



## The Party

Wes

“Where is he?” Liz asked, looking a little shell-shocked as she stood by the keg and watched the sights and sounds of Ryno’s basement. I had no idea what she did with her friends on the weekends, but I also knew I’d never seen her at a party.

So this was probably jarring.

And even as part of me wanted to laugh at how out-of-place she seemed in her yellow church dress, clutching her cup so damn tight I half-expected it to pop out of her pink-polished fingers, the other part of me fucking loved it.

Because it was *so* Liz Buxbaum.

Her chin was raised and she was wearing her *I'm fine* smile, but I could tell by the way she kept chewing on her bottom lip and tucking her hair behind her ears that she was nervous as hell.

“We’ve only been here ten minutes—chill,” I said, wondering if she had any clue what her Chanel No. 5 did to my brain. “He’s here somewhere.”

She didn’t say anything, but just kept blinking those long lashes and looking around for Michael. It was irritating, the way she thought he was fucking God-tier, but I wasn’t too concerned because I knew they weren’t a match. He would never see her for what she was – he never had – and she’d be bored with him in five minutes if she ever got close.

“Maybe you should relax and try having fun.” I pulled my phone out of my front pocket and checked for messages. Three from my dad, asking how I’d pitched at practice, but nothing from Liz’s dream dude. “You do know how to do that, don’t you?”

“Of course,” she said defensively, and I had to bite the inside of *my* lip so I didn’t laugh when she took a sip of beer and immediately crinkled her nose in disgust. I was pretty sure she thought she was pulling off *cool*, tossing back a cold one, but anyone with eyes could see the girl hated whatever was in that red Solo cup.

“Wesley!”

*Shit, shit, shit.* It was Ashley Sparks, who I liked, but she tended to get out of hand when she drank and I didn’t want her to scare my next-door neighbor. I wasn’t sure why, but I really wanted Liz to have a good time with me and my friends.

Probably because I knew she made assumptions about who she thought I was.

It'd be nice if Ryno's little get-together didn't make things worse.

Ash let out a squeal and wrapped herself around me, *very* tightly, and when I glanced over her shoulder, Liz rolled her eyes.

She rolled her eyes.

I knew it didn't mean anything, but I also knew I didn't hate Liz being irritated by a pretty girl hugging me.

"What took you so long?" Ashley yelled over the music, pulling back from the hug. "I've been looking for you everywhere."

"I had to pick up Liz." I said, pointing toward Buxbaum. But Ash didn't even look. She just scooted closer and slurred into my ear, loud enough for half the basement to hear, "You look really hot tonight."

"Uh, thanks, Ash," I said, stepping back from her while trying not to be too obvious about it. She was nice when she was sober, so I didn't want to make her feel bad, but I also had no interest in...whatever she was interested in that night.

"I probably shouldn't tell you that," she yelled again, closing the distance between us. Her breath smelled like it was 100-proof as she drawled, "But what the hell, right?"

I was opening my mouth to answer when Liz stepped forward and tapped Ashley on the shoulder.

She tapped. Ashley Sparks. On the shoulder.

*What is this?*

Ashley turned around, smiled at Liz like they were best friends, and said, “Hey.”

Liz leaned closer to Ash – *what the hell is this* - and I had to really strain to hear her when she said, “Don’t tell anyone, but Wes and I are kind of...y’know...”

And she trailed off.

*Suggestively.*

I caught Liz’s smirk as she glanced at me for a half-second, and it was my turn to be shell-shocked.

What was she doing? *What the hell was happening?*

“Together?” Ashley asked, looking confused, but then she seemed to understand Liz and yelled excitedly, “I had no idea—I’m so sorry!”

“Shh.” Liz’s eyes darted around the basement, probably looking for Michael to make sure he hadn’t heard. “No worries at all, we’re just keeping it quiet.”

“I mean, I was going after him hardcore,” Ash said, waving her hand at herself and laughing. “I did *not* mean to make a move on your man!”

It was impossible not to smile as Liz shook her head frantically, desperate to shut Ashley up. “Shh . . . no biggie. He isn’t my man yet so—”

“He will be, girl.” Ash smiled at me. “You go get it.”

“Oh my God,” Liz muttered under her breath. “Shh. Um, okay.”

