

BETTER



THAN



BEFORE



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CHAPTER ONE

The summer before freshman year

Bailey

Please don't wake up.

I looked at the guy in the seat beside me (who I'd mentally named Mr. Nothing because those were the words on his stupid shirt) and was kind of impressed by his ability to remain asleep. We'd just landed, and in spite of the flight attendant's smattering of announcements and the random people who were now standing beside us in the aisle, he remained unconscious.

Thank God.

He was a cynical, know-it-all smart-ass who seemed to enjoy pushing my buttons, even though we'd been strangers mere hours before. He'd ruined my first-ever solo flight with his incessant assholery, so as far as I was concerned, the less time I had to listen to him before finally getting off the plane, the better.

Although, as I watched him sleep, it occurred to me that he was way more attractive than I'd originally thought. He was my age-we were both freshmen-so I should've noticed, but his personality had somehow distracted me from the length of his eyelashes, the thickness of his dark hair, the prominence of his Adam's apple, and the way he had the tiniest little dimple in his chin.

He was, objectively speaking, a very cute guy.

"You checking me out, Glasses?"

Gah!

His eyes remained closed as he said, “Swear to God I can hear you holding your breath. Relax and exhale, kid; it’s okay to creep on me.”

“As if,” I growled, irritated that I’d gotten busted, because the last thing on earth I wanted to do was stroke his ego. “I just thought you might be dead.”

“Worried?”

“Hopeful.”

His eyes opened then, squinting around a smirk as he turned his head in my direction. “Little Miss Uptight, letting loose with the death wishes. Sometimes you think you know a person...”

“We don’t know each other.” I clutched my bag and wished the people in the rows in front of us would get their bags and exit faster.

“Yes, we do.” He unbuckled his seat belt and lifted the armrest between us, looking utterly... entertained as he gave me a twinkly eyed half smile and said, “I know your drink order—half diet, half regular—the book you’re reading—*Addicted to You*—the album you’ve listened to on repeat for the entire flight—*Nicole*—and the fact that you roll your eyes every single time I speak.”

I rolled my eyes in spite of myself, which made his grin slide even higher.

“Come on now, Glasses, don’t be that way,” he teased. “After sharing such a momentous flight together, we should be exchanging numbers, not eye rolls.”

“You have got to be kidding,” I muttered, and then I might have snorted.

His eyebrows knitted together and his nose wrinkled, like he was nauseated by the notion that he might be interested in me. “Of course I’m kidding. The last thing I need in my life is someone new to hate me. I’ll stick with my existing friends and family for that, thank you.”

I looked at his serious brown eyes, and even though I knew he was awful, something in his words felt honest. Like he really thought the people in his life hated him. Maybe it was the crinkle between his dark eyebrows or the way he visibly swallowed that tricked me—I’m not sure. All I know is that I was an absolute moron for attempting to reassure him with “I’m sure no one hates you.”

Because as soon as I said it, he laughed. It was our turn to stand and get our bags from the overhead compartment, but he took a quick second to grin like I was a foolish child and tousle my hair with his big hand before stepping into the aisle.

He tousled. My. Hair.

The kind of tousle an older brother reserves for his annoying little sister.

I ducked out of his reach, nearly braining myself on the overhead compartment, and when I stepped out of our row to retrieve my carry-on, he was already grabbing it.

“Stealing my bag?” I asked (huffed, really, because I was so freaking annoyed), pushing my over-humidified curls out of my face as I straightened to my full height.

“Being helpful, actually.” He lifted the bag down and turned his body sideways so I could get past him and be next in line to exit the plane.

“I didn’t think you did things like that,” I said as I took the bag from his hands. “Worried about your karma all of a sudden?”

His mouth opened like he was going to say something, but then he just pursed his lips and gave me a shrug and an eyebrow raise. “Let’s go with that.”

I set down my bag, extended the handle, and said, “Well, I guess this is goodbye. Have a nice life.”

