

BETTER THAN THE MOVIES

LYNN PAINTER

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For my amazing mom, who's always been my biggest fan, harshest critic, and the woman single-handedly responsible for my distrust of those asshats in the shoe industry. Thank you for letting me read under the blankets when I should've been sleeping.

And for my beloved dad, who saw the cover but never got to read the book. He would've loved the Stella's scene and remembered the ketchup. RIP, Jerry Painter (5/17/39–5/18/20)

—L. P.



PROLOGUE

"I'm just a girl, standing in front of a
boy, asking him to love her."

—*Notting Hill*

My mother taught me the golden rule of dating before I even hit the second grade.

At the ripe age of seven, I'd snuck into her room after having a nightmare. (A house-size cricket might not sound scary, but when it speaks in a robot voice and knows your middle name, it is terrifying.) *Bridget Jones's Diary* was playing on the boxy television on top of the dresser, and I'd watched a good portion of the movie before she even noticed me at the foot of her bed. At that point, it was too late to rescue me from the so-not-first-grade-friendly content, so she snuggled up beside me, and we watched the happy ending together.

But my first-grade brain just couldn't compute. Why would Bridget give up the cuter one—the charming one—for the person who was the equivalent of one ginormous yawn? How did that even make sense?

Yep—I'd missed the movie's point completely and had fallen madly in love with the playboy. And to this day, I can still hear my mom's voice and smell the vanilla of her perfume as she played with my hair and set me straight.

"Charm and intrigue can only get you so far, Libby Loo. Those things always disappear, which is why you never, ever choose the bad boy."

After that, we shared hundreds of similar moments, exploring life together through romantic movies. It was our *thing*. We'd snack-up, kick back on the pillows, and binge-watch from her collection of kiss-infused happy endings like other people binge-watched trashy reality TV.

Which, in hindsight, is probably why I've been waiting for the perfect romance since I was old enough to spell the word "love."

And when she died, my mother bequeathed to me her unwavering belief in happily ever after. My inheritance was the knowledge that love is always in the air, always a possibility, and always worth it.

Mr. Right—the nice-guy, dependable version—could be waiting around the very next corner.

Which was why I was always at the ready.

It was only a matter of time before *it* finally happened for me.

CHAPTER ONE

“Nobody finds their soul mate when they’re ten. I mean, where’s the fun in that, right?”

—*Sweet Home Alabama*

The day began like any typical day.

Mr. Fitzpervert left a hair ball in my slipper, I burned my earlobe with the straightener, and when I opened the door to leave for school, I caught my next-door nemesis suspiciously sprawled across the hood of my car.

“Hey!” I slid my sunglasses up my nose, pulled the front door shut behind me, and hightailed it in his direction, careful not to scuff my pretty new floral flats as I basically ran *at* him. “Get off of my car.”

Wes jumped down and held up his hands in the universal *I’m innocent* pose, even though his smirk made him look anything but. Besides, I’d known him since kindergarten; the boy had never been innocent a day in his life.

“What’s in your hand?”

“Nothing.” He put the hand in question behind his back. Even though he’d gotten tall and mannish and a tiny bit hot since grade school, Wes was still the same immature boy who’d “accidentally” burned down my mom’s rosebush with a firecracker.

“You’re so paranoid,” he said.

I stopped in front of him and squinted up at his face. Wes had one of those naughty-boy faces, the kind of face where his dark eyes—surrounded by mile-long thick lashes because life wasn’t fair—spoke volumes, even when his mouth said nothing.

An eyebrow raise told me just how ridiculous he thought I was. From our many less-than-pleasant encounters, I knew the narrowing of his eyes meant he was sizing me up, and that we were about to throw down about the most recent annoyance he’d brought upon me. And when he was bright-eyed like he

was right now, his brown eyes practically freaking twinkling with mischief, I knew I was screwed. Because mischievous Wes always won.

I poked him in the chest. “What did you do to my car?”