I watched Liz’s face as Ash stumbled away, and she was biting her lip again and intentionally *not* looking at me. I knew without a doubt that she hated I’d heard her, but I *loved* it and just couldn’t bring myself to let her off the hook.

It was too perfect. I lowered my voice and said, “Did you just tell her that—”

“Yep,” she interrupted, cutting me off and continuing to avoid eye contact.

*God, is there anything better than messing with Liz?*

I bent my knees, so our faces were level and she *had* to look at me. Green eyes met mine and I asked, “Why would you do that?”

“Well,” she said, pursing her lips together before looking down at her beer and murmuring, “I was trying to save you, um, from her amorous clutches.”

*Her amorous clutches.*

I shook my head in disbelief. Her *amorous clutches*? Who even thought, much less said, things like that?

Liz Buxbaum protecting my virtue had *not* been on my Ryno’s-party-bingo-card.

And as I stared down at the sprinkling of freckles on her nose, I couldn't hold back a laugh because she was being just *so* classic Liz. Her refusal to look at me was one hundred percent from the Little Lizzie playbook.

But what should've come next was her lifting that stubborn chin and glaring at my laughter. I would've expected her to be wildly defensive of her own behavior.

And perhaps a little mean.

Instead, her eyes met mine, her lips turned up, and she started laughing.

*With* me, like we were partners in crime.

*God, she was so pretty.*

I wasn't sure if it was the sound of her laugh or the memory of her face when Ash had been yelling, but once I started laughing, I couldn't stop.

And neither could she.

We both kind of lost it, cackling like friends who laughed together all the time instead of neighbors who snarked at each other on a daily basis. It felt like some sort of breakthrough, like forward progress on something that'd been stuck for a really long time, and I wondered--

“Hey, y'all.”

*Damn. It.*

“Hey. Michael.” I looked away from her just to be irrationally irritated by the sight of his face. He was so *nice*, like a genuinely great guy, but all I wanted was for him to disappear. “You made it.”

“Brought you some Lone Star,” he said, looking around at the packed basement. “It’s in the bathtub.”

“Nice. Thanks.” I glanced back at Liz, but now her face was like a goddamn billboard for lovesickness as she stared at him, our moment already forgotten. Her green eyes were soft, her mouth in a tiny smile, and I wondered what it felt like to have Liz Buxbaum look at you like that.

Like she thought you could walk on water.

“Did I see Kyle Matthews here?” he asked. “Over by the keg?”

“Probably,” I said, still watching her watch him. “He said he was coming.”

“Does he still play ball?”

“Um. Yeah,” I replied, noticing there was a tiny red heart on each of her fingernails. *Liz core.*

As if sensing my focus, Michael shifted his attention to her and asked, “So how have you been, Liz? You look exactly the same. I would’ve recognized you anywhere.”

“Same,” she replied, and there was something about the way her cheeks got pink and her voice got breathy that annoyed the shit out of me.

“So where do you work?” he asked, waving a hand and gesturing to her body.

“What?” Liz kept smiling, but a tiny wrinkle formed in-between her eyebrows.

Michael gestured to her dress again and said, “Your uniform . . . ?”

Her *uniform*?

Her. Uniform.

It took me a second to realize what he meant, and then -- *ohhhhhhh, Liz.*

Michael thought her yellow dress was a work uniform.

*To be fair, it did have a waitresy vibe to it.*

Liz’s eyes shot to me for the quickest of seconds, like she was checking to see if I’d heard, and then she blinked fast and said, “My uniform. Yeah. Um, I, uh, pick up hours sometimes at the diner.”

The diner?

Michael asked, “What diner?”

I could see a million thoughts crossing her panicked face, all at once, and it took everything in my power not to laugh at her inability to lie. Her lips rolled inward and her eyes narrowed before she stammered, “The, uh, *The Diner.*”

“I love *The Diner,*” I said, grinning while she looked like she wanted to stab me.



“I barely ever work there,” she said, presenting Michael with the worst fake smile I’d ever seen.

And as much as I was enjoying the spectacle of Little Liz crashing and burning, I didn’t like the unease in her eyes. I didn’t like that she looked trapped.

Michael asked, “Where exactly—”

“I wish you’d moved back into your old house, Young,” I interrupted, compelled to stop the bleeding even though I was staunchly opposed to the Liz-Michael agenda. “Because we could totally re-up our last epic game of hide-and-go-seek.”

