

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

ELLIE HALL

THE
NOT

Love

LIST



A SWEET ROMANTIC COMEDY

THE Not Love LIST



ELLIE HALL

ABOUT THIS BOOK

I don't believe in love at first sight, but it turns out that hate at first sight is definitely real.

Cateline

I gave up my career in professional ballet to pursue a college degree. It was the logical and safe choice—and not only because a degree would secure me a 401k. Back home I had a suitor and had to escape that barbarian.

Leaving the past behind, I landed a job as an etiquette coach. I quickly learned how to transform cavemen into gentlemen. However, having gained my independence, I'm not looking for one of my own.

And I'm certainly not looking at my latest client, the football player they call "the Wolf." Not at his large hands, broad shoulders, or his captivating eyes. I'm no Little Red Riding Hood. I've had enough of big, bad men, thank you very much.

Connor

Getting in trouble with my commissioner after an error in judgment and having to attend etiquette training isn't the worst part of the punishment. No, that's getting benched from dating or hooking up while at "reform school."

My nickname isn't unfounded. I have plenty of room in my life for women, just not relationships. Then again, that doesn't mean I can't have a little fun with the sassy and striking, yet tightly wound woman (she wears a bun!) assigned as my new image coach.

She despises me—or maybe just football and fooling around. Typically, I take over a room with my swagger alone but can't seem to get her to let her hair down. When the real-world application of our lessons takes us on a camping trip, things between us get serious—life and death serious—and I suddenly can't imagine mine without her.

We're opposites in every way, like rivals on the field, so why are we so attracted to each other?

CONTENTS

Reader note

Kerfuffle

1. Cateline
2. Connor
3. Cateline
4. Connor
5. Cateline
6. Connor
7. Connor
8. Cateline
9. Connor
10. Cateline
11. Cateline
12. Connor
13. Connor
14. Cateline
15. Cateline
16. Connor
17. Connor
18. Cateline
19. Cateline
20. Connor
21. Connor
22. Cateline
23. Connor
24. Connor
25. Cateline
26. Connor
27. Cateline
28. Cateline
29. Connor
30. Connor
31. Cateline
32. Cateline
33. Connor
34. Connor
35. Connor
36. Cateline
37. Connor

38. [Connor](#)

39. [Cateline](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Also by Ellie Hall](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Let's Connect](#)

READER NOTE

Welcome back to Concordia, or if this is your first visit, I'm glad you're here!

Technically, this is book two of the Love List series, however, all of the books stand alone, meaning you can read them in any order. The storylines in each of the books take place at roughly the same time and, in places overlap, but I did my best to make it so readers can dip in and out of the various books without needing to have read the one that was previously released. Of course, reading all of them will provide a layered, nuanced, and hopefully hilarious experience!

In case the characters in this book seem somewhat familiar, I originally published Kat and Wolf's story in 2020 as *True Love with the Football Billionaire*, then I changed it to *To Love or Not to Love the Billionaire*.

It has since been expanded and revised, but you'll still get Kat, aka Cateline, the ballerina who regrets nothing except hanging up her toe shoes, and Wolf, who doesn't look back until Cat urges him to look at their future. But in between, it's a real case of hate to love as they fight like, well, like cats and dogs.

As always, I hope you enjoy this series where jocks become gentlemen, women get treated like royalty, and all the sass and spark in between.

♥Ellie



Kerfuffle

ker·fuhf·uhl

Noun: fuss; commotion.

CATELINE



Concordia is best known for its chocolate cake—three layers of moist deliciousness cushioned by fluffy buttercream and topped with a rich ganache.

As someone with what I privately call a “Chocolate tooth,” having easy access to this kind of confection is vitally important. For the uninitiated, a chocolate tooth is like a sweet tooth but specifically for all things cocoa related. My dentist does not approve.

The chocolate cake was but one of the pros of moving to Concordia. Another thing this small country is famous for is the sweeping view of the ocean to the south and the lush mountainsides that give way to impressive peaks to the north.

The third is the sunrises. I live for those. Don’t get me wrong, sunsets are pretty, but there’s something especially promising about a new day.

If you’re a night owl, please don’t hate this early bird.

Upon waking, my first thought is chocolate cake. Don’t judge.

My second one is much like a character in a fairytale cartoon. I envision rushing to the window, throwing open the curtains, and letting in the light of what’s sure to be a beautiful day.

However, I don’t dare because I’d risk stumbling over the assortment of nearly-identical shoes, clothes in need of dry cleaning, and the rest of my life scattered on my bedroom floor like confetti.

Also, it’s still dark out. Like clockwork, my body knows what day it is without having to look at the puppy-themed calendar on the wall. I guarantee if any of my clients wandered in here, they wouldn’t believe this

is the headmistress's room. Like my chocolate tooth, I keep my mess to myself.

I flop back onto the mattress, but something pokes into my side. I dig out one of my many black high heels—this one with scalloped detail on the top line. One of my previous clients pointed out that I have an assortment of black high heels—different heights, textures, and styles. All black, all designer, all made to elongate my legs. I suppose some habits don't disappear after the thirty days they say it takes to break one.

How many years has it been since I gave up what everyone said was a promising future in ballet? Before I can make that calculation, something else pokes me.

I click on the dim light on my bedside table.

