NOTHING BETTER THAN YOU

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The guy getting his head jammed into the boat's propeller was so fucking lucky.

Sure, he was getting murdered by a serial killer, but Liz Buxbaum's green eyes were watching him so intently that he was probably enjoying the torture.

What a way to go.

I *should* have been enjoying the movie, because I loved horror, but there was no way I could focus on anything other than *her* and the way she looked in the darkness.

Because something was off with us.

Different, and it had been since Stella's.

Different in a nice way that was confusing as fuck, and I could still feel it in the air and in the nonexistent space between my leg and hers as we sat together on the living room floor.

It fucking *crackled*, I swear to God.

"Buxbaum."

"Huh?" she said as she turned her face toward me, her eyes soft and drowsy in a way that made me want to tell her bedtime stories until she fell asleep with her weight tucked against my side.

Shit.

Would those eyes ever not make me consumed with want, with a claustrophobia that had nothing to do with small spaces and

everything to do with the fear of being trapped in a space where she wasn't?

And it felt worse, stronger somehow, tonight because tonight she felt closer than she ever had, like she was somehow within my reach.

I bumped my shoulder against hers, needing the contact. For the whole of my life, I'd been a junkie for her personal space, addicted to the tactility of Liz. I leaned closer and whispered, "I'm a little uncomfortable with the level of attention you just gave to that slashing. I don't think you blinked."

She blinked then, her eyes sweeping over my face as a smile crawled over hers. Dear *Jesus*, she gave me a shy grin that I wanted to sip on, a brand-new flavor of her smile that'd never before been offered to me. "Quit watching me, creeper."

I wasn't sure, but that might've been the closest I'd come to my heart exploding.

Because the way she was looking at me...

Fuck.

That look was full of everything I wanted, everything I suspected she saw on my face whenever I looked at her. Her eyes tracked down to my mouth, and it felt like every muscle in my body went rigid, like I was a second away from imploding into powder because her perfect lips were *right fucking there* and she wasn't moving away from me.

If anything, she was leaning closer.

Looking at my mouth like she wanted me to kiss her.

I swallowed—*be cool, dipshit*—and searched her face for permission. It felt like time stopped, like the world was on pause, and I could hear nothing but the hammering of my heartbeat in my ears as I watched for the signal.

Give me that green flag, honey.

As if hearing my internal begging, Liz leaned even closer and bumped her shoulder against mine, that shy smile sliding into something flirty—*what the fuck?*

Did she want me to kiss her? It looked like she did; what in the actual fuck was happening?

Brain: insert Michael Scott "it's happening" meme here.

My eyes dipped down to her mouth, to those Retrograde Red lips that distracted my brain with their mere existence, and I—

"Scoot over," Noah said obnoxiously as he plopped down on the other side of Liz, bumping into her as he damn-near yelled, "I'm going deaf sitting between those screamers."

No! No, no, no, you piece of shit, Noah, fucking NO!

Liz's attention was no longer on me as she scooted over. Yes, she was technically closer to me, but the moment was gone. People were talking now and Liz's eyes were back on the

movie and the universe had unpaused itself and I wanted to fucking rage.

I sat there, grieving what'd almost happened, in shock that a kiss had been ripped out of my hands by a jackass in a Louisville shirt.

"I'm going to get a drink," I whispered to Liz, leaning my head closer to hers in an attempt to re-create the past of two minutes ago. "You want one?"

I didn't realize that I was worried I'd imagined it until her eyes came back to mine. Until she gave me a sweet smile, a nervous little thing that made me want to throw her over my shoulder and make a run for the door, because it confirmed that we'd been on the same page.

"That'd be great, thanks," she said quietly, and even though it was dark, I knew her cheeks were the prettiest shade of pink at that moment.

My voice fucking cracked—literally—when I said, "Diet Coke, right?"

But how could it not crack when the possibility of us was right there in that living room full of my idiotic friends? Every cell in my body had been reduced to a sweating, nervous middle schooler because suddenly I was terrified.

Please, God, don't let her change her mind.

I rushed to get our drinks and get back to her, ignoring everyone in the kitchen as I

basically grabbed two cans, then roared back out into the living room.