I started walking with my rolling bag, glad to finally be leaving the plane. Even though I was dreading what awaited me in godforsaken Nebraska, at least I’d be free of this close-proximity-to-a-jackass nightmare.

But as I muttered thanks to the flight attendant and stepped into the Jetway, I heard his deep voice from behind me.

“Glasses.”

I didn’t stop, just looked over my shoulder as I walked. “Yeah?”

His dark eyes were unreadable, his mouth absent of its smirk as he walked with his hands in his pockets. “Thanks.”

That made me almost trip, because he didn’t look like he was messing with me. “For what?”

He just shrugged again and said, “For trying.”

And then he walked around me, passing me, those long legs taking him down the rest of the Jetway and into the terminal. I watched as he disappeared into the crowds of the chaotic airport, and I realized I'd never see Mr. Nothing again.

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CHAPTER TWO

Charlie

Mom: I got tied up at work so Uncle Larry's going to pick you up in front of the Delta drop-off. I'll swing by their house and grab you when I'm done.

I sighed and put my phone in my pocket, watching the array of mismatched suitcases ride around on the baggage carousel. Uncle Larry was a decent guy, but I just wanted to go home. I was in a shit mood after having to say goodbye to everything I cared about that morning and didn't exactly feel like being social.

Especially after a long-ass flight.

Honestly, I felt kind of bad for the frizzy-haired girl with glasses who'd been in the seat beside me, because her uptightness had challenged my stubborn douchey side and I'd been unable to hold back.

I was a total asshole.

For the entire flight.

As if hearing my thoughts, Glasses walked past me and stopped by the other end of the carousel to wait for her luggage. Her eyes were laser focused on watching for her bags, so she had no idea I was there.

I didn't mind.

There was something about her that I didn't hate looking at.

Her eyes were green and ridiculously expressive, her lips hit that sweet spot where they weren't puffy but were plump enough to distract me, and she had some curves (I was keeping my eyes on her face, though—I wasn't a perv).

But then there was the unruly hair, nervous attitude, and mouth full of silver braces.

It was like she was stuck between caterpillar and butterfly, and I couldn't look away.

She pulled a makeup tube from her pocket and raised it to her lips. Her attention didn't waver from the circling luggage as she ran the shiny gloss over her mouth, and I swear to God I could smell the strawberry from the other side of the baggage claim.

I mean, I couldn't—that wasn't possible—but I'd been so distracted by the fruity smell of her lips during the flight that it was, like, stuck in my nose.

Or something.

Glasses was controlled, uptight, and someone who overthought every minute detail in her life—my least favorite kind of girl—yet there was something about her....

I'm sure no one hates you.

Yeah, that was it.

There was an unexpected sweetness underneath all that prickly, like she still believed in fucking Santa Claus or something.

I'm sure no one hates you.

It'd taken me a second to realize she meant it when she said that, that she was actually literally, unbelievably trying to make me—a dickhead stranger—feel better. I knew I'd pissed her off by laughing, but it'd been the most genuine laugh I'd laughed in ages, because I'd been straight-up shocked to the core.

I'm sure no one hates you.

I watched as she shoved her lip gloss back into her pocket and pulled a tissue out of her purse. She folded the Kleenex, held it in front of her face, then pressed her lips around it. I knew she was just blotting the makeup—I wasn't an idiot, for fuck's sake—but my eyes were fixed on her shiny lips, and I wondered if she'd ever been kissed.

What she would kiss like.

Would her nervous, overthinking side be in charge, or would the bossy, controlling part of her take over? The smell of strawberries, the slick gloss, a sharp intake of breath—

“She's kind of cute-you know her?”

I turned to my left and—holy shit—my cousin Wes was grinning beside me. He'd clearly just left baseball practice (not surprising since he ate/slept/breathed baseball), because he was wearing grass-stained baseball pants, a T-shirt with the sleeves hacked off, and a backward Cubs hat, and he still had eye black smeared on his face.

"Duuuude," I said, sliding into our old handshake/hug/backslap. It was impossible not to smile, because something finally felt comfortable. "What is up?"

