



NEW YEAR'S EVE

“If my fifteen-year-old self could see me now,
he would punch me in the dick.”

—Set It Up

Wes

“This place is *packed*.”

“Dude, I told you,” Adam said, loading a piece of gum into his mouth and smirking as we walked into the party. Loud music was booming from a speaker somewhere, and everyone appeared to be talking *over* the sound.

I followed him and Noah up the stairs and into the living room, where it looked like everyone I knew from high school was in attendance. *Shit*. People were *everywhere*, sitting on couches and standing around, and I instantly regretted my decision to go out.

“Bennett!” Alex ran over from the other side of the room and wrapped her arms around me, pulling me down into a hug.

“Happy New Year, Benedetti,” I said, swallowing hard as I hugged her back.

“How *are* you?” she asked, and I hated the way she smiled

when she pulled away. It was one of those pitying smiles, like she was asking how I was handling the fact that my life had turned to shit.

“Good,” I said, torn between being happy that my friends were back from college—*holy balls I have a social life again*—and kind of hating being social. Because as nice as everyone was, I could tell they all felt sorry for me. Sorry about my dad, sorry about the fact I’d dropped out of college, sorry about the fact I was no longer playing baseball.

I was one hell of a sorry guy.

Since Noah and Adam got back, I’d said *absolutely not* every time they invited me out. But for some reason, New Year’s Eve made me cave. The fact that it was a holiday had softened me, apparently, which I was now regretting.

Because nothing felt the same.

The last time I was with these people, we all had big plans for our futures.

And . . . well, *they* still did.

I, on the other hand, had pivoted.

When my dad died (two weeks after I moved in at UCLA), I came home for the funeral and never left, deciding to bail on school and everything that the future held for me. *As if I had a choice*. Now that it’d been a few months since his heart attack, I was firmly settled into full-time employment at the grocery store with a side-hustle as an Uber driver. Life was fucking *great*.

“Come on—Michael’s playing Money Bet in the kitchen,” Noah said, pointing. “It’s too loud over here.”

Money Bet, the new favorite party game, was basically just dares with money attached. Some guys I worked with at the store made it up, and when I mentioned it to Adam and Noah, they went nuts with it.

I followed them into the kitchen, stopping to grab a drink before sitting down at the table.

“It’s about time, Bennett,” Michael said from his spot at the other end of the table, drawling just enough to let me know he was already buzzed. “You’ve been a hermit all break.”

I gritted my teeth when I heard the first few notes of that old song from *Fearless* playing in the other room. It just *figured* that the party would have *that* song playing in the background. It was 100 percent on-brand for my life lately.

“I’ve been busy,” I said, picking up my cup and downing the entire thing. I wasn’t *trying* to get drunk, but I wasn’t trying *not* to either. We’d pregamed a little at Noah’s with his brother, so I had a nice start.

“Money bet five says Bennett can’t make it from here,” Noah said, pushing an empty can in front of me and gesturing toward the kitchen sink.

“Accept,” I said, then hurled the can in the direction of the sink, watching it bounce off the counter and clatter to the ground.

“You suck,” he replied, and I pulled a five-dollar bill out of my pocket and set it in front of him.

“Still better than you.”

“Joss just got here,” Noah said, looking down at a text, “with my chicken sandwich, hell yes.”

I said, “Money bet chicken sandwich says y—”

I trailed off when I saw her.

She. Was. There.

Holy *shit*.

Libby was standing in the living room.

I’d managed to avoid her for the entire two weeks she’d been home on break, but now we were at the same party.

On New Year’s Eve.

Are you kidding me, Universe? I’d vetoed three different parties that night, parties where I thought she might show up, but I’d assumed this one would be safe.

I’m not sure if things got quiet or loud, blurry or hyperfocused, but I know the universe changed as I looked at Liz, everything melting into impressionistic streaks of fuzzy background colors. She was talking to Joss, smiling, and the emptiness I felt at the sight of her, a gnawing ache, made it hard for me to breathe.

I hadn’t seen her, in person, since the day of my dad’s funeral. We’d done the long-distance thing for a few weeks after that, but then I ended it.

I had no choice.

I can’t breathe without you, but I have to . . .

My fingers itched to touch her, to go to her, to grab her hand and pull her into the kitchen with me so we could laugh about Money Bet and convince someone to do something ridiculous.

But she wasn’t mine to touch anymore.

It felt like a thousand memories of her—smiling at me, laughing with me, tangled up in my arms in my dorm room—swirled

together and crashed into my lungs like a ninety-mile-an-hour fastball.

She was wearing a slouchy sweater, black and soft and oversize, with the front tucked into her plaid skirt. She looked nice, all dark tights and cute boots, but my eyes focused like lasers on the sun-kissed shoulder the sweater had exposed and the inky edge of her tattoo that was peeking out from underneath.

Calling to me.

Because I knew that tattoo better than I knew my own, probably because I’d never simply looked at hers. No, I’d explored hers, traced hers, kissed hers, studied that inked-on latitude like her body was my map and those coordinates were my true north.