Liz’s eyebrows scrunched together, like she didn’t understand why I was helping her, and then she looked down at her cup.

*I’m just as confused as you are, honey.*

“Can you imagine?” Michael said, smiling, and it was kind of surreal that he was oblivious to everything going on with Liz at that moment.

“I prefer not to,” she interjected, grinning at Michael and ignoring me completely. “When our hide-and-seek games turned ‘epic,’ that usually meant that Wes and the twins were terrorizing me.”

“How many times do you think I snuck over and warned you?” he asked her, smiling in a way that I didn’t like. Like he was seeing her. “God, I saved you from so many bugs and frogs down your shirt.”

*Yeah, you were fucking Prince Charming.*

*We get it.*

“The twins used to get so pissed when you helped her.”

“I just couldn’t let you do that to Liz,” he replied, grinning and shaking his head as we three walked down memory lane. “Every time I see a cheesy movie on TV, I still think of Little Liz.”

She was back to watching him with the enamored smile that made my jaw hurt.

He said, “Remember how she always watched *Bridget Jones Diary* and got so mad if we made fun of it?”

I *did* remember that, and I also remembered the day I realized why. Liz had been so devastatingly broken on her pink bike when she’d realized her mom’s movies were gone. Her face had been red and splotchy and she’d cried to *me*, for God’s sake – that was how I knew it was the worst.

She’d come to *me*. She’d let *me* help her.

“Do we have to rehash the past?” Liz pushed her hair behind her ears, still looking amused as she said, “I heard—”

“Can you get me a beer?” Ashley appeared beside Liz and yelled to Michael, “I’m bad with the keg and always end up with too much head.”

I *think* she was trying to flirt with Michael, though it was tough to tell.

But Michael, the consummate good guy, took her cup and said, “Sure.”

As soon as he turned away and reached for the tap, Ashley asked me, “Are you going to prom, Bennett?”

Liz was watching me, so I raised my eyebrows and met her gaze while I answered, “I haven’t decided yet.”

“Dream on,” she replied quietly, for my ears only, grinning before looking away.

Damn, but I loved when she gave me shit.

“A whole bunch of us are going as a group,” Ash slurred, her voice getting louder with every word. “You two should come. We’re getting a limo and everything.”

My eyes returned to Liz, but *her* eyes were once again on Michael.

*Christ.* Was he really that interesting to look at?

Ashley hiccupped, and the girl looked sweaty and kind of like she was ready to pass out.

“Did we do a little pre-gaming before the party?” I asked, already knowing the answer.

“At Benny’s—his mom was gone,” she said, giggling.

“I see. How about some water?” I grabbed a bottle from the cooler of ice by the keg and opened it for her, but she muttered something under her breath that sounded like *limosheen* as she grabbed it and took a drink.

“Well, I do love me some limo,” I said because she clearly wasn’t going to let it go, “So I’ll have to think about prom.”

But I *wasn’t* going to think about prom.

Well, not unless there was someone else who wanted to go.

“When *is* prom?” Michael asked.

Everything stopped for me as Liz’s eyes widened like all of her wishes were about to come true. I inhaled through my nose, not wanting to tell him for some idiotic reason, but then I answered, “In two weeks.”

“It’s so bizarre,” Michael said in the drawl that I couldn’t decide if I hated or not (it only bothered me when Liz was present, to be honest), “switching schools two months before graduation. Senior prom is supposed to be this really big deal, but I don’t even know any girls here yet except for Laney.”

I didn’t have to look at Liz to know her smile slipped at the mention of Laney’s name.

“Are y’all going?” he asked, pointing to Liz and me.

“*Us?*” Her voice was weirdly high-pitched and she waved a hand between us while making an exaggerated face. “Wes and I? Oh my God, no. Are you kidding me?”

*Are you kidding me?*

I knew it was how she felt, but that didn’t mean I liked it.

“Yeah,” I said, shaking my head and adding, “We are not going anywhere together. Trust me. I wouldn’t go to the gas station with this one.”

“Well, I wouldn’t invite you to the gas station, so you can just shut your big mouth,” Liz said around a smile, following it up with a fake arm punch. “Believe me.”

She hit harder than I expected, which didn’t actually surprise me because I’d never been able to completely figure her out. I could read her face and guess her reactions, but she always had some little detail tucked away that usually shocked the hell out of me.

