and slightly defiant.

Like he didn't give a shit or what I thought.

I hadn't seen that look from him in a long time, and it hurt me that it had come back.

"I take it Liz is here?" Alex asked, giving me a warm, sympathetic smile, as if he understood. He's behind me, right?

I turned our bodies, so that I could no longer see Buxbaum, and cleared my throat before saying:

-Not anymore.

—Wess! Alex yelled my name, laughing as we got out of the car. How could you even think that?

"He told me he *had extra time*. We were in kindergarten, how was I to know he didn't mean two hours?

We walked towards the Secret Area, more relaxed than we had been all night because at least it was all over. Neither of us wanted to go to the after-

prom party and see the people we liked with *other* people, so we decided to hang out by the bonfire until it was late enough for our parents to be at the party. bed and couldn't ask a million questions about why we got home so early.

"I bet you were a piece of shit," he said as he opened the back door.

"Guilty," I said, and then...

What the hell?

There was a fire roaring in the pit, the twinkling lights were on, and, *fucking shit*, a box of graham crackers and a bag of marshmallows were floating on top of the fountain.

-What the hell? I looked to my right, expecting to see my mom or something, and there was a broken radio on the floor with a bunch of batteries next to it.

"Look," Alex whispered, nudging me and pointing. Liz.

My head spun so fast and, *what the hell*, there was Liz, crawling the other way, on the ground, in the dark.

"Liz?" I said, and she froze in place.

I was surprised at how calm my voice sounded.

What could he be doing back there?

He stood up and turned around to look at us. He gave us a big fake smile, like a scary clown grin, and waved:

-Hi guys. How are you? Fun prom, right?

I was unable to get words out as I looked at Liz, who was wearing my sweatshirt.

Why was I wearing my sweatshirt?

And God, why did he look so fucking cute on her? I hated that it was impossible for me to erase the image of my brain addicted to Liz.

-Certain? Oh my God. Alex, thank God, he remembered how to use the words. She smiled and acted like we hadn't seen Liz doing a raccoon

impersonation as she said, "I thought I was going to have a heart attack when Ash was crowned.

"I know," Liz said, still smiling that weird smile. His eyes darted up to me for a quick second before adding, "A total heart-stopping moment. Like, *what?* Ash was crowned?

I knew she wasn't friends with Ashley, and it pissed me off that she was playing some game.

-What are you doing here? -said.

I hadn't meant to sound like a jerk, but seeing her there was physically painful.

And why was he already home?

"I, um, followed my cat up here and, uh, I dropped something and thought it might have rolled under this bush.

He pointed to the general wooded area, and it was obvious he was just making all this shit up.

But why?

"Your cat doesn't go outside," I said.

She swallowed heavily and looked nervous.

-If it does. Actually, no, you're right. fled.

-Really? The rest of the world disappeared as he watched her. And what did you drop?

"Um, it was money. A cent. He cleared his throat and added, "I dropped a penny and it rolled away." So yes. I was out here looking for my penny. It was lucky.

I wanted to shake her up a bit and try to get her to blurt out something resembling the truth.

-You...

-Penny. Yes but does not matter. I do not need it. He cleared his throat once more and his eyes moved all over my face. The penny, you know? I mean,

who needs a dime, right? My stepmom throws them away, for God's sake.

I stared at her, flustered and babbling and lying nonstop, and I missed her so much that she almost knocked me over.

"It's strange how sometimes there can be a penny that's always there, and you think you don't need it and don't even like it, right?"

I tried to swallow, but something in my throat was totally fucked up.

"So, you wake up one day and your eyes widen to how amazing pennies are. How could you not have noticed before, right? I mean, they're like *the best coins ever*. As in, better than all other currencies combined. But you weren't careful and you lost your penny and you just want to make your penny understand how sorry you are that you didn't appreciate it but it's too late because you lost it. You know?"

I wished Alex wasn't there. I felt a pinch in my chest as I mentally tried to sort through the debris of this entire encounter.

"Liz, do you need to borrow some money?" Alex asked.

If I hadn't been so close to dying at the time, I might have laughed.

"Um, no thanks, I have to go, although I don't have a penny ha ha ha, so have fun." Don't do anything I wouldn't do.

She made a vague gesture with her hand and jumped over the fence into her yard, and I was tempted to run after her. He wanted to drag her back and make her tell the truth. Because, *shit*, it had almost sounded like...

"Wow," Alex said, walking over to the bonfire. That was weird, right?

I took Alex home almost immediately after Liz left the Secret Area.

It had been impossible to pretend that I wasn't worried about what had just happened, so Alex insisted that I drive her home so I could focus on kicking Liz's door down and having an argument with her.

We hadn't even made a single s'more before we brought Alex home, so yeah, it was the worst date ever.

But when I got back, Liz's car was gone. She had no idea where she'd gone, and it was entirely possible she'd ended up at some after-prom party and not come home that night.

Which was a crushing disappointment when hope reared its pathetic head again.

I went back to the Secret Area to put out the fire, but only got more confused while cleaning up. Because not only were there ingredients for s'mores in the water and a fire in the campfire, but there was also a broken CD in the player that said, with Liz's lyrics, *The Wes and Liz Soundtrack*.

With an image of a heart made with tomato sauce on the cover.

I was reeling from it (*what the hell, what the hell, what the hell*), when I turned around to carry the remains into the house. As I walked out onto the porch, I saw the note taped just above the doorbell.

SEE YOU IN THE SECRET AREA

Holy *shit*. I looked at the paper, at Liz's incoherent handwriting.

Had he been *waiting for me* back there? Was that what the whole thing was about? I almost dropped the pile of stuff in my arms because I instantly got so excited while also desperate to talk to her.

When she stopped ten minutes later (I could always hear her because her car needed a new muffler), I went out and sat on the porch. I felt like a dog on a leash, like I was at the end of my rope and straining to get to my prey as I waited for its door to open. He was going to confront her the moment she got out of that car, and see if anything could be salvaged.

Only... it didn't come out.

He just sat in the running car.

For what seemed like an eternity.

After twenty minutes of staring like a deranged stalker, I got up and walked over to his car. I would have felt better letting her out first, but right now I

was too focused on talking to her to wait another second.

I knocked on the fogged up window on the driver's side.

Wait.

He rolled down the window a little, a full minute later, and said:

-Yes?

I tried to see her through the small opening.

-What are you doing?

"Um... parking?" he replied, wiping his shirt with a napkin.

"I saw you park twenty minutes ago," I said as a hint of her perfume (and chips) wafted through the crack in the window and snaked around my head. Try again.

-Wow. Kind of creepy, right? he growled, obviously not wanting to leave.

Yes, I know. You make me someone who wants to listen to that damn muffler every minute I'm home.

I tried to sound cold.

"I wanted to talk to you, so yes, I was waiting. But now I think maybe you're never going to get out of that car.

He rolled his eyes, put down his drink, opened the car door, and got out.

-What do you need? -I ask.

And just like that I got *angry* .

Not with Liz, but with the reality that we were back there, a place where she rolled her eyes when she spoke and she spoke *with intent* . I didn't know what had been going on with her earlier in the secret area, but this was a throwback to who we had always been.

It wasn't fair that the good things (*Wes, you're not the good thing*) were apparently now a thing of the past.

Already.

So fucking fleeting.

"Well, for starters, I need you to explain to me what happened earlier.

His eyes moved over me (over my face, hair, and body as if he was cataloging what he saw) and then he said...

Damn, he said...

"Are you talking about when I lost my...?"

-Nope. I cut her off, fed up with this shit. Don't say "penny."

-I am sorry. He looked at the ground before saying quietly, "Lucky coin."

-Really? There was a roar in my ears as she refused to speak to me. Are you going to stick to that?

He shrugged and kept looking at his feet.

"Ah, well, that explains everything. Her eyes shot up to mine, and she looked surprised.

"Why do you seem angry with me?"

I inhaled through my nose and felt irritated at how green his eyes were.

"Because I hate games," I replied.

He blinked fast and asked:

-What games?

-*What games?* - It had not been my intention to say it so loud, but I was already fed up. He was sad and angry and just sick of it. You won your precious Michael, but as soon as I take a second look at Alex, you're burning me with this amazing CD and rambling about lucky pennies in a way that makes me think I'm the penny in that particular scenario. While wearing my baseball hoodie. What are you doing to me?

He hated how emotional it sounded, but it was too late to play it cool. Liz Buxbaum was killing me softly and there was nothing I could do to ease the pain.

Did you see the CD? His voice was low, his eyes serious as he looked at me.

“Liz, I'm not that clueless. I also saw the note, the supplies of soggy s'mores, and the broken CD player.

—Oh. She sighed, her breath a little ragged, and asked, "So you like Alex?"

What? I definitely didn't expect him to ask me *that* . I swallowed heavily and just said:

Alex is great.

—Oh. A small furrow formed between her brows and she blinked rapidly before saying, "Well, hooray." I have to go.

She moved around me, as if to enter, and I grabbed the fabric of her sleeve, stopping her.

-That is all? Aren't you going to explain what all that was?

He pursed his lips and shook his head a little.

“It doesn't matter anymore.

I dropped my hand.

-Could do it.

"He doesn't, okay?" He made a frustrated sound, like a groan, and said, "I made the CD and put on an embarrassing scene because I realized that Michael isn't the person I can't stop thinking about, and I wanted to tell you." I mean, he's cool, but being with him isn't like eating hamburgers with you, or sneaking off to the Secret Area to make s'mores and stargazing, or fighting with you over a parking spot. She seemed to have tears in her eyes as she added thickly, "But it took me a long time to figure that out, and now you have Alex."

I watched her face, the flurry of freckles I wanted to catch with my tongue.

—Liz.

-Nope. It's fine I understand it. She's perfect and sweet, and as much as I hate to say it, you deserve someone like her. She took a deep breath and

said, "Because I was wrong, Wes. *You are* the good.

Just like that, all the nerves in my body shorted out. It felt like he was lighting me up and setting me on fire as his words burned me. I met his gaze with mine and said:

"That's not the only thing you're wrong about.

-What? He gave me a questioning look. What are you talking about?

"You're wrong about Alex. It's not perfect.

Her brows fell into a Liz-patented frown that made me so happy I wanted to flip her over and mess her hair up.

"Bennett, come on, nobody's totally perfect. But, it's pretty close," he said.

I shrugged like I didn't care, bracing myself for her glorious overreaction when I said,

-I guess.

"*Do you suppose?*" "My Liz was furious, and it was perfection. He said, "What the hell could he be missing? Do you want bigger breasts or something? It is not...?"

"It's not you.

That made her gasp.

-What?

I swallowed the emotion, the girl made me so fucking weak, and said:

-Nope. Are. You.

He closed his mouth and stared at me, his wild green eyes everywhere on my face as if he wanted to believe me.

"She's pretty, but her face doesn't turn into pure joy when she talks about music. It's funny, but not so funny that you spit out your drink in amazement.

