

BETTER

THAN

THE

PROM

LYNN PAINTER



01.5 BETTER THAN THE PROM

Lynn Painter

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Synopsis

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

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

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

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

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

Better Than the Movies #1.5

Index

- [Synopsis](#)
- [Graduation dance](#)
- [About the author](#)

Graduation dance

Wes Bennett

Holy *shit*.

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

And there was Liz.

With Michael.

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

Nope.

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

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

No no no.

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

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

It was not fair.

I saw her first.

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

But now Michael had seen her.

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

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

But then...

Really, universe?

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

Because it was *Taylor* .

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

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

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

of *him*.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She was looking at me.

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

I was sad.

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

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

He tilted his chin.

To anyone else, it was just a look.

But not for me.

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

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

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

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

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

-Not anymore.

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

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

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

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

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

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

What the hell?

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

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

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

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

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

I was surprised at how calm my voice sounded.

What could he be doing back there?

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

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

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

Why was I wearing my sweatshirt?

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

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

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

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

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

-What are you doing here? -said.

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

And why was he already home?

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

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

But why?

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

She swallowed heavily and looked nervous.

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

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

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

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

-You...

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

SEE YOU IN THE SECRET AREA

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

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

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

Only... it didn't come out.

He just sat in the running car.

For what seemed like an eternity.

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

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

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

Wait.

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

-Yes?

I tried to see her through the small opening.

-What are you doing?

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

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

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

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

I tried to sound cold.

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

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

-What do you need? -I ask.

And just like that I got *angry* .

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

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

Already.

So fucking fleeting.

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

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

Damn, he said...

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

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

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

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

He shrugged and kept looking at his feet.

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

"Why do you seem angry with me?"

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

"Because I hate games," I replied.

He blinked fast and asked:

-What games?

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

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

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

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

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

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

Alex is great.

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

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

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

He pursed his lips and shook his head a little.

“It doesn't matter anymore.

I dropped my hand.

-Could do it.

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

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

—Liz.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

-I guess.

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

"It's not you.

That made her gasp.

-What?

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

-Nope. Are. You.

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

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

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

at her while she said:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What I really wanted was to go with you.

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

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

-Really?

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

"That's not supposed to make you happy.

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

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

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

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

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

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

I pulled back long enough to say:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

-That's my dad?

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

“Liz, it's time to go inside.

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

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

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

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

"Thank you, Helen.

Helena responded by singing:

-No problem.

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

“Listen, Liz, um...

"Now ," his father growled.

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

I tried one more time.

—Liz...

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Liz

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

Wess: *Still awake?*

I texted him the truth.

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

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

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

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

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

I wrote to him.

Me: *Yes...?*

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

I replied.

Me: *Um...?*

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

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

Me: *Really?*

Wess: *Yes.*

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

Wess: *Wherever it matters, baby.*

It was so ridiculous. I replied.

Me: *What does that mean?*

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

I snorted into the dark.

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

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

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

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

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

I sent him a message.

Me: *How does this help you?*

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

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

Me: *Do not tell me.*

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

That made me smile and send a text message.

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

Wess: *THAT IS AN ETERNITY.*

Now I was laughing again.

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

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

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

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

I wrote him a message.

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

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

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

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

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

And that was the moment I knew.

About the author



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

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