He pulled back and said, "My dad got sick of doing the airport loop, so he sent me in to snag you. Now tell me about this girl you're creeping on."

I don't know what I would've said to anyone else, but this was Wes. Not only was he my favorite cousin, but he'd always been one of my best friends, even when we didn't talk for long periods of time. "She's the uptight weirdo I got stuck sitting next to for the entire ten-hour flight."

Wes was looking at her. "You know how I feel about weirdos."

"Yeah, well, I don't share your fondness. This one sent me to the back of the boarding line for cutting."

"No shit?" He started laughing that contagious Wes Bennett cackle and said, "No wonder you're obsessed. There's just something about a girl who hates your guts."

"I'm definitely not obsessed," I corrected him, knowing full well I was still staring at Glasses.

"Yeah, me either," Wes said sarcastically. "Now let's grab your suitcase before you get to see Dad lose his shit because he had to wait too long."

As we walked toward the other side of the carousel, I admitted, "You know, I've always been a little scared of your dad."

"Me too, Chuck," he said, using the nickname I used to hate when I was little. "The man has scared the shit out of me since the day I was born."

CHAPTER THREE

Wes

She was under the tree.

My dad and Charlie were deep in conversation about something—football, maybe?—but I’d tuned them out the minute I looked out the back window. I could see Liz—my next-door neighbor—sitting on a blanket under her favorite cottonwood, reading a book.

Well, technically I didn’t *know* it was her favorite tree anymore.

But it used to be.

When we were in sixth grade and played night tag in her backyard, she yelled at Austin Potter for climbing that tree because it would “destroy her” if he broke it (she was so fucking melodramatic). She said it was her favorite tree because *cottonwoods have leaves that shimmer in the sunlight and sound like water when you close your eyes*.

She made us close our eyes and listen.

And she was right.

Anyway. It appeared she was wearing a costume like a total weirdo—maybe it was just a dress—and reading under that tree at the moment.

“You guys should go outside and throw a ball or something,” I heard my dad say.

Like we were little kids who needed to *go play*.

Throwing a ball was the man’s answer to everything, I swear to God.

Still, it was better than just sitting inside, listening to my sister, Sarah, chomping on her bubble gum while we waited for Charlie’s mom to finally show up (she was an hour late).

“Come on, Chuck,” I said, ideas sparking in my head as I turned away from the window. “Let’s go throw a football.”

He gave me a weird look. “Okay.”

As soon as we stepped out onto the deck, Charlie said, “So honestly—is your dad an asshole? Like, Uncle Larry’s always intimidated me, but today he kind of seems like a dick.”

That made me curious what they’d been talking about while I’d been zoning out, but I gave him the truth. “Ninety-five percent of the time.”

“I was never sure if it was my dad fucking up the family bonding vibes, or if your dad was at fault.”

Our families were weird in that we were close, yet not close at all. Charlie’s mom was my mom’s sister, and they were tight. They talked on the phone all the time, and when we were little, we’d get together a couple times a year for vacation. My sister played with his sister, Charlie and I ran around, and it felt like a nice little family thing.

Our dads, however, weren’t tight at all. Charlie’s parents got divorced earlier this year, but even before that, his dad and mine seemed to have zero in common and didn’t really even speak when they were together.

I was pretty sure they secretly hated each other.

“Let’s call it a collab.” I handed Charlie the football, ran down the deck steps, then sprinted to the other side of the yard. “Hit me, Chuck.”

He let loose with a perfect spiral, which pissed me off because it came *right* to me. I tossed it back, hoping for a poorly thrown pass. My naturally-athletic-but-not-at-all-competitive cousin sent me another dime, but God smiled, because it bounced off my fingertips and went over the fence.

“My bad!” Charlie yelled as he jogged over. “I’ll get it.”

I held out a hand. “Don’t you fucking dare.”

“Still with that?” Charlie said, grinning and shaking his head like I was pathetic.

I was pathetic.