I looked at her mouth and leaned in a little closer, feeling as if some invisible force was pulling me towards her. She looked at me and I looked

at her while she said:

"And when I see her, I don't feel like *I have* to talk to her or mess her hair or do anything, anything, to get her to give me that look.

She tucked her hair behind her ears (I loved the way she always did it when she was thinking hard) and said in a barely audible voice:

"You haven't messed up my hair in a long time.

"And it's been killing me," I said, half laughing and half grunting. I took a step closer to her, trapping her between my body and her car, and confessed my honest truth. I fell in love with teasing you in second grade, when I first discovered that I could make your cheeks rosy with just one word. Then I fell in love with you.

He looked at me, the furrow between his brows gone.

"So you and Alex aren't..."

-Nope. I reached down and wrapped the drawstrings of the hoodie around my hands. There was something about Liz in my sweatshirt that drove me crazy in a possessive, Neanderthal way that I was sure she'd scoff at if she knew. We are only friends.

"Ah," he said, no, he *whispered*, as he pulled her closer. Well, why did you act like you wanted me to accept Michael's proposal?

"You've loved him since kindergarten. I tried to explain what didn't even make sense to *me*. I didn't want our kiss to get in the way of that if that was really what you wanted.

And just like that, her perfect mouth slid into a stunning smile and she placed her hands on my chest. *Dear God, his touch made me serene and crazy, all at the same time.* Her eyes narrowed as she lifted her chin and said:

"What I really wanted was to go with you.

"Well, you could have told me that, Buxbaum," I said, lowering my face to hers. Because just seeing you in that dress made me want to punch our very good friend Michael.

His face broke into a wider smile, his *best* smile, and he said:

-Really?

The little shit looked pleased, absolutely delighted that she had tortured me, and I tugged on the cord.

“That's not supposed to make you happy.

"I know," he said, coughing up a short laugh. But it does. It's like fainting.

"Forget about fainting." I dropped the laces because I needed to *touch her*, needed to feel her soft skin under my fingertips. I cupped her face in my palms, my hands unsteady, and felt like every emotion I'd ever experienced, over the course of my entire fucking life, hit me at that exact moment.

I was seriously in danger of losing my fucking control, crying and laughing and howling at the moon all at the same time, so I lowered my lips to hers and put everything I felt into that kiss.

He inhaled through his nose, and I felt his fingers flex on my chest before kissing me back as if I'd been poisoned and my mouth was the antidote. Wild and breathless, Liz kissed like she did everything else. Different, and in the *best* possible way.

I felt it everywhere as Lizzie kissed me like she was reenacting the rain scene in *The Notebook*. I moaned and did my best to keep up, but hell, Liz's kisses weren't just hot, they were burning wildfire. Within twenty seconds of her mouth, he was doused with kerosene and desperate for his match. I wrapped my arms around her body, lifted her off the ground and carried her to the trunk of the car, where I had better leverage.

Or something like that. *Shit*. Thoughts were something he was no longer able to fully form.

I pulled back long enough to say:

"Do you realize we could have been doing this for years if you weren't a pain in the ass?"

She looked sleepy as she shook her head and said, the sexiest smile on her mouth:

“Nah, I didn't like you until recently.

I leaned over and rubbed my nose against her neck, then raised my head and said:

'From enemies to lovers: that's our trope, Buxbaum.

He started to laugh, a relaxed laugh, as he put his hands on my cheeks and said:

"You poor, confused lover." Just shut up and kiss me.

I did, moving closer and losing myself in the heat of his mouth. It got even hotter and wilder, and to be honest, I forgot where I was until we heard:

"Elizabeth Buxbaum, do you know what time it is?"

My mouth froze, and her eyes widened. He blinked and said against my lips:

-That's my dad?

As if he had heard the question, Liz's dad shouted:

“Liz, it's time to go inside.

"Um," he said, leaning in a little to look around me. Can I have five more minutes?

"To make out with your neighbor under the street light for the lecherous entertainment of the entire neighborhood?" No I don't think so.

"I tried, Liz," Helena called from somewhere in the dark. For the record, I got you an extra seven minutes.

I looked at Liz, and she didn't seem sorry. Or sorry. He touched my lower lip with his index finger, his eyes on mine as he yelled:

"Thank you, Helen.

Helena responded by singing:

-No problem.

He had to do it before the night was over. Quickly, quietly, I said:

"Listen, Liz, um...

"Now ," his father growled.

"I'm coming," Liz snapped, rolling her smiling eyes and giving me a knowing look, like we're partners in this whole vibe *my parents are so ridiculous*.

I tried one more time.

—Liz...

"Get out of the trunk and get in," said Mr. Buxbaum, no longer playing.

" *I'm coming*," she repeated, clenching her teeth.

"Can I ask your daughter out first?" I yelled in the general direction of the porch, desperate to remember before the night was over. Liz Buxbaum was in my arms and happy to be there; the night was obviously magical, terrifying me with broken spells, forgotten glass slippers, and discarded pumpkins. Please?

Liz beamed at me once more and opened her mouth to reply when her father yelled,

"I guess it's fine, but do it...

"Of course you can, Wes," Helena interrupted, sounding amused.

Liz threw her head back and began to laugh, loudly, and it was impossible not to join her. I wondered what she would think if she knew that Jerry McGuire's quote, *You Complete Me*, flashed through my soul as I watched her laugh.

Liz

I turned around and grabbed my phone from the nightstand, blinded by the brightness of the screen in my dark bedroom as I opened my messages.

Wess: *Still awake?*

I texted him the truth.

Me: *Yes. I'm too excited to sleep.*

Wess: *Does that translate to "TOO EXCITED FOR WESSY TO SLEEP"?*

He wasn't exactly wrong. I smiled in the dark and sent a text message.

Me: *In fact, that is the exact translation.*

Wes: I knew it. Listen, about our date tomorrow.

I wrote to him.

Me: *Yes...?*

Wess: *Tomorrow night seems so far away, doesn't it?*

I replied.

Me: *Um...?*

Wes: I must be getting sick, because the thought of not seeing you until tomorrow night makes me itch.

I sat up in bed and cradled my pillow, so incredibly happy that Wes was back as my favorite texting partner. I still wasn't sure how the Sad Prom had turned into one of the best nights of my life, but I wasn't complaining either. I sent him a message.

Me: *Really?*

Wess: *Yes.*

Me: *Dare I ask WHERE do you itch?*

Wess: *Wherever it matters, baby.*

It was so ridiculous. I replied.

Me: *What does that mean?*

Wess: *No idea. But I think I might know of a way you can help me.*

I snorted into the dark.

Me: *Bennett, I'm not going to scratch you.*

Wess: *I bet I could convince you, but that's not what I want.*

I laughed, which seemed to be my default reaction when conversing with Wes. I replied.

Me: *What do you want? (Only non-perverted answers).*

Wess: *I want to take you to LaMars donuts at 8 am.*

I sent him a message.

Me: *How does this help you?*

Wess: *I can see you before. I probably shouldn't admit this, but I have feelings for you.*

I made a different noise in the dark, this one similar to a human purr, and wondered how I had *never* found Wes to be the most attractive guy on the planet. I replied.

Me: *Do not tell me.*

Wess: *It is true. And I can't wait that long to see you.*

That made me smile and send a text message.

Me: *It's only, like, 17 hours until you pick me up.*

Wess: *THAT IS AN ETERNITY.*

Now I was laughing again.

Me: *Can't you wait 17 hours for me?*

Wess: *Buxbaum, I've waited my whole life for you. For God's sake, put me out of my misery and let me woo you with coffee and chocolate chips.*

I turned around and looked out the window, imagining Wes rolling around on *his* bed and looking out *his* window. I'd always thought he was the polar opposite of a rom-com movie hero, but sometimes he made the most swoon-worthy statements. *Buxbaum, I've waited my whole life for you.*

I was beginning to suspect that I had been wrong about him all along.

I wrote him a message.

Me: *So, are we talking about two dates in one day?*

Wess: *I was thinking more of a big, fat, endless date.*

Me: *What will we do between donuts and dinner?*

I expected him to follow an itinerary or a sarcastic joke, but instead, he gave me everything I had been waiting for my entire romantic life.

Wess: *Whatever you want, Buxbaum. As long as I'm with you, it will be the perfect day.*

And that was the moment I knew.

About the author



Lynn Painter lives in Omaha, Nebraska, with her husband and a pack of wild children. She contributes every other week to the parenting section of the Omaha World-Herald, even though she's the polar opposite of a Pinterest mom. When she's not chasing kids, she can be found reading, writing, and shooting Rockstar cans.

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wes & liz's college road trip

BTTM BONUS CHAPTERS



Nebraska

*Can't get you out of my mind
'Cause you're still home, you're still home*

--Nebraska, Oh Wonder

liz

“Okay.” Wes looked over at me with an intense expression on his face and he held one finger in the air. He was standing outside of his car on the driver’s side, and I was his twin on the passenger side. We were both in runner-ready stances. He yelled, “On your mark, get set, GO!”

It was lazy on my part, but *I Just Wanna Run* by The Downtown Fiction began playing in my head. If I had time, I would definitely conjure up some amazing athletic anthem, but if I didn’t focus, Wes would totally bolt without me.

We both took off, sprinting as fast as we could toward the bathrooms of the roadside rest area. We’d been bickering for ten minutes in the car about who was the faster runner – *I was* – and when I’d seen the exit for the interstate stop, we’d decided to race *and* use the facilities.

Win-win.

“You look winded, Buxbaum,” he yelled as we ran side-by-side, grinning his smartass smirk.

“You look annoying, Bennett,” I yelled back, adding an apology to the tiny man with the tiny dog who leapt out of our way.

We reached the restrooms at the exact same moment, both of us slamming our hands into the huge poster of a roadmap that was mounted in-between the men’s and the women’s rooms.

“I win!” I yelled, which made him slowly shake his head and smile.

“In what world is that a win?” he asked, hooking his two index fingers through a couple of my jeans’ belt loops and pulling me closer. “It was – at best – a tie, but we both know you got a head start so you’re a dirty cheater.”

I rolled my eyes and wrapped my hands around the bottom of his T-shirt. “Whatever that fragile male ego needs to make itself feel better.”

“My facts have nothing to do with sexism and everything to do with pretty girls who take off early.”

“Calling me pretty isn’t going to win you this point.”

“And cheating didn’t win you this race, did it?”

Oh, how I loved that. My favorite thing. I could seriously talk to Wes 24/7 and never get sick of it.

“I’m going to go in that door,” I said, letting go of his shirt to point at the women’s room while getting a little lost in the heat of his dark eyes. Sometimes when he looked at me I felt naked – body and soul. “And when I come out, I want you to say *Liz is the winner.*”

His lips slid into a grin, and he dropped his hands. “You better hope I don’t drive off and leave your cheating ass behind.”

I laughed and went into the restroom.

