

Checking YOU OUT



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WEDNESDAY BOOKS
NEW YORK

Chapter One

LIZZIE

Technically, snacks aren't allowed in the library. No one wants rats gnawing through the stacks of books. But I can't resist bringing my favorite librarian a sealed container of their favorite snack. When I place the red and pink package of Hello Kitty pineapple cakes on their desk, they laugh out loud and immediately clap their hand over their mouth.

"You didn't!" exclaims Mx. Villet. "How?" They marvel at the package of eight bright yellow pineapple cakes. I got them hooked on the ones from Sweet Yen Café, a Taiwanese bakery my family and I go to for authentic treats. And I know how much they love Hello Kitty.

"I have my ways," I say slyly. They slip the treats into their denim backpack before pointing to a stack of newly arrived books. I softly clap my hands in delight. I'm a kid at Christmas. They hand me ten new books.

I marvel at the way the spines gleam under the thin library covering and the way the bright green NEW sticker along the bottom edge stands out. I hug them to my chest like they are long-lost friends, which they are.

“Thanks, Mx. V,” I whisper.

I weave through the tan and blue tables until I arrive at the one we always meet at. No shock. I’m first. I sort the stack into piles—horror, mystery, fantasy, romance. I place a thick piece of black construction paper over the horror novels because I’ll definitely have nightmares if I even glance at these covers. I once made the mistake of looking at *Murders at Midnight* and had a vision of kitchen knives stuck in my head at 12 AM.

Eagerly, I look through the fantasy selections. The first one has an inky black cover with the hint of an eye. The next features the shape of a dragon’s wing. And the last is simply a swirl of colors and the face of a warrior. I crack open *The Eye of the Beholder* and flip through the crisp new pages. Is there anything more thrilling than opening a brand-new book? I seriously doubt it.

I pick out my favorite cozy chair and settle in with my new book. Soon after, Claudia arrives. She’s been my best friend since we were in utero because our parents were in the same prenatal yoga class. She flops her glittery pink book bag on top of the table and immediately grabs *The Last Visit*. I shudder when she sits down next to me.

“Don’t worry, I won’t subject you to the sordid details of the murder in this one,” says Claudia.

“You said that last time and then texted me such a vivid description that I couldn’t sleep without a light on,” I respond.

She laughs. “I sent you four kitten videos to make up for it.”

Her shiny blue and pink hummingbird earrings shimmer

as she cozies into the chair next to mine. We silently read side by side.

Daphne arrives and makes a beeline for the covers with sweet couples leaning toward each other. She happily sighs when she sits down at the table. She pulls out a black Mole-skine notebook and flips to a fresh page. I absolutely love her book journal. She keeps detailed stats of how many pages she's read, mini book cover stickers, and neatly written reviews of every single romance she's read, giving bonus stars if they contain her favorite tropes.

And finally, Jonny joins, pulling his stack to the other side of the table. Ever since the great nightmare of *Murders at Midnight*, he's made sure to keep his horror novels far away from me. He gives a nod, then wraps the black construction paper around the cover of his book.

My best friends and I meet in the Central Library every Wednesday. We met in sixth grade when we were the only kids at the Scholastic Book Fair who lingered long enough to have the volunteer parents who ran it politely ask us to leave by turning off the lights in the auditorium. The four of us started hanging out and just reading together silently. We tried to start a book club. But we kept pushing our fave genres on each other and failing, until we decided that just hanging out with each other was more important. After silent reading time, we head to The Last Bookstore to hunt for any new editions of our favorites, and then we end the night with a dinner of Taiwanese dan dan noodles and shaved ice at Pine & Crane. It's the most perfect hangout ever, and most importantly, we are all bookworms who respect that reading time in the library is sacred.

I look around at everyone and give a happy sigh before returning to my new book. My favorite part of any fantasy novel is the beginning. It's always a new adventure, even if it's a series.

When it's time to head over to The Last Bookstore, I stop by Mx. Villet's desk to say goodbye. They tap on the cover of *The Tales of Feline Forest*.

"It just came back. Pulled it for you."

I've read this copy about eight hundred times since I first discovered the fantasy series at my middle school's book fair. I had begged my mom for a kitten, and she shoved this book in my hands and declared it the same as having a pet. I fell in love with the series from the very first glance at the interior map with the Citrus River and the wooded forest full of adorable stray felines. I have my own copy at home—several different copies, in fact—but there's something special about the library version. It feels like comfort food.

"Thank you," I say, taking the book from them.

When I join my friends at the elevator, they smile at me cradling the worn-in copy of my favorite book. Claudia wraps an arm around me.