“I just enjoy messing with my neighbor, that’s all.”

“Sure it is.”

I ignored him and charged over the fence, easily climbing it and dropping right into the Buxbaums’ yard. The tree Liz was parked under was on the other side, bordering the other neighbors’ fence, and she was facing my direction.

The football was in the grass right beside her.

I walked over, taking in the way her back was against the tree, her legs stretched in front of her and crossed at the ankles. She was wearing heart-shaped sunglasses, red lipstick, and a dress that looked like an old-timey swimsuit.

A book was in her hands—*ten pink fingernails holding* Anna and the French Kiss—and a wineglass full of soda with a lemon was sitting beside the retro CD player on the ground to her right. Is that Kings of Leon I hear?

He wants to see you crawl....

“For someone who walks around with the cocky overconfidence of an athlete,” Liz said, not looking up from her book, “you really suck at catching.”

“Football’s not my game, Buxbaum,” I said, stopping in front of her to pick up the ball. “And it was a terrible pass, so not my fault.”

“It almost hit me in the nose.”

“Almost’ doesn’t count,” I said as my eyes got lost in the way the sun made her red hair blindingly metallic.

She lowered her chin to look at me over her sunglasses. “If I hadn’t covered my face in time, I’d probably have a broken nose right now.”

“I’d stop the bleeding with the shirt off my back if that happened, Lizzie.”

“Yeah, and I’d probably get a bacterial infection from your filthy jersey. Why don’t you just take your little toy and go?”

I really was insane, because I fucking loved going back and forth like this with her.

“I feel like you’re going to miss me,” I said, unable to stop myself from grinning down at her. “Now that we’ve shared a moment, maybe I should stick around.”

“Irritating each other is not sharing a moment, and if you do, I’m going inside.”

“Fine,” I said dramatically around a sigh. “I’ll take my ball and go home.”

“See that you do.”

I went back to my yard, zapped with the little zing I got whenever I messed with Liz, so I wasn't upset in the least when yet another errant pass went over her fence.

"Are you kidding me?" Liz yelled from the other side.

"Absolutely not," I replied, doing my best not to laugh as I vaulted over the barrier. "Ready to render first aid with my filthy jersey."

Her sunglasses were on top of her head, and her green eyes were narrowed as she watched my approach. I could tell she was trying to gauge whether or not the missed passes were intentional.

Yeah, like I'd ever fucking tell.

"Every time you jump the fence, it looks like it's going to topple over. Would it kill you to go through the gate?"

"Your dad put a lock on it," I said, "so I can't anymore."

"Oh-five, oh-four, two-one," she said, rolling her eyes. "Just put in the number, use the gate like a civilized human, and maybe don't even talk to me when you retrieve your misdirected sports paraphernalia. Zero contact would be cool."

"But how could I tell you how much I like your new hair if I didn't speak?"

Her eyebrows furrowed. "What are you doing?"

"What do you mean?"

"Are you being a dick about my hair? Because I *know* you're not complimenting me."

"Lizzie," I said, pouring on the tease, even though I fucking loved her new hair. It was shorter and cute as hell, but no way could I give her a genuine compliment.

We didn't do that.

So I said, "Your hair is the stuff of cheerleader fantasy. Of main character daydreams. Your hair runs so that young gingers' hair can walk."

She bit down on the inside of her cheek and—*holy shit*—looked like she wanted to laugh. "Are you high, Wes Bennett?"

"I'll answer that if you answer this: Were you playing Beyoncé on the piano last night?"

Her green eyes went wide, and her mouth dropped open. “You heard me?”

“The windows were open,” I said, shrugging like it was the first time I’d ever heard her, “and I was having a smoke out back. So was it ‘Halo’?”

“You smoke?” She was looking at me like I was a puzzle, like she couldn’t figure me out.

“No. Was it?”

The crinkle in her forehead grew somehow. “Yes. So... do or don’t you?”

“Like Beyoncé? Fucking love her.”

She rolled her eyes. “Why do I even bother trying to have a conversation with you?”