After I used the facilities and washed my hands, I looked at my reflection as I stuck my palms into the hand dryer. My lipstick was long-gone, and my straightened hair had morphed into its default waves, waves which would surely be springy curls in the near future. We’d been on the road for six hours – six – yet we were still in Nebraska; how was that even possible?

I'd been having so much fun road-tripping with Wes that it hadn't occurred to me to care. I was in no rush to get to UCLA because riding around and laughing with Wes was more fun than almost anything else in the world.

I grabbed a squirt of hand sanitizer before exiting the building.

It was a sunny afternoon, warmish but with a hint of impending fall, and being outside felt good. I glanced toward the men's room, but apparently I'd beaten Wes outside.

Or he'd left me somewhere just outside of Ogallala.

I wandered toward the grassy area in front of his car – *whew, still there* - stretching my back and letting the fresh air breathe over me. It always seemed like long car rides made the outdoors just a little sweeter, and I wanted to drink it in for a few more minutes.

But then I heard it.

It wasn't a meow, exactly, but more like a growl, mixed with a meow, mixed with a hiss - and tied together with a cat scream. I knew Mr. Fitzpervert was sound asleep in his carrier so it wasn't him (not like he'd ever expended the amount of energy necessary to make such a sound).

I glanced at the cornfield to my left. (Yes, it was cliché, but the I-80 rest area backed right up to an enormous cornfield. *That's just so Nebraska, amirite?*) The sound had definitely come from somewhere inside the tall rows of feed corn.

I squinted but didn't see anything. Maybe it'd been a wild animal, like a bobcat or a mountain lion. I didn't want to be mauled or attacked before I'd even left the state, so the smart thing to do would be to get in the car and maybe lock the door.

But then I heard it again.

And I saw its face, peeking out at me from where it was hunched behind a stalk.

It was a cat.

I looked over my shoulder, trying to see who its owner might be, but there was no one around. The rest stop was deserted except for a few semi-trucks parked way on the other end of the lot, and there were no houses nearby.

Just miles and miles of cornfield and interstate highway.

I walked a little closer. The cat didn't run away like I thought it would, but it growled more loudly and hissed as I approached.

"Hey, little guy," I murmured, and once I was close enough to get a good look at it, I slowly lowered to a squat. "It's okay, buddy."

It was an orange and white tabby with fluffy fur, fluffy fur that was matted down and knotted up in a few spots. He was scrawny and pathetic, and I assumed he was injured since he was staying put instead of running away from me.

"Hey - what're you doing, Tablecloth?"

I heard Wes' yell from behind me – referring to my red gingham Draper James top - but I didn't want to respond and spook the cat. I put out my hand for it to smell and said, "What are you doing out here in the middle of nowhere, sweet boy?"

Wes' footsteps were heavy on the dry grass as he approached. "Is there a reason you're squatting in a cornf—gah! What in the hell is *that* thing?"

The cat growled at Wes and crouched deeper into itself, obviously petrified of my towering sidekick, and I looked at Wes over my shoulder and cooed, "It's a sweet little kitty who is very scared and I think hungry."

Wes lowered to his haunches beside me. "I wonder if someone dumped him here."

I looked at the cat; could someone have been that cruel? Had this fluffy little guy woken up one morning in his house, comfy and secure, only to be left behind at a rest area? Abandoned? How long had he been there? How was he surviving?

“Relax.” Wes’s voice was deep in my ear as he said, “I was kidding. I’m sure he’s fine and probably one of those outdoor cats who loves his freedom. I bet he lives nearby.”

I turned my head, and his face was close. He was trying to make me feel better, and his dark eyes actually did; one look from Wes made warmth drizzle through me every time. But his words didn’t work when the cat was obviously hurt, dirty and hungry.

“We both know he doesn’t.” I tried for a smile and said, “Do you think there’s a shelter we can call?”

He glanced at his Apple watch. “You *do* know we have to get back on the road if we’re going to make it to Colorado tonight without your dad worrying and freaking out, right?”

We were stopping in Vail for the night, meeting up with Helena and my dad for dinner and sleep. They already had a generous head start, and Wes was right; this wouldn’t help.

I rolled in my lips. “I mean, yes. Let me just call someone really quick; we have to try, don’t we?”

He sighed. “Who are you going to call – The Humane Society of the Middle of Nowhere Rest Stop?”

“Yes, that’s right.” I gave him a fake smile and obnoxiously enthusiastic head bob. “You don’t happen to know their number, do you?”

He put his hand on my knee and gave it a little squeeze. “1-800-it’s-just-a-cat?”

I rolled my eyes. “1-800-one-call-could-save-his-life, more like.”

He stood and walked over to a picnic table that sat at the edge of the rest area's grassy knoll. Climbed over the bench seat and sat down on the table. "I'll look it up – was that Ogallala that we just passed?"

"Yep." The cat was watching me closely, but he'd stopped growling and was letting me lightly scratch his chin.

"Okay," Wes said, looking at his phone, "I found a number. Dozler Pet Rescue, the panhandle's only no-kill shelter."

I was about to grab my phone out of my pocket to call when Wes said, still looking at his phone, "Don't scare Mr. Ugly – I'll call."

I said around a laugh, "Thank you. And that isn't his name."

"Oh yeah – my bad. Don't scare Nasty Ace."

I looked at the cat, whose face was actually sweet under the scowl, and I said, "I think he looks more like a Roo."

"You're right. I rue the day you laid eyes on him." He said into the phone, "Hi, um, I have a question."

He got up and paced as he talked to the person at the shelter, and when he got off the phone and came back, he didn't look happy.

"What'd they say?" I asked.

He sighed. "They don't do pick-ups."

"What? How does the dog catcher not catch dogs?"

"Well, apparently their one truck has a blown head gasket so they cannot get animals today. And Ugly Roo is a cat. So...?"

“So, what do we do?” I knew he was going to say that we had to leave, but I couldn’t bear the thought of leaving the cat behind.

“Billy said we can drop off the cat, if we don’t mind driving thirty miles out of the way.”

“Billy?” I asked.

“The vet.” Wes looked down at me and rubbed the back of his neck. “How in God’s name are we going to get that mangy thing in the car without he and Fitz tearing each other to shreds?”

“Wes.” I couldn’t believe it. “You’d be willing to do that?”

His eyes were so *on me* when he said, “Of course I would.”

The moment hung there, the unspoken fact that he was doing it for me, and I said, “Do you know how hot you are right now?”

He shifted his weight to one foot. “Only right now?”

“When the light hits you just right,” I said, grinning up at that smartass smirk, “And you’re being all selfless and sweet – that’s when your hot really pops.”

He grinned and raised his arms, flexing his biceps. His voice sounded like Kronk from *The Emperor’s New Groove* when he said, “It’s pathetic how much you want me.”

“Isn’t it, though?” My cheeks got warm as he gave me a hot look, but then we both focused on the task at hand.

First, he went to the car and took Fitz out of his carrier. But *of course* the cat wouldn’t come out, so Wes had to curse through the scratches as he pulled my bow-tied baby out of the box. He set Mr. Fitzpervert on the seat, wherein the cat climbed under the driver’s spot and wouldn’t come out.

Next, Wes slammed the door and walked over with the carrier. His dark hair was tousled, his cheeks a little red, and his EDUCATED FEMINIST BRO shirt had a big dirt smudge on the shoulder. He looked like everything I could ever want, with his surly mouth and flashing eyes, and I tried not to laugh as he approached.

His eyebrows went up. “Something funny?”

“Not many guys would get their ass kicked by a cat for their girlfriend.” I glanced down at the stray, who actually seemed a little chill at the moment, before I said, “You’re a mess, Wessy, and I love it so much.”

“That’s because you’re the devil.” He pretended to be grumpy, but his eyes were smizing when he said, “Now what’s your plan to get that little hellbeast in this cage?”

“I am going to pick him up, and then put him down.” I shrugged. “Inside the cage.”

“Like it’s that easy. And what about rabies?”

“What about it?”

“That’s not a pampered kitty, Buxbaum. If he fights you and uses his teeth, do you really want to have to get rabies shots?”

I tilted my head and said, “I don’t think you can get rabies from a cat.”

His eyebrows went down. “Pretty sure you can get rabies from any animal.”

I sighed. “So how do you suggest I move him, then? Telekinesis?”

That made him smile. “Isn’t telekinesis reading someone else’s thoughts?”

I chewed on my lip. “I thought it was moving things with your mind.”

“I think that’s psychokinesis.”

I was pretty sure he was wrong. “Are you sure?”

“Not at all.”

That made us both laugh, and then Wes said, “I’ll grab him.”

“Well, what about rabies?”

He shrugged, “I’ll be careful.”

“Why do you think *you* will be less inclined to catch rabies than me?”

“Because you’re a disaster magnet.”

“True.” I said, “Well, put your socks on your hands at least.”

His eyebrows slammed together. “Pardon?”

“I don’t want you to get rabies, either so put your socks over your hands.”

He rolled his eyes but did what I asked, which made me smile even more as he removed his shoes and put his socks over his hands, creating a cotton rabies forcefield. Wes muttered the word *batshit crazy* while jamming his feet back into his sneakers. Then he crouched down, and in spite of the horrific noises the cat made, he managed to pick it up and get it into his arms.

But the cat was growling and coiled and ready to bolt if Wes even thought of loosening his hold; no way was he going in the cage. Wes asked, “Can you drive if I give you directions to Billy’s?”

“Of course.” I looked at disheveled Wes and the cat, who was doing a deep-throated, never-ending growl as Wes pressed it to his body, and I asked, “So you’re going to just hold him?”

“Yup.”

I wanted to remind him that Mr. Fitzpervert was no longer in a kennel, but Wes was working so hard that I couldn’t bear to give him another challenge. Besides, whenever Fitz got freaked out, he usually burrowed underneath stuff and you were lucky if you could find him two days later.

Surely he'd stay hidden under the seat.

I picked up the cat carrier and stood. "Let's go then."

We loaded into the car and headed for Billy's, and things were okay for a solid five minutes. Wes was talking quietly as he held the cat, and the thing actually stopped growling. Although to be fair, I couldn't imagine any creature not responding to Wes' deep, quiet cooing.

It made *me* want to huddle in Wes's lap like a stray cat.

He murmured, "That's a good boy, Mister Dickhead."

That made me laugh. "You cannot call the poor thing that. How about Fluffy?"

"Too sweet." Wes looked at me and said, "Assface works."

"That face is not the face of an assface."

"You mean the face of an ass." I gestured to the cat as I turned onto County Road C and suggested, "So maybe, um, Cookie would be a good name."

Wes laughed, "I refuse to assign a delightful name to the animal who currently has every single claw dug into my skin and is growling again. How about Wanker?"

"Cookie is not a wanker," I said, smiling as I saw what looked to be a town coming into view.

But then I saw the movement in my peripheral vision. I turned my head just in time to see Fitz, climbing on top of the seat behind Wes, his tail flipping in irritation.