“I didn’t do anything *to* your car, per se.”

“Per se?”

“Whoa. Watch your filthy mouth, Buxbaum.”

I rolled my eyes, which made *his* mouth slide into a wicked grin before he said, “This has been fun, and I love your granny shoes, by the way, but I’ve gotta run.”

“Wes—”

He turned and walked away from me like I hadn’t been speaking. Just... walked toward his house in that relaxed, overconfident way of his. When he got to the porch, he opened the screen door and yelled to me over his shoulder, “Have a good day, Liz!”

Well, that couldn’t be good.

Because there was no way he legitimately wanted me to have a good day. I glanced down at my car, apprehensive about even opening the door.

See, Wes Bennett and I were enemies in a no-holds-barred, full-on war over the one available parking spot on our end of the street. He usually won, but only because he was a dirty cheater. He thought it was funny to reserve the Spot for himself by leaving things in the space that I wasn’t strong enough to move. Iron picnic table, truck motor, monster truck wheels. You get it.

(Even though his antics caught the attention of the neighborhood Facebook page—my dad was a group member—and the old gossips frothed with rage at their keyboards over the blights on the neighborhood landscape, not a single person had ever said anything to him or made him stop. How was that even fair?)

But I was the one riding the victory wave for once, because yesterday I’d had the brilliant idea to call the city after he’d decided to leave his car in the Spot for three days in a row. Omaha had a twenty-four-hour ordinance, so good old Wesley had earned himself a nice little parking ticket.

Not going to lie, I did a little happy dance in my kitchen when I saw the deputy slide that ticket underneath Wes’s windshield wiper.

I checked all four tires before climbing into my car and buckling my seat belt. I heard Wes laugh, and when I leaned down to glare at him out the

passenger window, his front door slammed shut.

Then I saw what he'd found so funny.

The parking ticket was now on *my* car, stuck to the middle of the windshield with clear packing tape that was impossible to see through. Layers and layers of what appeared to be commercialgrade packing tape.

I got out of the car and tried to pry up a corner with my fingernail, but the edges had all been solidly flattened down.

What a tool.

• • •

When I finally made it to school after scraping my windshield with a razor blade and doing hard-core deep breathing to reclaim my zen, I entered the building with the *Bridget Jones's Diary* soundtrack playing through my headphones. I'd watched the movie the night before—for the thousandth time in my life—but this time the soundtrack had just spoken to me. Mark Darcy saying *Oh, yes, they fucking do* while kissing Bridget was, of course, as swoony as hellfire, but it wouldn't have been so *oh-my-God-worthy* if not for Van Morrison's "Someone Like You" playing in the background.

Yeah—I have a nerd-level fascination with movie soundtracks.

That song came on as I went past the commons and made my way through the crowds of students clogging up the halls. My favorite thing about music—when you played it loud enough through good headphones (and I had the *best*)—was that it softened the edges of the world. Van Morrison's voice made swimming upstream in the busy hallway seem like it was a scene from a movie, as opposed to the royal pain that it actually was.

I headed toward the second-floor bathroom, where I met Jocelyn every morning. My best friend was a perpetual oversleeper, so there was rarely a day when she wasn't scrambling to put on her eyeliner before the bell rang.

"Liz, I *love* that dress." Joss threw me a side-glance between cleaning up each eye with a cotton swab as we walked into the bathroom. She pulled out a tube of mascara and began swiping the wand over her lashes. "The flowers are so you."

"Thanks!" I went over to the mirror and did a turn to make sure the vintage A-line dress wasn't stuck in my underwear or something equally embarrassing.

Two cheerleaders surrounded by a puff of white cloud were vaping behind us, and I gave them a closed-mouth smile.

“Do you try to dress like the leads in your movies, or is it a coincidence?” Joss asked.

“Don’t say ‘your movies’ like I’m addicted to porn or something.”

“You know what I mean,” Joss said as she separated her lashes with a safety pin.

