

BETTING



ON



YOU



LYNN PAINTER

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *BETTER THAN THE MOVIES*

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BETTING ON YOU



LYNN PAINTER

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This book is dedicated to the late Nora Ephron—the greatest rom-com writer of all time and the queen mother of autumnal comfort movies.

And to the readers who create playlists, aesthetic boards, and full-on edits—everyone should be so lucky as to connect with stories in such an immersive way.



CHAPTER ONE

THREE YEARS AGO

Bailey

The first time I met Charlie was at the airport in Fairbanks.

My dad had just said goodbye, so I was swallowing down heavy emotion as I left behind life as I knew it and prepared to fly to Nebraska, where my mother and I would now be living since my parents had officially separated. I lifted my chin and attempted to channel *maturity* as I traversed the airport with my rolling pink carry-on, but every blink of my eyes held back a weighted homesickness for the place and the memories I was leaving behind.

It was when I got stuck in a long line of people waiting to go through security, sandwiched between strangers and stressing over whether or not my braces were going to set off the metal detector, that we made contact.

The line started moving, but I couldn't take a step because the two people in front of me were kissing. Hard-core. As if their mouths were fused together and they were desperately trying to pull them apart by turning their heads from side to side.

Or else they were eating each other's faces off.

I cleared my throat.

Nothing.

I cleared my throat again.

Which made the guy open his eyes—I could only see one eye—and look directly at me. *While still kissing the girl.* As if that wasn't weird enough, he said *to me* while his lips were still attached to hers, “*Oh my God—what?*”

Which sounded like *omiguhdwhruut.*

And then The Eye closed and they were full-on kissing again.

“Excuse me,” I said through gritted teeth, my emotional anxiety replaced by irritation, “but the line. The line is moving.”

The Eye opened again and the dude glared at me. He lifted his mouth and said something to his girlfriend that prompted them to actually move forward.

Finally. I heard his girlfriend chirp about how much she was going to miss him, and I could see by his profile that he was kind of half smiling and not saying anything as they stumbled forward, hand in hand.

But I couldn't get past the fact that they looked like they were my age.

What?

I was going into my freshman year. Of high school. People my age didn't make out in public; they couldn't even drive yet. People my age didn't have the audacity to totally *get after it* in the airport security line, where they could get in trouble.

So who *were* these obnoxious PDA renegades?

The girl stepped out of line and waved to the guy, probably relieved to finally be getting oxygen. After making it through security and reorganizing my

things, I checked the time on my phone. I wanted to be right next to the door when the Jetway opened, so it was imperative that I get there as quickly as possible. I went around the face-eating jackass as he looked down at his phone, and I walked as fast as I could toward the departure gate.

It wasn't until I took a seat *right* next to the check-in counter, where I couldn't miss any pertinent announcements and would be guaranteed a spot at the very front of the line, that I was finally able to calm my nerves.

I scrolled through my phone, checked the airline's app for updates, then put on my headphones and cued up the freshly curated *Bailey's Airplane Playlist*.

But as I sat back and watched the other travelers milling about the terminal, I couldn't help but wonder how many of *them* were being forced to go

somewhere they didn't want to go and start a new life they had no interest in beginning.

If I were a betting person, I'd say zero.

I had to be the only person in that entire airport who was going on what was the polar opposite of a trip. I had a ticket to my own transplantation, and it sucked. I dwelled on this for the entirety of the hour wait, especially when Adorable Family of Four plopped down across from me, looking like poster children for the Disney resorts as they bounced around with palpable travel enthusiasm.

The sight of their familial bliss made me want to snuggle with the tiny scrap of blankie I still slept with (even though no one knew) and cry just a little.

So to say I was tightly wound by the time we lined up to board would be an understatement. I was first in line— *hell yes*—but buzzing with my *own* brand of palpable energy. My gurgling turmoil saw Adorable Family’s enthusiasm and raised the pot by a hundred.

“Hey, you.”

I looked to my left, and there was the face-eating jackass from security, smiling at me as if we were friends.

“I looked everywhere for you, babe.”

I glanced behind me at the rest of the boarding line, because he couldn’t possibly be talking to me. But when I turned back around, he was actually moving marginally closer, forcing me to take a step over so he could stand beside me. He nudged my shoulder with his and winked.

What in the actual hell? *Was he high?*

“What are you doing?” I whispered, clutching the strap of my carry-on bag as I tried scooting away from him while still maintaining my First in Line status.

He was wearing a hoodie that said *Mr. Nothing*, with baggy shorts, and he didn’t have a single thing in his hands. No carry-on, no book, no coat; what kind of person traveled like that?

He moved even closer, so his face was about an inch from mine, and said under his breath, “Relax, Glasses. I just don’t want to wait in that line, so I’m making it look like we’re together.”