"Wes."

I glanced to my left and Alex was standing at the deck door, looking at me.

Which made *me* look in Liz's direction, only to discover she wasn't there anymore. There was an empty spot where she'd been sitting on the living room floor.

"Yeah?" I said, not wanting to talk to Alex or anyone whose name wasn't Elizabeth Marisol Buxbaum.

"Come out here for a sec," she said, gesturing toward the deck.

I looked again and didn't see Liz anywhere, so I set down our drinks and followed Alex outside.

"What's up?" I asked, immediately trying to see around her to check for Liz's return.

Alex was cool, but the second the door closed behind us, I realized I'd made a mistake. I needed to be inside, waiting to rekindle the floor magic, not outside with someone who'd never even had a single piano lesson.

"He likes her," she said with a smile. "Michael kind of *likes* Liz."

"What?"

Alex was best friends with my younger sister, Sarah, who'd opened her big mouth and told Alex that I was just being a "good wingman" to

Liz and not actually seeing her. I knew I didn't have to worry about Alex telling anyone Liz and I were only fake-seeing each other, but I still didn't love that she knew.

Of course, that knowledge led to her and Sarah trying to convince me to "fake-like" Alex in order to make Adam jealous (Alex was really into Adam), but no *way* was I doing that.

"I did your job and was talking her up," she said, "and he admitted that she's changed a lot and he might ask her out."

"Really." I looked at her and felt like I'd been punched in the chest.

Michael might ask Liz out?

As if on cue, the door slid open and there he was, Liz's dream guy.

"Hey, y'all." He smiled the nice smile I fucking hated at that moment and he said, "Movie's over, so everyone's trying to figure out what we should do now."

"We should go to Zio's," Alex said. "I'm starving."

"I should probably get back inside," I said, "and see what Liz wants to do."

I nearly ran through the sliding glass door, ignoring them in my quest to get to Liz's side before Michael had a chance to make all her dreams come true. As soon as I saw that she was back by the couch, I scrambled over there and

offered a hand to help her up. I felt better when she looked up at me and smiled.

"Did you know," I said, eager to whisk her away before I lost the chance, "that Michael's father has a grand piano? It's upstairs in an acoustically designed room."

A jolt of electricity shot through me as she took my hand, her fingers the conductor as she climbed to her feet.

God, I'm such an idiot for her.

But at the mention of his name, her eyes left me.

She looked at Michael, who'd followed me inside and was standing to my right.

Michael.

Fuck.

The one who she *really* wanted.

Please come with me.

"Wow," she said, her eyes moving back and forth between Michael and me. "For real?"

I felt queasy as I watched her probably freaking out that she'd just shared a moment with *me* when she could potentially have *him*.

Thank God I didn't kiss you, Lib, because you'd probably never forgive yourself, right?

"I think he's convinced he could've been a classical pianist if he'd had that room at a younger age," Michael said in that charming *Michael* way of his—*yes, ma'am, I'm a cowboy*—that made me want to push him with both

hands. Until he hit a fucking wall. "He's obsessed with it."

"Our Little Liz plays piano," I said, swallowing hard as she looked at me like she was confused.

Yeah, same.

"She's really good," I said, my eyes stuck on hers.

"No, I'm not," she said, shrugging but holding my gaze.

What, Liz? What are you thinking?!

"Do you want to see it?" Michael asked, and I clenched my fists so that I *didn't* push him.

Do you want to see it? What kind of bullshit move was that? I'd brought it up so that *I* could fucking show her. *I* was supposed to be whisking her away to the quiet room where she could play the piano for me and look at my mouth again.

Not him.

She blinked in surprise, turned away from me, and replied, "I would *love* to."

As jealousy hit me so hard, I nearly stumbled backward, that Southern asshole actually had the nerve to say, "Well, then, follow me, Miz Liz."

Can you just give the Southern charm a break for five fucking minutes?

I think I might've smiled politely—like a total chump—as Michael led her away.

She followed him up the stairs, but I decided to stay back.

I couldn't handle watching her rip out my heart.