The piece of mail is addressed to me, Cateline Berghier. The first one like this came a few months ago and they've increased in frequency. I ignored it until last week and was instantly sorry that I opened it.

The immigration office regrets to inform me that my work visa has expired and blah, blah, blah.

I'll deal with that problem later. After I get this school back on track and after I deal with today. Every year, in late March, a tsunami-sized wave of regret and relief washes over me.

Yes, it's that big. I'm French and have been told I have a flair for the dramatic. Actually, my mother said that. But trust me, when it comes to her, I have my reasons.

To everyone else in the world, I'm calm, reasonable, and have the style and poise that got me the job as headmistress and ranks me as one of the top etiquette teachers in the world.

Take that, mère.

However, it's my clients who have a flair for the dramatic, evidenced by them messing up their lives in such a way that necessitates character rehabilitation at Blancbourg Academy d'Etiquette in Concordia.

Then again, I'm all too familiar with messes. My private bedroom in the headmistress's suite notwithstanding—this space is an exception. The main room is tidy and organized, as it should be. My room, not so much. There are only so many things I can stay on top of, and this one I can leave behind a closed door.

About a decade ago, my entire life was a mess. I made a vow to be true to myself and have kept my word ever since. But that doesn't stop me from

pulling out the box at the back of my closet once every year to make sure I made the right choice.

After carefully picking my way across the room, and kicking aside yet another pair of black high heels, I open the closet. From the back, I pull out a box and remove the lid. My hand immediately lands on the pale pink tulle tutu. A ripple runs through me, landing deep in my stomach.

I set it to the side and remove the leotard, the tights, and at last, the ballet slippers—my satin pointe shoes. They're as worn and beloved as I remember. My fingers smooth across the ties and the ripple inside turns into a tug.

As usual, I have a long day ahead, but this is something I get up early for once a year. It's something I have to do. I owe it to the brave young woman who made a tough decision all those years ago.

There is only one way to confirm that I didn't choose the wrong path.

As the sky lightens, I clear the furniture from the middle of the spacious main room in my suite. As the headmistress, it's the largest in the manor and aside from my bedroom, the tidiest. Ordinarily, I feel like it's a bit excessive, given the financial situation at Blancbourg, but today, it's necessary.

I draw a deep breath, already feeling warm from rearranging the furnishings and rolling up the rug to reveal the hardwood floor. A pinkish-yellow light, like a ripe peach, filters into the room as the sun rises.

Next, I pull my hair into a smooth bun—not at the nape of my neck like how I usually wear it when working, nor is it the messy kind I wear on the top of my head when I'm alone—which is the rest of the time.

Even in the dim light, my fingers remember what to do without me needing to think about how to achieve the perfect ballerina bun. I did it so many times when I was growing up, the motions are programmed into my hands like a hair-styling robot.

Work is my life now, but before that, it was ballet. Gaston, my dreadful barbarian of an ex, tried to slip in there but when he revealed his true—and at times aggressive—motives, I said goodbye to love and hello to my future.

My best friend and former assistant, Gemma Nelson, thinks I could stand to let a little love into my life, but this way, I don't have to clean my room, won't have to share my chocolate, and don't have to worry about heartbreak.

Relationships are messy, and in my experience, they can be dangerous.

But before I made my great ballet escape, I'd been in what felt like a life-long relationship with the guy my mother wanted me to marry and who was my dance partner.

When I wasn't with Gaston (and often when I was) I practiced ballet before school and afterward until my mother eventually found a tutor and my schedule switched. After that, I studied early in the morning and late into the night while spending the majority of the day dancing. Then they sent me to the academy where I danced full-time.

After doing my hair, I pull on the tights, leotard, and tutu. Lastly, I grip a shoe in each hand. Closing my eyes, I feel the curve, the potential, the meaning. They are the final piece to the version of myself I'd left behind. When I put them on, I'll dance and know if I did the right thing.

Like every other time I perform this annual ritual, my stomach flutters with reluctance and anxiety, because what if something is different? What if I changed my mind? What if I lace up the shoes and realize I made the wrong choice?

I'll have to live with that regret and tell my mother that she was right. She'd respond, *It's too late. You should have listened to me. You're too old. You messed up.*

Although my bedroom is a mess, I'm otherwise a perfectionist and can't tolerate the thought of being wrong.

However, there is only one way to find out.

I slide my foot into one shoe and then the other. If anyone were watching, they'd witness a ceremonial, almost reverential, method to my lacing the ballet slippers around my ankles.

Next, I point and flex my feet, do a few ankle rolls, and then go through the steps that I performed daily over the span of years.

Afterward, I move through first position, second, third, fourth, and fifth then continue with *centre* practice. I do a few more warm-ups and then glide effortlessly across the floor performing arabesques, *grande jetés*, and a pirouette as part of but one of the many choreographed dances that are etched into my DNA. The movements are part of my muscle memory, having been drilled into me early and often. It's like my bones are the worn grooves of water over stone.

My body knows what to do.

But my mind?

My heart?

My mind pings me with a reminder that I have to get ready for work soon. Although I don't currently have any students, I'm actively looking for new coaches, have to plug a hole in our finances, and find someone to plug a hole in the roof—we had to let the groundskeeper go and I don't want to ask Arthur to climb up there. He'd do it, but I can't risk anything happening to him. In other words, I must be on my toes—pun not intended.