That's the thing I love about my friends. They don't care that I read the same books I read in the sixth grade and we're at the end of senior year. They don't make fun of me. In fact, they understand why I love it, just like I understand why book reading lights are the best holiday gifts. (I found us the perfect set and got matching stickers to put on them for "BB4E"—Book Besties Forever.)

Sure, people at school think I'm kind of weird. Or anti-social. But here's the thing: I don't care. I truly, truly, truly

do not care that the so-called popular kids who run around in the California sun and do things like hike Runyon Canyon and wax poetic about the twenty-dollar smoothies at Erewhon think that I'm an introvert with only three friends, because I absolutely am and it makes me so happy.

Give me a couch, a stack of books, and a lychee boba tea drink and I'll show you the best day of my life.

I flip through book one, *Feline Forest: Zephyr's Quest*, and I smile because it still makes me feel like I did when I first discovered it. The black-and-white cat face with long white whiskers on the cover. Its shiny green eyes glinting at me. The mysterious woods in the background that feel ominous and beautiful.

Claudia steers me clear before I bump into the elevator doors. We exchange a smile. I've stopped her from bumping into walls while she reads. It's something we do as a group.

Once we're in the elevator, Daphne, Claudia, and Jonny go back to reading. I turn my attention back to my book. A slip of white paper falls out from its pages, floating down to the ground.

I bend to pick it up. It's a checkout receipt. I glance at the book titles:

The Tales of Feline Forest: Zephyr's Quest
Dragon Fighters
Moonstone Chasers

My three all-time favorite fantasy series. Date checked out: March 13, 2024. I get this weird feeling in my stomach. My palms are sweaty. My pulse quickens. If I could only take three books to a desert island, these are the exact ones I

would take. I gulp and rest a hand over my heart, as if that will still it.

Before I can stop myself, I declare, “I found my next crush.”

My friends look up from their books; three sets of eyebrows are raised. Since they’ve known me, I’ve only had crushes on book characters who don’t exist in real life. No actual person can come close to my feelings for Drago Tsang, the wondrous dragon warrior with a heart of gold. My heart is thumping wildly in my chest.

Claudia clears her throat. “Let me see that.” I hand Claudia the slip of paper. She scans it quickly. “Wow,” she murmurs. “This is like looking into your soul.”

Daphne shoves her *Just One More Chapter* bookmark in place while Jonny grabs his *Latino Queer Joy* bookmark, then look over Claudia’s shoulders.

“I never thought I’d see the day,” says Daphne.

Jonny looks at me with a wide grin. “Wow, you really do have a crush already,” he teases.

“Shut up,” I say, though I have the biggest smile on my face.

“L is blushing!” exclaims Daphne. I clap my hands over my face like I can cover the hot flush that’s creeping along my cheeks.

“Oh my gosh, you guys, this is the ultimate mystery,” says Claudia. “We need to find Lizzie’s book soul mate!”

Claudia wraps her arm around me. “We’ll talk to Mx. Villet next week and see what they know.”

“What if this person is like eighty years old?” I ask.

Claudia waves my question away. “I doubt it. Consider this my first case. Please?”

I glance at Daphne and Jonny. They already have pleading looks on their faces. What harm is there in letting Claudia look for them? I mean, it's not like I'm going to lose anything by letting *her* do the searching. Best case: I meet the person of my dreams. Worst case: They turn out to be some old person and we become book buddies.

"Consider yourself hired, Detective Kim," I say, offering Claudia my hand.

Claudia shakes it briskly. "You won't regret this."

Chapter Two

LIZZIE

I immediately regret it. Usually, I leisurely stroll through The Last Bookstore's maze of books, hunting down bargain prices for used editions of my favorites that I can't afford to pay full price for. But this time, Claudia is hot on my heels, cooking up theories of who it might be. She has already texted me a list of "potential suspects / soul mates." Her words, not mine.

I mean, it's just a library checkout receipt. A piece of trash. But I can't help but think about who this person might be. They must be close to my age, because all three fantasy series had a resurgence on social media when I was in middle school.

I pull out the receipt from my book bag to look at it again. There's no name. Only the checkout date, call number, and return date. I tuck it into my wooden storage box of bookmarks with the word *booktrovert*, an Asian Boba Girl sticker, and a big-eyed kitten engraved on it.

Daphne and Jonny have drifted away and are already

immersed in the horror and romance sections, so it's just me with supersleuth Claudia.

I run my hands along the spines of the books I've seen before. I have a good amount at home, but there's something magical about staring at a row of books that you know and love. My favorites are the ones with the gold foil lettering. I pull a few out to see if there's a new special-edition cover I've somehow missed.