Some things were just too bloody to witness.

Adam said something to me and I think I said something back, but I was no longer in the living room with my friends. No, my brain was lurking upstairs in the music room, wondering if Liz was going to look at Michael's lips and give him a shy smile.

I managed to be chill and wait a solid seven minutes before I couldn't take it anymore and I had to disrupt them.

"Someone go get Michael," I said (yelled), "because we need pizza."

"We need Young for that?" Noah asked.

"We do because he's buying," I said, a total lie that made everyone haul ass upstairs. I followed behind, casually taking the steps like I wasn't masterminding the interruption at all, but when I stopped in the doorway, I saw everything as if the world had been paused again.

Liz was sitting on the piano bench, smiling up at Michael.

Michael was leaning beside the piano, smiling back at her like they'd just had a fucking lovely-ass conversation about how they hoped

they'd have musical children when they were spending the rest of their lives together.

Alex ran into my back (because I'd just stopped in the hallway like a dipshit), and the sound of her voice as she squealed my name managed to unpause everything and make Liz look in our direction.

And I don't know what I expected, but all I saw on her face when she looked over was disappointment, like she definitely *wasn't* happy to see me.

Which wasn't a surprise since she'd been alone with Michael.

O*f course* she didn't want the interruption.

"We should order a pizza," I managed, even though everyone who'd come up before me had already shouted the suggestion about fifty times.

Alex started talking about where we should get the pizza from, but I couldn't look away from Liz. Her eyes were wide and all over my face, like she was searching for the answer to a question I didn't know, and my chest burned with a homesickness for Stella's.

For the living room floor, where her freckled nose had crinkled *for me* when she'd smiled.

Noah said something that made everyone head for the stairs, but Liz and Michael weren't moving. They were staying put, right where

they were, and even though her eyes were mine, her intentions were obviously not.

So I left too because what else could I do?

"Thank God we parked close," I said as I started the car, flipping on the wipers as it poured outside. "We would've been drenched if we'd been a second later."

I suddenly believed in miracles. Somehow it was just the two of us again. Only a half hour earlier I was about to escape back home and wail into my pillow in the fetal position. But just when I'd thought Michael and Liz were going to have sex on the piano and get married and never fucking come back downstairs, they appeared and weren't holding hands.

And she sat on *my* end of the couch when they joined the card game that everyone had played for a solid five seconds, not his.

And then Alex, my favorite sister from another mister, convinced everyone we needed to go to Zio's.

Only Liz needed to get home instead.

Now it was just me and her.

Order restored.

"For sure," she agreed, and I was obsessed with the juxtaposition of the quiet of her voice in my car and the thundering rain outside.

"Sorry about my sketchy friends," I said, even though I absolutely was *not*. Their inability to follow through on a game was what had me alone with Liz in my car this very minute.

"Nah—it's cool. I was supposed to go home as soon as the movie ended, anyway."

"Yeah, what's with that?" I asked, looking over my shoulder before putting the car in drive and pulling onto the street. "You're months away from leaving for college, but your dad's still all over your business. Is he a smidge overprotective, maybe?"

I had no idea what the song was on the radio, but I loved the vibe.

"Big-time," she said. "Even though he's moved on with his life, he never forgets about my mother's accident and the fact that sometimes the things that seem unlikely to happen in life *do* actually happen."

"Wow." I glanced over at her, relieved that she didn't look sad as she talked about her mom's death. "Pretty tough to argue over that one, eh?"

"I don't even bother," she said.

I cranked the wipers and pulled out onto Harbor Drive, but it was hard-as-shit to see. It was raining even heavier now and the windshield was starting to fog up, but I didn't

want her to be late, so I couldn't afford to pull over.

She turned on the defroster, and I knew I'd reached a maximum level of patheticness when her hands on my car's knobs made me happy.

But I liked that she was comfortable enough to just switch it on without asking.

"So Alex, huh? You're going to ask her out?"

I damn-near hydroplaned as she asked me that question, jamming my foot on the brake, but then I leaned closer to the windshield and played it off like I'd been intentionally slowing for the stoplight ahead. "Did Michael say that?"