My mind is hungry to learn, grow, and pursue opportunities to further my career as an educator. To remain independent and provide myself with a secure future.

However, my heart... My heart beats out a rhythm that I wasn't expecting. It catches me off guard, and I stumble but quickly recover.

I assumed it would have the same response that it's had for the last ten years that I've suited up on the anniversary of my decision to leave ballet. To leave France. To pursue a life for myself.

Closing my eyes, I press my hand against my chest. My heart races from exertion, leaving me more breathless than I've been in a long time. But there's something else too. Something I can't quite put my finger on.

However, there isn't time to try to figure it out right now. The church bells in the village where I attend worship service every week ring, signaling the hour. Panic jolts me into action. I danced longer than usual and lost track of time.

I quickly unlace my pointe shoes, tear off the tutu, leotard, and the tights—not taking the usual care to make sure they don't snag and run.

As I shove everything back into the box, I pause when I glimpse the contents at the bottom. The many newspaper articles, clippings, programs from shows, and photographs draw my attention.

My heart lurches—probably strained from the effort of dancing. I've been holding my breath and gasp. Something foreign and liquid springs to my eyes as I gaze at the image of a young woman. She stands under the spotlight, perfectly poised in the traditional ballet stance with one arm lifted, one leg extended in a clean line as she gazes at the sky, in the distance, at her future.

From the photograph, an innocent seventeen-year-old girl looks back at me.

It is me. Who I once was.

The photo had been captured during my last performance. But there is no time for reminiscing. I rub my eyes and stow everything back in the closet. Hurrying as I rearrange the furniture, uneasiness wells inside.

“Things sure have changed,” I mutter. For some reason, I don’t think that’s all the change on the calendar this week.

CONNOR



For all the millions of dollars spent on the Boston Bruisers training facility, I'd expect cell phone reception to be better. I drop the call with my manager. Moments later, it rings again, likely him calling back to discuss how the wolf sanctuary I sponsor is opening its fifteenth branch in the fall and I'm slated to make an appearance.

Answering, I say, "Yeah, just put it on my schedule."

I expect him to remind me to prepare a speech—I'm better at winging those kinds of things.

Instead, a slick voice with an Appalachian accent, similar to but much thicker than mine, comes through the phone.

"Well, aren't we frilly and fancy? 'Just put it on my schedule.' I figured you'd already have it in ink since Lizabeth sent out the invitations a few weeks ago."

"Hello, Cain." The greeting to my brother comes out like steel on gravel as I await whatever fresh trash is going to come out of his mouth.

We rarely speak, twice a year at best. See each other once a year at the annual Enduro Survival Challenge back home.

"No congratulations? I figured you'd be pleased to hear about your big brother's upcoming nuptials."

"I'm pleased as punch."

"Nah, I bet you're jealous. Envy is eating you alive. As usual, I beat you to the punch." He chortles.

The way he says that particular word reminds me of how many punches I've taken from him, though the last time, I hit back. As a result, he lost a

tooth. Hasn't come at me since, but he still talks a big game, more than happy to remind me of my place in the pack.

But I'm not envious or jealous. More like concerned for Elizabeth's wellbeing, but I have to trust she knows what she's doing. I take a deep breath, reminding myself to at least attempt to be gracious to my brute of a brother. So far, he's behaved himself, and that's saying something.

"Congratulations, Cain. Please pass on my well wishes to your bride-to-be."

At the mention of his future missus, he launches into a detailed account of what he'll do to me if I so much as look at her and provides supporting evidence of what happened to Hayden Kennedy, who asked her if she wanted a drink when they were last at the poolhall.

I interrupt his account of the brawl. "Cain, I have to go. Nice talking to you."

"Wait. I was just getting to the good part. But I understand. You're busy up there in the big city with your fancy life and all. Just remember that you're my best man and have to give a toast at the wedding." He laughs darkly like that has a double meaning.

I've been to a few weddings. I'm pretty sure the best man toast is a bit of a roast, but I will try to keep things clean, simple, and short so Cain doesn't drag me outside and try to use me as a punching bag, emphasis on *try*.

Before I get off the phone, he launches into a few instances of our childhood when he was bigger, better, and more brutal than me.

I doubt he'll even notice when I've hung up. But now I'm strung up with aggravation. I don't want to go to his wedding. It's sure to be a who's who of bullies and brutes.

I stomp into the lounge at the training facility here in Boston.

"Uh, oh. Looks like Wolf is looking to bite," says Declan Printz Charming, our wide receiver.

I grunt. "My brother just called and reminded me about his wedding. I have to give the toast."

"Didn't know you had a brother." Chase Collins frowns—yes, of the legendary football family.

"I don't. You're my brothers. Cain was less of a brother and more of a bully."

“Are you going? I’ll be your plus one. Keep Cain in line.” Declan waggles his eyebrows. We’re all Bruisers, but he’s never backed down from a fight.

“I’ve got your back, bro. Whatever. I’ll crash the thing if he gives you any trouble,” Chase adds.

“It’s not until next month. I didn’t plan to go, but I’ll be in North Carolina, anyway.”

“That’s right. Your annual retreat to the woods where you survive off the land,” Grey says with interest. Of all the guys, Adams is the most outdoorsy, and our linebacker.

“Knowing Cain, he’ll probably be named Groom-zilla of the year,” I say.

“Is he that bad?” Declan asks.