I knew exactly what she meant. I watched my mom’s beloved rom-coms practically every night, using her DVD collection I’d inherited when she died. I felt closer to my mother when I watched them; it felt like a tiny piece of her was there, watching beside me. Probably because we’d watched them together So. Many. Times.

But Jocelyn didn’t know any of that. We’d grown up on the same street but hadn’t become actual *good* friends until sophomore year, so even though she knew my mom had died when I was in fifth grade, we’d never really talked about it. She’d always assumed I was obsessed with love because I was hopelessly romantic. I never corrected her.

“Hey, did you ask your dad about the senior picnic?” Joss looked at me in the mirror, and I knew she was going to be irritated. Honestly, I was surprised that wasn’t the first thing she asked me when I walked in.

“He wasn’t home last night until after I went to bed.” It was the truth, but I could’ve asked Helena, if I’d really wanted to discuss it. “I’ll talk to him today.”

“Sure you will.” She twisted the mascara closed and shoved it into her makeup bag.

“I will. I promise.”

“Come on.” Jocelyn stuck her makeup bag into her backpack and grabbed her coffee. “I can’t be tardy to Lit again or I’ll get detention, and I told Kate I’d drop gum by her locker on the way.”

I adjusted the messenger bag on my shoulder and caught a glimpse of my face in the mirror. “Wait—I forgot lipstick.”

“We don’t have time for lipstick.”

“There’s always time for lipstick.” I unzipped the side pouch and pulled out my new fave, Retrograde Red. On the off chance (so very off chance) my McDreamy was in the building, I wanted good mouth. “You go ahead.”

She left and I rubbed the color over my lips. *Much better*. I tucked the lipstick back into my bag, replaced my headphones, and exited the restroom, hitting play and letting the rest of the *Bridget Jones* soundtrack wrap itself around my psyche.

When I got to English Lit, I walked to the back of the room and took a seat at the desk between Joss and Laney Morgan, sliding my headphones down to my neck.

“What did you put for number eight?” Jocelyn was writing fast while she talked to me, finishing her homework. “I forgot about the reading, so I have no idea why Gatsby’s shirts made Daisy cry.”

I pulled out my worksheet and let Joss copy my answer, but my eyes shifted over to Laney. If surveyed, everyone on the planet would unanimously agree that the girl was beautiful; it was an indisputable fact. She had one of those noses that was so adorable, its existence had surely created the need for the word “pert.” Her eyes were huge like a Disney princess’s, and her blond hair was always shiny and soft and looked like it belonged in a shampoo commercial. Too bad her soul was the exact opposite of her physical appearance.

I disliked her so very much.

On the first day of kindergarten, she’d yelled *Ewww* when I’d gotten a bloody nose, pointing at my face until the entire class gawked at me in disgust. In third grade, she’d told Dave Addleman that my notebook was full of love notes about him. (She’d been right, but *that wasn’t the point*.) Laney had blabbed to him, and instead of being sweet or charming like the movies had led me to believe he’d be, David had called me a weirdo. And in fifth grade, not long after my mom had died and I’d been forced to sit by Laney in the lunchroom due to assigned seating, every day as I picked at my barely edible hot lunch, she would unzip her pastel pink lunchbox and wow the entire table with the delights her mother had made just for her.

Sandwiches cut into adorable shapes, homemade cookies, brownies with sprinkles; it had been a treasure trove of kiddie culinary masterpieces, each one more lovingly prepared than the last.

But the notes were what had destroyed me.

There wasn’t a single day that her lunch didn’t include a handwritten note from her mom. They were funny little letters that Laney used to read out loud

to her friends, with silly drawings in the margins, and if I allowed my snooping eyes to stray to the bottom, where it said “Love, Mom” in curly cursive with doodled hearts around it, I would get so sad that I couldn’t even eat.

To this day, everyone thought Laney was great and pretty and smart, but I knew the truth. She might pretend to be nice, but for as long as I could remember, she’d given me crusty-weird looks. As in *every single time* the girl looked at me, it was like I had something on my face and she couldn’t decide if she was grossed-out or amused. She was rotting under all that beauty, and someday the rest of the world would see what I saw.