Claudia's still talking. She taps her full lips as she muses on another theory.

"What if we leave a note back?" asks Claudia, a mischievous smile on her face.

"What do you mean 'we'?"

"Obviously, you would write it, but I would think of the right place to leave it. A trail of clues."

"Ooh, I haven't seen this one before," I exclaim. It's the edition with a special cover of *Song of a Thousand Swords* from the Treasure Trove subscription box. I stared at it on Insta for two weeks before I told myself it wasn't meant to be. Mainly because of the fifty-dollar price tag. Claud, Daphne, Jonny, and I are saving up for a college road trip tour. Local colleges like USC and UCLA first, then driving up north to Berkeley. We want to visit our future alma maters together (except for Jonny's, since he's headed to NYU). We've been planning it for months, but it's put a serious cramp in my normal book buying habits. Obviously, the library is perfect. But all I want is to take this book home with me.

Because my eyes have been glued on the book, I don't see Claudia writing notes in her green notebook with the pencil she usually has tucked behind her ear. Claudia was so

hooked on old *Veronica Mars* episodes in eighth grade that she insisted I call her Veronica.

“What are you cooking up?”

“A first draft,” she says, handing me her notebook.

Dear Book Soul Mate:

I know we don't know each other, but we have a lot in common. First, we're both into the same books. So I'm leaving you a note in the next book I want to read to see if we're truly meant to meet. What do you say?

Yours,

Future Soul Mate

“No,” I respond, thrusting the notebook back into her hands. “Absolutely not. I can’t tell this random person that I think we’re soul mates. That’s like revealing the third act in the first five pages.”

Claudia has her pencil poised over her notebook. “What about ‘Dear Book Friend’ and ‘Your Future Friend?’”

“I don’t know.” I suddenly feel really embarrassed, like this person can see me. They can’t possibly be here. Or could they? I turn around and eye the customers in the fantasy section with me. Everyone looks older than me.

Daphne rounds the corner with a stack full of romance novels, and Claudia shoves the notebook in her face. Daphne gives her books to me.

“I know we said we’re budgeting for our road trip, but I just need to look at these and maybe get just one?”

She has fifteen romances in her stack.

Daphne reads over the note. “Oooh, let me add a little bit more spice.” There’s a wicked grin on her face that I do not like. Claudia hands her the pencil.

Everything in me says not to trust a romance reader with a love letter.

“I don’t even know this person,” I argue as Daphne scribbles. I search the aisles for Jonny, my voice of reason, my calm in this swoony love storm that is brewing.

I find Jonny and he’s talking to the cute bookstore clerk he’s had a crush on for forever. I bite my lip. I can’t interrupt him right now. The clerk is laughing at something Jonny said and is touching his forearm. Jonny’s smile is pure joy. I look back at Daphne and Claudia, who are in serious giggle mode. Ugh. My love for Jonny wins out. I let Daphne finish writing.

“Now, *this* is a note to remember,” declares Daphne. Claudia reads it over my shoulder.

Hello, Friend!

I couldn’t help but notice that your library book checkout list has the same exact books I love. I found your list when I checked out *Feline Forest: Zephyr’s Quest*. It’s my absolute favorite book. Is it yours too? It might seem wild to suggest meeting you, but I feel like we could be good friends, or something more. If you’d like to meet sometime, leave me a note in the fantasy novel you’d take with you to a desert island.

Love,

Your Secret Admirer

I have to hand it to Daphne—it’s a cute note. But I’m not that kind of girl. At least, I don’t think I am. I’m not the main character in a romance novel. I’m more of the fun friend who you call after the amazing first date or disastrous but charming meet-cute.

“You’re doing that thing again,” says Claudia.

“What? Reading?”

“No, that thing where you make a mental list of why you’re not the main character of your own life.”

I sigh.

“Listen,” pleads Claudia, “it’s only a note. It could be nothing. It could be everything. But you never know unless you try. Just try.”

I glance at Daphne, who nods in agreement. “What could it hurt?” she asks.

I stare down at the notebook, and my heart thumps. I reach for the pencil in Daphne’s hand and make some edits.

Hello, Friend!

I ~~couldn't help~~ but noticed that your library book checkout list has the same exact books I love. I found your list when I checked out *Feline Forest: Zephyr's Quest*. It's my absolute favorite book. Is it yours too? It might seem wild to suggest meeting you, but I feel like we could be good friends, ~~or something more~~. If you'd like to meet sometime, leave me a note in the fantasy novel you'd take if you were stranded on a deserted island.

~~Love,~~ — Fellow Fantasy Reader
Your Secret Admirer

I give the notebook back to them, and Claudia squeals with glee, clapping her hands together.