Did that lying motherfucking "hey y'all" cowboy feed you bullshit about me?

The light turned green and I laid on the gas, trying to focus on the zero-visibility road while white-hot rage coursed through me at the thought of Michael—

"Car!" Liz yelled as brake lights glowed red in front of us.

I slammed on the brakes, trying to stop the car, but they locked up and we were going to hit the car in front of us. *Shit, shit, shit!* I jerked the wheel to the right, going up and over the curb, and then I stood on the brakes, but it was no use.

We were headed for about a million fucking trees.

"Shitshitshitshit," I said, trying to control the car as it fucking headed down a hill, straight toward a huge tree.

I jerked the wheel in the other direction, trying my damnedest to change our trajectory, and then we hit something.

Fuck! We definitely hit something, but it made the car lurch to a violent stop.

We stopped.

We weren't going to hit a tree, *praise Jesus*.

"Are you okay?" I asked, looking over at her terrified face. My heart was racing and my fingers were cramped and I couldn't believe I'd done that. My stupidity had nearly killed us both, holy *shit*. "Holy shit, Liz."

"I'm fine," she said, and the way she said it was like she was trying to reassure me, which was... sweet, right? She squinted and tried to see out the window. "Oh my God, we're fine...?"

"Oh my God, that was wild," I said, laying my head back on the seat as my heart continued racing.

We'd almost hit a tree.

I had almost driven her into a motherfucking tree because I'd been distracted by jealousy.

"I can't believe we're okay," she said. "You were incredible."

I unbuckled my seat belt and couldn't look at her. "Incredibly reckless for driving in this

weather, you mean."

"No, I mean not only did your driving keep us from slamming into that car, but then it kept us from slamming into a tree. Thank you."

I still couldn't look at her because I was an irresponsible jackass. I said, "Don't thank me yet. I might've gotten us stuck."

I reached over and opened the glove box, grabbing the flashlight my dad insisted I keep in there. *Thanks, Stu.* "Wait here—I'm going to check it out."

I opened my door and got out, instantly drenched. Loud thunder boomed from the sky as I came around the front of the car and saw the situation. *Fuck.* I knelt down and saw that not only had I hit a damn boulder, but the front tire was hung up on it.

I was going to need a tow.

Which meant my dad was going to fucking *kill* me.

"Seriously? A rock?"

I looked up and there was Liz. In the driving rain, squatting right beside me, looking down at my tire as she got drenched too. I said, "I thought I told you to wait in the car."

"You're not the boss of me," she yelled through the rain. Then she smiled as she hollered, "Besides, if you die, I'm stuck out here all alone."

I love you so much, Elizabeth Buxbaum.

"True," I yelled, standing and grabbing her hand, pulling her to her feet. "I'm getting back in the car—would the lady care to join me?"

"She would, actually," she yelled back with a grin, and I knew this was the greatest moment of my life so far. I led her to the car and pushed her into the driver's seat, making her giggle as she climbed inside and scooched over to the middle of the bench seat.

I followed her in and slammed the door, but it was impossible to ignore the fact that she'd stopped scooching. She was in the middle, right beside me, and she wasn't moving over to the passenger seat.

For a split second, I was frozen, fixated on watching her push the wet hair off her face. It felt wildly intimate, like watching someone after they step out of the shower, and I wanted to memorize the way her pink fingernails looked as she wiped the rain from her cheeks.

Focus, dipshit.

"I'm calling my dad." I pulled out my phone and dialed his number, dreading the way he was going to ruin this moment by verbally murdering me. "He can get here fast and his buddy has a tow truck."

"Cool," she said. Then I heard her whisper, "Oh no—my Chucks."

I listened as the phone rang, but my heart was in my throat as I watched her looking down

at the shoes I'd bought her like she was devastated they were dirty.

Honey, I would shower you with bouquets of spotless Converse if you'd let me.

"What's up?" my dad barked as he answered the call.

I told him what happened, but I was on autopilot because Liz had my full attention. She was looking in the mirror, wiping at her eye makeup, and it somehow made it okay that my dad was cursing like a sailor about the fact that I shouldn't have gone out in the first place because I had practice in the morning. He was losing his ever-loving shit about my lack of focus while I focused on Liz.