“Gum?” Laney held out a pack of Doublemint with her perfectly arched eyebrows raised.

“No, thanks,” I muttered, and turned my attention to the front of the room as Mrs. Adams came in and asked for homework. We passed our papers forward, and she started talking about literary things. Everyone began taking notes on their school-issued laptops, and Colton Sparks gave me a chin nod from his desk in the corner.

I smiled and looked down at my computer. Colton was nice. I’d talked to him for a solid two weeks at the beginning of the year, but that had turned out to be *meh*. Which kind of summed up the whole of my collective dating history, actually: *meh*.

Two weeks—that was the average length of my relationships, if you could even call them that.

Here’s how it usually went: I would see a cute guy, daydream about him for weeks and totally build him up in my mind to be my one-and-only soul mate. The usual high school pre-relationship stuff always began with the greatest of hopes. But by the end of two weeks, before we even got close to official, I almost always got hit with *the Ick*. The death sentence to all blossoming relationships.

Definition of the Ick: A dating term that refers to a sudden cringe feeling one gets when they have romantic contact with someone and they become almost immediately put off by them.

Joss said I was always browsing but never buying. And she ended up being right. But my propensity for tiny little two-week relationships really messed with prom potential. I wanted to go with someone who made my breath catch

and my heart flutter, but who was even left in the school that I hadn't already considered?

I mean, technically, I had a prom date; I was going with Joss. It's just... going to prom with my best friend felt like such a fail. I knew we'd have a good time—we were grabbing dinner beforehand with Kate and Cassidy, the funnest of our little friend group—but prom was supposed to be the pinnacle of high school romance. It was supposed to be poster-board promposals, matching corsages, speechless awe over the way you look in your dress, and sweet kisses under the cheesy disco ball.

Andrew McCarthy and Molly Ringwald *Pretty in Pink* sort of shit.

It wasn't about friends grabbing dinner at the Cheesecake Factory before heading up to the high school for awkward conversation while the coupled-off couples found their way to the infamous grinding wall.

I knew Jocelyn wouldn't get it. She thought prom was no big deal, just a high school dance that you dressed up for, and she would find me completely ridiculous if I admitted to being disappointed. She was already peeved by the fact that I kept blowing her off on dress shopping, but I never felt like going.

At all.

My phone buzzed.

Joss: I have BIG tea.

I looked over at her, but she appeared to be listening to Mrs. Adams. I glanced at the teacher before responding: Spill it.

Joss: FYI I got it via text from Kate.

Me: So it might not be true. Got it.

The bell rang, so I grabbed my stuff and shoved it into my bag. Jocelyn and I started walking toward our lockers, and she said, "Before I tell you, you have to promise you're not going to get all worked up before you hear everything."

"Oh my God." My stomach stress-dropped, and I asked, "What's going on?"

We turned down the west wing, and before I had a chance to even look at her, I saw *him* walking toward me.

Michael Young?

I came to a complete halt.

"Aaaand—there's my tea," Joss said, but I wasn't listening.

People bumped off me and went around me as I stood there and stared. He looked the same, only taller and broader and more attractive (if that was even a possibility). My childhood crush moved in slow motion, with tiny blue birds chirping and flitting their wings around his head as his golden hair blew in a sparkling breeze.

I think my heart might have stopped.

Michael had lived down the street when we were little, and he'd been everything to me. I'd loved him as far back as I could remember. He'd always been next-level amazing. Smart, sophisticated, and... I don't know... *dreamier* than any other boy. He'd run around with the neighborhood kids (me, Wes, the Potter boys on the corner, and Jocelyn), doing typical neighborhood things—playing hide-and-seek, tag, touch football, ding-dong-ditch, etc. But while Wes and the Potters had enjoyed things like flinging mud into my hair because it made me scream, Michael had been doing things like identifying leaves, reading thick books, and *not* joining in on their torture.