I loved that about her.

“Oh. I thought I heard you were a thing,” Michael said, and Liz got that *don’t-make-me-sick* look on her face again.

Yes, my girl was a real ego-check.

“Yeah, well, you heard wrong,” she said, looking horrified at the realization that she might’ve ruined her own chances by showing up at the party with me.

And even as she insulted me, I couldn’t stop myself from springing into action when those green eyes weren’t happy.

Fucking simp, I was.

I reached out a hand to mess up her hair and convincingly proclaim, “Way off base, dude. No Little Liz for me.”

“Nope,” she agreed, making a face and slapping my hand.

“Oh.” Michael appeared to be deep in thought as his eyes moved between us, and then he said, “Two weeks, huh?”

Now, *I* knew he was thinking about Laney, but Liz’s face was a wide-open book that screamed *I will go to prom with you*.

I wanted to mess up her hair again.

“So tell me what’s happened since I moved.” Michael was oblivious to the havoc he was wreaking inside of our little Miss Buxbaum and just kept talking. “Do y’all still hang out? How about the twins and Jocelyn?”

Liz leveled me with a look, a nonverbal transmission that begged me not to embarrass her, so I said nothing.

“Wes and I see each other long enough to fight over the parking spot in front of our houses, but that’s pretty much it. And Joss is actually my best friend now, which even I find hard to believe.”

“I can’t find my phone.” Ashley popped up from behind me, grabbing my arm. “Have you seen a purple iPhone?”

“Sorry,” I said, wondering who she’d come with because she was officially shitfaced and needed to retire. “I haven’t.”

As I checked over her head to see if Carolyn – her best friend - was nearby, I heard Liz say to Michael, “I don’t know if you knew it, but when we were little, I had the biggest crush on you.”

My head whipped around so fast at that because I honestly couldn’t believe she was just shooting her shot the very first time she talked to him. *What the hell are you doing, Buxbaum?*

But *shiiiiit*, Liz was giving Michael the same lovesick smile she had been all night and he was grinning back at her like he was interested.

*He wasn’t interested, was he?*

I fucking hated the way they were looking at each other.

Ash grabbed my arm again and whined, “I don’t feel so good.”

And then she threw up.

Immediately, and with great force.

While Liz stood directly in the line of fire.

Holy, holy *shit*, she vomited all over Buxbaum.

Liz gasped – loudly – and looked frozen, holding out her arms like someone had just doused her with a bucket of ice water. There was chunky vomit in her hair, covering her dress, all over her *legs* – Dear God, she was covered in it.

And her eyes were huge, like she had no idea what to do.

“I’ve got clean clothes in my trunk, Liz,” I heard myself say, stepping closer and grabbing her elbow. “Let’s get you up to the bathroom, and you can clean up while I run to my car and grab them.”

She didn’t argue, so I led her through the gawking crowd. I was sure she was dying of embarrassment as everyone watched, so my prime focus was getting her out of the basement and into clean clothes as quickly as possible.

*So much for not reinforcing her preconceived notions about me and my friends.*

Liz still hadn’t uttered a word, so when I finally got her to the bathroom upstairs and turned on the lights, I bent my knees to make sure she heard me. “Get out of these clothes and clean up, and I’ll be right back, okay?”

She just nodded, looking like she might vomit, too.

I ignored everyone as I sprinted out to the car for my baseball bag, and when I got back to the bathroom door, I knocked and said, “Liz, do you want me to hand the bag through the door, or should I just leave it here on the floor and go downstairs?”

“If you could leave it, that would be great.”

*Finally she speaks.*

And then she said, in the softest voice, “Thank you.”



“No problem.” I cleared my throat and wondered when I’d become so pathetic that a mere *thank you* made me emo. “Everyone is downstairs, so if you just reach your hand out the door and swipe the bag, no one will see anything.”

“Okay,” she said, and it occurred to me that she was likely naked at that moment.

*Get it together, idiot. She’s covered in vomit, for Christ’s sake.*

I cleared my throat again. “There’s a Target bag in the side pocket that you can put your dirty clothes in. And I’ve got your purse downstairs—do you need it?”

“No.” Her voice was a little louder when she said, “Um—thanks. So much, Wes.”