I yelled, "Hold on tight to that--"

Mr. Fitzpervert let out a growl that morphed into a mrewow before he jumped on top of the cat. All hell broke loose. Both cats were growling and hissing, and Fitz delivered three smacking punches to the top of the cat's head with his paw. Wes was arm-barring the stray, forcing it to stay where it was, while he lifted Fitz straight up – one-handed – before dropping

him into the back seat. Mr. Fitzpervert was still meowing and growling, but he didn't seem interested in coming back over.

I floored it as I saw the shelter sign at the top of the hill, and Wes was trying his hardest to calm down the stray as it wriggled against him and tried to get free. When I turned into the blacktop parking lot of the country animal shelter, I hightailed it for the parking spot that was right next to the door as Wes cursed under his breath.

As soon as I put it in park and turned off the car, I opened the back door and put Fitz back in his kennel. He was still growling, and his bowtie was sideways, but as soon as he was safely contained, I came around to the passenger side.

"Ready?" I asked through the closed window, not wanting to open the door before Wes had a good hold of the cat.

He just gave me a smartass look as he held that mangy cat like it was a life preserver and if he were to let go, he would surely sink to the bottom of the ocean.

He stepped out carefully, and as soon as I slammed the door behind him, Wes hissed because the noise made the cat dig in his claws again. I muttered a sorry, and he said through gritted teeth, "I hope you know that you owe me bigtime, Buxbaum."

"I know, I know," I said, giggling a little because Wes was always funny, even in a crisis.

I opened the door for him, and a woman who was apparently Billy rushed forward.

"Are you Wes?" She asked, carefully extricating the cat from Wes's hold.

"Yes, ma'am," he said, and my chest felt all warm and buzzy as he smiled at her. Was it lame and weird that I was proud of him? He was such a good, solid human that I was proud of him and felt like showing him off. Like, *hey, girl, he rescued this cat from a cornfield just because I asked. Can you believe that?*

He was too good to be true, only he wasn't.

He was the real thing.

Billy took the cat from Wes and launched into vet mode, carrying it over to an exam table where she quickly diagnosed a broken back leg. She was sweet and ultra-cuddly with the dirty feline, making me totally comfortable leaving him in her care.

"What song is playing right now, Buxbaum," Wes asked when we finally walked out the doors and into the sunshine. He asked me that all the time, because *I know that brain of yours is always pairing music and I want to be able to veto any shitty music you might assign to me.*

"And it better not be *Cat Scratch Fever*. That's lazy. You're better than that."

I tilted my head and surveyed the middle of nowhere parking lot in front of us. I could be happy anywhere with Wes, literally, so I said, "*Street Lightning*."

I wanna be where you are.

His eyes narrowed and he pulled out his phone. "Hey, Siri. Remind me in one hour to google *Street Lightning*."

I laughed, because he never trusted me and googled every song he didn't know.

When we finally got to the car, ready to re-embark upon our road trip, Wes went to the trunk to change into a clean shirt. There was a suspicious wet spot that he couldn't be sure was the product of Fitz or the stray, and he'd rather not "stew in their juices all the way to the mountains."

I went to the backseat to reassure Fitz that everything was okay, and when I went around to the back of the car, Wes had just put his soiled shirt in a grocery bag. He was standing there, shirtless in baggy sweatpants, and I literally gasped.

Because not only was his chest broad, tanned, and absolutely gasp-worthy, but it was covered in angry scratches. Cuts and welts. He hadn't whined or put the cat down, he'd just held onto the thing and cooed reassurances while Cookie tore him to shreds.

The first notes of *Cuts and Bruises* started playing in my head as I put my hands on his chest and pushed him up against the side of the car. His eyebrows crinkled together as I crowded him against the vehicle.

"Do you know," I started, going up on my tiptoes to bring my mouth closer to his.

"How much I love it when you push me around?" His mouth turned up in a teasing grin and he put his big hands on my face. His eyes were bright as he looked down at me and said quietly, "I do, actually."

"No." Not smiling was impossible when Wes looked at me like that, like he wanted to kiss me and tousle my hair, all at the same time. I don't know what came over me, but I heard myself say the words, "Do you know how much I love you?"

Wes's smile disappeared and he swallowed, his Adam's apple bobbing as what I'd just confessed came screaming at me.

I tried recovering. "I know it's only been a few months so it's probably too soon to say it, and I mean it in a super chill, non-clingy way, but I, um, —"

"Have never said that before." He finished my sentence for me, his voice was quiet and husky, and his hands dropped to my shoulders. He swallowed again and added, "To me."

"Yeah, but it's just--"

His mouth stopped my words. His big palms squeezed my shoulders – hard – as he lowered his head and kissed me like he was committing every fiber of his being to the task. His

teeth nipped at my bottom lip and his mouth fed me wild kisses while I felt his fingers stroke up the sides of my neck, light as a feather.

I was on fire, so full of raw emotion for Wes. It was like I wanted to consume every little bit of him because every little bit was so incredibly intoxicating. My hands moved all over his skin, traversing his chest and arms as I felt downright grabby.

Wes Bennett was one potent drug.

Insert *Movement* by Hozier, I thought as he made a growling noise in his throat that weakened my knees.

We breathed hard – together – and his fingers hypnotized me with their barely-there sliding, up and down the column of my neck. *When you move, I'm moved.* He lifted his mouth from mine and looked down at me, his dark eyes unreadable, and he breathed the word, “Same.”

WES

When she opened her eyes, I swear to God I could feel a current running from Liz's green gaze to every nerve ending in my body.

Liz Buxbaum loved me.

It felt like my face was on fire, like my fingers were numb, as I struggled to find words.

Liz Buxbaum loved me.

I knew what she wanted me to say, what I was supposed to say, what I wanted to say more than fucking life, but my brain couldn't stop its interrogation as it repeatedly shouted the question *what in the hell do you know about love, Wes?*

Because Liz grew up bathed in it - from her mom, her dad, Helena - and she consumed it like it was necessary for her survival. She was the shiny, smiling, wide-eyed product of unconditional love.

The spokesperson for love.

A love mascot.

But I didn't know it in the same way.

And I didn't know if I knew *how* to be like that.

At least not the way Lib deserved, the way her glass heart had always dreamed.

In my life, I hadn't witnessed the love she wanted. I mean, yes, my mom loved me, and my dad (I assumed) loved me, too, even though it seemed more like he just loved watching me pitch when I wasn't getting *lazy* and throwing outside of the strike zone.

But my parents had actively - angrily - despised each other for the whole of my life. They had their own rooms, their own lives, and seriously, the thought of them ever kissing or holding hands was no different than the thought of a unicorn taking up residence in the secret area.

Inconceivable.

Did I feel huge things for Lizzie, so all-encompassing that it scared the ever-loving shit out of me? God, yes. Was it love? A thousand percent yes.

Did I know what to do with that?

Hell, no.

Everything with us was mind-blowingly perfect, but what if I didn't know how to give her what she'd spent her entire life expecting? What if it was one of those traits passed down to children from their parents - like fucking blue eyes and taco tongue - that I was going to be incapable of, no matter how badly I wanted to love her to perfection?

But as she looked up at me, the whirring thoughts all came to a stop.

I'd just have to find a way *not* to screw it up.

Because Liz Buxbaum fucking loved me.

I put my mouth next to her ear and said, “We’re gonna get arrested if you keep pawing me in public, Buxbaum.”

She gave my chest a little push and stepped back, her eyes squinting as she grinned up at me. “I was tending to your wounds.”

“You were rounding second base,” I said, messing with her hair, knowing it’d make her smack my hand.

She rolled her eyes *and* slapped at me - *my God, I loved her so fucking much* - before muttering, “Your pecs aren’t second base, dispshit.”

"I think I'd miss you even if we'd never met."

Nick, The Wedding Date

Colorado

*But I'll always have those moments
In the mountains, oh
All the wonders that I saw
All the stories that were told
--Moments in the Mountains, Madison Olds*

liz

“I’m going to go borrow Wes’s headphones.”

“Okay,” my dad said, not looking away from the TV. “Keep the door open.”

I rolled my eyes and got off the couch. *Like we weren’t going to be living on our own and away from adult supervision in mere days.*

Helena was already in bed, exhausted from the drive, and Wes had “turned in” a few minutes before, after his shower. We were spending the night at an Air B&B in Vail, because it was apparently cheaper than hotel rooms. The condo felt like a mini-ski lodge, with a huge stone fireplace, big windows and a woodsy kitchen, but I felt like the accommodations were both good *and* bad.

Good in that we’d had a delightful dinner in the charming mountain town and the condo was like a really nice house, but bad in that I’d had zero opportunity to be alone with Wes. And after being in a car with him all day, I just wanted a few minutes where we weren’t going 80mph and bound by seat belts.

Also, he’d held my hand after dinner in a way – *that* way – that set me on fire.

Side note: Why did the whole fingers-sliding-around-your-fingers thing weaken the knees? It didn't make sense, but I'd needed my smelling salts on the walk back to the condo after dinner.

I went past the kitchen and jogged up the stairs that led to Wes's room. I knocked quietly, not because he was asleep but because I didn't want Helena to wake across the hall.

Wes pulled the door open.

He was wearing basketball shorts and no shirt, his hair was wet and messy from the shower, and the smell of man soap filled my nose.

"Buxbaum," he said, smiling.

"Bennett," I said as I stepped into the room, my stomach flipping as I approached half-naked Wes in his bedroom. "Can I borrow your headphones?"

That made him squint at me. "Sure, but don't you have, like, ten very expensive pairs at the ready at any given moment?"

My dad had missed the flimsy excuse, but not Wes.

"Oh, that's right, I forgot," I said, snapping my fingers and stepping closer to him.

"Guess we'll just have to make-out instead, since I'm already here."

His voice was quiet and deep as he did a little laugh thing and said, "I knew my hand seduction did the trick."

"How does it work every single time?" I laughed and rested my forehead on his pecs, jokingly ashamed of the thing he knew got to me every single time. "Do I have a weird hand holding fetish? Is that my kryptonite – linked fingers?"

He laughed, too, and I felt his hands move to my lower back. "I mean, I *do* have a tight hand-holding game--"

“Spare me.”

“But I’m gonna get the door so we can--”

I lifted my head. “My dad said to leave it open.”

“What?”

“I told him I was borrowing your headphones,” I said, rolling my eyes, “And he said to leave the door open.”

Wes’s teasing grin disappeared. “So he knows you’re up here and is worried about us having, uh...relations?”

“*Relations.*” I snorted and said, “Apparently so?”

His eyebrows went down. “Well, then, I’m going to have to respectfully ask you to leave.”

“Bennett.” I tilted my head. “You’re not serious right now...?”

He narrowed his eyes a little, like he was considering my words, and then he said, “Yes. I’m afraid I am.”

“*Wes.*”

He shook his head. “Your dad and Helena are awesome, and I would hate it if they thought I was up to no good. So, um, please remove your sexy-ass body from my room.”