My brain cued up “Someone Like You,” and the song started over from the beginning.

*I've been searching a long time,
For someone exactly like you.*

He was wearing khakis and a nice black shirt, the kind of outfit that showed he knew what looked good but also didn't spend too much time on fashion. His hair was thick and blond and styled the same as his clothes—intentionally casual. I wondered what it smelled like.

His hair, not his clothes.

He must've sensed a stalker in his midst, because the slo-mo stopped, the birds disappeared, and he looked right at me.

“Liz?”

I was so happy that I'd taken the time to apply Retrograde Red. Clearly the cosmos had known Michael would be appearing before me that day, so it had done everything in its power to make me presentable.

“Girl, chill,” Joss said between her teeth, but I was helpless to stop the whole-face smile that broke free as I said, “Michael Young?”

I heard Joss mutter “Here we go,” but I did not care.

Michael came over and wrapped me in a hug, and I let my hands slide around his shoulders. *Oh my God, oh my God!* My stomach went wild as I felt

his fingers on my back, and I realized that we could very well be having our meet-cute.

Oh. My. God.

I was dressed for it; he was beautiful. Could this moment *be* more perfect? I made eye contact with Joss, who was slowly shaking her head, but it didn't matter.

Michael was back.

He smelled good—so, so good—and I wanted to catalogue every tiny detail of the moment. The soft, worn-in feel of his shirt under my palms, the breadth of his shoulders, the golden skin of his neck, scant centimeters away from my face as I hugged him back.

Was it wrong to close my eyes and take a deep brea—

“*Oof.*” Someone bumped into us, hard, destroying the hug. I was shoved into and then away from Michael, and as I turned around, I saw who it was.

“Wes!” I said, irritated that he'd ruined our moment, but so unbelievably happy still that I beamed at him anyway. I was incapable of *not* smiling. “You should really watch where you're going.”

His eyebrows crinkled together. “Yeah...?”

He was watching me, probably wondering why I was smiling instead of going ballistic over the packing tape incident. He looked like someone waiting for the punch line, and his confusion kicked up my happiness to an even higher level. I giggled and said, “Yeah, you big doof. You could really hurt someone. Buddy.”

He narrowed his eyes and talked slower. “Sorry—I was talking to Carson and doing the extremely difficult backward-walking thing. But enough about me. How was your drive to school?”

I knew he wanted to hear all the details, like how long it had taken me to remove the tape or the fact that I'd broken two freshly manicured nails, but I wasn't about to give that aggravator the satisfaction. “Really, really great—thanks for asking.”

“Wesley.” Michael did a bro handshake with Wes—when had they had time to choreograph that little touch of adorability?—and said, “You were right on about the biology teacher.”

“It's because you sat by me. She haaaates me.” Wes grinned and started talking, but I ignored that tool and watched Michael speak and laugh and be as

sweetly charming as I'd remembered.

Only now he had a slightly Southern drawl.

Michael Young had a soft accent that made me want to personally handwrite a thank-you note to the great state of Texas for making him even more appealing than he'd already been. I crossed my arms and pretty much melted into a puddle as I enjoyed the view.

Jocelyn, who I might have forgotten existed in the presence of such lovely Michaelhood, nudged me with her elbow and whispered, "Settle down. You're drooling all over yourself."

I rolled my eyes and ignored her.

"Hey, listen." Wes hitched up his backpack and pointed at Michael. "Remember Ryan Clark?"

"Of course." Michael smiled and looked like a congressional intern. "First baseman, right?"

"Exactly." Wes lowered his voice. "Ryno's having a party tomorrow at his dad's—you should totally come."

I tried to keep my expression neutral as I listened to Wes ask *my* Michael to come to his party. I mean, Wes *did* hang out with the guys that Michael used to know, but still. They were best friends all of a sudden or something?

That wouldn't be good for me. Couldn't be.

