

the Art of Breaking Up

ALSO BY ELIZABETH STEVENS

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the Art of Breaking Up

ELIZABETH STEVENS



SLEEPING DRAGON BOOKS
ADELAIDE

Sleeping Dragon Books

the Art of Breaking Up
by Elizabeth Stevens

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*This one's for me.
There are some things you get over,
some things that haunt you,
and sometimes you put them in books.*

Author's Note

All authors put a bit of themselves in every book to the point we worry all our characters are starting to be the same person, but what you're about to read is the most autobiographical I've ever been. Some of it was intentional, and some of it was an accident. It's made this story pretty special to me, and not at all as therapeutic as I expected. I still had a lot of fun with it, though and am going to miss Norah and Wade with the same nostalgic rose-coloured lenses with which I miss my teens.

Think of it as a mixture of *Keeping Up Appearances* and *Accidentally Perfect*, nestling between them in plot, heat-level, and the amount of swearing.

This book is written using Australian English. This will affect the spelling, grammar and syntax you may be used to. It might come across as typos, awkward sentences, poor grammar, or missed/wrong words. In the majority of cases (I won't claim it's infallible, despite all best efforts), this is intentional and just an Aussie way of speaking (it took my US beta readers a bit to get used to). I can't say 'the' Aussie way, since we seem to differ even within the same state. Just think of us as a weird mix of British and US vernacular and colloquialisms, but with our own randomness thrown in. I still hope you enjoy it, though!

Chapter One

“Oh, piece of shit,” I heard Lisa grumble from where she was leaning on the locker next to mine.

“What?” I asked as I rifled in my already unmanageably messy locker.

“I owe you ten bucks.”

“Sweet.” I paused in my rifling; textbook not just lost but momentarily forgotten. “Why?”

“You were right,” she sighed. “Steph didn’t last the weekend.”

I turned around involuntarily. My eyes had no trouble finding the object of our bet. Not that it had really been a bet. Upon hearing of Clara’s upcoming party the week before, I’d merely scoffed, “Ten bucks says Steph doesn’t last the weekend,” and Lisa had replied, “She’s barely been around a week. He won’t be done with her yet.” But, done with Steph he was.

Unless, of course, Steph had suddenly decided to become a brunette over the weekend and apply far too much fake tan. In which case, that might have been Steph pressed up against his locker and being utterly smothered by the human shit-stain more commonly known as Wade Phillips as they tried to inhale the same molecule of air.

“Here,” Lisa said, feigning disinterest in the spectacle as she brandished a pretty blue plastic tenner at me.

On one hand, I felt bad taking her money. We both knew the only reason she'd underestimated even Wade's ability to go through girls was because there was still a small part of her that refused to believe he'd become such a wanker.

On the other hand, there was a pie and a bag of chips down at the Tuck Shop that had my name on them. And, faced with the option, my love of food would always win out.

Besides, if I didn't argue with her then we could both pretend she wasn't still hung up on him.

I nodded as I took it from her. "A bet's a bet."

"It's only fair." She slammed her locker a little more heavily than necessary.

I still said nothing. Just went back to my locker and internally cursed the day Wade Phillips came into this world. Again. But I did find my textbook.

"How far through your essay are you?" I changed the subject as I stacked my textbook in my arms and closed my locker noticeably less vigorously than my best friend.

"I finished the second edit last night."

Because of course she had. She said it almost absently, like it wasn't an achievement or anything. Which she wouldn't have thought it was. The absentness, I suspected though, had more to do with the fact her eyes were still glued to the display up the corridor.

"Have you even started?" she continued.

I turned to her with a look of utter injury on my face as we started walking to class. "Have I even...?" I breathed incredulously. "Do you think *so* little of me?"

She smiled and finally pulled her eyes off Wade. "I think very highly of you. I'm just not stupid enough to think you've started the essay."

“Well, you will be *very* proud of me, then,” I informed her as I did a little hip-twist as we walked along.

“You’ve started?” Had she been anyone else, I’d have been actually insulted by the shock not just in her voice but on her face. As it was, my best friend knew me the bestest in all the land.

I nodded. “I *have* started.”

“How many words do you have?”

“Twenty-three,” I said proudly.

She huffed a laugh. “The question is twenty-thr—”

It was, of course, just then that Wade turned around and right into Lisa’s path like he’d orchestrated the whole thing to rub his latest conquest in her face. That was possibly attributing far too much intelligence and organisation to him.

I watched in helpless slow-motion as my best friend ran right into the great arsehole, the giant hardback History textbook in her arms smacking her square in the face. It at least gave her a less embarrassing reason for her flushed face and quickly blinking eyes than the truth behind the reaction.

“Oh. Sorry, Wade,” she stammered breathlessly, managing a weak smile while her gaze lingered longingly on the way his, like, oh-so gorgeous ash-brown hair fell into his, like, totally dreamy eyes.

