



## Liz's Proposal

Wes

If a raccoon in a suit and tie – with a tiny little briefcase in his tiny little paw - had been standing on the porch when I opened the front door, I would've been less surprised than I was to see Liz. I mean yes, she lived next door, and yes, she'd yelled at me from her car an hour ago, but we didn't do things like ring doorbells.

Our modus operandi was sarcastic mockery and shouts across the yard.

But there she was.

On my porch.

My heart instantly switched into *what is happening* panic mode as the smell of her perfume swirled around my head and her green eyes met mine. *Liz is here. Liz is here. What in the everloving hell, Liz is on my porch.* Her hair was wet and her eyebrows were screwed together like she was already irritated with me, yet I felt punched-in-the-chest by the sheer power of her face.

Somehow, Liz Buxbaum managed to be prettier *every single time* I saw her than she'd been the time before.

Fucking witchcraft, that.

“Well, well.” I was impressed by how relaxed I sounded when something akin to the THIS IS FINE fire meme was going on in my brain. *I’m wearing pants, right?* “To what do I owe this honor?”

“Let me in,” she said as the rain poured down on her. “I need to talk.”

She was in Bossy Liz mode, which forced me to keep the door mostly closed and say, “Yeah, I don’t know – are you going to hurt me if I let you in?”

“Come on,” she said, and I swear to God her teeth were clenched. “I’m getting drenched out here.”

I wasn’t a jerk. If it were anyone else, I’d be holding the door open because it was pouring and I was a nice guy.

But that wasn’t how things worked for us. Our love language was playful torture.

“I know – and I’m sorry – but I am seriously afraid you’re going to junk-punch me for stealing the spot if I let you come inside.” I opened the door a little further (once my brain catalogued that I was indeed wearing pants) to spike the ball that I was warm and dry as I said, “You’re a little scary sometimes, Liz.”

“Wes!” My mom popped up behind me, nearly giving me a heart attack. I hadn’t heard her coming, like, at *all*, which meant either she was in stealth mode or I’d been so Liz-focused that the rest of my senses had shorted out entirely. *Were other things happening in the universe besides Liz’s appearance on my porch? Impossible.* I could tell my mother was embarrassed when she said, “For the love of God, open the door for the poor girl.”

“But I think she’s here to kill me.” I said it to get a reaction out of Liz, but before she could respond, my mom took over.

“Get inside, hon,” she said, grabbing Liz’s arm and pulling her into the house. “My son is a nuisance and he’s sorry.”

“No, I’m not.”

“Tell me what he did,” my mom said to Liz, who was smiling back at her sweetly, “And I’ll help you punish him.”

That made Liz’s eyes land on me – *Dear God, those eyes* – as she pushed back her wet curls and professed, “He stole my spot when I was trying to parallel park.”

*Lizzie, you little shit.*

“Oh, my God, you told my mom on me?” I closed the front door as my mother ushered Liz further into the house. I followed but felt the need to add, “Well, if we’re randomly tattling, Mom, I should probably tell you that Liz was the one who called the cops on my car when I had pneumonia.”

“Wait, what?” Liz stopped and turned around, looking up at me with squinty eyes. “When were you sick?”

Ummmmm. Liz Buxbaum asking about my well-being, even if it was just a simple question, felt different. New. Uncharted territory that I wanted to explore.

Kind of like the rain drops that were scattered across her cheeks.

But I just said, “Well, when did you call?”

She peered at me like she was trying to figure out whether or not I was lying.

Which made me put my hands on my chest and cough dramatically. “I was too ill to even move my car.”

That part was actually true; it was the sickest I’d ever been.

I'd felt like shit for two weeks, coughing and exhausted 24/7, but my delightful father had insisted it was a cold and that I needed to "nut-up and power-through" my workouts, regardless of the over-100-for-days-on-end fever.

It wasn't until I literally passed out in the gym that I was finally sent to a doctor, who immediately diagnosed me with pneumonia and prescribed total bed rest. It took a full week of feeling close to death before I finally started getting better.

Which was right about the time Liz called the authorities.

*Such a brat.*

"Stop." Her voice was quiet and absent of its usual snark when she asked me, "Were you seriously sick?"

*I don't want to answer that question.*

I didn't want to answer because I knew my words – any words from me whatsoever – would end that unexpected half-second of Lizzie's concern. It was nothing and everything, her worry, and I wanted to lounge around in it for just a heartbeat. I let my gaze tumble over her damp curls and pink lips before managing to ask, "Would you seriously care?"

Our eyes met and held, and I stopped breathing as she looked up at me like she might actually care. *Wait – why is she here?* Maybe I'd—

"Knock it off, you little brats!" My mom swooped in and waved her arms, destroying the moment, gesturing like we should follow her into the living room. "Sit on the couch, eat some cookies, and get over yourselves."

