

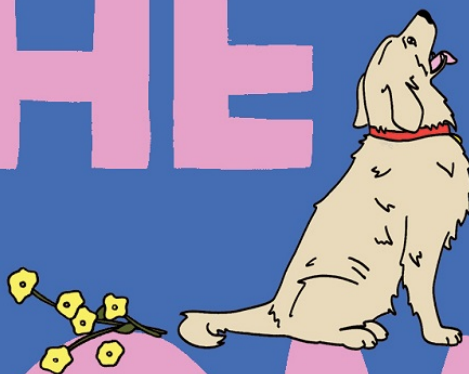
BETTER

THAN

THE

PROM

LYNN PAINTER



PROM

Wes Bennett

Holy *shit*.

I don't know if it was some kind of sixth sense or just an unfortunate coincidence, but the minute Alex and I were finally laughing about our pathetic situation (her being obsessed with a clueless Adam and me being hung-up on my next-door neighbor) and dancing underneath that stupidly huge Mardi Gras baby, something made me glance toward the doors.

And there was Liz.

With Michael.

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

No.

When Liz grinned, everything disappeared into a fuzzy, out-of-focus backdrop as she became clarity personified. I'd always thought Liz's smile made the rest of the world go quiet, but as I watched her give it to Michael, my thoughts were anything but.

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

No, no, no.

He wasn't allowed to smile at her like that.

I wasn't jealous—*okay, I was so jealous I wanted to pull down that papier-mâché super-infant and beat the living shit out of it*—but God, Michael hadn't *earned* her smile.

It wasn't fair.

I saw her first.

Liz Buxbaum had always been *my* secret. She was the incredible thing I'd known about but 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.

I was a prick for wanting to hit him, right? Michael was a good guy, but at that moment I just wanted to plant my fist in his face so badly. Which was asinine in and of itself, since I firmly believed that guys who fought were morons.

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

But then—

Seriously, universe?

As I worked my ass off to give my date the attention she deserved, a Taylor Swift song came on. I could hear the notes of "New Year's Day," the combination of melodious piano and Taylor's soft voice, and I held out for as long as I could. I was strong for a few minutes, but it was impossible for me *not* to look back in Liz's direction.

Because *Taylor*.

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

She'd straightened her hair, so it looked long and soft, and my fingers itched to tug on it. Images of those copper strands all wrapped around my fingers slammed into me like a hard uppercut, but that was nothing new. Ever since she'd kissed me in my car, a continuous loop of fantasy Liz scenes had been playing in my head as if

my brain was no longer a functioning organ but rather a dedicated Elizabeth Buxbaum TikTok—aesthetic.

Her dress was just as incredible as it'd been in the picture she'd texted me, but I felt, like, *pissed* when I looked at it. Not pissed at *her*, but pissed that it had become a different dress entirely.

His.

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

The dress she'd texted *me* a picture of, not Michael.

As I watched her talking intently to him, their faces close, he smiled down at her and I thought they were going to kiss. *Nonononononono*—my breath got stuck in my lungs as I watched them, unable to look away.

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

Okay, maybe not worse, but still terrible.

Was it possible to literally throw up over a girl? Because my stomach churned as she wrapped her arms around his shoulders.

I gritted my teeth and forced myself to turn my attention back to my date—God, I was an asshole—but she was still talking about Adam and completely unaware of the fact that my internal organs were malfunctioning en masse.

I shifted my gaze back in Liz's direction one more time, a glutton for punishment, but—

She was watching me.

Liz had always had an expressive face, so easy to read, which was why I felt the blood slow to a stop in my veins when she blinked and looked at me with wide green eyes, a tiny wrinkle in between her eyebrows.

She was sad.

I was gutted by her exit from my life—could she be dealing with the same emptiness? I dared to hope, like a damn chump, but then her face changed.

She met my stare, and then Lizzie raised one eyebrow.

Tilted her chin.

To anyone else, it was just a look.

But not to me.

I knew that look intimately, because I'd been on the receiving end of that look for the whole of my fucking life. That was the way Liz had always looked at me; matter-of-factly, lacking in warmth, and mildly challenging.

Like she didn't give a shit about me or what I thought.

I hadn't seen that look from her in a while, and it stung that it was back.

"I take it Liz is here?" Alex asked, giving me a warm smile of commiseration, like she understood. "She's behind me, isn't she?"

I turned our bodies, so I could no longer see Buxbaum, and I cleared my throat before saying, "Not anymore."