When he hung up on me, I said, "He'll be here in ten minutes. I am so sorry, Lib."

I hadn't meant to call her that, not to her face, even though I'd thought of her that way for so many years. The only people who called her "Lib" were the ones she loved, so *of course* it was my wildest dream to be allowed to refer to her that way.

But *shit*, had she noticed?

"No worries," she said casually, so apparently not. "You didn't drive me headfirst into a tree, so we're good."

The way she said it, with breathless teasing, made something in my chest burn. "Good."

Her green eyes settled on my face, with intention, and I heard her take a deep breath before she said, "Wes."

No, no, no. I didn't want to hear whatever was coming.

"Hey. Your curls are back," I said, trying to distract her with words but saying the absolute worst thing. *Hi, I am obsessed with your appearance.* But I couldn't stop myself from staring at the copper tendrils that had a mind of their own, just like her. "I think I've missed them."

I lifted my hand, wanting to feel the damp softness of her hair against my fingertips, but *thank God* I stopped myself before I actually touched them.

What the hell is wrong with me?

"Weren't you the one who demanded I straighten my hair?" she teased around a soft smile.

Maybe it was the cocooned intimacy of the car's interior against the raging storm outside, but we felt close at that moment, like we were two people who whispered to each other in the darkness.

"I was," I said, my voice sounding pathetically raspy as my eyes dipped over her eyes and cheeks and mouth. I was so moved by the sight of her that I confessed, "And I think I

regret all of it. I miss your clothes and curly hair. You look best when you're you."

We were so close in the dark interior of my car, her lips a breath away from mine, and all I wanted to do was kiss her. The list of things I'd give up to kiss her at that moment was never-ending, yet consisted of only one word.

Everyfuckingthing.

"Gee, thanks, Bennett," she said in a whisper.

A whisper I was hungry to taste. "I mean it."

The moment held, our mouths so close as we watched each other in the darkness, and then she slammed into me.

Liz's arms came up to my shoulders as her entire body moved closer to me on the bench seat of the car. I felt her fingers slide into the back of my hair as she pulled my head closer and her lips pressed against mine.

The entire world stopped and my heart *did* explode.

I sat there for a second, memorizing every detail: the smell of the rain mixed with Chanel No. 5; the uneven sound of her breathing; the soft slide of lipsticked lips against my mouth; slim piano fingers playing over my scalp.

Liz Buxbaum was kissing me.

That thought restarted the world, spinning it so fast that it left its axis. I took a deep breath and dove into her, flexing my fingers on her soft

cheeks as control left my body. I angled my head and kissed her without a thought, unable to employ skill or finesse because holy shit, this was Liz.

My Libby.

I kissed her like an animal, like a beast whose survival was solely contingent upon getting as much as possible out of one kiss. Like her mouth was essential to the continuation of my existence.

I am that beast.

My fingers slid into her hair—*God, I love her hair*—as I consumed her, holding her in place as my lips and teeth and tongue ran wild. I licked into her, nibbled upon her, fucking *tasted* every drop I could get of her sweet mouth.

My hands were shaking as I slid her closer to me on the seat, because God, was this really happening? I felt her body against mine, her soft curves imprinting in a way that was going to haunt me for years, but she distracted me from that by moving those hands all over me.

I felt her fingertips on my jaws as her tongue made me crazy, felt the heat of her hands on the back of my shirt as I got lost in all that slide, and I fucking clamped down on that full lower lip with all my teeth when I felt her hands dive under my sweatshirt, the warmth of her soft palms moving over my naked skin.

I could fucking die now and it would be fine.

But when she made a breathy little impatient noise as she drove all ten fingers into my hair, I growled like the beast she'd turned me into, obsessed with the greedy way she kissed me back.

Nothing has ever been this perfect.

I opened my eyes, just needing a half-second confirmation that it was really her and this was really happening.

But the sight of her eyes softly closed, for me, was nearly my undoing.