I pointed to my pajamas and said, “But I wore my special fuzzy socks and ripped hoodie with the sole purpose of being your in-person thirst trap.”

“You could wear a clown costume,” he said, leaning down far enough to bury his face in the side of my hood and nip my neck. “And I’d still be turned on.”

I closed my eyes as his mouth lingered on my skin. “But you’re afraid of clowns.”

“This is what I’m saying.” He lifted his head and gave me a heavy-lidded look. “You need to go.”

“But—”

“Get. Out. Of. My. Room.” He grabbed my shoulders, turned me around so I was facing the door, smacked my behind and pushed me until I was in the hallway. “Good night, Miss Buxbaum.”

And then he closed his door.

Which made me giggle and mutter, “Good night to you, Mr. Bennett.”

When I got to my room – thirty seconds later – I had a text from Wes.

I have regrets.

I tried to laugh quietly, since my dad was still watching TV just outside my door. *Me: That’s what you get for kicking me out.*

Wes: Now I hate Colorado.

Me: Oh, don’t blame it on Colorado; it’s beautiful and charming and doesn’t deserve your wrath. Blame yourself for being so ridiculously decent.

Wes: I hate that about myself.

Me: SAME.

Wes: I seem to recall you professing your love and adoration while accosting me in Nowheretown, Nebraska.

Me: I don’t remember that.

My phone started ringing. I smiled and answered with, “You always do this.”

“I know. When I get excited I can’t text. I fat-finger everything and it takes too long.”

I was laughing again. “What do you want?”

“So, what if we go for a walk?”

“What?”

He lowered his voice and sounded like he was eating his phone. “You tell your dad that you want to go for a walk to see the village all lit up, and you also say that I’m going to go with you to keep you safe from the baddies.”

“I will not be saying those words.”

“Fine – just the first part.”

“And then what?”

He said, “And then we’ll...go for a walk.”

“For real, or is walk a euphemism for something?”

“Well, we will start out walking...”

“Yeah...? Am I still in my PJs?”

He ignored that. “And then we might...stop walking...for quite some time...in the woods...if the feeling hits us.”

“Ooh – okay.”

“Then after we stop...”

“Yes? On the edge of my seat here.”

“We walk. Again.”

“Diabolical. I’m only human so there’s no way I can resist this plan.” I got up and walked over to my suitcase. “I’m going to change, and then meet me in the living room in five minutes.”

I was about to disconnect the call when Wes said, “Wait. Buxbaum.”

“Yeah?” I asked, unzipping my bag and grabbing my jeans.

“What song is playing right now?”

I narrowed my eyes as I held the phone between my ear and shoulder so I could change out of my pajama pants. *Hmmm...what song?* It took me five seconds to come up with, “*Golden* by Harry Styles.”

“Is that song about a girl *obsessed* with her neighbor?”

“Look it up.”

“Do you have any idea how many lyrics I’ve googled this summer?”

“No.”

“Just tell me, Buxbaum.”

“You’re down to four minutes, Bennett,” I said, hanging up the phone and tossing it onto the bed.

My dad was fine with the plan, and I grinned at Wes as he came downstairs and we both put on our jackets. It was chilly up in the mountains, but neither of us minded. We just wanted a few minutes alone, and alone in the great outdoors would totally work for us.

“Y’know what?” My dad stood and turned the TV off with the remote, smiling like he had a great idea. “I’m wide awake and kind of want a Snickers. Care if I join you?”

I said, “Um, well the thing is—” at the same time Wes said, “Of course not.”

I rolled my eyes before the three of us took a nice, chilly walk into the village square. Now, to be fair, it was a lovely night. I had a great time strolling around with my dad and Wes, and the town was gorgeous all lit up, but it was a far-cry from the making-out-in-the-great-outdoors walk I’d envisioned.

At one point I leaned close enough to whisper into Wes’s ear, “Hey, dumbass, when do we stop walking for a while?”

To which he responded by shoving me.

When we got back, we said our goodnights and my father ensured we retired to our respective rooms.

I was smiling, but our plan had definitely been a fail.

After changing back into my pj's, I went in the bathroom and pulled back my hair, scrubbed my face, brushed my teeth and put in my retainer. When I opened the door, Wes was leaning against the wall in the hallway.

He grinned, and his dimples were like a laser shot to my midsection.

"What are you doing," I started, but realized when I dragged my "g" that I was wearing my retainer, so I quickly stopped talking. I wanted to disappear because I knew just how terrible I looked, but Wes straightened and took two steps so he was directly in front of me, giving me a heart-stopping grin.

He said, "I'm sorry - are you twelve? Is that a retainer I spy?"

I crossed my arms and attempted a glare.

He coughed over a laugh and said, "Why didn't I know about this, honey? Do you have, like, a glass eye or anything else I'm unaware of?"

"Two, in fact."

"Well," he said, stepping even closer and lowering his deep voice to a husky growl, "I was lurking because I wanted to steal a kiss before bed. But since you've already got your oral hardware all locked and loaded, I guess I'll have to take a raincheck. God only knows the amount of bacteria that bad boy is housing. Like a little wired petri dish."

I laughed in spite of my mortification. "Can you please not look at me and also perform a brain scrub so you're unable to recover the memory of this image?"

“Don’t you get it?” He lifted a hand and ran his big thumb over my cheek. “Little Lizzie is *my* kryptonite. When you show me that weirdy side that you try so hard to repress, I am smitten and weak as fuck.”

“I think there’s something wrong with you,” I said, grabbing the front of his shirt and tugging just a little.

“Yeah, but you love me,” he said, lowering his head and kissing just under my ear. “Can’t take it back now, Buxbaum.”

“Like I’d ever want to,” I breathed, and as he bit down on my earlobe, the lyrics of *Kryptonite* started playing in my head, getting louder and louder as the scene faded to happiness black.

It wasn’t until later, when I turned out the lights and settled into bed, that I realized.

Holy shit.

Wes hadn’t said *I love you* back.

“Because you saw me when I was invisible.”

Mia, The Princess Diaries

Utah

*I see your reflection
Sleeping so softly
Pillow on the window
--Road Trip, Matt Walden*

WES

Liz pulled over onto the shoulder and unbuckled her seat belt. Her muttered *shit, shit, shit* had woken me up, but she was so deep in the freakout zone that she hadn't noticed. She dug into her purse and pulled out her wallet as the Highway Patrol officer approached her window.

The guy leaned down a little and said, "Do you know why I pulled you over?"

Liz cleared her throat – she always did that when she was nervous but pretending not to be. She raised a hand to the silky green scarf that was tied in her hair like she was Doris Day before she said, "No, officer. I wasn't speeding so I don't know..."

She trailed off, staring up at the guy. It was so typically Liz to *not* flirt or fake cry to get out of a ticket. No, Liz Buxbaum was going to blink up at him from behind her owlsh glasses – I could see her reflection in his aviators - until he caved and let her go.

Which he wouldn't do, by the way. I'd been dozing so I couldn't be sure, but Liz had a heavy foot and tended to drive at least fifteen over the speed limit if she was listening to music.

And she'd been singing along to every note of *Evermore* when I'd fallen asleep.

"The speed limit is eighty, and we clocked you at ninety-six."

"Miles per hour?" she asked.

The cop just stared at her.

"Um," she said to him in a hushed voice before glancing over at me. As soon as she saw I was awake she did a double-take, like she hadn't considered that I might regain consciousness

while she was being detained by the authorities. I shot her a *what-the-hell-are-you-doing-Buxbaum* look, and she gave me the glare that meant she was smiling inside, even though she refused to let it out. Her mouth was puckered and pointed to the left, her *not-gonna-laugh* pout, and she turned her face back toward the cop.

My mind replayed her words from the day before.

“Do you know how much I love you?”

If I was going to freeze and not be able to say it back, I should’ve at least played it cool and asked- “on a scale of one-to-let’s bone?” -just to be a smartass.

But no. I’d gotten so tripped up in my own emotional bullshit that I’d said *SAME*, like a fucking middle-schooler, in response to Elizabeth Marisol Buxbaum saying that she loved me.

I was like a pathetic dipshit who’d never seen a girl before or something.

And now my brain had it on a loop and hadn’t stopped binge-watching since she’d said it; I’d been up all-night thinking about my epic failure.

I finally realized at 3:42 a.m., as I’d tossed and turned in that tiny condo bed, why her words had come as such a shock.

Because really, they shouldn’t have, right? Things had been great with us since prom, we were basically inseparable, so I knew she liked me. Okay – I even knew she *like*-liked me (see aforementioned pathetic dipshittery).

But I think it was the fact that I’d had a *thing* for Liz since...shit, um, *forever*...that made what should’ve been a normal next-step in our relationship turn into a gut-punch of a surprise. Her being my girlfriend was still kind of surreal, in and of itself.

I mean, last week when we watched *Titanic* in her living room and she'd fallen asleep with her head on my chest, I couldn't stop thinking about the fact that Liz was sleeping on me on the couch that sat next to the piano that I used to listen to her play through the back windows.

It was a bit of a mind screw, getting the girl you'd always been preoccupied with.

"I don't think that can be right." Liz ran her hand through her long red hair, making the smell of coconut find my nose as she said to the officer, "I never speed."

I wanted to snort, but I kept my mouth shut and opened the glove box, grabbing the pink slip and insurance as the first notes of *Back To You* popped out of the speakers.

"You might want to look up the definition of 'never' after you give me your license and registration, young lady." The cop gave her a stern half-smile, a total power douche look.

"Here you go," I said, holding out the registration in front of Liz. "It's my car."

He grabbed it, and after he took her license and went back to his car, Liz sighed and looked over at me. I looked back, but she just raised an eyebrow. I tried not to smile as I innocently asked, "What?"

She rolled her eyes, the same way she'd rolled them at me since kindergarten, and I said around a laugh, "*What*, Lib? I didn't say a word."

"You didn't have to," she said, shaking her head but sliding into a smirk. "For the record, no way was I going that fast."

Now I raised *my* eyebrow.

"Seriously," she argued, still grinning the grin that made her eyes get squinty, "His little radar gun has to be malfunctioning or something."

"I've heard that happens when they reach a certain age." I grabbed my Red Bull out of the center console.

“That’s the only explanation,” she said, moving the rearview mirror so she could look back at the patrol car.

I took a drink and watched as she adjusted the mirror, pulled out her lipstick, and re-applied.

Retrograde red.

The color of my happiness.

See? That was some pathetic dipshittery right there.

“What song is playing right now, Buxbaum,” I asked, my eyes glued to the motion of that red stick and her perfect mouth.

If I were the one loading up songs, I’d choose *Lie To Me* by 5SOS simply because that’s how I felt. If I asked her if she loved me, and she’d changed her mind since Ogallala, I didn’t want to know.

I hope you lie-lie-lie-lie, lie to me.

Pathetic Dipshittery x 1000.

“Well,” she said, capping the tube of lipstick and putting it away as she grinned one of those just-for-me smiles that always gave me an annoying little pinch in the center of my chest.