“Because you’re fascinated and want to know more.”

She snorted.

“Because you find me wildly attractive and need some insight into my soul?”

“Try again.”

“Because you want to reconcile the data you’ve entered into your diary about me with the real-life, actual facts?”

“So you *are* high.”

“Wes.” Charlie peered over the fence. “I’m going inside for a sec. I’ll be right back.”

Liz was staring—wide, unblinking green eyes—at my cousin as if she was seeing Jesus himself.

“Cool,” I said, still watching her watch him. I knew I couldn’t be rude, *even though I wanted to be*, so I added, “Hey, Chuck—this is Liz.”

No one had an easier face to read than my next-door neighbor. Liz’s every thought played out for the world, as if her freckles were transmitting Morse code or something.

And at that moment, she was having a million melodramatic romantic thoughts about my cousin.

Fucking awesome.

“Hey, Liz,” Charlie said, wearing a huge-ass grin as he peered at her over the fence. “I’m Charlie. Nice to meet you.”

“You too,” she said, squinting as she smiled back at him.

Fucking lovely.

“So you’re unlucky enough to live next door to Wes—that’s gotta be tough,” he said, and as I looked at his sarcastic face, I knew he was remembering my Liz issues and messing with me on purpose.

“You have no idea,” Liz said, her eyelashes fluttering as she made a cute giggling noise.

“Oh, but I do. I’ve vacationed with him. Did you know he talks in his sleep?”

“You should shut up, Charlie,” I said, but it was like he didn’t hear me.

Liz’s lips slid all the way up as she smirked at me and said, “I mean, I’m not surprised, because he never stops talking when he’s awake.”

“Right?” Charlie said, laughing because he had me. “He also still sleeps with his baby pillow, but I suppose that’s—”

“Foul,” I interrupted, loving the way she was giggling even as I wanted to cram the words back down his throat. “Fucking foul, Chuckles.”

“Whoa.” Liz’s mouth dropped wide open, and her eyes were huge as she gaped at me. “Say that again, *Chuckles*. Wes Bennett sleeps with his...?”

“It’s cute as fuck,” Charlie said, ducking as I threw the football toward his head. “The thing is faded and torn, but Wes always has it tucked under ___”

“Weren’t you going inside, asshole?” I said through gritted teeth.

That made him full-on laugh—along with Liz—as he looked at her and said, “Later, Liz.”

She was quiet until Charlie went inside, but the minute the door closed behind him, she looked up at me and said, “So who *is* Charlie?”

CHAPTER FOUR

Liz

The look on Wes's face made me instantly regret my question.

"Why?" he asked, giving me a half smile.

"I'm just curious," I said, trying to sound casual and undo what I might've just done. The last thing I needed was for Wes Bennett to have leverage over me. "I've never seen him in your little baseball boy band, that's all."

"That's because Charlie—my cousin—doesn't go to Emerson."

"He's your cousin," I said, surprised for some reason. "That explains why he knows you cuddle with little pillows."

"I do," he said, grinning his cocky grin even as his cheeks got red. "I'm not ashamed. I sleep better with my lumpy old pillow, so what?"

"From what I hear, it's not so much *old* as it is a pillow intended for tiny, little babies."

He ignored that and said, "You do know that if you're interested in him, you're going to have to go through me, right?"

I sighed and immediately gave up on any notions about Hot Charlie. "First of all, I'm not 'interested,' because I don't even know him. Second of all, if I *were* interested, surely there would be a better way than through *you*."

"Why are your cheeks red?"

Wes had always been able to see through everything and just *know*. My thoughts, my reactions—he never missed a blush or a stammer, and he had the ability to catch any tell that my face might expose.

He was looking at me like I was a silly child, and I kind of wanted to hurt him. "Because I'm sitting in the hot sun, dumbass."

“No need for name-calling when I’m trying to help you.”

“How are you trying to help me, exactly?”

“If you’re interested in Charlie, I can provide the assist.”