“Let’s leave the letter tomorrow, as soon as we can,” declares Claudia.

And that’s how my book soul mate mystery began.

Chapter Three

LIZZIE

What Claudia said about me not being the main character in my own life bugs me because she's right. It's annoying when she's right, so I hop into our group chat to protest.

Me

Fine. I've decided to do something out of character.

Claudia

About time!!!

Daphne

Tell me you'll date someone who isn't permanently attached to a book, because I know someone very cute.

Jonny

Lizard can't do that.

Me

I don't trust someone who doesn't read!! Who doesn't like knowledge?!? You lack empathy! Books are mirrors into our souls so anyone who doesn't read is a walking ghost.

The chat goes silent, then the three dots appear and disappear. I can see my friends all wanting to chime in. They know I'm right. I might be rigid in my beliefs, but a girl has to have standards.

My sophomore-year boyfriend was a total jock. Like, a watch-football-every-single-Sunday kind of jock. But he could *really* kiss, and we both loved the *Jurassic World* franchise. That was literally all we had in common. I got bored quickly after realizing we could only talk about dinosaur DNA. I ended up reading while he watched football. He broke up with me because I was "too serious," and I vowed after that to only go out with guys who own a bookshelf.

Claudia

You are definitely thinking about Jett.

And yes, his name was Jett, with two *ts*.

Jonny

Oh my god! Jett! I forgot about that cutie. What about Henry? She has a crush on him.

Daphne

The most book boyfriend
ever.

Claudia

Who she's never asked
out!

Me

Hi! I can see your texts,
Claud.

Claudia

Good!

Daphne

You promised us you'd
do something out of
character.

* * *

Three days later, I finally get a break from thinking about my mystery crush and my goal to do something unexpected. It's early June, and that means kitten season is in full effect in Los Angeles. I spend every weekend at Best Friends Animal Society in the kitten nursery, helping feed the babies who come in. Some without their mothers. Some with their moms. And some of them as tiny as the palm of my hand. I wave hello to the familiar faces from the dog team before I head upstairs to the kittens.

Barbara is feeding a week-old kitten with a tiny bottle when I arrive, and she nods at me while keeping her blue-gloved hand steady on the black-and-white kitten's back.

“How are Cookies and Cream?” asks Barbara. The kitten hungrily suckles at the bottle. Cream-colored liquid formula stains his whiskers.

“Wild. Silly. So big now.” I gesture to show how big they’ve gotten. Barbara remembers when Cookies and Cream were itty-bitty incubator babies who came in with a bad viral infection. I fell in love with them from the moment I held them. I volunteered every day so I could help them get better. My mom and dad could see how much I loved Cookies and Cream, and we adopted them after they had their spay and neuter surgeries. Now they are spoiled rotten, as they should be.

I go to the stainless steel sink to wash my hands thoroughly before I put on my nursery apron. As I’m finishing up, I notice someone new in the kitten nursery. I glance at Barbara, who asks, “Can you please help train the new volunteer? My shift is over after I finish feeding Zeus.”

I secretly sigh. *Of course* a new volunteer shows up when all I wanted was to cuddle some little neonatal kittens and bottle-feed them.

At least the new volunteer is cute. He’s tall, Asian, with toned arms and tan skin. He has on an orange BEST FRIENDS LOS ANGELES T-shirt on. I wonder if he likes to read. A girl can dream. The name badge says, DYLAN LIN HE/HIM/HIS.

“I’m Lizzie.”

“Dylan,” he says, pointing to his name tag.

I offer him a white apron with black paw prints on it. “You’ll need this.”

He puts it on and somehow looks even cuter with it on. I don’t know how that’s possible. No one looks cute in these

aprons. I don't hate how I look in it, but even I look like a potato. The apron barely covers his broad shoulders.

"Is it your first day in the nursery?"

He smiles, and two dimples appear on his tan cheeks. Because of course they do. "Is it that obvious? I completed the online orientation last week. And I've watched a lot of Kitten Lady videos."

I laugh. "Training and watching a video are one thing, but once you have a tiny one-week-old mewling with no idea how to latch on a bottle, you suddenly forget everything you're supposed to know. Speaking from experience."

He gives me that adorable dimpled smile before gesturing forward. "Lead the way."

I take him to our dry-erase board, which lists every single kitten in the nursery, what time they got fed, how much they weigh, and any other special notes. "It's super important to weigh them before and after so we know how much food they took in. We need to know if they're losing weight, which could be a sign of a health issue."

"Right," says Dylan, with a serious nod. I hide my smile and hand him a pair of disposable blue gloves.

