

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