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

"She told me that I *had extra time*. I was in kindergarten—how was I to know she didn't mean two hours?"

We walked toward the Secret Area, more relaxed than we'd been all night because at least it was over. Neither of us wanted to go to post-prom and watch the people we were into with *other* people, so we'd decided to hang out by the fire pit until it was late enough that our parents would be in bed and unable to ask a million questions about why we were home so early.

"I bet you were such a little shit," she said as I opened the back gate.

"Guilty," I said, and then—

What the hell?

There was a fire roaring in the firepit, the twinkle lights were turned on, and—*holy shit*, a box of graham crackers and a bag of marshmallows were floating on top of the pond.

“What the hell?” I looked to my right, expecting to see my mother or something, and on the ground was a broken radio with a shitload of batteries lying beside it.

“Look,” Alex whispered, nudging me and pointing. “Liz.”

My head whipped around so fast and—*what the hell*—there was Liz, crawling in the other direction, on the ground, in the darkness.

“Liz?” I said, and she froze in place.

I was surprised at how calm my voice sounded.

What could she possibly be doing back there?

She climbed to her feet and turned around to face us. She gave us a huge fake smile, like a terrifying clown grimace, and she said, “Hey, guys. What’s up? Fun prom, right?”

I was incapable of words as I stared at Liz, who was wearing my sweatshirt.

Why was she wearing my sweatshirt?

And why, God, did she look so damn cute in it? I hated that it was going to be impossible for me to scour the image from my Liz-addicted brain.

“Right? Oh my God.” Alex, thank God, remembered how to use words. She smiled and acted like we hadn’t just witnessed Liz doing a raccoon impersonation when 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. Her eyes darted to me for a quick second before she added, “Total heart attack moment. Like *whaaaaaat*? Ash was crowned?”

I knew she wasn’t friends with Ashley, and it pissed me off that she was playing some game. I said, “What are you doing out here?”

I hadn’t meant to sound like such a dick, but seeing her there was physically painful.

And why was she home already?

“I, um, I followed my cat out here earlier and, uh, I dropped something and thought it might’ve rolled under this bush.”

She pointed to the general wooded area, and it was obvious she was just making shit up.

But why?

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

She swallowed and looked nervous. "Yes, he does. Actually, no, you're right. He ran out."

"Really?" The rest of the world disappeared as I looked at her. "What'd you drop?"

"Um, it was money. A penny." She cleared her throat and said, "I dropped a penny and it rolled away. So yeah. I was just out here, uh, looking for my penny. It was lucky."

I wanted to give her a little shake and try to bust loose something that resembled the truth. "Your—"

"Penny. Yep. But it doesn't matter. I don't need it." She cleared her throat again and her eyes moved all over my face. "The penny, y'know? I mean, who needs a penny, am I right? My stepmom throws them away, for God's sake."

I stared at her, flustered and babbling and lying through her teeth, and I missed her so much that it nearly dropped me.

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

I tried swallowing but something in my throat was way fucked up.

"Then you wake up one day and your eyes are opened to just how amazing pennies are. How had you not noticed before, right? I mean, they're like the *best coins ever*. As in, better than all other coins combined. But you weren't careful and lost your penny and you just wish you could make your penny understand how much you regret not cherishing 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 tried to mentally sift through the rubble of this entire encounter.

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

If I wasn't so close to dying at that moment, I might've laughed.

“Um, no, thanks. I’ve got to run—even though I’m penniless haha—so you guys have fun. Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.”

She gave a little wave and climbed over the fence to her yard, and I was tempted to run after her. I wanted to drag her back and make her make sense. Because—*shit*—it had almost sounded like—

“Wow,” Alex said, walking toward the fire pit. “So that was weird, right?”

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

It’d been impossible to pretend that I wasn’t preoccupied with what’d just happened, so Alex insisted I take her home so I could then focus on kicking down Liz’s door and having it out with her.

We hadn’t even made a single s’more before I was driving Alex home, so yes, I was the worst date ever.

But when I got back, Liz’s car was no longer there. I had no idea where she’d gone, and it was entirely possible she’d ended up at post-prom and wouldn’t be returning home that night at all.

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

I went back to the Secret Area to put out the fire, but only got more confused as I cleaned up. Because not only were there s’mores ingredients in the water and a fire in the pit, but there was a CD in the busted player that said—in Liz’s handwriting—*The Soundtrack of Wes and Liz*.

With a picture of a ketchup heart on the cover.

I was reeling over that—*what the hell, what the hell, what the hell*—when I came around front to take the rubble inside the house. As I walked onto the porch, I saw the sign taped just above the doorbell.

