

# THE UNWRITTEN RULE

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E L I Z A B E T H   S C O T T

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**New York London Toronto Sydney**

one

**I liked him first, but it doesn't matter.**

I still like him.

That doesn't matter either.

Or at least, it's not supposed to.

# two

**Brianna and Ryan are kissing. I try not to notice,** but when you're the only person in the room who isn't wrapped around someone else, it's kind of hard not to. Also, the movie Brianna has picked is one I've seen before.

More than once.

Thirty-seven times, to be exact.

I know it's a lot, but Brianna really likes it, and it's better than what's on at my house, which is either the news or old sitcoms—Dad's favorites—or DVDs Mom's made from footage of her in different cooking contests. Since she entered the Fabulous Family Cook-Off, she's been "studying" herself at other cook-offs to see how she can "improve her prep work."

Yes, I have watched my mother watch herself chopping onions. And then watched her critique herself on it.

So you can see why I'd rather watch a movie and why, as of right now, I'm on viewing thirty-seven of "girl meets boy, girl falls for boy, boy falls for girl, then boy gets cancer and dies while girl is brave and only cries once, at the end, as the boy says, 'I'll wait for you,' and then dies."

I admit, I cried the first time I saw it. And the second. But by the third time, I started to wonder about the girl's best friend, who shows up at periodic intervals throughout the movie to support the girl, usually by providing ice cream and/or doing something stupid-silly like catching her skirt in the door and tugging until she tears herself out of it. She also sings to an umbrella at one point.

Anyway, by the third time through, I started wondering about the best friend. How come she has to be klutzy and wacky? Doesn't she get tired of being supportive and eating ice cream? (Well, maybe not so much on the last thing.)

What's the best friend's life *really* like? She must do something when she isn't losing her skirt or saying, "Oh, you're so brave!"

So far, the best friend has been the following—at least in my mind:

—a secret heroin user (that was the week Ryan took Brianna to the awesome indie film about the model who stayed skinny by shooting heroin and how everyone told her how fabulous she looked right up until she died. I ended up going with them because Brianna said she wanted someone to talk to when she got bored. So I listened to her guess who was going to win the new

date-a-rockstar reality show episode where all the girls have to try to fry an egg naked without burning themselves. But what I saw of the movie was great, and I went back and saw it with my mother later. She said it was “depressing,” but at least I got to see the whole thing.)

—a spy (because hi, obvious awesome plot!)

—a superhero who is trying to save the world while keeping her disguise as a mild-mannered klutz (another obvious but awesome plot)

—in love with the boy, who loves her back, and they have secret meetings—when the girl is in one of her musical montages—and the boy tells the best friend he really wants her, but doesn’t want to hurt the girl, and the best friend agrees because she’s really a good person in spite of the fact that she’s totally into her best friend’s boyfriend.

That last one is—well, I try not to think about it, but I do.

I do because I can see it happening—in the movie, I mean—and the best friend is a nice person. Really, she is. She can’t help the way she feels about the guy.

She really can’t. Trust me on this one. I might be . . .

Oh, forget it. I am. I’m that girl. The one who likes her best friend’s boyfriend. In the world of friendship, I’m awful. Everyone knows the unwritten rule: You don’t like your best friend’s boyfriend.

I know that, I do, and I don’t want to like Ryan. He’s Brianna’s boyfriend. She’s crazy about him. If I turned my head a little, I could see them kissing. I know they’re together. I know it’s Brianna and Ryan now.

I don't look at them. I don't need the reminder that they're together.

And besides, I know that if I look it'll hurt too much.

So I watch the movie. Maybe the best friend is secretly an assassin from the future, and has come back through time to make sure an evil scientist is stopped before he destroys mankind.

A sofa throw pillow hits me in the head, and since I know who did it, I say, "Hey, Brianna, what if I miss what's going to happen next?"

Brianna laughs and I make myself look back at her.

She grins at me, lips not attached to Ryan any longer. "So, are you coming with us tonight or what?"

I pretend to stretch so I can look at the clock. It's only ten. Too early to say I have to go home. I'll have to make up a reason why I can't go with her. Them.

"I can't. Mom wants me to get up at five tomorrow and go shopping with her. She's doing another test run of her recipes in case she gets the call."

"Why do you have to go?" Brianna says.

"My dad can't because of his hip, and she wants someone there to help."