Dropping onto one of the leather sofas, I answer, “He’s worse than mayo.”

Declan sticks out his tongue. “Sounds like Cain is cruisin’ for a bruise.” We could give him the ole Boston Bruiser wedding gift.”

“What’s that?” Chase asks.

“How about a balloon bouquet filled with whipped cream?” Declan makes a popping motion.

“Or we could put one of those creepy mannequins that Grey found in the basement when he was looking for old jerseys in Cain’s hotel room.”

“Good one,” Chase says.

“Speaking of pranks. We should discuss the matter of Brandon Campos. The new center,” I say, eager to forget about my brother.

“I’ve put some thought into this. We could glue his hands together while he’s sleeping.” Declan is originally from Ireland. He doesn’t look like a leprechaun, but has one tattooed on his arm. People think they’re funny little men with happy accents. Not so. In traditional lore, they’re tricky, dangerous creatures to watch out for. Declan too, if his mischievous smile is any indication.

“Dude, he’s our new center. We kind of need him to have use of his hands.” Grey speaks carefully and is the least likely among us to be voted trouble maker of the year.

I’d probably get that superlative. Along with the best safety. On the field, I’ll cover the wide receiver—Declan—and I’ll tackle anyone, anytime...all the time.

“Yeah. Coach Hammer says his hands are gold.” I grunt, because that remains to be seen.

“The commish says he’s like the rising sun and any team would be lucky to have him.” Chase lifts and lowers one shoulder. He’s our peacemaker, though he makes trouble with the best of us.

“Luck has little to do with it. I say he’s in it for the paycheck.” I cut my eyes in Chase’s direction.

Grey sniffs. He’s our elder statesman and has little tolerance for our smack talk.

“Now, now. Let’s give him a chance,” Chase says. “You felt the same about me in the beginning.” He arches his eyebrow, referring to his start on the team as a legacy player.

“You proved yourself,” I say, now proud to call him one of my football brothers.

“So will Brandon,” Grey says.

“Brandon Campos will have to do more than prove himself. He’ll have to endure our killer practices, show that he’s a team player, and not a showboating—” I use a few of what Coach Hammer calls *locker room words*. Even though the Boston Bruisers are the toughest team in the league, language like that is against the rules, but Hammer isn’t here.

We have our own rules, namely, initiating new players. Campos will also have to prove himself while training and on the field, but there will be plenty of time for that.

“How about we replace his toothpaste with mayonnaise?” Declan wrinkles his nose as though even speaking the idea out loud grosses him out.

Chase tilts his head from side to side as though that idea doesn’t cut it. “We could always use the old standby.”

I cross my arms in front of my chest. “No. We’re not covering the toilet seats with plastic wrap. Coach Hammer made me clean it up last time. Never again, man.”

“Doughnuts filled with mayo? Mayo in Oreos?” Declan suggests, his slight Irish accent coming through.

“What’s with you and mayo?” Chase asks.

I recall a late-night party and an early morning snack-sesh that involved mayonnaise and resulted in a miserable, ailing Declan Printz. He vowed never to touch the stuff again.

“I know what we’re going to do.” My lip curls as an idea takes shape.

“Oh, boy. He has that look.” Grey shakes his head. “Whatever it is, I’m not sure I want to take part.”

Declan cuffs him. “No, you’re not backing out. With Rylen off on his honeymoon, we need all the manpower we can get.”

The details formed, I lean in and tell them my plan.

“Brandon Campos is not going to be impressed.”

“Sure he will.” I wink. “Let’s see. Macy, Stacy, Allison, Keisha... They all seemed impressed by my—” I slap my rear end, referring to the many women who’ve complimented the way my backside looks in uniform.

Grey holds up his hand. “We do not need to hear about your latest conquests.”

Chase shifts uncomfortably at the mention of my wolf-like reputation. We all know—and respect—that he’s looking for the right woman.

“I think there are just as many who’d like to give you a swift kick on that backside when you date ‘em and leave ‘em,” Grey mutters.

“Haters gonna hate,” I say.

“Lovers gonna...fill in the blank,” Chase says.

No need to fill in the blank. There’s nothing else to say. But there is a reason I date ‘em and leave ‘em. My nickname, Wolf, isn’t unfounded. I have plenty of room in my life for women, just not relationships.

“I think Rylen would approve,” Declan says.

Only I laugh in response.

We spend the next few minutes in a huddle, hashing out the plan to prank the newest member of the team. When we’re done, we throw our hands into the center of the tightknit circle, and holler, “Cruisin’ for a Bruisin’”—the team slogan.

Who needs commitment, drama, and baggage when I have football bros like this, a winning streak, and my pick of any woman for an evening of a no-strings-attached good time?

We convince Chase, the one least likely to rouse suspicion, to text Brandon out of the blue. He invites him to come to hang out with us in the team lounge—the idea is to build trust and comradery. He he.

Chase’s phone pings with a reply a moment later. “Brandon says that he’s on his way.”

I grin. “Perfect.”

Head resting in his hand, Grey rolls his eyes. “I don’t know why I let you guys talk me into this.”

I’m crossing the room to get into position and stop short. I cast Grey a glare of warning. An outsider might think that I’m fixing for a fight—and that I’m an idiot for crossing our linebacker—but it’s just one football brother to another, reminding him of who he is. Grey needs that from time to time, otherwise, he’ll travel down a dead end. Been there myself and it’s no fun finding the way back.