MEET ME IN THE SECRET AREA

Holy *shit*. I stared at the paper, at Liz’s loopy cursive.

She’d been waiting for *me* back there? Was that what the whole thing was about? I nearly dropped the pile of stuff in my arms because I was instantly keyed

the hell up while also desperate to talk to her.

When she pulled up ten minutes later—I could always hear her because her car needed a new muffler—I went outside and sat on the porch. I felt like a leashed dog, like I was at the end of my tether and straining to get at my quarry as I waited for her door to open. The second she stepped out of that car, I was going to confront her and see if it was possible for us to salvage something.

Only... she didn't get out.

She just sat in the running car.

For what felt like forever.

After twenty minutes of staring like an unhinged stalker, I got up and went over to her car. I'd have felt better letting her get out first, but at that point I was too intent on talking to her to wait a second longer.

I knocked on the steamed-up driver's side window.

Waited.

She rolled the window down a crack—a full minute later—and said, “Yes?”

I tried seeing her through the small opening. “What are you doing?”

“Um... parking?” she replied, wiping at her shirt with a napkin.

“I watched you park twenty minutes ago,” I said as a hint of her perfume—and French fries—danced through the window crack and snaked its way around my head. “Try again.”

“Wow—creep much?” she barked, obviously not wanting to get out.

Yes, I do. You turn me into someone who listens for that damn muffler every minute I'm at home.

I tried sounding chill. “I wanted to talk to you, so yeah, I was waiting. But now I think maybe you're never going to get out of that car.”

She rolled her eyes, set down her drink, opened the car door, and stepped out. Said, “What do you need?”

And just like that I was *pissed*.

Not at Liz, but at the reality that we were back there, in a place where she rolled her eyes when I spoke and she *meant* it. I didn't know what'd been going on

with her in the secret area earlier, but this was a throwback to what we'd always been.

It wasn't fair that the good stuff—*you're not the good stuff, Wes*—was apparently a thing of the past now.

Already.

So fucking fleeting.

“Well, for starters, I need you to explain what happened earlier.”

Her eyes moved all over me—over my face, my hair, and my body like she was cataloguing what she saw—and then she said—

She *fucking* said—

“Are you talking about when I lost my—”

“Nope.” I cut her off, done with the bullshit. “Do not say ‘penny.’”

“Sorry.” She looked down at the ground before quietly saying, “Lucky coin.”

“Really?” There was a roaring in my ears as she refused to talk to me. “You’re sticking to that?”

She shrugged and kept staring at her feet.

“Oh, well, that explains everything.”

Her eyes shot to mine, and she looked shocked. “Why do you seem mad at me?”

I inhaled through my nose and felt irritated by how green her eyes were. I said, “Because I hate games.”

She blinked fast and asked, “What games?”

“*What games?*” I hadn’t meant to say it so loudly, but I was done. I was sad and pissed and just done. “You won your precious Michael, but as soon as I looked twice at Alex, you’re burning me this unbelievable 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?”

I hated how emotional I 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.

“You saw the CD?” Her voice was quiet, her eyes serious as she looked up at me.

"I'm not oblivious, Liz. I also saw the note, the soggy s'mores, and the busted CD player."

"Oh." She sighed, her breath a little choppy, and she asked, "So do you like her?"

What? I definitely hadn't expected her to ask me *that*. I swallowed and just said, "Alex is great."

"Oh." She got a little wrinkle between her eyebrows and she blinked fast before saying, "Well, yay. I've got to go."

She moved around me, like she was just going to go inside, and I grabbed the fabric of her sleeve, stopping her. "That's it? You're not going to explain what all of that was?"

She pressed her lips together and gave her head a little shake. "It doesn't matter now."

I dropped my hand. "It might."

"It doesn't, okay?" She made a frustrated sound, like a groan, and said, "I made the CD and set 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 great, but being with him is nothing like eating burgers with you, or sneaking out to the Secret Area to make s'mores and look at the stars, or fighting with you over a parking space."

It looked like she had tears in her eyes when she said in a thick voice, "But it took me too long to figure that out, and now you've got Alex."

I stared at her face, at the flurries of freckles I wanted to catch on my tongue. "Liz."

"No. It's fine—I get it. She's flawless 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 stuff."

Just like that, every nerve in my body shorted out. It felt like I was igniting and catching fire as her words burned through me. I met her gaze with my own and said, "That's not the only thing you're wrong about."