“The obvious choices would’ve been *Breaking the Law* by Judas Priest or *I Can’t Drive 55--*”

“Obviously.”

“But I actually decided on *Bad* by Royal Deluxe because I love the vibe.”

“Vibe my ass,” I teased, “You picked it because you’re not sorry.”

“And because I’m bad as bad can be.” Her green eyes pulled me in with their happy crinkle as she laughed. “But you’re right - I’m not sorry. I know I should be, and telling my dad

about this ticket is going to suck, but driving through the desert is the worst and I just want to put it behind us.”

“Want me to drive?”

“Nah - I just need a Twiz.” She reached into her purse and pulled out two pieces of licorice. “Want one?”

I shook my head as the officer came back. He started talking to Liz about the ticket, and I realized I should probably be listening to his lecture or helping her somehow. Instead, though, I just enjoyed the show.

The way she tilted her head when he was being condescending, the way she said “mmm” instead of agreeing with his take that she’d been “zoning out and flying over the highway,” and the way she rubbed her eyebrow when he called her “dear” and asked if she needed him to show her how to use cruise control; her patience was commendable.

“I actually know how to use it but prefer not to. Thank you, though.”

To the world she appeared polite and respectful, but I knew she was seething inside.

Swear to God, sometimes it felt like I knew her as well as I knew myself.

It was weird. I’d always assumed if a person finally got with the person they’d been into forever, the reality would fall short. Surely that person couldn’t be as amazing as the other had made them out to be in their head for so long, right?

Somehow, though, Liz was better.

It pained me to think something so inane, but that morning, as she’d subjected me to an endless T-Swift playlist, I realized that Liz was a fucking Taylor Swift song.

She *was*.

Vibey and romantic, but with the uncanny ability to reach inside of you and grab your heart with her absolute specificity. Liz Buxbaum wasn't just a redhead; no, she was a girl whose hair was the color of the late September maple leaves that fluttered on the home base tree in her front yard.

And Liz Buxbaum didn't just wear a sweater, for God's sake. No, she wore an apple green cardigan that smelled like Chanel No.5 and the front seat of your car, where she'd left it for a week.

She said it reminded her of the way the rain sounded on the roof the first time you kissed her.

Taylor. Fucking. Swift.

Had anyone ever been that pathetic before?

Probably not, but I blamed Liz.

"Dude."

"Huh?" I'd totally been in the zone and had no idea what Liz had just said.

"Can you believe what a tool that guy was?" She buckled her seatbelt and put the car into drive, her eyebrows all scrunched together as she rolled her eyes at me. "He called me "dear," for God's sake."

"Well, *honey*," I said, grabbing a piece of licorice and holding it up to her mouth, "He was just trying to help. I can always show you how to use the cruise control later, if you're a good girl."

She rolled those eyes yet again and bit down on the Twizzler. "Don't make me kill you and leave you in the desert. You're too pretty to have your face eaten off by wolves."

"Awww, you think I'm pretty."

She snorted and said as she pulled back onto the interstate, “Pretty annoying.”

“Pretty annoying must be your kryptonite, then.”

She cued up more Taylor Swift - *Run* this time - and stood on the gas pedal. “I guess it must be.”

And as she shot forward on the desolate stretch of Utah road, I realized I was becoming a bit of a (pathetic dipshit) Taylor Swift fan, myself.

*Darling, let's run
Run from it all
We can go like they're trying to chase us
Go where no one else is
Run*

liz

Maybe he hadn't realized that he hadn't said it.

That was possible, right?

I set the cruise control - *of course I knew how to set the cruise control, Officer Assbag* - and slid off the shoes I'd jammed my feet into when I'd seen the cop. I'd been up all night, tossing and turning in that huge condo bed, but I ultimately talked myself into believing that Wes hadn't even noticed that he'd only said “same.”

I mean, the look on his face after I'd said it, the way he'd kissed me; that'd *felt* like crazy-stupid love. It'd felt so much like love that it'd taken me twelve hours to realize I hadn't heard him say the actual words, for God's sake.

And it was early - we hadn't been an official *thing* for that long. It was fine if he didn't want to say it yet.

Wasn't it?

It was strange, I thought, looking at the desert highway and listening to Wes hum along to the *Red* album. As someone who'd spent her entire life gearing up for love, daydreaming and impatiently awaiting its big-gesture arrival, I would've expected this to freak me out more.

Those three words were *everything*, right?

But there was just something about Wes - his presence, his half-smiles, his thoughtfulness - that made me feel kind of chill about it. Patient, even. I loved him, and I loved being with him. If he wasn't ready to say those words, I could wait until he was.

That morning, while my dad, Helena and I had filled our faces at a charming Vail café before hitting the road, Wes went outside and called the rescue shelter in Ogallala, just so he could get an update on Cookie the Cat for me. He maybe hadn't *said* that he loved me yet, but as long as he was still right there, beside me, giving me every amazing bit of his Wes-ness, I could totally wait.

"What're you thinking about, Speed Racer?"

I glanced over at him, at that teasing smile and those mischievous eyes as he stretched his long legs out in front of him, and I just said, "How badly that cat kicked your ass yesterday."

He gave a little laugh sound and said, "You're so lucky you're driving right now, Buxbaum."

"I feel lucky," I said, turning up volume on the stereo and letting the music pour into the moment.

"If you're a bird, I'm a bird."

Noah, The Notebook

Nevada

We're winning 'til the curtain's coming down
-- Vegas Lights, Panic! At The Disco

liz

“How ya doin’ over there, Bennett?”

Wes’s eyes raised to me from his forearm, where the tattoo artist was busy at work, and he gave me a slow grin. “Amazing, Buxbaum. You?”

I grinned back at him as the needle moved over the skin of my shoulder and the chorus of *Tattoos Together* by Lauv looped through me. “Amazing as well, thank you for asking.”

It was the middle of the afternoon, and Wes and I were in Vegas, getting matching tattoos.

It was mind-boggling, what we were doing, but I was so excited. Never had a random, spur of the moment idea made two dorks so ridiculously enthusiastic.

I blamed Las Vegas.

Since neither of us had ever been there, we’d decided to give ourselves an hour to walk around on the strip. We’d pulled into town, parked the car, and headed out to see the city. I had wicked blisters from walking so much in Colorado, so Wes - my most incredible Wesley - piggybacked me around the sights so I didn’t have to destroy my heels.

It was getting absurd, the depth of my feelings for that perfectly wonderful pain in the ass.

As we ran around the strip acting like idiots, we saw an ad for tattoos at The Venetian. That launched a conversation about how Wes couldn't wait to get one and how I wanted another one, and before either of us knew what was happening, we were brainstorming which tattoos each of us were going to get.

We'd plopped down at an outdoor table, sucked down cold Starbucks, and worked through the options.

We each wanted to get something small. Symbolic. One thing led to another, and we started talking about how fun it would be to get something to commemorate our epic road trip.

"I don't mean something to commemorate *us*," I clarified as he scrolled through Google images of tattoos on his phone, "So don't lose your mind and think I want to immortalize you on my body in ink or something."

He glanced up. "You know you do."

"Anyway," I said as he set down his phone, crossed his arms over his chest and looked at me like he couldn't wait to hear the rest. "I just think that even if we hate each other someday, we will both still have amazing memories of this drive, right?"

"Like you could ever hate me, Buxbaum. You're madly in love with me, remember?"

"I never said 'in' love - just love. And I never said madly, either."

"What's the difference?"

"Degree of affection - there's math involved."

"Come on Lib - the degree is, like, the Nth degree. Admit it."

"I will not."

"So. Okay. What are we talking about here, tattoo-wise? Like...a cat? To remember Fluffy? Because I'm not getting a cat tattoo."

“A cattoo. And her name was Cookie.”

“Dickhead, actually.” He reached out a big palm and tousled my hair, making a laugh sound in this throat when I swatted at his hand. “Now listen. I like your idea. What if we got, like, something...”

He paused for a few seconds before saying, “Something like the latitude and longitude of the animal shelter?”

I gasped. Then I squealed. Because Wes *totally* nailed it. A tattoo that would mean something to each of us forever, even if we didn’t live happily ever after together.

But sidenote: I was really starting to think we would. (Note to self: add The Best Years by 5SOS)

I tried to keep it casual all the time, because we weren’t even college freshman yet, but Wes was so much BETTER than everything I’d ever thought I wanted from a cinematic rom-com hero. Not only was he hot and sweet and charming, but I never had as much fun as when I was just hanging out with him.

Example: When I rode along with him the day he renewed his tags at the DMV, which was purportedly the worst place to go on the planet, we had so much fun that I’d ended up making a DMV soundtrack. Now whenever I drove by the shiny government building, I smiled like a lovesick fool as I remembered the game he created where we each attempted to chew 20 pieces of Juicy Fruit at one time without drooling.

Now you have to sing the alphabet song, Buxbaum.

Sidenote: No one wins at that game.

I’d literally laugh-cried off all my mascara that day.

“Do you think your dad is going to freak out when we get to the hotel tonight?” Wes seemed entirely unfazed by the needle moving over his skin, which was somehow not surprising at all. He looked at me and said, “I mean, he’s pretty cool, but these are permanent.”

I shrugged. “We don’t have to tell him - you can wear long sleeves and they won’t see mine.”

“You’re such a little sneak.”

“Am not.”

“We want to go see Vail’s lights, Daddy,” he said in a ridiculous singsong voice. *“So we’re taking a walk in the dark and you can’t come.”*

I started laughing and rolled my eyes, which made him start laughing, too, which made both of our tattoo artists have to stop working until we could pull ourselves together.

Once we were finished, we spent a solid thirty minutes telling each other how great our tattoos looked. His tan, muscular forearm looked downright sexy with his brand-new longitudinal tattoo, and he seemed to think my fresh ink was worthy of worship at a later date when it was no longer covered with A&D ointment and Saran wrap.

He piggybacked me to the car, and he’d just set me down by the trunk when his phone buzzed from inside my hoodie pouch, where I’d been keeping it for him.

“You just got a text,” I said, watching him pop open the back so he could grab a soda out of the cooler.

“Who’s it from?” he asked, opening the lid and digging into the ice. “Read it.”

Wes was the only guy I’d ever met who had no qualms about anyone getting into his phone. Like, ever. I pulled it out, looked at the message and said, “It’s from your dad. He wants to know if you worked out at the hotel last night.”

Wes froze for the slightest of seconds and his jaw clenched, and even though they were the tiniest movements, I could tell that he wasn't happy. He said, "Just ignore it."

"I can just lie and say yes if you want...?"

He gave his head a tiny shake. "Thanks, but he'll want details."

"So I should say no, then," I said, giving him a teasing look.

He sighed and gave me a smile that looked like he was pretending he didn't care. "Then he'll lecture."

"Oof." I tried picturing Mr. Bennett. "Talk about a lose-lose."

His face came to me then, but not the neighborly face I'd seen throughout my childhood. That image had been erased by the intense man I'd seen at Wes's baseball games, a serious guy who crossed his arms over his chest and yelled a lot.