You’re the only thing I know like the back of my hand . . .

Goddamnit.

“Money bet three says you can’t guess the card,” I said to Adam, grabbing the deck from the middle of the kitchen table and trying to distract myself. I was pretty sure I couldn’t handle the memories that were sure to kick my ass if I continued looking at Liz.

And almost worse than the memories were the questions that never seemed to go away when I thought about her.

Does she still go to the beach to read? Has she been to our In-N-Out since I left? What songs has she added to her freshman year playlist?

And I didn’t even let myself consider whether or not she was seeing someone.

I was better off not knowing.

I’d deleted my social media accounts after deciding not to go back to school, partially because I knew I’d spend the rest of my

life creeping on her and partially because what the hell would I post that mattered? While my friends were sharing pics from frat parties and studying for finals, it'd be wicked cool for me to post a slice of my life as well, right?

Worked a double shift at the grocery store today and taught myself how to fix the blower motor on the furnace. Runs like a dream now. #blessed

"Accept. And it's a queen," he said, smiling like an ass.

I turned over the jack. "So, so wrong, son."

"We want to play." Joss walked into the kitchen and sat in the empty chair between Adam and Noah, dropping a fast-food bag onto the table as Adam tossed three dollars at me.

"I love you and this sandwich," Noah said, tearing into the bag. "So much."

I felt like my entire body was on alert, buzzing, knowing Liz wouldn't be far behind Joss. I kept my eyes on the cards as Adam said, "All right, Jo—money bet five says you can't say the Pledge of Allegiance backward."

There was laughter and heckling when she started, but I couldn't hear over the roaring in my ears as I felt Liz take the empty seat on the other side of Adam. Red hair and Chanel No. 5 became my atmosphere, the mix that I breathed into my lungs and that seeped in through my pores. I refused to look at her—*I can't fucking do it*—but my face burned as I felt her eyes on me.

Shit, shit, shit. I started shuffling the cards as Joss kept going.

"Nice beard, Bennett," she said quietly, her voice diving into my bloodstream and pumping to every part of my body.

I inhaled through my nose and had to look.

I mean, I couldn't ignore her.

I raised my eyes from the cards, and then everything inside me stilled as she smiled at me.

Because it was the same.

Her smile was the same knee-weakening smile that she'd given me the first time she said she loved me, in the parking lot of the animal shelter in Ogallala, Nebraska. Red lips, twinkling green eyes, pink cheeks—

Holy shit, she doesn't hate me.

I swallowed and didn't know what to do as a million questions ran through my head.

Why didn't she hate me? She was crying the last time we spoke, for the love of God.

She was supposed to hate me.

What the hell am I supposed to do now?

I didn't realize we were just staring at each other until Noah said, "For Christ's sake, kids, get a room. Money bet twenty says Liz and Wes won't kiss."

Silence hit the kitchen with an open hand, the awkward slap echoing as no one quite knew how to react. Before I could process that and find a way to make his words disappear, Liz raised her chin and said, "Accept."

If I were standing, I'm pretty sure I would've stumbled backward from the force of that tiny little six-letter word, crashing into my chest like an uppercut. I heard nothing but my own heartbeat, pounding like a bass drum in my skull, as I looked at her Retrograde

Red mouth, smiling and daring me to kiss her.

I clenched my teeth as my mind ran wild, because I'd never wanted anything more than I wanted to kiss her at that moment. I wanted to pull her onto my lap and lose myself in her kiss, in the warmth I hadn't felt since the day she'd waved to me from the security line before flying back to LA.

But if I did, I knew we'd get back together. No way was I strong enough to let her go again, even when it was the best thing for her.

And it *was* the best thing.

So I swallowed, pushed back my chair, and stood as I looked down into her emerald gaze.

"That's a hard pass for me," I said, a little shocked by how unfeeling my voice sounded when every cell in my body was drowning in feelings.

I left the kitchen, not interested in the bullshit that Noah yelled as I walked away—"Why are you such a dick?"—or the verbal take-down Joss was sure to deliver the next time she saw me.

Fuck them all, I thought as I headed out the back door, needing to get the hell away from there.

But I knew, as I sat alone on the deck at midnight, staring at the orange tip of a Swisher while everyone inside the house yelled, "Happy New Year," that I'd never forgive myself for what my words had done to her face.

CHAPTER ONE

A YEAR AND A HALF LATER

"I hate you so much that it makes me sick."

—*10 Things I Hate About You*

Wes

I shut off my alarm—six a.m.—and sat up in the dark.

AJ, my roommate, muttered, "Sadistic assbag," and rolled over in his bed while I climbed out of mine and got dressed. We'd been sent to the same Canadian summer baseball league and stayed with the same host family, so even though it was only the first day of fall classes, it felt like we'd lived together for years. I knew he'd sleep in until five minutes before we had to leave for lifting, but I wanted to be wide awake and ready to go hard when we hit Acosta in a couple of hours.