“No problem,” I managed, and when I heard the sound of my own *it’s-okay-baby* voice – *was I fucking crooning?* - I realized I needed to clear out and quit acting like a pathetic dipshit. “I’m going downstairs, then.”

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Michael was talking about roadrunners when she came back.

He was telling me that the bird actually existed in real life – in Texas - and that it looked nothing like the one in cartoons. He was feeding me this mind-blowing information that would forever change my DNA when her wave caught my eye.

And then I died.

I swallowed my tongue, had a heart attack, and might've blacked out for a second, all at the same time.

Because there Liz stood, barefoot on the basement step, looking like *that*.

Her hair was wet – I fucking *loved* her curls holy shit – but instead of wearing the hoodie in my bag or some floral concoction of a shirt I'd half-expected to see because that was her default, she was wearing a tank top.

A plain tank top and a *lot* of smooth skin.

I inhaled through my nose as that tank top became my instant obsession, the garment most likely to merge with the Liz Buxbaum avatar that already existed in my brain.

But worse than that shirt were the sweatpants she was wearing.

My sweatpants.

*My* sweatpants.

The sight of her in my clothes – *she was wearing my clothes what the hell was going on in the universe* – made something inside of me burn. It was a Neanderthalic reaction that I wasn't necessarily proud of, but at that moment I wanted to drop every piece of clothing I owned at her feet and beg her to wear them for the rest of her life.

Only – God help me - it got worse.

Because my pants (*mine*) were huge on her, so baggy that even though she'd rolled them at the waist, they hung low and showed off her belly button and what appeared to be a tiny flower tattoo on her hip.

*A daisy.*

*A. Daisy.*

*Holy hell. A daisy.*

I was dizzy – it was fucking dizzy in there, wasn't it? Someone needed to open a window or something because I was having trouble getting air. How did she have a tattoo? *Liz has a hip tattoo.* Liz had a hip tattoo and I had no idea how I would ever convince my brain to move on and think about anything else.

*A daisy.*

*Fuck.*

I swallowed and wondered how she could be standing there looking like *that*, like...shit...*that*, when she was supposed to be covered up with flowers so no one knew.

I pulled out my keys and walked over, suddenly in a hurry to get her far away from my friends and that party. "I'm assuming you want to go?"

*Why the hell did my voice sound like I'd just eaten glass?*

"Yeah," she said, but her eyes were on Young, not me.

Her cheeks were blazing as she ran a hand through her wet curls, looking nervous, and when I glanced at Michael, I clenched my jaw and wanted to push him.

Into a wall.

Because who the hell did he think he was, leering at her naked stomach like she was some...I don't know, someone who wasn't Liz? Like she was just there for his...his...corneal pleasure or something. I liked him, but he was an asshole to look at her like that.

As if hearing my thoughts and wanting to piss me off even more, he grinned and drawled, "I really like your tattoo."

No shit, Sherlock.

"Oh. Thanks," she said, and I watched in frustration as she tugged at the bottom of her shirt but also *smiled* at him.

Smiled at him in a way that made my chest hurt.

"You ready?" I gritted my teeth, hating that Michael was still eyeballing her body. If he'd been blind to her for the whole of our lives, then he didn't deserve to suddenly wake up and gawk at her skin like she was on display just for him, right?

Nope. He couldn't see it anymore.

Enough.

I grabbed her waistband in my hand, yanking it up to cover everything that Young didn't get to see. I tried to sound chill – *I was anything but fucking chill* - when I said, “Liz's clothes are falling off so it's time for us to leave.”

I think Michael said goodbye, but I only half-heard him because my brain was incapable of focusing on anything but the fingers that were holding up her clothing. Liz's gaze trailed over my face, registering what I was doing, and I was surprised she didn't comment.

Because her green eyes told me she was very aware of my knuckles on her stomach.

*My knuckles are on Liz's stomach.*

My knuckles. Were on. Liz Buxbaum's. Belly.

I swallowed and waited for her to jerk away from me, but she didn't.

“Come on, Buxbaum,” I said, “Let's get you home before you flash anyone else.”

But even after she took over the pant-holding responsibilities, I could still feel the warmth of her skin on my fingers. I flexed my hand as we exited the house, but the movement did nothing to erase the imprint of *her* on my flesh.

My knuckles were forever tattooed with the soft skin of Liz's stomach.

And I was totally fine with that.