“But.” I looked at him and wondered who Mr. Nothing actually was. He was obviously my age-ish and a generally attractive human. He had thick, dark, careless hair and a nice mouth. But his nerve was just too huge for a normal boy.

“That’s not fair.”

He raised an eyebrow.

“Everyone else has to wait in line,” I said, trying not to sound like a child screaming *It’s not fair* while kind of wanting to throw elbows. “If you didn’t want to wait, you should’ve gotten here earlier.”

“Like you?” he asked, his tone thick with sarcasm.

I pushed up my glasses. “Yes, like me.”

Why is this total stranger messing with me? Was this karma for daydreaming about Adorable Family being stranded at the airport? Karma was supposed to be a cat, dammit, not *this*.

He tilted his head to the side and looked at me. “I bet you used to be a hall monitor.”

“*Excuse me?*” It was obvious he meant it in an insulting way, and I was torn between wanting to punch him in the face and wanting to sobbingly beg him to leave me alone. I glanced behind us again, and the man next in line was smirking, clearly eavesdropping. I turned back to Mr. Nothing and whispered, “Not that it’s any of your business, but everyone had to take a turn at my school.”

“Sure they did.”

Sure they did? I made a noise, sort of a growl mixed with a groan, before eetingly wondering if punching a fellow passenger was a federal offense.

“Are you... Do you not believe me?” I asked through gritted teeth. “About *hall* monitoring?”

He smirked. “It’s not that I don’t believe you; it’s that we both know you would’ve signed up whether it was mandatory or not.”

How would he know that? He wasn’t wrong, but it pissed me off that he behaved as if he knew me, when our relationship spanned a few awful minutes. I was squinting and my nose was scrunched up like something smelled bad, but it was physically impossible to unsquinch it. I managed to bite out, “Whatever.”

He stopped talking but didn’t move; he just stayed put, right where he was.

We both stood there, side by side, staring in front of us in silence. *Why isn’t he*

moving? He’s not going to stay here, is he?? After another long minute of non-speak, I couldn’t take it and very nearly shouted the words “Why are you still here?”

He seemed confused by my question. “What?”

I pointed my thumb over my shoulder, and he said, “Oh my God, you were serious about that? You’re going to make me go to the back?”

I breathed in through my nose. “*I’m* not making you. It’s the way things work.”

“Oh, well, if it’s the way things work...” He looked at me like I was an idiot.

The airline employee who’d been standing beside the door grabbed the speaker and began announcing our flight. I gave Mr. Nothing another pointed look, the patented *WTF are you doing* look, punctuated with bug eyes, which made him shake his head and step out of line.

He looked at the guy behind me and said, “It’s the way things work; don’t worry about it.”

And even though I refused to turn around and watch him, I heard him mutter “It’s the way things work” no less than five times as he made his way to the back of the line.

Whyyyyyyyy? Why was this smug, sarcastic jerk even part of my experience?

He’s ruining flying for me, I thought as I scanned my boarding pass and started down the Jetway, which was ironic when flying was the *only* thing I didn’t hate about the day.

My first time flying alone was the one teensy-tiny thing that I’d been excited about, and Assbag Zero seemed determined to destroy that.

I didn’t relax until we were boarded, my bag was stowed in the overhead compartment, I’d texted both my parents, and I was seated next to the window.

People were still getting settled, but I’d made it. I’d been stressed all day, but now

—ahhh. I closed my eyes and felt like I could finally exhale.

Until.

“What are the odds that we’d be seat neighbors?”

I opened my eyes, and there was Mr. Nothing, standing in the aisle, his mouth hard as he looked just as happy to see me as I was to see him.

CHAPTER TWO

Charlie

As if my day wasn’t shitty enough, my seat was right next to Little Miss The-Line-Is-Moving.

Wonderful.

She gazed up at me with big eyes and blinked fast, like she was shocked to see me, but she looked like one of those uptight girls who was *always* shocked when life wasn’t perfect. She crossed her arms over her chest and said, “One in a hundred and seventy- ve, I would guess.”

For some reason, she made me want to mockingly repeat her words in a high-pitched voice. *One in a hundred and seventy-five, I would guess.* I looked longingly at the rows behind ours, stretching toward the back of the plane, and wondered if anyone would be interested in swapping seats.

Also— *of course* that girl knew the number of seats in the plane.

The second I sat down, the phone in my hoodie pouch buzzed. I knew it was my mom, and I also knew that if I didn’t respond, she would keep sending messages.

I pulled it out and looked at the display.

Mom: Did you make it on time?

I leaned back a little in the cramped seat, way too fucking tall for ying.

I hated ying.

I replied: **Yes.**

I buckled my seat belt, but before I could even let out a sigh, my phone buzzed again. **Mom: Did your dad go in with you, or just drop you at the door?**

I reached into my pocket, needing a TUM already. After I popped two into my mouth, I ignored her question (because no good could come of the answer—

dropped me at the door because parking was too expensive) and texted: **Nana Marie said to tell you hi.**

I knew that would stop the texts.