Light split through the dark window, headlights illuminating rain streaks—*no, no, no, no, no*—and I regretted calling my dad. I'd rather be drenched and stranded for hours, with her like this, than be rescued warm and dry.

"Liz," I whispered against her mouth, hating myself for doing something as foolish as interrupting this. Although to be fair, I was still kissing the shit out of her as I said it, committing to memory the perfect way she fit in my arms.

But I couldn't ignore those headlights, or the reality that my dad was their owner and wasn't going to wait around while I spent the rest of my life kissing her.

"Liz," I said twice more, pulling back just a little from the kiss to nip at that tempting bottom lip.

"Hmmm?" Her eyes slowly fluttered open and she was smiling as she hummed the question, looking like it was morning and I was waking her with kisses. On my deathbed, the Liz montage that would go through my head before I died would begin with this image, I swear to God. Especially when she sleepily asked, her smile sliding even higher, "What?"

"I think my dad's here."

"What?" she asked again, blinking fast, and the way she seemed as out of it as I felt made my heart pinch in the center of my chest. I couldn't stop running my hands over her back, my body's way of continuously confirming this was actually happening.

"Oh, shit," she breathed, running a hand over her hair.

"I should probably go talk to him before he opens your door, okay?" I whispered, and it took every ounce of self-control I possessed not to bite down on that earlobe or lower my face to trace the soft veins in her neck with my tongue. "Libby?"

I pulled back to look into her face, and the world went hot fucking neon when she shook her head and playfully said, "Nuh-uh."

I laughed, wanting to shout prayers of thanks to the gods of rain and wreckage as Liz teased me. I'd never meant anything more than

when I confessed, "I'm good with staying if you don't mind my dad seeing us like this."

I'd let Stu rage all fucking night if Liz asked me not to stop.

"Fine, go," she said, setting her palms on my chest and giving me a teasing push that felt so fucking intimate, I was *this close* to trapping her hands there so I could revel in it for another minute. The sight of those pink-polished nails on my body, the same pink-polished nails that made ketchup hearts, was almost too much.

But then she grinned up at me and flirted, "I was done with you anyway."

I will never be done with you, Lib.

"Whatever, Miss *Nuh-Uh*," I said, already mourning the loss of our moment as I reached for the door handle. "Be right back, Elizabeth."

"I'll be here, Wessy," she said on a sigh, and I laughed again because seeing Liz flirt with me was like freebasing happiness.

I got out and ran to my dad's side as he stood there in the deluge, looking down at my front tire. I yelled through the driving rain, "Do you think—"

"That we've got to have Webb tow it? That you're paying me back for the tow bill?" he yelled, sounding like he'd been burning about it all the way here. "Yeah, I do. Get the neighbor girl and let's go."

Yes, we're fine, Dad; thanks for asking.

"Can you try to be nice?" I asked, knowing it was going to piss him off but needing to give it a shot. "She's a little shaken up from the crash."

"Get your friend, Wesley, and get in my car," he snapped as the rain poured on us. "Before she gets shaken up by the fact that you two have to walk home in a thunderstorm."

I gritted my teeth—*no, Dad*—and refused to let his asshattery ruin what was the best night of my life. I opened her door a crack, and just the sight of her face made it feel like the sun was shining in the car's interior.

"Hey, he's going to need Webb's truck to get my car out so he's just going to take us home and come back."

She was still wearing a sleepy smile as her eyes moved all over my face, slowing to stop on my mouth, dear *God*. "Okay."

I wanted to cackle because my Libby looked as kiss-drunk as I felt. I was *wasted out of my mind* on it. I leaned closer and said into her ear, "I was *not* ready for him to be here yet."

"I wasn't either," she confessed, and suddenly I didn't give a shit about anything other than kissing her again. I looked down at her lips and needed another taste, just a quick hit to hold me over—

"Come on, kids—I'm gettin' soaked out here," my dad hollered from somewhere behind me.

Dammit.

I held out my hand, and when Libby took it, I laced my fingers through hers—*holding her hand, holding her hand, holding her hand*—and led her over to my dad's car. I opened the back door and—

DAMMIT, the box of car parts was still on the seat.