Totally unfazed and in full-on charm mode, Wade grinned widely. He had the actual audacity to put a hand on her arm at the same time his eyes slid to one of his stupid friends. He’d already mentally dismissed her. “All good, Lis. Mind out next time, yeah?”

Lisa’s answering giggle was pathetic, in every literal and etymological sense of the word. “Of course. Sorry.” She looked down and started walking away again.

I felt my arm moving, but was powerless to stop it. Like

watching an oncoming train-wreck, I saw my hand close on the material of Wade's Matric bomber and turn him harshly to face me, caring not one single frakking whit that he was in the middle of saying something to his sycophant.

"How about we practise our good manners today, Phillips?" I suggested chirpily.

His mouth was still half-open from being interrupted. As he looked me over intently, his eyes lost the look of surprise and the corner of his lips tipped up in a knowing and mischievous half-smirk. It wasn't the first time we'd done this dance.

"I could say it goes both ways, Lincoln."

"Oh, I'm afraid we rejected your claim to the corridor. So, it turns out," I shrugged as though I was sorry, "that in fact everyone has a right to walk here."

Wade's eyes darted to Lisa, who was begging me silently to drop it. "Logic then suggests I also have a right to walk here," he answered.

"Of course, you do," I started out sweetly. "But it would apparently kill you to politely observe the natural flow."

"And what about my natural flow?" he asked, a suggestive smirk at his lips.

I was about ready to kick him in his natural flow.

"How about, next time you decide to enter oncoming traffic, you use your blinkers? Check both ways?" I clicked my fingers. "Oh, that's right. Your driving instructor apparently forgot that little lesson." I paused to see if he'd rise to the bait. He didn't. My stupid mouth decided to keep pushing. "You know. Since you crashed your fancy car and all."

There was a slight crack in the arrogant, lazily charming armour as his nose wrinkled like he wanted to say something really

unpleasant to me. Oh, how I wished he would. His grey eyes stared into mine for what felt like the longest time. I almost regretted my words. By all accounts, that crash had been a bad one. People had been hurt. But, pissing off Wade Phillips had become a singularly favourite past time of mine the last couple of years.

Finally, Wade just sucked his teeth and momentarily turned to Lisa. “My bad, Lis. I’ll watch myself.”

Lisa turned an even more violent shade of red, helped along fabulously by her beautiful ginger traits, and nodded quickly. “Sure. Whatever.” She looked at me pointedly. “Norah, we’re late.”

Wade and I squared off for a few more tense heartbeats, until Lisa’s plucking at my arm got too persistent to ignore. I flashed him a none too friendly grin before letting Lisa pull me to class.

“I wish you wouldn’t do that,” she whispered to me as I struggled to keep up with her.

If our school had that walking sport in Athletics Day, girl would leave all other competitors in her dust on a good day. When she was flustered? My legs were longer and I still practically had to jog to keep up with her.

“He pisses me off.”

“So does Felix. And Vinnie. And Harry. But they don’t bring out the worst in you. You don’t make jokes about serious shit that happened to *them!*”

I rolled my eyes. “What serious shit happened ever to them?” I muttered.

“Norah!” Her tone reminded me that wasn’t the point. Her voice was tense and I knew I’d pushed the boundaries one step too far that day.

“Okay. I’m sorry,” I sighed resignedly, keeping all further

thoughts of how much I hated Wade-the-Walking-Turd to myself.

“I know it comes from a place of love, but...” Her sigh was heavy with regret.

I nodded. “I promise all mentions of the car crash are *heretoforewith* off-limits.”

“That’s not a word.”

“I’m sure I heard in it one of those Shakespeare *doomagajigs*.”

“Plays,” she said, her tone becoming more rueful. “They’re called plays and you know that.”

My play was working. She was either forgiving me for my outburst or forgetting about it. Either way, I wasn’t about to give her any reason to get annoyed with me again.

“I still heard it. In fact, I’m sure you were the one who said it.”

Lisa threw me a look that informed me I was an idiot but reminded me I was lucky she loved me anyway. “I did not.”

And she’d remember. No matter how long ago she’d been in a play, she still remembered all her lines from every single one. If I remembered what I had for breakfast that morning, I considered that a win.

I nudged her gently as we walked into the classroom and she smiled at me, all annoyance gone.

Now, all I had to do was avoid Wade for the rest of the day and I wouldn’t have to see it again.

Which was far easier said than done.



So, I hadn’t avoided Wade the rest of the day, but I had managed

to leave the antagonism at a nice cool temperature that saw me do nothing more than narrow my eyes at him behind Lisa's back. He'd had the gall to wink at me in return, but Lisa had turned around and I'd narrowly forestalled unleashing my fearsome retribution on him. My reward had been the highly anticipated pie. I'd imagined smashing it into Wade's face, but eating it was far sweeter.