To drive home my point, I ask, “Who started the newbie initiation, Grey?”

Grey Adams is the oldest player on the team and arguably the best. He can win a game blindfolded and backward. Seriously. We challenged him once. Granted, it wasn’t against another team, but he was formidable. Football is woven into the very fiber of his being. It means everything to him and though he might not admit it, we do too.

“Who was the original mastermind behind all the pranks?” I ask.

Grey’s lips form a thin line and the muscles in his jaw twitch. He knows he’s the OG, the original. The real deal.

“Don’t forget who you are. Don’t let *it* get you. He wouldn’t want that.” The weight carried in each word is enough to qualify as a workout. I know it. He knows it. Declan too. As for Chase, as far as I know, the guy has lived a charmed life, so I’m not sure what kinds of challenges he’s faced. But it doesn’t matter. We’re family and look out for each other.

As for my actual brother, he’d just as soon see me get injured on the field, kicked off the team, or wiped off the planet. Figures he’d invite me to his wedding.

Hope the bride is an ogre.

Grey exhales and then nods as though set to rights.

The four of us assume our positions while waiting for Brandon. A wisp of anticipation shoots through me. I live for football, but pranks are pretty fun too. Footsteps echo from down the hall.

In Rylen’s absence, Declan leans in, and as if starting a game with the classic expression, *Hut, hut, hike*, he says, “On the count of three...”

We adjust our stances, preparing, and then as the door opens, Declan says, “Now.”

...And at that moment, whoever stands in the doorway gets an eyeful of Boston Bruisers’ butt and I am not sorry.

“It’s a full moon in Boston,” Declan shouts.

I let loose my classic howl.

Then someone gasps.

A camera clicks and flashes.

A low voice groans.

If it weren’t already apparent, when I turn around, it isn’t only Brandon in the doorway. The pro league Commissioner Starkowsky and his daughter, Elyse, along with several other team officials, stand with their mouths hanging open.

This was more than the mission I expected, but I’d say it’s mission accomplished. I chuckle inwardly. Time to get folks around here to loosen up.

Then the commish, shielding his daughter’s eyes, blusters.

The guys make their apologies. I do not.

Elyse wiggles out from her father’s grasp. “Dad, I’ve been in and out of locker rooms for almost thirty years. I’ve seen—”

She’s definitely eyed my rear end.

Starky’s face turns purple. “You are excused,” he chokes out.

It all happens in fast-forward as we rush from the lounge, dispersing like kids caught ringing the neighbor’s doorbell, leaving an unwelcome gift, and running while laughing our butts off. In this case, literally.

CATELINE



After showering, I dress in a fashionable work ensemble—typically consisting of trousers or skirts, a blouse, a blazer, and heels. Today, I wear a pencil skirt, a cream-colored blouse with tiny pink roses, and a strand of pearls. A dark blue blazer completes the look.

My bedroom may look like a raccoon broke in and played dress up, but everything about my appearance tells me I’m perfectly put together.

I grab my leatherbound folder with all of today’s important details when my phone rings. It’s Giselle, my cousin.

“I have great news,” she exclaims.

I wait a beat for her to tell me something sensational—like my mother, her parents had high aspirations for her life. She was thrust into the spotlight at a young age and became a European pop star. When the glamor faded, she left to live a quiet life in Florida, yet always has exciting stories to share.

“I have good news and bad news,” she says in *Franglais*, a portmanteau of *Français* and *Anglais*—our combination of French and English that we’ve been using since we were kids.

“Let’s hear the bad news first.” My tone drops because I know what she’s going to say and I’m genuinely disappointed. “Wait, let me guess. You’re not coming.”

She’s quiet a beat before rushing into a flurried explanation. “I’m not coming to work for you, but that doesn’t mean I won’t visit.”

“You met someone?” I guess.

Giselle is always meeting someone. While her love life could be a romance novel, mine is more like a notebook. An empty one. But that’s fine

because I don't have time for relationships.

"I did, and he's—" She squeals, which is so not the French way. "His name is Garrison and he's a football player." She goes on to tell me about his yacht and how sweet he is.

"Okay, how about the good news?" A moment too late, I realize maybe that was the good news. Perhaps she sees a future together for them.

At this rate, I won't be tying the knot. Despite what my mother may think of me, I'm not interested in all the drama that comes with dating. Seriously, Giselle has told me stories that make me glad I'm single.

Not glad that I occasionally get lonely, but I don't dwell on that. Plus, it's nothing that a puppy couldn't fix. Adopting a dog is a someday plan for when Blancbourg gets over this rough patch.

"The good news, no, the great news, is that my friend Maggie is going to come work for you."

I'd asked if Giselle wanted to take a position here, and can't deny I'm a little shocked she took it as an invitation to canvas her friends and neighbors to see if they'd like to work for the esteemed etiquette school.

After asking about a dozen questions, I'm somewhat satisfied Maggie isn't one of Giselle's questionable friends—seriously, she tends to be like a squirrel, picking up nuts wherever she goes. At the market, she makes a new best friend. The movies? She exchanges numbers with someone who loves sappy romances as much as she does. And don't get me started on the beachside restaurant where she waits tables. She practically knows the whole town.

I have to get to my office, so we hang up, but not before Giselle promises that she'll send a photo of Garrison if I agree to give Maggie a chance.

