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MOVIES**

LYNN PAINTER

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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 commercial-grade 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