I wanted to bang my head against the wall as Liz followed my mom and forgot about me entirely.

*Why are you here, Liz?*

I was dying to know the answer to that question, but I also didn't want to know, which was insane, right? But as long as my mom was fetching milk and rambling about God-only-knows-what, all the possibilities in the world still existed. Maybe Liz was here because she needed a ride somewhere, maybe she was here because she wanted to discuss getting to know me better, or maybe she was going to confess that she'd been crushing on me since that day in first grade when she punched me and I told her mom on her.

They were all impossible scenarios, but until she told me otherwise, they were still technically *possible*.

Now, the reality was that she probably came over to scold me for the tape job on her car or my too-easy snag of her parking spot, but I was enjoying the sweet spot between dreams and reality.

It was kind of my happy place.

My mother finally ran off after reminding me I had to pick up Sarah at 6:30, leaving me face-to-face with an Elizabeth Buxbaum who was towel drying her hair in my living room.

Drying her hair. In my living room.

Were we in slow motion?

Because it *felt* like we were in slow motion. She rubbed the towel over her long hair, and God help me, I couldn't away. There was something wildly intimate about knowing *how* she dried her hair (soft but efficient, so on-brand for Liz), and a gun to my skull couldn't have convinced me to avert my eyes.

"Oh, I love this movie," she said, looking toward the TV while still rubbing the towel over her waves.

And I thought: *I know*.

Because I could watch any movie – ANY movie at all – and instantly know if Liz loved it or not; it was like my superpower. So when my mom was watching this when I walked in after school, I'd immediately thought - *I bet Liz loves this stupid movie.*

"Of course you do." I grabbed a cookie. "So what do you want to talk to me about?"

"Okay, um," she replied, looking nervous. She was blinking fast and her cheeks were pink as she sat down on the couch. "Here's the thing. I kind of need your help."

There was no fucking way I could have held in the smile that those words elicited.

Which made her put up a hand – perfectly pink fingernails – and say, "Nope. Listen. I know you're not one to help out of the goodness of your heart, so I've got a proposition for you."

"Ouch. Like I'm some kind of mercenary or something. That hurts."

"No, it doesn't," she replied, rolling her eyes.

"No, it really doesn't," I agreed, wondering why she'd always thought of me as such a colossal asshole.

"Okay. But before I tell you *what* I want you to help with, I want to go over the terms of the deal."

She took a deep breath, like she was about to jump off a cliff, and tucked her hair behind her ears (Lizzie's *this-means-business* move). "First of all, you have to swear to secrecy. If you tell *anyone* about our deal, it is void and you don't get payment. Second, if you agree to the deal, you have to actually help me. You can't just do a little and then blow me off."

*Wait - what the hell is this?* It sounded like her deal was more than just me promising not to tape her car again. It sounded like...shit, it sounded like *something*. I calmly asked, "Well, what's the payment?"

She swallowed – *this plan had my girl crazy nervous* – and said, “The payment will be uncontested, 24/7 access to the parking spot for the duration of our deal.”

“Whoa.” I walked over, needing to sit, because *duration of our deal* meant that whatever this was, it wasn’t a one-and-done situation. I dropped into the chair across from her and said, “You will give me THE parking spot?”

Her teeth were nibbling on her bottom lip when she nodded and said, “That’s correct.”

“I’m in. I’m doing it. I’m your guy.”

Honestly, a scenario didn’t exist where I would say no. Liz could suggest I lie down in the middle of the street and wait for a truck to crush my bones, and this guy right here would probably inquire as to exactly where she would like my body to rest.

I was a fool for my neighbor.

“You can’t say that yet,” she said, looking like a little kid with her eyebrows all squished together. “You don’t even know what the deal is.”

“Doesn’t matter. I’ll do whatever it takes.”

Her eyes narrowed to a squint. “What if I want you to run naked through the commons during lunch?”

“Done,” I said, knowing this casual acceptance would drive her to madness.

She grabbed the couch blanket and wrapped it around her shoulders. “What if I want you to turn naked cartwheels through the commons during lunch while singing the entire *Hamilton* soundtrack?”

“You got it,” I said, struggling to concentrate when the blanket that I napped with *on a daily basis* was now curled around her body. “I love ‘My Shot.’”

“Seriously?” She smiled, then, her eyes on me as she grinned in a way that made my chest pinch. “But can you even do a cartwheel?”

“Yup,” I said on autopilot, hypnotized by the way she was smiling at me. There was no mockery, no dickery whatsoever, and it would now be tattooed on my brain forever.