After getting off the phone, I gaze out the window and take a deep breath. The sun shines over Concordia as Intherness, the capital city in the distance, begins a new day.

Just as I'm about to step out the door, I catch my reflection in the mirror. In my haste, I forgot to remove my ballerina bun, planted high and tight on my head.

I pull the pins, unfurl my long dark hair, and hastily smooth it into my usual low bun, just above the nape of my neck. A few strands of hair fall loose around my face. I smooth them with my fingers, but they refuse to go back into place. In the reflection of the mirror, the rug and the chair are

askew. A prick of anxiety at things not being where they belong form tension around my shoulders.

However, being late will be worse. Without time to fix things properly, I exit. But as I do, I have the sense that it isn't only my hair and the furnishings that are out of place. Something is also off inside, in my heart. I tell myself to let it go because pondering my feelings isn't something I do. Ever.

After the pressure from my mother and the tumultuous and emotional years in the ballet academy and company, I decided to take charge and rule my life with logic and reason.

There isn't time or space for desires and dreams—not like Giselle. I'm punctual, practical, and accept nothing less than perfection.

However, once again, a tickling sensation reaches the corners of my eyes as I stride down the hall. I hastily swipe it away.

"Stop being a baby," I scold myself in French.

Standing outside the meeting room, I tug at the hem of my blazer, take a deep breath, and remind myself why I'm the youngest headmistress in the history of Blancbourg Academy d'Etiquette in Concordia. Once I set my eyes on a goal, I work harder than anyone until it's achieved.

Over the years, my mother, ballet masters, mistresses, and coaches had all commented and applauded my rare ability to go into what they called "fifth gear." When everyone else topped out at fourth gear, I could go harder, faster, and longer.

In the instance of getting the job at the school, it was purely practical. I needed a place to live in a country I'd never been to. I'd traveled with a single piece of luggage and Giselle's parents' suggestion that I'd be able to make it in Concordia—and have done so. At the time, I was alone and sometimes scared—not that I'd ever admit it. However, it fueled me to outperform my fellow job candidates.

I push the thoughts of my humble beginnings from my mind and enter the meeting room. It's much like the rest of the manor at Blancbourg, with corniced ceilings, wallpaper on the upper half of the walls, and ornately carved wood panels on the lower half. Dark burl wood furniture with a high patina dots the perimeter of the room, along with gilded gold frames hanging on the walls containing oil paintings of important historical figures.

It's all familiar and comfortable, as far as I'm concerned, except for one thing. In the center of the room, the Board of Regents sits in a row behind a

polished oak table. They're almost, but not quite, as intimidating as coming before a panel of ballet judges.

After making a few announcements, they voice their concern about finances, the budget, and cutting costs.

This probably isn't the time to inform them that I've hired three new instructors, but I do so anyway. The expected questions come from the board.

I reply as simply as possible, "In order to instruct etiquette, we need people qualified to do so."

"And how do you plan to pay for that?" a brash voice comes from behind where the various remaining employees at Blancbourg sit in wooden chairs, including Arthur Fitzgerald. He's the doorman, butler, and jack-of-all-trades at the manor who does just about anything and everything. I don't know what I'd do without him. He gives me a soft smile of understanding at the comment made by our bursar.

"Mrs. Harrow, please do not speak out of turn," a member of the board reminds her.

More than ever, I appreciate the formality and orderly nature of the meeting. It wouldn't be fair to say that Regina Harrow is a thorn in my side, but she's not a swatch of fine silk fabric either.

We discuss expectations and goals for the coming fiscal quarter and how to achieve them with the new coaches. Speaking of, I expect they're waiting for me in my office. I glance at the clock. So far today, it feels like I've been perpetually off by a second, a minute, or an hour.

The Board of Regents wraps up the meeting with a dismal financial forecast. I make a mental note to come up with a way to fix that. My mental notes would fill an entire wall with yellow Post-its.

When I get to my office, my phone rings off the hook. I answer and receive an earful from a man with an American English accent, blustering about football players. "Open your newspaper and you'll see what I'm talking about. Or don't if you want to preserve your dignity. Never in my life have—" I can't get a word in edgewise as he continues to outline a scandal among the professional athletes.

Giselle and her new guy, Garrison, come to mind.

The man on the phone says, "They're rude, crude, and have bad attitudes. Please await instruction from management. We appreciate your services." Then he hangs up.

“Well, good day to you too, sir,” I mutter into the now silent phone.

I make a few notes, wishing I didn’t have to let Gemma Nelson go. She’d already be researching this matter. She was my assistant and is still my good friend. But if this means we’re getting a new batch of students, perhaps things are looking up just in time...or they’re looking late.

My new instructor is over an hour tardy for her introductory meeting. Perhaps the flight was delayed. I hope that’s the case, and she didn’t bail out at the last minute—not that I can imagine why anyone would turn away an opportunity to live and work in the most beautiful and wealthy nation in the world.

It took me a car, a bus, an airplane, three taxis, and then another plane and a train, but I found my way from France to London, where I’d gone to university, and then to the small island nation of Concordia just north of England. It’s now the place I call home. I love it here and never want to leave.

But I worry that if I can’t save the school, I’ll soon be looking for a new job and a place to live. Plus, there’s the matter of my work visa. My heart hiccups at the notion, sending anxiety racing through me at the same time a door slams down the hall.