"What?" She gave me a questioning look. "What're you talking about?"

“You’re wrong about Alex. She’s not flawless.”

Her eyebrows went down in a patented Liz scowl that made me so happy I wanted to spin her around and mess up her hair. She said, “Bennett, no one is totally flawless—come on. She’s pretty dang close, though.”

I shrugged like I didn’t care, bracing myself for her glorious overreaction when I said, “I suppose.”

“You *suppose*?” My Liz was fired-up, and it was perfection. She said, “What on earth could she possibly be lacking? Do you want bigger boobs or something? Is she not—”

“She’s not you.”

That made her gasp. “What?”

I swallowed down emotion—the girl made me so damn weak—and said, “She. Isn’t. You.”

She closed her mouth and looked at me, her wild green eyes everywhere on my face like she wanted to believe me.

“She’s pretty, but her face doesn’t transform into sunlight when she talks about music. She’s funny, but not spit-out-your-drink-in-astonishment funny.”

I looked down at her mouth and leaned a little closer, feeling like some invisible force was pulling me into her. She watched me and I watched her as I said, “And when I see her, I don’t feel like I *have* to talk to her or mess up her hair or do something—anything—to get her to swing that gaze on me.”

She tucked her hair behind her ears—I loved the way she always did that when she was thinking hard—and said in a barely-there voice, “You haven’t messed up my hair in a really long time.”

“And it’s been killing me,” I said, half-laughing and half-growling. I took a step closer to her, trapping her between my body and her car, and confessed my honest-to-God truth. “I fell in love with teasing you in the second grade, when I first discovered that I could turn your cheeks pink with just a word. Then I fell in love with you.”

She looked up at me, the wrinkle between her eyebrows gone. “So you and Alex aren’t—”

“Nope.” I reached down and wrapped the hoodie’s drawstrings around my hands. There was something about Liz in my sweatshirt that made me nuts in a Neanderthalic, possessive way that I was positive she’d mock if she knew. “We’re just friends.”

“Oh,” she said—no, she *breathed*—as I tugged her closer, “Well, why did you act like you wanted me to say yes to Michael’s promposal?”

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

And just like that, her perfect mouth slid into a breathtaking grin and she set her hands on my chest. *Dear God, her touch made me calm and crazy, all at the same time.* Her eyes got squinty when she lifted her chin and said, “What I really wanted was to go with you.”

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

Her face slid into a wider smile, her *best* smile, and she said, “It *did*?”

The little shit looked satisfied, absolutely thrilled that she’d tortured me, and I yanked on the drawstring. “That’s not supposed to make you happy.”

“I know,” she said, coughing out a little laugh. “But it does. It’s just so swoony.”

“Forget swoony.” I dropped the strings because I needed to touch *her*, needed to feel her soft skin under my fingertips. I took her face in my palms, my hands unsteady, and it felt like every emotion I’d ever experienced—over the course of my entire fucking life—was slamming into me at that exact second.

I was in serious jeopardy of losing my shit, bawling 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.

She inhaled through her nose, and I felt her fingers flex on my chest before she kissed me back like she’d been poisoned and my mouth was the antidote. Wild and breathless, Liz kissed like she did everything else. Different, and in the *best* way.

I felt it everywhere as Lizzie kissed me like she was recreating the rain scene in *The Notebook*. I groaned and did my best to keep up, but hell—Liz’s kissing wasn’t just hot, it was a blazing wildfire. After twenty seconds of her mouth, I was doused in kerosene and desperate for her match. I wrapped my arms around her body, lifted her off the ground, and moved her to the trunk of the car, where I had better leverage.

Or something. *Shit*. Thoughts were something I was no longer capable of fully forming.

I pulled back enough to say, “Do you realize we could’ve been doing this for years if you weren’t such a pain in the ass?”

She looked sleepy as she gave her head a shake and said—with the sexiest smirk on her mouth, “Nah—I didn’t like you until recently.”

I leaned down and rubbed my nose against her neck, then raised my head and said, “Enemies-to-lovers—it’s our trope, Buxbaum.”

She started laughing, a relaxed cackle, as she put her hands on my cheeks and said, “You poor, confused little love-lover. Just shut up and kiss me.”

I did, stepping closer and losing myself in the heat of her 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 opened. She blinked up at me and said against my lips, “Is that my dad?”

As if he heard the question, Liz’s dad yelled, “It is time to come inside, Liz.”

“Um,” she said, leaning a little to see around me, “Can I have five more minutes?”