“Prove it,” she replied, tilting her head just a little and giving me that sass that I fucking loved, holy shit.

“You’re so high maintenance.” I stood, kicked the coffee table out of my way, and did a cartwheel. I knew it was bad, but I grinned like an Olympic gymnast when I stuck the landing and saw her laugh.

She tried holding it in, but I’d made. Her. Laugh.

*A unanimous 10 from all judges.*

Her green eyes moved over my face, like she was trying to find answers, and then she said, “Okay, but I swear on everything holy that I will hire a hitman if you blab about this.”

“I very much believe you.” Liz took a bite of her cookie as I said, “Now spill it.”

“Um.” She held up a finger while she finished chewing, but then instead of looking at me, her eyes went down to her lap. It was obvious she was avoiding further eye contact, but why? Whatever this was, she was *very* nervous to tell me. Which, for no good reason at all, gave me some kind of optimistic thrill.

Because what could she be so scared to share with *me*?

“Okay, here’s the thing,” she said, still staring down at her knees. “Michael is back in town, and I was kind of hoping to, y’know, *touch base with him*. We were close before he moved away, and I want to get that back again.”

Aaaand my brain exploded into a thousand tiny pieces.

Because Michael.

This was about Michael Young.

I mean, of course it was.

*Fuck.* What else could it possibly have been about, right?

I scratched my eyebrow, suddenly feeling a little sick again. “And I can help with that how, exactly?”

She still wouldn’t look at me. “I don’t have any classes with him, so there’s no way for me to talk to him naturally. But you and Michael are already friends. You hang out. You invited him to a party.”

She finally raised her eyes, eyes filled with doubt about me and my willingness to help her. Her voice was almost shy when she said, “*You’ve* got the connection that I want.”

I looked into those wishful green eyes and wanted to scream – or punch a wall - because I was screwed. The last thing in the world I wanted to do was help her fucking “touch base” with Young, but I hated even more the way she expected me to destroy her over this.

She was never going to stop seeing me as the dick next door unless I showed her that I wasn’t.

*Dammit.*

“So let me get this straight.” I shoved a cookie in my mouth so my unhappiness wouldn’t be broadcasted in my voice when I said, “You are still starry-eyed over Young, and you want me to drag you along to Ryno’s party so you can get him to like you.”

She opened her mouth to deny it, but then she shrugged and said, “Basically.”

I didn’t want to hurt her, but I told her the truth. “I heard he’s kind of interested in Laney.”

Her lips tightened before she faked like she didn't care. "Don't you worry about that."

*God, I love her bristles.* "How positively scandalous of you, Elizabeth."

"Shut it."

Somehow, messing with her made this marginally less painful, like a downgrade from a groin-kick to a nose-punch. "You can't think that just showing up at a party is going to make him notice you. There's going to be a ton of people there."

"I only need a few minutes," she said, raising her chin in that way that told me she was trying her damndest to seem confident.

"Pretty confident, are we?"

"I am," she said, then added, "I have a plan."

*Of course you do, honey.* "And it is...?"

She tucked her legs underneath her and I had to force my eyes to stay on her face as she said, "Like I'm telling you."

"Nah." I stood and went over to the couch, plopping down beside her. "Your plan sucks."

"How could you possibly know that," she said, wrapping the blanket tighter around her shoulders, "when you don't know my plan?"

"Because I've known you since you were five, Liz," I said, a thousand percent certain that she had an actual written plan somewhere in her room. "I'm sure your plan involves a contrived meeting, an entire notebook's worth of silly ideas, and someone riding off into the sunset."

"You're way off base."

"Bet."

That made her sigh and roll her eyes. "So...?"

“So...?” I said, crossing my arms and drinking in the adorable irritation streaking across her face.

“Oh, my God, you’re torturing me on purpose. Are you going to help me or not?”

If she were standing, she’d be stamping her foot.

So I scratched my chin, as if this was a difficult decision for me. “I just don’t know if The Spot is worth it.”

“Worth what? Allowing me to be in your presence for a few hours?” She swiped a wet curl behind her ear. “You’ll barely even know I’m there.”

Wait.

She wanted me to take her *with me* to a party.

I was starting to get confused by my whiplash reactions.

Because as much as I didn’t feel like helping her with Michael – *just kill me, universe* - she was asking me to take her to a party.

“What if *I’m* trying to hit it off with someone? Your presence might mess with my mojo.”

She laughed – *that’s two* – and said, “Trust me, you won’t even notice me. I’ll be too busy making Michael fall wildly in love with me to even touch your mojo.”

“Ew. Stop talking about touching my mojo, you perv.”

“Are you going to say yes or *what?*” she asked, rolling her eyes in exasperation yet again but also still laughing.