"Other side," my dad growled from the front, and for a half second, I considered bringing her with me to the other side and pulling her onto my lap. The thought of separating from her was almost unbearable at that moment, like it would provide closure for our time in the rain-soaked fantasy.

And that was the last thing I wanted.

But I couldn't assume she wanted to sit on my lap. I brought her around to the front and pulled open the passenger door, gesturing for her to get in. She did, but the look she gave me just before I closed the door made me reconsider, and I winked before closing her door.

You winked? You winked?? I ran around the car in the rain, wishing I had a time machine to strike a fucking wink from the record. I got in the back and was surprised to hear my dad say to Liz, "No problem, sweetie. Last time I gave you a ride somewhere, you were pretty tiny."

I'd never loved him more. He was *actually* being friendly to Liz; I couldn't believe it. He wasn't the world's biggest asshole or anything, but he didn't usually exchange small talk unless forced.

Apparently I'd forced him.

Thank *God*.

"Dairy Queen, right?" Liz said, and I could hear the smile in her voice. "That had to be ten years ago."

It was.

"That's right," my dad said.

And just like that, he was done with the niceties, because he looked at me in the rearview mirror and said, "After Webb gets the car, he's going to text what he needs from NAPA because I guarantee you screwed up the suspension."

"Got it," I said.

He started talking about other things he thought I might've damaged, but I wasn't listening and I didn't care. The world felt different now, the weight of my dad's disapproval lighter than usual, because Liz had kissed me.

That quote from *The Sandlot* popped into my head and made me grin in spite of my dad's never-ending lecture on not being a dumbass behind the wheel.

He had kissed her long and good. We got banned from the pool forever that day, but every time we walked by after that, the lifeguard looked down from her tower, right over at Squints, and smiled.

I wanted to freeze time when we pulled into the Buxbaums' driveway and Liz thanked my dad for the ride, because it was ending. The perfect night was ending and there was nothing I could do to stop it.

My dad stayed on his best behavior, though, and said, "Of course. Nice seeing you, honey."

Damn, but I was proud of him.

But she didn't say anything to me. Liz got out and ran through the rain to her porch without another word. It made sense, since my dad was there and the rain was like a damned monsoon, but I wished I'd had the chance to say goodbye.

Beg her to kiss me again.

Pledge my undying love.

When we pulled into the garage and got out of the car, I heard her yell my name through the rain.

I looked in the direction of her house, and—*what the hell?*—Liz was standing in between our yards in the pouring rain. Her everything was plastered to her as she shouted, "Thanks for everything!"

And then she turned and ran back to her porch.

I started laughing, *hard*, ignoring my dad as he muttered something and went inside, because Liz ran through a fucking monsoon to yell "thank you."

To me.

She stood in the driving rain.

For me.

"Hold up, honey," I said under my breath as I took off running after her, grinning as the downpour pelted the shit out of me. I sprinted through the grass, and when I saw her run up the steps and onto the porch, I stopped in the middle of her front yard.

"Libby!"

Fuck it, I was calling her that now.

"What?" She was smiling when she turned around, and that grin struck me like lightning.

"You said 'everything'!" I yelled, wanting to run closer but not wanting to get her in trouble. "Does that mean you're thanking me for the kiss, too?"

"I should've known you'd ruin it," she shouted, laughing, and the driving rain was my new favorite weather as she flipped me shit and made no move to go inside.

She just stood there, soaked to the bone on her porch, smiling at me.

"Nuh-uh, Buxbaum," I said, grinning like a fool as I used her kiss-drunk words against her. "That was too perfect for anything to ruin. G'night."

SIMON TEEN

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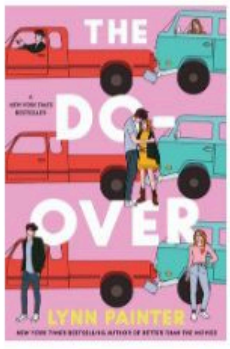

[The Do-Over]

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, The Do-Over, Betting on You*, and *Nothing Like the Movies*, 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 @LynnPainterBooks, or on Twitter @LAPainter.

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