I force myself not to startle and go find out what the fuss is about. Some people claim the manor is haunted. A windy day can loosen window fasteners. But that’s nonsense. I take it as a reminder to stay on my toes, because most likely, these football players will be brutes who won’t even know how to properly and politely enter a room.

My bets are on the latter.

CONNOR



Last night, while on a date with a tennis player named Bunny, the full moon hung over Boston. Before long, word started to spread as the papers churned out headlines, images, and articles. She showed me a post on her phone, illuminating four Bruiser backsides.

Despite ticking off the commissioner, I'd be lying if I claimed to have lost any sleep over what's been dubbed "Moon-gate" by the press and #BruiserButt on social media.

I wake up as bright-eyed and bushy-tailed as ever. What can I say? The nickname Wolf isn't for nothing. Then Coach Hammer calls Declan, Chase, Grey, and me into his office.

An hour later, the other guys shuffle in as if they anticipate what's coming. I might be known for tackles on the field, but when it comes to face-to-face conflict, deflection is my greatest weapon. Then again, that never worked with my brother.

Hammer is on a phone call and gives us the one-minute signal with his pointer finger along with the hairy eyeball.

I just smile.

Grey grumbles.

Chase shifts from foot to foot like his mama caught him with his hand in the cookie jar that subsequently broke, and ruined all the cookies for her book club.

Declan wears an unreadable expression, as if he's been disciplined before. That makes the two of us. I guess we all have our ways of coping.

"Looks like Hammer is going to drop the—" Chase starts, practically shaking in his sneakers.

“Don’t you dare say, ‘I told you so,’” I warn.

“Come on, we’ve done worse.” Declan shrugs as if to say, *It can’t be that bad*.

“Guys, Elyse was there.” Chase refers to Commissioner Starkowsky’s daughter. Let it be known that she’s a grown woman. Having been around the team her entire life and now a reporter, she’s often in the locker room pre and post-game. I can attest to the fact that she’s seen her share of football players in various stages of dress.

“It’s the principle. Would you want your daughter to see our backsides?” Chase adds.

“He has a point,” Grey says.

“We don’t have daughters,” I say.

Grey pokes me in the chest. “But if I did and a guy like you so much as...”

Point taken.

“You know what I mean,” Chase hisses.

I do, but I won’t indulge him by agreeing.

Declan laughs, as if any of us are anywhere close to settling down and having kids. That’ll be a cold day on the equator, at least as far as I’m concerned. Grey could stand to have a family. Chase will probably have enough kids to populate a football team.

Me? No thank you. Not part of the contract or the terms of service for my future.

Coach Hammer gets off the phone and holds up his massive hand, indicating we keep quiet. He paces along the bank of windows overlooking the practice field. “I understand the pranks are part of the game, the comradery, and the glue that holds the team together in some ways. But you went too far. I’ve had a lot of heat coming down from up high lately about your—” He turns his hand in a circle. “About your antics.”

I lift and drop my shoulders. “Oh, come on, we were just having fun. We thought it was only going to be Brandon, not the commish.”

“Elyse was mortified.”

“More like the commish was mortified,” I mutter.

Hammer tilts his head at what we’ve collectively dubbed a *shut up* angle. “Connor.”

Truth is, all he needs to do is use my given name and I stand at attention. He’s alpha in this office and I respect that.

“Yes, sir.” My Appalachian accent slips out, revealing the many times I’ve uttered those two words.

“I need you to understand what is appropriate and what goes over the line,” Hammer says.

Chase nods.

“Filling someone’s car with balloons? Harmless. Coating the inside of a locker with molasses? Amusing. Stealing all the toilet paper rolls and removing them from the building?” Hammer winces. “Mooning the commissioner, his daughter, our newest player, and a bunch of officials?”

“Hilarious,” I say only loud enough so the others can hear.

“Boys, there are consequences.”

“A fine? I’ll pay for it,” I say, taking responsibility.

Hammer gives a subtle shake of his head.

“Penalty?” Declan asks.

“Community service?” Chase suggests.

Having been around for so long and seeing the many moods of Coach Hammer, Grey remains quiet, as though he senses it’s bad.

“No, you’re going to finishing school,” Hammer says.

I bark a laugh. Confusion and questions fill the room, namely that this is some kind of joke.

“Sir, we all finished school and have diplomas to prove it,” Declan says. Then, under his breath, he adds, “In my case, just barely. But all the same...”

“I think Coach is saying that he has to make an example of us,” Grey says.

“Not me. This is coming directly from the commissioner.” Hammer plops into his seat and then tosses a newspaper down on the desk between us with the headline *Full Moon Over Boston*.

Declan and I chuckle. Chase cracks a smile. Grey is as stony as ever.

“You guys are terrible with the press.”

“They say any kind of press is good press.”

“The problem is we’re lacking in actual good press. You’re all cocky. Not at all humble.” Coach casts a look of disapproval, mostly in my direction.

“Come on, it’s all hype,” Chase says.

“The fans love to see us getting rowdy,” Declan adds.

“We’re the Bruisers. We have a reputation to uphold.” I elbow Grey, who’s been on the team the longest. “Tell him.”

The coach’s shrug is tight. His expression, unyielding. “Starky wants you to clean up, learn some manners, and prove that you’re well-behaved gentlemen.”