I kicked my feet up on the coffee table. “I *do* love watching you take the walk of shame from Mrs. Scarapelli’s. It’s kind of my new favorite hobby. So I guess I’ll drag you along to the party.”

She squealed, “Yes!”

“Settle your ass down,” I said, grabbing the remote and raising the volume. “Wait – this movie? You love *this* movie?”

“I know it’s a weird premise, but I swear to you that it’s great.”

I couldn’t let that comment fly because it was ridiculous. “I’ve seen it. This movie is trash, are you kidding me?”

Liz went off, then, passionately defending the absurd time-travel rom-com while I watched her expressive face and responded with just enough sarcasm to ensure she didn’t think I was into her.

But I was shocked by the entire debate, to be honest, because even though we absolutely disagreed and I was full-on trying to get her riled up, we were *both* having fun. For once, instead of exchanging gunfire bursts of snarky sarcasm, we were debating something harmless in a very normal way.

Her feet were up on the coffee table, beside mine, and it was *comfortable*.

Almost like we were friends.

I wanted to pause this moment and rewind it.

Over and over again.

“Enemies-to-lovers is a classic trope,” she was saying, looking enamored by the concept.

“Oh, good God, you think it’s awesome,” I said, patting the top of her head like she was a silly child. “You poor, confused little love lover. *Tell me* you don’t think this movie is remotely connected to reality in any way.”

She smacked my hand off – *yes, Lizzie* - as she came back with, “Yeah, because I believe in time travel.”

“Not that,” I said, shaking my head. “Time travel is probably the most *realistic* part. I’m talking about rom-coms in general. Relationships never-ever-ever work like that.”

“Yes, they do,” she defended.

“They *do*?” I pictured my parents and mentally called bullshit. “Correct me if I’m wrong, but it didn’t seem like it worked that way with Jeremiah Green or Tad Miranda.”

That made her mouth kind of hang open for a minute as those green eyes moved over my face. *Yes, Liz, I know every person you’ve ever been romantically linked to; sue me.*

“Well, they *can*,” she continued, pushing her hair out of her face. “It’s out there, even if the jaded, cynical people like you are too, um...*cynical* to believe.”

“You said cynical twice,” I said, wondering if she realized that she was having fun with *me*.

She just sighed.

I asked her, “So you think that two enemies – in the real world – can magically get over their differences and fall madly in love?”

*Carefully consider your answer, Elizabeth.*

“I do,” she said, and if there was a God, he was underlining, highlighting and bookmarking her response for future follow-up.

“And you think that plotting and planning and trickery is no big deal if it’s done to spark some sort of true love?”

She nibbled on her bottom lip as she thought through her answer. “You’re making it sound ridiculous on purpose.”

“Oh no – it’s just ridiculous.”

“*You’re* ridiculous,” she teased, and I wondered what it’d be like to watch an entire movie with her. Would she talk through the entire thing – *possibly* – or would she quietly watch while that romantic brain of hers ran wild?

“Have you thought about the fact that if your little love notions are valid,” I asked, “Then Michael is actually *not* the guy for you?”

That made her focus settle on my face. “What do you mean?”

“At this point, you and Michael aren’t mad at each other, so it’s doomed. Every rom-com has two people who can’t stand each other in the beginning but eventually bang it out.”

“Gross.”

“Seriously.” I started listing off rom-com titles to prove my point, but that didn’t work.

Because she smiled a secret smile and said, “You’re a little impressive with your rom-com knowledge, Bennett. Are you sure you aren’t a closet watcher?”

She couldn’t know what her usage of my last name did to me - *dear Lord, call me Bennett again* - and I calmly said, “Positive.”

“I won’t tell anyone if you secretly fangirl over romance flicks,” she teased around a giggle.

“Shut it,” I said, physically incapable of doing anything but smile. “So what trope works for you and Michael, then? The followed-him-around-like-a-puppy-but-now-he-sees-the-puppy-as-a-potential-girlfriend-even-though-he-already-has-a-potential-girlfriend trope?”

“You are an obnoxious love *hater*,” she said, laughing.

“Who is apparently taking your ass to a party,” I added, waiting for her reaction.

“Yeah, um.” Liz looked a little flustered as she said, “So should I just walk over, or--”

“I’ll pick you up.” My voice was scratchy when I said, “At seven.”

God only knew when I'd have the chance to take Buxbaum anywhere ever again, so I was damn sure going to pick her up. I wanted to hear her voice coming from my passenger seat, see her painted fingernails switching my radio stations, and smell her floral perfume as it danced with the A/C in my air vents.

I didn't *want* to drive her to Michael, but I was damn-sure going to make the most out of the bumpy ride.