Because Wes Bennett got off on messing with me—he always had. In grade school, Wes was the guy who'd put a frog in my Barbie DreamHouse and a decapitated lawn gnome's severed head in my homemade Little Free Library. In middle school, he was the guy who'd thought it was hilarious to pretend he didn't see me when I was lying out, and then water his mom's bushes, "accidentally" spraying the hose right over me until I screamed.

And now, in high school, he was the guy who'd made it his mission to harass me daily over The Spot. I'd grown a backbone since we were kids, so technically now I was the girl who yelled over the fence when his jock friends were over and they were so rowdy, I could hear them over my music. But still.

"Sounds good," Michael said with a nod, and I wondered what he'd look like in a cowboy hat and flannel shirt. Maybe a pair of shitkickers, even though I didn't technically know what differentiated a shitkicker from a regular cowboy boot.

I'd have to Google it later.

“I’ll text you the details. I gotta go—If I’m late to my next class, I’ve got detention for sure.” He turned and started jogging in the other direction with a yell of “Later, guys.”

Michael watched Wes’s disappearance before looking down at me and drawling, “He lit out of here so fast, I didn’t get to ask. Is it casual dress?”

“What? Um, the party?” Like I had any idea what they wore to their jockstrap parties. “Probably?”

“I’ll ask Wesley.”

“Cool.” I worked to give him my top-shelf smile, even though I was dying over the fact that Wes had screwed up my meet-cute.

“I’ve gotta run too,” he said, but added, “I can’t wait to catch up, though.”

Then take me with you to the party! I yelled internally.

“Joss?” Michael looked past me, and his mouth dropped open. “Is that you?”

She rolled her eyes. “Took you long enough.”

Jocelyn had always been closer to the neighborhood boys, playing football with Wes and Michael while I did awful cartwheels around the park and made up songs. Since then, she’d turned into this tall and freakishly good-looking human. Today her braids were all pulled back into a ponytail, but instead of looking messy like when I wore a ponytail, it showed off her cheekbones.

The warning bell rang, and he pointed up at the speaker. “That’s me. See y’all later.”

Y’all.

He went the other way, and Jocelyn and I started walking. I said, “I can’t believe Wes didn’t invite us to the party.”

She gave me side-eye. “Do you even know who Ryno is?”

“No, but that’s beside the point. He invited Michael right in front of us. It’s common courtesy that he should invite us, too.”

“But you hate Wes.”

“So?”

“So why would you want him to invite you anywhere?”

I sighed. “His rudeness just pisses me off.”

“Well I, for one, am glad he didn’t, because I don’t want to go to any party that those guys are having. I’ve been to Ryno’s, and it’s all about beer bong, Fireball, and that never-have-I-ever kind of immature stuff.”

Joss used to hang out with the popular kids before she quit volleyball, so she'd "partied" a little before we became friends. "But—"

"Listen." Jocelyn stopped walking and grabbed my arm to stop me from walking too. "That's what I was going to tell you. Kate said he lives next door to Laney and they've been talking for a couple weeks now."

"Laney? Laney *Morgan*?" Nooo. It couldn't be true. No-no-no-no, please, God, no. "But he just got here—"

"Apparently he moved back a month ago but was finishing classes online at his other school. Rumor has it that he and Laney are almost official."

Not Laney. My stomach clenched as I pictured her perfect little nose. I knew it was irrational, but the idea of Laney and Michael was almost too much for me to bear. That girl always got everything I wanted. She couldn't have him, dammit.

The thought of them, together, made my throat tight. It made my heart hurt.

It would crush me.

Because not only was he everything I daydreamed about, but he and I had history. The wonderful, important kind of history that involved drinking from garden hoses and catching lightning bugs. I thought back to the last time I'd seen Michael. It'd been at his house. His family had had a cookout to say goodbye to all the neighbors, and I'd walked over with my parents. My mom had made her famous cheesecake bars, and Michael had met us at the door and offered us drinks like he was a grown-up.