A part of me was re-imagining what Wade would have looked like with hot – lukewarm, let's be honest – meat pie all over his idiotically arrogant face as I walked into the house that night. Lisa and I had had sports' practice after school, then we'd wasted some time at Macca's on the way home, so I was later than usual. Which is my only explanation for trying to sneak in and up to my room like I was under some ridiculously misguided assumption that my parents had blindly thought I'd been in my room for the last couple of hours.

Sneaking around was not something I'd ever practised...unless Father Christmas was involved. There was a reason why I'd never caught him as a child. Okay. Two reasons.

I gently closed the front door as softly as I could and winced as the lock click sounded harshly loud.

The house was eerily quiet.

I looked up. Usually there was at least barely muffled music blaring from my older brother's room.

I strained my ears, like I could just make my hearing better through sheer will alone.

But, nothing.

No. Wait.

Something.

Something very quiet, coming from the kitchen.

Voices.

No idea what possessed me, I crept towards the kitchen door and pressed my back against the wall to listen.

“...asking for a moment, Owen,” Mum was saying. She sounded tired.

“I’m happy to give you as many moments as you need,” Dad replied, sounding like he was forcing some more positive emotion than he was feeling. “But I thought we agreed we weren’t going to do this now.”

I heard the sounds of something gently hitting something else, like whipping a tea towel. “I’m not trying to do anything now.”

“You say that, and then you say you want a moment. You can’t have it both ways, Elise. We either stick through it, or we don’t. We can’t half-arse this if you don’t want to worry the kids.”

My stomach flip-flopped, though I wasn’t entirely sure why.

Mum sighed. “No. No, you’re right. We said until Christmas. Wait until Norah’s graduated and one final family Christmas.” She sounded like she was giving herself a pep talk.

Wait... What? What did she mean ‘one final family Christmas’?

“If you can’t or won’t wait that long, I’m not going to make you.”

“No,” she sighed again. “For the kids. We can stay together another seven months for the sake of the kids. We’ve managed this long.” Like she was counting down the minutes.

“It wasn’t always...”

I didn’t care to hear any more.

Now I knew the reason my stomach flip-flopped and my heart constricted in my chest.

Had I heard right? Had I accidentally closed the door on my head and knocked myself out? I looked to the front door to check I wasn’t lying there and having some out of body experience. But no

such luck.

My breath was coming faster than I liked.

I stumbled to the bottom of the stairs, my head a mess of thoughts and feelings I was too afraid to let in properly.

Mum and Dad were talking about divorce. About us not being a family anymore.

I'd never experienced a literal rug being pulled out from underneath me, but I was pretty sure I had some idea of how it would feel. I felt suspended between losing and keeping my balance, a nervous jolt of adrenaline spiking in my chest as I teetered between the uncertainty of future safety.

My hand gripped the bannister hard, but I couldn't make my feet take that first step upstairs. I had no idea how long I stood there.

"And, just where have you been?" Koby suddenly demanded loudly, making me jump.

I looked up at him quickly, feeling far guiltier than I really had reason to.

Then, proving it the joke it had been intended, he laughed goofily. "Chillax, Young Linc." He gave me a lop-sided grin as he thundered down the stairs towards me then ruffled my hair on his way to the kitchen.

But chillaxing was hardly on the radar. My heart pounded, both from his intentional and teasing scare, and from my parents' words. They echoed in my head as though they were bouncing off the walls of my skull. Like that old Windows screensaver the school receptionist still used.

"Koby," I heard Mum chuckle as he walked into the kitchen.

It might have just been me, but she sounded nervous, like he'd caught them out.

"Was that Norah you were talking to?" Dad asked.

“Yeah. Regular bad girl, that one. You’re gonna have to put bars on her windows to stop her sneaking out at night,” he snorted.

“Leave her be,” Dad said fondly as Mum said, “Like we almost did with you, you mean?”

I started running up the stairs, wanting to avoid seeing them for as long as possible.

“I hope you and Lis didn’t fill up on junk,” I heard Dad say and turned to see him at the bottom of the stairs, smiling ruefully.

I forced a smile of my own. “Nope. Just enough to still have room for dinner.”

“Good.” He nodded. “I’m serving up now, then.”

I nodded my head once. “Okay. Be right back down.”

He paused, watching me carefully. I felt my heart flip-flop in my chest again and forced my smile wider. It wavered and I felt my eyes get hot. Just as I thought tears were about to fall unbidden, Dad gave me another smile and headed back to the kitchen.

There was noise again in the house. The noise of a family going about their business as though it wasn’t all going to come crashing down around us in the near future.

I released a big, shaky breath and took the rest of the stairs two at a time.

I threw my backpack on my bedroom floor and ripped my phone out of my pocket. Lisa’s chat thread popped up and my fingers hovered over the keyboard. I felt frozen. No words. My head was a numb buzzing. I shared everything with Lisa. I always had. But I didn’t know how to put this into words. I didn’t know how to start a conversation I wasn’t sure I wanted to have. After all, words gave a thing power. And maybe, if I didn’t give words to it, I could – like the people downstairs – pretend it wasn’t happening.