"Well," I said, "How about I say *yes but I'm driving so I can't talk.*"

Wes narrowed his eyes, like he was really considering me, and then he said, "If you want to, go for it."

"You don't think it'll work?" I asked.

He just gave a chin-nod toward the phone, egging me on to do it.

So I did. I sent the text, and then I said, "There."

I put the phone back in my pocket, but Wes said, "You might as well keep it out."

Before I could question that, the phone buzzed.

Wes closed the trunk, but we both stood there as I took out the phone again.

Mr. Bennet had sent multiple messages.

Dad: As long as I'm paying for your phone, you can answer the question.

Dad: How much did you lift?

Dad: What'd you eat yesterday?

I looked over at Wes, who was watching me, and he did it again. He gave me a patented laidback Wes smile, but it hurt my heart because his eyes weren't smiling.

Another text came in.

Dad: We've worked too damn hard for this for you to screw around on the way there. I hope you're taking this seriously.

I sighed and texted for Wes: *I am.*

Dad: Really? Because I didn't see that you entered a damn thing in Coach's workout log for yesterday. Is this how you want to start your career? Blowing off the important stuff to fuck around?

I looked up from the phone and said to Wes, "Does your dad know that you're only 18? I think he thinks you're 30 and play in the majors."

"It's fine." He reached over and took back his phone, looking embarrassed. "He's just a little nuts about baseball."

"I remember from your games," I said, wondering if his dad had always been an asshole and I'd just never known. "I think he's more nuts about baseball than you are."

I'd said it offhandedly, but Wes barked out a laugh, like I'd just said something ridiculous. His smile was forced and sarcastic. "Ya think?"

For a split second he looked unbearably sad, and I stepped closer to him. "Wes--"

"No. Buxbaum." He gave his head a shake and said, "We're not going to do th--"

"Nope – we're not." I grabbed his hand and pulled him a little closer. "But I do have to be annoying for the tiniest second and tell you that you deserve to make yourself happy. You're

18 and starting your whole big life. Fuck everything – and everyone - that doesn't make you smile.”

Wes

I swallowed, but it felt like something jagged was in my throat.

I looked at her lips, her cheeks, her eyes and her defiant eyebrows, and I opened my mouth. Couldn't think of what to say, so I closed it again.

“It's *your* life, Bennett,” she said, reaching up to grab the strings at the top of my hoodie. “Yours to own. Starting now.”

I reached out a finger and ran it along her cheekbone, feeling, to be honest, a bit overwhelmed. “God, you *do* love me.”

I hadn't meant to say it out loud, but it was still so fucking incredible.

She nodded, her mouth turning up at the corners before she said, “No matter what.”

Fuck.

“Listen, Lib,” I said, my voice a little gravelly than I cared for her to hear. “When we were at the cat shelter yesterday, I wanted to say it. I hadn't expected--”

“I know. Shh.” She raised up onto her tiptoes, touching her mouth to mine so sweetly that I wanted to fucking cry. What the fuck, right? She kissed me, and it felt like she was trying to show me something that felt important.

More dipshittery right there.

But my arms went around her waist, squeezing her, pulling her closer, and I tried my hardest to fucking inhale Liz Buxbaum.

She made a noise - a sigh - when I kissed her back, and I swear to God I lost it every single time she did that. It was sweet and nothing, but it felt like some sort of contented reaction to *me* that always made me want to pump my fist in the air.

That was me - I did that.

She set her hands on my chest and met me kiss for kiss, driving me wild with the flexing of her fingers and the smell of her perfume. I swear to God it felt like Libby kissed competitively, like she was trying to win every time our mouths came together.

Every single kiss was perfection.

I could kiss her for centuries and never get tired of it.

She was *that* good.

Eventually, she pulled back and looked up at me through heavy-lidded green eyes and a smartass smirk. The moment - the tension - had been erased, and I wanted to kiss her again when she said as if nothing had happened, “Listen, Bennett – we’re going to get arrested if you keep pawing at me in public.”

liz

It wasn’t until hours later, when it was getting dark and we were cocooned in the quiet of the car and the hum of the highway under our tires, that I turned toward him in my seat and said, “Can I confess something?”

“Please don’t tell me you’re Catfishing someone in California and we’re stopping off to meet them tomorrow.”

I chuckled and thought he looked good in the lights of the dashboard. I could still see the angles of his face and the curl of his long eyelashes, but the faint red of the speedometer made his dark eyes sparkle in the most delightful way.

“No, smartass, and now I’m not telling you.”

“Oh, come on - tell me.”

“No.”

“Pleeeeeeease, Libby. Please tell me your deepest, darkest confession.”

His lips curled up, and I felt like that tiny movement controlled the temperature of my happiness. Like, all the time. He smiled, and I burned just a little brighter. His eyes were on the road as I said, “I don’t know. Now that I think about it, you’ll probably judge me harshly and my confession might even lower my Wessy stock value.”

“Your Wessy stock value continues to soar, don’t worry.” He looked over at me and grinned before dropping a hand to my knee. It was nothing, just his hand resting on me, but I loved being his to touch. I loved that it was natural for him to set a hand on me while he was talking.

“It’s nothing, honestly,” I said, staring down at his big fingers, “But because you know what a little weirdy I am, I thought you’d find it ironically funny.”

“Tell me.”

“Okay. So.” I cleared my throat before saying, “I realized as we were getting inked that not only do I have a reminder of Cookie, but--”

“Mr. Ugly,” he corrected.

I rolled my eyes and continued. “I have a reminder of the first time I ever said those three words to someone.”

“Those three...?” He trailed off and his eyebrows bunched together. He glanced over at me and said, “No. You lie, Buxbaum. You’re the silly little love-lover, remember?”

“I know.” I shrugged and said, “I guess I just always wanted to save it.”

He glanced over at me again for a fleeting second, and his expression was so unguarded that I felt a little hitch in my breathing. He said, “But...”

“But you’re the first.”

I watched his profile as he drove through the dark Nevada night, and his Adam’s apple moved when he swallowed. There was a long pause before he said, “The hell you say.”

“I’m serious.” My voice was scratchy as I said, “You’re the only one.”

“Um. Shit.” His eyes shot over to me before returning to the road, as if to confirm that I said what I’d said. Then he hit the brakes, pulling over onto the shoulder of the nearly deserted highway. When the car came to a complete stop, he jammed it into park and gave me a white-hot look that I could feel through the darkness.

Before I could think, his big hands were on my face and his mouth was on mine. I loved the feel of his baseball calluses on my skin as his scent slithered through my senses and gave me goosebumps. His lips opened my lips, making me breathless as he kissed me like I was going to disappear and he needed to devour every bit of me before that happened.

His tongue slid inside my mouth, but he wasn’t one of those guys attempting to taste a tonsil. No, Wes kissed with stomach-dropping finesse. He did this scraping thing with his teeth - *ohhh, his teeth* - that made me moan in an embarrassing way.

It was always like that when Wes kissed me, where I pretty much had to dig my fingernails into his biceps and hold on tight, because what else could I do when my entire body was melting into a puddle?

When he pulled back, my eyelids felt weighted. I blinked - slowly because it was so difficult - and just wanted more as I looked up at his handsome face.

“I love you, Elizabeth Buxbaum.”

I swear to God my heart stuttered in my chest as he looked at me like he meant every word. I took a shaky breath and whispered back, “I love you more, Wesley Harold Bennett.”

He rubbed his thumb over my chin and said regretfully, “I should’ve said it back--”

“It doesn’t matter,” I said, watching him watch his finger on my skin. “You didn’t have to say it for me to know.”

His mouth moved dropped a small, sweet kiss on mine before moving over to my ear. He took my earlobe in his teeth and said in a raspy voice, “What song is playing now, Buxbaum?”

I closed my eyes and pictured him under the streetlight back home, tugging on the strings of the hoodie I’d been wearing after prom. It was the way I always pictured him when I was alone and cataloguing every amazing thing about him, and I could still perfectly hear his deep voice. *Enemies-to-lovers - it’s our trope, Buxbaum.*

I smiled in the darkness and said, “Cue the Bazzi.”

“And she saved him right back.”
Vivian, Pretty Woman

California

*It's amazin', California
Celebrate it or berate it
It's been fated, California
--California
88 Rising*

liz

“You guys,” Helena whispered as she came back to her seat, looking trendy-cool in her jeans and three-inch pumps. “I think I just saw Angelina Jolie in the bathroom.”

My dad said, “Sure you did, honey,” at the exact time I said, “You know you didn’t, right?”

Helena had a habit of seeing famous people all the time - at the grocery store, at Walmart, at the gas station - yet it always turned out that it was just a regular person who barely looked like the famous person she claimed to have seen at all.

Helena pursed her lips and sat down, taking her spot at the table. My dad worked with someone who knew someone fancy in LA, so we’d managed to land reservations at a trendy bistro called *Effe*. The menu was sorely lacking on the burger front, but after the cross-country drive, it was nice to be dressed up and eating out somewhere that didn’t have a drive thru.

I glanced at Wes, who was wearing jeans and a nice button down that made me want to bite him, and he threw me a wink.

“Why do we hang out with these losers,” Helena asked Wes, putting her napkin back on her lap.

“No idea,” he said.

“I just had an illuminating conversation about hand dryers with the former Mrs. Pitt, and these two just give me eyeballs.” She gestured toward me and my dad before leaning a little closer to him and saying, “Ang is a big fan of the dryers, in case you were wondering.”

He said, “See - I would’ve pegged her as a towel girl.”

“Towels at home, but dryers in public. It’s all about the image.”

His mouth curved up at the corners. “She’s a hypocrite?”

“And a goddess - have you seen her arms?” Helena picked up her glass of chardonnay and raised it to her lips. “I bet she could bench press your girlfriend.”

Wes looked at me, his eyes squinty and smizing in a way that would make Tyra proud. “Liz would never go for that. She’s too ticklish.”

I reached for my water. “First of all, it wasn’t her. Second of all, if Angelina Jolie wanted to bench me, I’d definitely let her.”

We all spent a few more minutes teasing each other before Wes’s mom called. His parents were flying in the following day to help him get settled, so he went outside to take the call. My dad and Helena started discussing what they were going to order, and as I looked at the menu, my face still full-on smiling, a dull ache settled into my stomach.

Almost out of nowhere.

My mother.

I swallowed, but the lump in my throat wouldn’t go away. I missed her desperately at that moment, in almost a panicked way, and I took a deep breath and pictured her face. She should be

there with me, tripping across the country to college. But I kind of hadn't thought of her in a few days, hadn't focused on her other than a few fleeting thoughts, and something about that realization made my stomach hurt.

Was it starting?

Was life was moving on and she was being left behind?

I took another deep breath and swallowed again. It was fine. Everything was fine.

My mom is in my fiber. She is always with me.