My mom had called it the most adorable thing she'd ever seen.

All the neighborhood kids played kickball in the street for hours that night, and the adults even joined us for a game. At one point, my mother was high-fiving Michael after stealing home base in her floral sundress and wedge sandals. That moment was pressed in my memories like a yellowed photograph in an antique album.

I don't think Michael ever had a clue as to how madly in love with him I'd been. They moved a month before my mom died, breaking the tip of my soon-to-be shattered heart.

Jocelyn looked at me like she knew exactly what I was thinking. "Michael Young is not your racing-to-the-train-station dude. Got it?"

But he could be. "Well, technically they aren't official yet, so..."

We started walking again, dodging bodies as we headed for her locker. We were probably going to be late because of our impromptu hallway meet-up with Michael, but it would totally be worth it.

“Seriously. Don’t be that girl.” She gave me her motherly scowl. “That there with Michael was not your meet-cute.”

“But.” I didn’t even want to say it because I didn’t want her to shoot it down. Still, I almost squealed when I said, “What if it was?”

“Oh my god. I knew, the second I heard he was back, that you were going to lose it.” Her eyebrows went down, and so did the corners of her lips as she stopped in front of the locker and turned the lock. “You don’t even know the guy anymore, Liz.”

I could still hear his deep voice saying *y’all*, and my stomach dipped. “I know everything I need to know.”

She sighed and pulled out her backpack. “Is there anything I can say to yank you back from this?”

I tilted my head. “Um... he hates cats, maybe?”

She held up a finger. “That’s right—I forgot. He hates cats.”

“He does not.” I grinned and sighed, thinking back. “He used to have these two snarky cats that he *adored*. You should’ve seen the way he treated those babies.”

“Ew.”

“Whatever, hater of felines.” I felt alive, buzzing with the thrill of romantic possibilities as I leaned against the closed locker next door. “Michael Young is fair game until I hear an official proclamation.”

“I can’t talk to you when you’re like this.”

“Happy? Excited? Hopeful?” I wanted to skip down the hall yell-singing “Paper Rings.”

“Delusional.” Jocelyn looked at her phone for a minute, then back at me. “Hey, my mom said she can take us dress shopping tomorrow night if you want.”

My mind went blank. I had to say something. “I think I have to work.”

She narrowed her eyes. “Every time I bring it up, you have to work. Don’t you *want* to get a dress?”

“Sure. Yeah.” I forced up the corners of my mouth. “Of course.”

But the truth was that I *so* did not.

The thrill of the dress was its ability to inspire romance, to make one's date speechless. If that factor wasn't in play, the prom dress was just an overpriced waste of fabric.

Adding to that, there was the screaming fact that shopping with Jocelyn's mom for dresses was just a huge reminder that *my* mom wasn't there to join us, which made it a wildly unappealing outing. My mother wouldn't be there to take pictures and get teary as her baby attended the final dance of her childhood, and nothing made that hit home quite like seeing Joss's mom do those things for her.

To be honest, I hadn't been emotionally prepared for the emptiness that seemed to accompany my senior year, the many reminders of my mom's absence. Senior pictures, homecoming, college applications, prom, graduation; as everyone I knew got excited about those high school benchmarks, I got stress headaches because nothing felt the way I'd planned for it to feel.

Everything felt... lonely.

Because even though the senior activities were fun, without my mom they were void of sentimentality. My dad tried to be involved, he really did, but he wasn't an emotional guy, so it always just felt like he was the official photographer as I traversed the highlights alone.

Meanwhile, Joss didn't understand why I didn't want to make a big deal out of every single senior milestone like she did. She'd been pissed at me for three days when I'd blown off the spring break trip to the beach, but it had felt more like an exam I was dreading than an actual good time, and I just couldn't.

However. Finding a rom-com happy ending that my mother would have loved—that could change all the bad feels to good, couldn't it?

I smiled at Jocelyn. "I'll text you after I check my schedule."