I put in my AirPods and cranked "Trouble's Coming" as I took off down the hill, making my way past dorms whose names I'd yet to learn. I'd run every morning since move-in, and there was just something about campus in the early hours, before it came alive, that I loved. Seeing the sun rise, listening to the birds (between

songs), running past the green trees on the hill that somehow felt *different* from the green trees back home; I was smitten with California.

I was smitten with UCLA, to be precise.

And honestly—my smittenhood probably had more to do with the fact that it was where my second chance was happening than the location itself. Yes, it was a gorgeous setting, but it was the setting where my dreams were taking place.

That was the sappy shit that I felt in my bones as I slowed to let a scooter zip past me. Because I was obsessed with the possibilities of this place. The baseball potential (both college and fingers-crossed MLB), the educational potential, the *other* potential; this spot on the map, Westwood, was like the starting point of my everything.

I kind of wanted to break into song as I jogged around a dude with a hose who was washing out a trash can; I was that big of a sap.

Instead, I gave him a chin-nod and kept running.

Good morning, my dude.

AJ might've thought I was out of my mind for running so early every day, but he was just a baby, an eighteen-year-old who'd barely had time to shed the title of prom king before reporting to school.

I, on the other hand, was a twenty-year-old freshman with a lot to prove.

Because two years ago, I'd had everything.

Then I lost it all.

So now that I had a second chance to grab on to that everything, you could bet your ass I wasn't casually reaching.

No, sir, I was greedily grabbing with both hands and never letting go.

I was *carpe diem*—ing the crap out of my life, throwing myself into every single moment because I knew firsthand how fleeting those moments could be. I mean, if I was being honest, I was absurdly giddy about my first day of school. Like, I didn't want to spew bullshit like *today's the first day of the rest of my life* (that was tragically close to *live, laugh, love*, right?), but it kind of felt like it was.

And I was so ready.

I ran my three-mile loop, showered, then grabbed a breakfast burrito with AJ at Ackerman before we took scooters over to Acosta.

I fucking loved the scooters.

Since I hadn't brought a car to college and didn't own a bike, the Bird scooters that could be found all over campus were the stuff of my dreams.

Wes + scooters = HEA

God, I really am an overexcited kindergartener on my first day of school, aren't I?

I was still nerding out when I got to my first class—lifting had done nothing to hack my buzz.

“Welcome to Civil Engineering and Infrastructure.”

I entered the lecture hall the second the professor started speaking, which meant that all hundredish students in the enormous classroom turned their eyes away from him to witness my entrance.

Way to go, dipshit.

I'd completely underestimated the amount of time it took to get from Acosta to Boetler Hall, so my decision to grab a protein smoothie with AJ after lifting had been a total mistake.

But I'd been so stoked after being the top baseball lifter of the day—*hell yes*—that it'd seemed like a brilliant idea (at the time). Why not hang out for a few extra minutes, doing nothing but reveling in the fact that so far, on Day One, I'd yet to screw up?

I quickly took an empty seat in the front, unzipping my backpack and pulling out a notebook (I was *not* a laptop guy when it came to note-taking). It was an intro course, the introductory course for civil and environmental engineering majors, so the last thing I needed was to miss any important information.

"Instead of going over the syllabus with you, such a cliché thing to do on the first day, I'm going to trust that you are capable of reading it. You look like a smart bunch." Professor Tchodre, a tall man with a serious mustache, stood at the table in the front of the hall and said, "So let's get started, shall we?"

I pressed on the eraser of my mechanical pencil, opened the notebook, and got ready to take notes.

"In this class, we will be looking at the role of civil engineers in infrastructure development and preservation."

I started writing as he launched into the material, still blown away by the fact that I was taking an engineering course on the first day of my first quarter. I'd assumed gen eds would fill my freshman year, bogging me down with pointless classes like world music and anthropology, so it felt amazing that I was enrolled in this, as well as chem and calc.

I'd *missed* math and science in the two years I'd been out of school, as crazy as it sounded.

I blamed Mrs. Okun, my tenth-grade physics teacher.

She talked me into attending an engineering camp in Missouri the summer after my sophomore year (during the two weeks between summer and fall ball), and I really hadn't known what to expect. I'd really only gone because it was a two-week getaway from boring Nebraska, right?

I never would've imagined how much I'd love being around other people who liked math and science in the same way that I did. Before camp, I'd been a good student with no clue what I wanted to do with my life, aside from being a major league pitcher, of course.

But the minute I had arrived, it felt like I'd found my spot. I understood the way everything worked in that place, with those people; it all made sense. That camp lit something inside me and made me feel like I was meant to follow the engineering path, even though baseball was my higher priority.

So the fact that I was finally here, in a lecture hall, on my way to making it happen?

It felt huge.

I basically wrote down Tchodre's every word until class ended, knowing I wouldn't need the majority of the info but not really caring. I took college for granted the first time, the idea that *of course* I could go if I wanted to, but after seeing those options disappear, I had an entirely different outlook now.

I was cherishing every fucking piece of it.