But then I looked at my dad and Helena across the table and felt a pang of homesickness for them, which made no sense since they were still there, right? As I gazed past them and saw Wes through the window, laughing and talking on the phone, my heart pinched in my chest.

Shit, shit, shit.

Everything was about to change, and my heart was racing as I thought about the next few days. My dad and Helena would leave, and Wes and I would embark upon something new and probably wonderful but so different that I suddenly couldn't breathe.

Nothing would be the same.

Never again would we be together like we were in that moment, the same unit we'd always been. Until we reached UCLA, we four remained a part of my childhood; this was the college road trip portion of my wonder years.

But once we stepped out of trip mode and moved into the new life, it was over. We would wave goodbye to the life we used to know as my dad and Helena drove away, and then we'd be left to live something new.

"I'm going to the restroom," I breathed, pasting a calm smile on my face.

"Tell Ang hi for me," Helena said, making my dad groan.

I almost tripped over my chair as I stood and went in the direction Helena had come from. I was taking deep breaths, trying to keep myself from getting emotional. *This is stupid, this is stupid, this is stupid.*

I pushed in the door to the ladies' room and rolled my teary eyes at my lunacy. I was beyond excited about UCLA, so I had no idea where this was coming from. I couldn't wait for the music classes, I was thrilled to be out on my own, and the roommate I'd been randomly assigned - Bushra - seemed amazing. She was just as wild about books as I was, and we'd already spent hours laughing together on Facetime.

I couldn't wait to meet her in-person.

So, like, everything that was about to happen was something I was excited about.

Which begged the question - what the hell was my problem?

I went over to the sink and turned on the faucet, leaning down to splash water on my cheeks. The song I chose for my bathroom meltdown was *Off The Rails* by Wallice, for obvious reasons.

"Shit." I turned off the water and grabbed a paper towel, blotting at my water (and tear) dampened cheeks. *Dammit, Libby, get it together.* I was throwing the towel away when the bathroom door flew open and Helena came inside.

"Oh. Um, hey," I said, raising a startled hand to my chest.

"Hey," she said, smiling in that everything-in-the-world-is-amusing way of hers. She always seemed like she magically knew that everything was going to work out just fine, no matter the crisis. She asked, "You okay?"

"Oh. Yeah." I forced a smile on my face and said, "Just got hit with a wave of tired."

"You sure you weren't trying to corroborate my Angelina story?"

I rolled my eyes. “I can assure you I was not.”

“So, um,” she said, crossing her arms and tilting her head. “We haven’t had much of a chance to talk on this road trip. Are you doing okay with everything?”

I breathed in through my nose and lied. “Yeah, I’m good.”

Her eyes narrowed just a little. “You’re still okay with the fact that you haven’t been able to go see her?”

No need to ask who - we both knew who *her* was.

“I’m fine,” I said, swallowing and biting down on the inside of my cheek.

She pursed her lips and I could just tell she knew. Everything. She said, “You sure, kid?”

I nodded, but tears pricked my eyes at the same time.

“Oh, honey,” she said, and something about her concerned tone made me totally break down. I let her wrap her arms around me as an alarming volume of tears once again filled my eyes.

WES

Helena: It’s time.

I looked at Liz’s dad, who was happily eating the spinach and artichoke appetizer that had been set in front of the two who’d disappeared into the bathroom ten minutes before, and I looked back at my phone.

Texted - *NOW??*

Helena and I had planned a little surprise for Liz, which I assumed was what she was referring to, but surely it wasn’t an opportune time for that.

Helena: She’s crying.

“I’ll be right back.” I stood and headed in the direction of the restrooms, not waiting for his response as my stomach sunk. I’d seen Liz fight back tears before, and it was the worst thing I’d ever witnessed. Because Liz Buxbaum was supposed to be laughing and romantic - she’d been born in a daydream and been built on love stories, for God’s sake - so seeing her devastated was the *worst*.

But when I reached the doors to the restrooms, there was no one there.

I stood there for a minute, waiting for them to appear, but my brain kept sending me images of Libby fucking crying and it was too much.

I pushed in the door to the women’s room just a crack. Said, “Helena?”

All I heard was a distracted *uh-huh* from Helena and a snuffle from Liz.

So I went in.

I stepped inside of the dark, trendy women’s restroom in time to see Helena on the floor - on her hands-and-knees with her nose nearly pressed to the tile - and Liz wiping her eyes in front of the mirror in that flowered dress that made me want to throw her over my shoulder and take her somewhere with twinkling lights and only the two of us.

They both looked at me, their heads turning almost in unison as I walked in.

It would’ve been hilarious if Lib didn’t look so sad.

She furrowed her eyebrows and asked me, “What are you doing in the ladies room?”

Helena snorted and lowered her face to the floor. “I sent him a bat signal.”

“What are *you* doing,” I asked her, confused as hell as she looked like she was about to lick the floor. “Helena?”

“My contact popped out,” she said.

“You should probably go,” Liz said to me, looking a little embarrassed. I knew she hated showing her emotional side, which struck me as the sweetest contradiction because Lizzie’s emotions were fucking everything. “Before someone comes in.”

“Wait.” Helena rolled her eyes and climbed to her feet, dusting off her knees when she said to Libby, “That thing’s going to be too skeevy for me to put back on my eyeball, anyway, so I’ll move on. Um, the thing is, Liz, we have something for you.”

Liz tilted her head and narrowed her eyes, and I was so damn happy to see that her curiosity was pushing back the sadness. She crossed her arms and said to me, “You do?”

I nodded and took the phone out of my pocket.

“Maybe we should go back to the table...?” she said, glancing at the door behind me.

“Nah,” Helena said, shaking her head. “It might make you emotional, so you’ll want to get it in here. I’ll keep out the riffraff.”

I scrolled to the app and opened it, praying to God that it wasn’t the worst idea I’d ever had. I wanted it to help her, to make her feel a little less far from home, but what the hell did I know about grief? I glanced at Helena, and she apparently took that as her cue.

“We knew you were dreading not being able to go see your mom every day,” she said, walking over to the sink, turning on the water and washing her hands. “So Wes came up with this idea and your dad made it happen.”

Liz looked at Helena before stepping closer to me and looking down at my hand. The app was open now, and she gasped and grabbed my phone when she saw the image on the screen.

liz

Holy shit.

I didn't want to look away from Wes's phone, where there was a crystal-clear image of my mother's headstone, but I raised my eyes because I didn't get it. I asked him, "What is this?"

His face was sweet, his dark eyes soft as he looked down at me. "Your dad installed a modified trailcam at the cemetery that starts recording whenever you open the app, so you can pull it up anytime you want."

I looked back at the phone. "It's live?"

Just as I asked that, a bird flew in front of the camera. I glanced up at Wes and he smiled at me. "Yep. Almost like being there."

I shook my head and covered my mouth, trying my hardest to keep my emotions in check. But just like that, a mix of relief and joy and longing and love washed over me like a wave. I didn't want to cry again, but what kind of a gift was that? They'd literally given me the one thing I'd been devastated to leave behind.

"You guys, I..." I tried to find words to tell them how much it meant to me, but my voice wouldn't work. I shook my head as tears started falling again, and then Wes's arms were around me and my face was buried in his nice shirt and the smell of his soap was cocooning me in warmth.

I was surrounded by everything wonderful; there was nothing I could do but cry happy tears, right?

"Get out," I heard Helena say. "We need a minute."

A female voice said, "Excuse me, but we need to use--"

"No." Helena hissed, "We need. A. Minute. Angelina Jolie is in here and she needs her space."

And then I heard the door slam.

I relished another second of Wes's protection, of the lovely pillow his big body was as it wrapped around me, before I lifted my head and grinned through the tears. "Ohmigod, Helena, did you just kick someone out of the bathroom?"

She was leaning all of her ass on the door and she shrugged. "We just need a minute; that's not so much, right?"

Her legs were bent, her high heels holding her up in a squat like she was a football player at the line of scrimmage. She was fierce and hilarious and gorgeous, and I loved her so much.

"Hey." A frantic knock sounded on the bathroom door. "Helena!"

It was my dad.

Wes kissed the top of my head and let go of me, his hands sliding down until the fingers of his right hand linked between mine. His eyes were unsure as he looked down at me, and I squeezed his hand and quietly said, "It's pathetic how much you love me, Bennett."

The corners of his eyes crinkled as he said, "It really, really is."

Helena opened the door, but only a crack. "May we help you?"

I couldn't see him, but I heard my dad say, "They're freaking out here, hon. These ladies need to go to the bathroom, and the severe woman at the hostess stand is threatening to kick us out. What is going on?"

Helena said, "Lizzie kind of had the moment we expected."

They'd expected it?

"She did?" My dad's head popped in through the crack. "Lib, hon, are you okay?"

I started laughing at the sight of his head squeezing through the door gap, and I had to wipe my eyes. "I'm so, so good."

Helena opened the door and let him in, which resulted in five very well-dressed LA women - with very angry faces - following him in.

"I'm sorry, but you need to leave." One of the women - rail-thin with a chiseled bob and very short bangs - pointed to all of us and said, "Please grab your things and go."

"That's the severe hostess," my dad said in a terrible version of a whisper, which earned him a withering glare from the aforementioned hostess.

"We will leave," Helena declared loudly, spreading her arms wide as if on stage, "But only because we want to. You women have a wonderful evening - we're going to White Castle!"

"I don't think they have White Castle here, dear," my dad said, ruining Helena's mic drop as he gestured with his hands for us to follow him out the door.

"Yeah, I think he's right," Wes agreed.

"What do they have - In and Out?" she asked, like the decision needed to be made at that moment and couldn't wait.

"Jack in the Box, I think," I said, unable to hold in a smile as Wes squeezed my hand and the absurdity of our situation hit my funny bone.

"Please go," huffed the severe hostess before muttering under her breath, "I've got to get out there before Angelina leaves."

"I *knew* it!" Helena yelled, her gaze moving between my dad, Wes, and me. "It *was* Angelina!"

We were all still laughing an hour later, as we wolfed down Jack In The Box burgers on the beach. The four of us, in the orange of the California sunset, reveled in the barefoot joy that could only accompany getting bounced from an LA restaurant that was way cooler than we would ever be.

And yes, we had seen Angelina Jolie – that hypocritical goddess - as we'd been escorted from *Effe*.

A tiny part of me was still sad about the waning hours left in our wonder years, but the scuffle in the bathroom had showed me that I could weather all the changes that the future held.

Because as long as I had them in my life, I had everything.

“Do you realize we could’ve been doing this for years if you weren’t such a pain in the ass?”

-- Wes Bennett, Better Than The Movies



Spotify – Wes & Liz College Roadtrip

<https://open.spotify.com/playlist/45LhjkH2ZSNgAPQN2K4PdI?si=9f00296985d5496b>

Note: Thank you so very much to everyone who has read BTTM, loved Wes and Liz, sent sweet notes, shared posts, created amazing art - y'all have made this entire experience (prepare yourself for lameness) better than the movies for me.

XOXO