This is a lie. My mother doesn't need help when she's grocery shopping. She knows every grocery store in a fifty-mile radius like she knows our house. She knows who gets produce in when, which stores get the newest products first, and which ones are open late in case inspiration strikes and she wants to make something at 10 p.m.

Mom is intensely, fiercely focused on creating recipes. She

enters cooking contests all the time, and has “placed” in four, which is cook-off lingo for coming in second or third—which everyone, even Mom, says they’re happy about, but isn’t.

Mom wants to win a cook-off. I know she does. She likes cooking, she likes making up recipes, but she also enters seemingly every single cook-off there is. She keeps it pretty low-key—especially compared to some of the other “contesters” I’ve met—but it’s there and it drives her to keep going.

She’s always had that drive, I think. I mean, there’s a reason I quickly learned to play Go Fish with Dad and not her when I was little—with Dad, I at least won sometimes.

This year she’s sent in—and is now practicing—twenty recipes for the Fabulous Family Cook-Off. This is a low number in the contesting world, at least among the diehards, but Mom decided the key was to really focus on “just a few dishes.” Dad and I have been eating them for a while now because she wants to be ready when (my mother doesn’t believe in “if” when it comes to cook-offs) she gets the call.

Unfortunately, Brianna knows all of this, and that’s the problem with having a best friend who’s known you since you were five. Twelve years of friendship mean Brianna knows almost everything about me and my family.

“She doesn’t need you to go,” Brianna says. “She knows where everything is in every grocery store around here, and besides, she’s never needed your help shopping before. She has a system and everything.” (Brianna’s right, Mom does. She can find anything in any store in a minute, tops, and probably blindfolded to boot.)

But, of course, this doesn't help with the excuse thing at all.

"Maybe Sarah doesn't want to go to the party," Ryan says, looking at the framed photo of Brianna that Brianna's hung on the far wall. I took it last year, when I signed up for Photography thinking it would be an easy A.

It was a very hard B-, with a lot of bad photos on my part, but the picture of Brianna is a good one. She's sitting on her front steps, looking off into the distance, and I'd messed with the timer and the speed so much that I accidentally managed to get myself in the shot as I was running back to the camera to see if it was still working. I turned out as a smudge, a sort of blur of motion, but Brianna is perfectly still, perfectly captured. I messed around with the photo a little and got Brianna to almost glow in it, pushed the blur that was me into a ghostly shimmer.

"She wants to go," Brianna says to Ryan, and then nudges me with a foot. "I hear Tommy might be there."

I shrug. Tommy is in my English and Chemistry classes, and he's sweet. He's also hopelessly in love with Brianna.

However, unlike most of the guys who are hopelessly in love with Brianna, he knows he has no chance with her. So he has decided he likes me. Today, in school, he asked me if I was going to be at the party tonight, and I watched him start to ask if Brianna was coming too and then stop, remember she has a boyfriend.

I watched him remember he was supposed to like me.

"You don't think he's cute?" Brianna says.

"He's okay." He is. He's okay. He has eyes and a nose and a mouth and hair that doesn't look like it was cut by a lawn mower

and his clothes aren't hideous and he doesn't smell or spit when he talks.

"So, come with us. There's always room in Ryan's car, you know. The whole school could fit in his car. Which is fine! Great!" She rolls her eyes at me.

I smile, because there *is* always room in Ryan's car. He drives a station wagon, and Brianna hates it. She wants Ryan to ask his parents for a new car, and has since they started going out a little over six weeks ago.

"I like my car," Ryan says, and glances at me.

I let myself look at him for just a second, get a glimpse of dark hair, bright, intense eyes (so blue you'd swear they came straight from the sky on a hot summer day, the kind of day where even the clouds have burned away), and the tiny scar that cuts across the corner of his right eyebrow that he got during a soccer match back in seventh grade.

"I can't go," I say. "I mean, I can, but I'm tired and I had to eat Cheesy Corn and Rice Casserole for dinner again and my stomach hurts—I mean, it's the fourth night in a row I've had to eat it—so I'd rather just go home and—"

"Pleeeeeeease," Brianna says.

"I'm too full of corn and rice to be any fun."

"You're full of something all right," she says, shaking her head, and then sighs. "Fine. Go home, leave me and Ryan all by ourselves at the party."

"You'll have fun," I say.

"I know," she says. "I just like it if you're there. I always like it if you're there."

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I look at Ryan again, one last quick glance before I go.

He's looking at me, and for a second, one crazy second before I stand up and smile and say goodbye and good night and walk out to my car, I think about what it would be like to be the one sitting next to him.