“No offense, but I will never—in my entire life—want you anywhere *near* my love life.”

“Never say never.”

“Nevernevernevernever and oh, yeah—never.”

“You wound me, Buxbaum,” he said, putting his hand over his heart.

“But I don’t,” I said, feeling like I knew his reactions just as well as he knew mine. Regarding me, he was either amused, entertained, irritated, or snarky; it was all in his eyes. Right now he was amused but also mildly irritated, probably worried I was going to start stalking his cousin. “You’d have to have genuine emotions to be wounded.”

“You think I don’t have emotions?” He crossed his arms over his chest and tilted his head. “I just told you I’m obsessed with your hair and you don’t think I have emotions? I turn the hose on you every time you look hot in the backyard and you think I’m not genuine?”

“I knew you squirted me on purpose!”

His mouth turned up into a big smile, the kind that made his eyes twinkle and secretly made me want to laugh.

But I would never.

If Wes Bennett thought that I thought he was funny, the resultant torture would be unbearable.

“Settle your ass down, I didn’t say that. But, Lizzie, if I’m watering my mom’s flowers and I know you’re baking on the other side of the fence, wouldn’t it make me a bad neighbor if I didn’t give you a spritz from time to time?”

“I’ll give *you* a spritz,” I muttered under my breath.

“What’s that?”

“Nothing.”

He gave me a knowing look and said, “So do you want me to put in a good word with Charlie or not?”

“Not.”

“I can talk you up, tell him about how mean you are, or about the time you fell out your bedroom window.”

“I didn’t fall out the window, and you know it!” God, no one pushed my buttons like freaking Wes. “I was trying to fix my screen, *it* fell out, and then I climbed out the window to retrieve it.”

“And...?” His smile was ginormous, and I wanted to punch it.

“And my foot got caught and I landed on my face, *but I didn’t fall out the window.*”

“I wish I had pictures of the road rash left on your forehead.”

I flipped him off.

“At least I still have them up here.” And he tapped his forehead, the dick.

“Have I told you lately that I hate you?”

“Oh, you don’t hate me, Buxie,” he said, dropping to a squat in front of me. His dark eyes moved all over my face before he said, “How could you hate the first boy you ever punched?”

“That *was* a special moment,” I agreed, giving in to a tiny smile. “I’ll always remember the look of shock on your stupid face just before you ran to tell my mom on me.”

“I mean, I couldn’t let you get away with assault. What kind of lesson would that teach?”

“Such a model citizen,” I said, rolling my eyes. “Now can I get back to my book?”

“Absolutely.” Wes reached out a hand and flicked the spine. “I don’t want to interrupt your studies.”

“This isn’t for school—it’s still summer,” I said, putting my sunglasses back on. “Remember?”

“Oh, I wasn’t referring to school; I was referring to the fact that you’re studying French-kissing. Very important subject. You should totally throw yourself into your studies.”

My cheeks were instantly hot again. “This isn’t—”

“*Shhhhhh*, don’t ruin this,” he said, cutting me off with an obnoxious grin as he scooped up the football and straightened. “Because I don’t know if I’d say I’m an *expert*, but if you ever need any coaching, I’ve got all the

tips you'll ever need. I'm your guy—*the* guy—for mastering the art of the French kiss.”

I crinkled my nose. “Gross.”

He turned and started walking toward his yard, but just before he reached the fence, he looked at me over his shoulder and said, “Y’know, Buxbaum, someday you might see it differently.”

I tilted my head, crossed my arms, and said, “I was talking about *you*, Wes, not kissing in general.”

His lips slid up into the dirtiest of smirks. “Oh, I know, Elizabeth.”

With that, he launched himself over the fence as if I hadn’t just told him the combination of the gate’s lock.

“Use the gate next time, Baby Pillow!” I yelled.

“We’ll see!” he yelled back, and then I heard him say something—presumably to Charlie—and fall into that loud, carefree Wes Bennett laugh.

A laugh I’d recognize anywhere.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Photo by Jackson Okun

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