My mother and my grandmother had always been close, but as soon as my parents decided to divorce, that was history. Now my mom referred to her as

“the old battle-axe,” and Nana Marie called my mother “that woman.”

Mature adults, right?

I rested my head on the back of the seat and tried to wrap my mind around the fact that summer was over. It seemed like *days* ago that I'd been pumped

to y to Alaska and spend the summer with my dad's family, but now here I was, leaving them (and Grace) behind, ying back to life with my mom and her new boyfriend.

I was too damn old to feel this fucking homesick, especially when the plane hadn't even taken o yet.

I felt a dull ache between my ribs as I pictured Grace, and I swear to God I could still smell the fruity mousse she used in her hair. My brain took o on an unwelcome montage that captured a summer full of Grace's laughter, and I gritted my teeth.

Fuck *me*.

I put the phone back in my pocket, even though all I wanted to do was get lost in one of our mindless exchanges.

But there was no point in texting Grace. Like, ever again. Because relationships failed on a daily basis when people lived in the same fucking house.

Relationships were doomed to fail *period*.

So the mere notion of a long-distance one? Total joke.

The only good that could come from staying in contact with Grace was that I might nally be depressed enough to take up songwriting or irt with drinking.

Walking away—no, ying away—was absolutely the way to go.

One of the ight attendants started on the safety checklist, and I glanced over at Hall Monitor. She was attractive, but the braces and poofy hair weren't

doing

her any favors. Her arms were still crossed, and she was listening so intently that I half expected her to pull out a binder and start taking notes.

Yeah, it was time to mess with her.

Messing with her in the boarding line had actually taken my mind off Grace for a few minutes, so perhaps it was karma that had assigned her uptight ass to the seat beside me. I'd been good all summer, so maybe karma knew I needed a distraction.

Maybe karma was a girl in glasses.

CHAPTER THREE

Bailey

“How much do you think she gets paid?”

“Shh.” I tried tuning out Mr. Nothing so I could hear the flight attendant's emergency instructions.

“Oh, come on—you're not actually listening to this, are you?”

I refused to look at him. “Please be quiet.”

“Everybody knows that if the shit goes down, we're dead.” His voice was deep and rumbling as he murmured, “They go through these motions to give passengers a false sense of hope, but the reality is that if the plane crashes, our bodies are going to be splattered for miles.”

“Good Lord.” I did look at him then, because there was something seriously wrong with Mr. Nothing. “What is your problem?”

He shrugged. “I don’t have a problem—I’m just a realist. I see things for what they really are. You, on the other hand—you probably believe this shit. You probably think that if the plane hits the ocean at Mach ve, that in atable seat is going to save your ass, right?”

I pushed my glasses up my nose and wished he’d stop talking about crashing.

I wasn’t scared, but it also didn’t make a bit of sense to me how an object as heavy as a plane could stay in the sky. “It could.”

He gave his head a slow shake, as if I were the world’s biggest fool. “Oh my God, you are precious. You’re like a sweet baby child who believes everything her mommy tells her.”

“I am *not* precious!”

“Are too.”

Why couldn’t I have been seated beside a mature businessman or Visor Man in front of me, who was already asleep? Hell, the screaming baby squalling somewhere in the back would’ve been a better choice.

“No, I’m not,” I said, irritated by how whiny I sounded but unable to stop myself. But this guy was really pissing me o . “And just because you say shocking things like *Oh, this plane could crash* doesn’t make you edgy or any more of a realist than I am.”

“Oh yeah?” He turned a little in his seat, so he was facing me, and he pointed to my carry-on. “I bet you put all of your liquids in a baggie before you hit

security, right?”

“Um, that’s actually the law,” I said, unwilling to let the guy think he was hot shit, “so that doesn’t mean a thing.”

“It’s not the law; it’s just a stupid rule that isn’t going to do dick to save us from a terrorist attack.”

“So you don’t follow the rule?”

“Nope.”

Bullshit, I thought. No way did this guy—a minor, like me—disregard the laws of the skies. He was full of crap for sure. I humored him, though, and asked, “Then how do you transport your liquids?”

“However I want.” He gave a half shrug and looked utterly relaxed as he lied, and I was jealous of his confidence. Even if the guy was a compulsive liar, I wished I were that comfortable in my skin. He said, “Sometimes I put a few in my carry-on if I have one, sometimes I pack the full-sized bottles in my checked bag, and today I even stuck a shampoo in my pocket just for fun.”

“You did not,” I said, unable to let that one go.

He pulled a trial-sized Suave from the pocket of his shorts. “Did too.”

“No way.” To my horror, a laugh gurgled out of me. I raised my hand to my mouth, quick to cover any evidence that Mr. Nothing was the teensiest bit amusing. “Why do you do these things?”

Damn my curiosity.