“To make out with the neighbor under the streetlight for the entire neighborhood’s licentious entertainment? No, I don’t think so.”

“I tried, Liz,” Helena yelled from somewhere in the darkness. “I bought you an extra seven minutes, for the record.”

I watched Liz, and she didn’t look sorry. Or regretful. She touched my bottom lip with her index finger, her eyes on mine as she yelled, “Thank you, Helena.”

Helena answered with a singsong, “You’re welcome.”

I had to do it before the night ended. I quickly—quietly—said, “Listen, Liz, um—”

“Come *on*,” her dad barked.

“I’m coming,” Liz snapped back, rolling her laughing eyes and giving me a conspiratorial look, like we were partners in the whole *my-parents-are-ridiculous* vibe.

I tried again. “Liz—”

“Get off the trunk and come inside,” Mr. Buxbaum said, no longer playing.

“I *am*,” she repeated, gritting her teeth.

“Can I please ask out your daughter first?” I yelled in the general direction of the porch, desperate to set it up before the night ended. Liz Buxbaum was in my arms and happy to be there; obviously the night was magic, which made me terrified of broken spells, forgotten glass slippers, and discarded pumpkins. “Please?”

Liz beamed up at me, yet again, and she opened her mouth to answer when her dad yelled—

“I suppose that’s fine, but make it—”

“Of course you can, Wes,” Helena interrupted, sounding amused.

Liz threw her head back and started laughing—hard—and it was impossible not to join her. I wondered what she’d think if she knew the quote from Jerry McGuire—*You complete me*—flashed through my very soul as I watched her laugh.

Liz

I rolled over and grabbed my phone off the nightstand, blinded by the display's brightness in my darkened bedroom as I opened my messages.

Wes: Are you still awake?

I texted the truth: Yep. I'm too wired to sleep.

Wes: Does that translate to 'TOO TURNED ON BY WESSY to sleep'?

He wasn't exactly wrong. I smiled in the darkness and texted: That is the exact translation, actually.

Wes: Knew it. Listen—about our date tomorrow.

I texted: Yes...?

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

I replied: Um...?

Wes: I must be coming down with something, because the thought of not seeing you until tomorrow night makes me itchy.

I sat up in bed and fluffed my pillow, so incredibly happy that Wes was back as my favorite texting buddy. I still wasn't sure how Sad Prom had turned into one of the best nights of my life, but I wasn't complaining, either. I texted: Is that right?

Wes: Yep.

Me: Dare I ask WHERE you're itchy?

Wes: Everywhere that matters, baby.

He was so ridiculous. I texted: What does that even mean?

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

I snorted in the darkness. I'm not scratching you, Bennett.

Wes: I bet I could talk you into it, but that's not what I want.

I giggled, which seemed to be my default reaction when conversing with Wes. I replied: What DO you want? (Non-perv answers only.)

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

I texted: This helps you how?

Wes: I get to see you sooner. I probably shouldn't admit this, but I've kind of got a thing for you.

I made a different noise in the darkness—this one akin to a human purr—and wondered how I'd ever *not* found Wes to be the most attractive guy on the planet. I replied: The hell you say.

Wes: It's true. And I just can't wait that long to see you.

That made me smile and text: It's only, like, 17 hours until you're picking me up.

Wes: THAT'S AN ETERNITY.

Now I was giggling again. You can't wait 17 hours for me?

Wes: Buxbaum, I've waited my whole life for you. For the love of God, put me out of my misery and let me woo you with coffee and chocolate sprinkles.

I rolled over and stared out my window, imagining Wes rolling over in *his* bed and staring out *his* window. I'd always thought that he was the polar opposite of a cinematic rom-com hero, but sometimes he stumbled upon the swooniest statements. *Buxbaum, I've waited my whole life for you.*

I was starting to suspect that I'd been wrong about him all along.

I texted: So are we talking two dates in one day?

Wes: I was thinking more like one big, fat, never-ending date.

Me: What will we do in-between donuts and dinner?

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

Wes: Anything 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 writes romantic comedies for both teens and adults. She is the author of *Better Than the Movies*, *Mr. Wrong Number*, and *The Do-Over*, as well as being a regular contributor to the *Omaha World-Herald*. She lives in Nebraska with her husband and pack of wild children, and when she isn't reading or writing, odds are good she's guzzling energy drinks and watching rom-coms. You can find her at LynnPainter.com, on Instagram [@LynnPainterKirkle](https://www.instagram.com/LynnPainterKirkle), or on Twitter [@LAPainter](https://twitter.com/LAPainter).

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