"You have to put these gloves on after you wash your hands, or you could spread germs to them. They have itty-bitty, weak immune systems and could catch anything. Since it's your first day, you aren't allowed to handle the animals just yet. You can watch me while I feed a litter."

I take him through the steps of preparing the bottles of kitten formula.

"Before I even pick up one, I get all my supplies ready. Mug of warm water to gently heat up the bottles. A fleece blanket. The scale."

Dylan follows me as I head to a cage. “We only feed one litter at a time and then toss the gloves in between. We don’t want to spread any illness from one litter to another.”

“Got it,” says Dylan with the most earnest look on his face.

I go first and pick up a tiny orange tabby named Garfield, who sleepily stretches his paws. I place him belly down on a warm towel.

“Can you write down his weight on the sheet outside his cage? Two hundred grams.”

“Sure thing.”

I gently grip the back of Garfield’s neck while bringing the ready-made warm bottle of kitten formula to his mouth. I patiently wait for the kitten to latch onto the nipple on the bottle. After poking out his pink tongue, he finds his way to the edge and begins slowly lapping up the formula, which isn’t the same as latching and drinking. I try again until he figures it out.

Dylan and I find a steady rhythm working together so that we’re able to feed all the kittens. Afterward, he sweeps the floor while I wash all the bottles.

“Thanks for showing me the ropes,” says Dylan. He bends down to sweep litter debris into a dustpan, and I can’t help but admire his muscular legs.

“Are you working on service hours for graduation?” I ask.

“Yes and no. I need about ten more hours at my school to complete my volunteer hours for graduation, but I mainly got hooked on kitten videos and decided to help out.”

I swallow, my throat suddenly dry. Cute *and* cares about cats. I’m itching to text the BB4E group chat about him, but my phone is in the volunteer cubbies area.

“Thanks for your help today,” I manage to say as he follows me out to the cubbies. I sign out of my shift, taking a beat longer than normal. Maybe he needs help with logging out? It’s his first day, after all.

His stainless steel water bottle says LOS ALTOS HIGH SCHOOL on it.

“Oh! You go to my high school,” I say a bit too loudly.

He grins. “I transferred back in January.” He takes a swig from the bottle. “Do you like it?”

Now, how do I answer that? It’s not that I hate my high school.

“I’m ready for it to be over,” I say honestly.

“I hear you,” he says, smiling with those hella cute dimples again.

I grab my tote bag, which is covered in bookish enamel pins and has the words CHECK ME OUT written across it. I search for my phone to get his number—to help him at his next shift, obviously. He crinkles his broad nose when he sees the heavy book sticking out of my book bag.

“Um, what was that?” I ask.

“What? Nothing,” says Dylan, averting his gaze.

“You made this face when you saw the book in my bag.” I scrunch my face in tight like I ate a bite of bitter melon. “Tell me you’re not one of *those* people.”

“Define ‘*those* people,’” he says with a laugh as we walk side by side to the parking lot. A giant poster of a puppy and kitten is plastered alongside the exterior wall, and I try to focus on their cute faces instead of how irritated I suddenly am. I stop in front of my car.

“Someone who hates reading.” I shudder to say it aloud.

His face goes blank for a second. He bites his lip. It’d be

endearing if I wasn't completely annoyed. Who grimaces at reading?

"Or worse—you're someone who thinks that fantasy novels aren't serious literature and therefore are not worthy of anyone's time except for nerds who dress in costume."

"I really didn't mean anything by it," he says. "I'm just more of a play-tennis-and-go-for-a-hike-on-the-weekends kind of person."

Hike? I'd rather scrub a toilet with a toothbrush.

Then he adds, "I have zero opinions on books."

I frown. "How is it possible to have zero opinions on books? I have way too many opinions on books I loved *and* hated. Maybe you just haven't found your genre yet. Literature goes beyond the required books that teachers make us read."

He shrugs his shoulders like it's not a big deal. "Not really my thing."

This can't be. I can't like someone who doesn't read. My burgeoning crush on this kitten-loving cutie is over. Good thing I didn't swap numbers with him under the guise of helping him out at his next shift.

He opens his car door. "Thanks for the help today. I appreciate it."

I wave goodbye with barely a smile and get in my car. Before I head out, I check my phone.

Claudia

I have the first suspect
for you.

Daphne

I have one too!

Jonny

Should I pretend I have
one too just to keep this
thread going?

Despite my bad mood over Dylan's serious lack of reading joy, a real smile breaks across my face. My friends are corny as hell, but I love them.

This is a work of fiction. All of the names, characters, organizations, places, and events portrayed in this work are either products of the author's imagination or used fictitiously.

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