Grey snorts like that’s the most hilarious thing he’s ever heard.

“Think of it like reform camp. You’ll be there a month.”

The room falls silent until Hammer clears his throat. “You’ll attend several classes for your betterment. I hope I’ve made my point and you’ve learned your lesson. No mooning the commissioner’s daughter, or anyone else for that matter.”

We erupt with protests.

“What about training camp?” I ask because I live for football. Nothing can sideline me.

“OTAs?” Chase asks.

“The program you’ll be attending is the only organized team activity you’ll be completing if you want to attend training in August.” Hammer, ever the picture of calm, grits his teeth.

“So, if we want to go to training camp, first we have to attend this camp?” Chase asks.

“That’s right. Your midpoint and final reviews will determine whether you hit the field with the rest of the team before the season starts.”

All at once, we each voice objections and try to talk him out of it. I’m not proud to say so, but I even try puppy dog eyes.

Hammer only hears one word among the chatter. “Unfair? Poor Elyse cannot wipe the sight of four pasty rear ends from her mind—neither can the rest of the country.” Hammer points at the newspaper, which features the photo, blurred in select areas. One of the officials must’ve snapped it with their phone.

“Hey, my rear end is not pasty. It’s muscular and tan,” Declan says.

“For an Irishman,” Grey mutters.

“Listen, my hands are tied. It’s this or walk, boys.” Hammer shuffles folders around on his desk.

“This team is my life,” Grey says softly.

“All of our lives,” Declan echoes.

For half a second, I feel like I’m in the center of a tunnel—can’t see one end or the other. The room blurs, but I snap myself out of it, not willing to

give up.

“Consider this probation.”

“Did you mean *walk* as in leave the team?” Chase asks. “Considering the only thing I know how to do is play football, I’ll do it. I’ll go to the finishing school or whatever.”

“Can’t you have your father talk to the commissioner?” I ask Chase, trying for a Hail Mary.

“You know the answer to that.” Grey sighs.

“Which is—?” I ask.

“If he did, whatever the deal, would be worse, much worse.” They must know something about Mr. Collins that I don’t.

Declan gazes toward the ceiling as though asking for help.

“You’ll each be assigned a personal etiquette coach. And if you screw up, you’re off the team.” Hammer cocks an eyebrow because he means business.

It’s a group case of whiplash because I don’t think any of us could imagine our punishment being worse.

“All of you,” Hammer says with finality.

“What do you mean? If one of us screws up we’ll all be let go?”

“Starky’s rules. He wants to see you all clean up and revamp your reputations. You can settle down and make honest men of yourselves, but no fooling around, if you catch my meaning.” He clears his throat.

Most of the guys on the team have a reputation for being players—off the field as well as on. I’m no exception. Chase is. I’m not sure what Grey’s deal is, other than he doesn’t kiss and tell.

“You mean we can settle down as in get married?” Chase asks.

“If you’re not planning to meet her at the end of the aisle, don’t bother.”

“The grocery aisle?” A chuckle rolls out of me.

Coach looks like a defeated parent who doesn’t know what to do with the likes of me.

I shrug. “What? You didn’t specify which aisle.”

“The Bruisers used to be more family-oriented. Time we return to our values.”

Grey stiffens.

Not having signed up for this, I glare.

Chase wears a private smile.

Hammer grips the edge of his desk. “I’m not telling you that you *have* to get married, but Marsha was the best thing that ever happened to me. She taught me what matters in life. And look at one of our own—Rylen learned that lesson too. There’s something powerful about finding that special someone instead of playing the field. There’s security, comfort, fun, love...”

“Ah, look. Hammer is getting all mushy on us.” Bitterness laces my voice. I’m all too familiar with how a sweet little love story ends.

The coach nails me with a hard look, reminding me of my place in the pack. “A real man isn’t afraid to love, Connor.” He opens his gaze to include the others. “During this monthlong period, there aren’t going to be any pranks or bad press. Not one of you, as you call it, will be players—with women. Do you understand? Bonus points if you can settle down. Now, get out of here. I have work to do.”

Various sounds of resigned affirmation come from the guys as we exit the office.

“Oh, and one more thing,” Coach calls. “At the end of the month, there will be a ball.”

“A what?” Grey asks.

“A football?” Declan asks.

Hammer chuckles. “Something like that.” Then he picks up the phone, dismissing us.

We form a huddle in the hallway, all of us ready to spout off. Okay, that’s mostly me, but this is ridiculous.

When you spend this much time with a bunch of dudes, you learn to read their body language almost better than the words they use. That said, no one is happy.

Grey’s gaze is level but a reprimand nonetheless. “Listen, you know what this team means to me. We’re going to follow orders.”

“Good luck keeping Wolf away from women,” Declan says.

Chase says, “You heard him. If one of us screws up, we’re all off the team. We’re going to approach this like we would a game. We need a playbook...of rules.”

I shift away, never a fan of rules. Declan shoots me a glance of sympathy. Getting me to follow rules is like trying to fold a piece of paper in half more than twelve times. Can’t be done. Seven is the average. Those are facts.

Chase tugs me back into the huddle. “This is serious. I’ll repeat what Hammer said. If one of us screws up, we’re all out.”

“Easy for you to say. You’re waiting to get married.”

Chase shrugs like nothing will dissuade him from honoring his faith.

Declan’s hand wanders to the chain around his neck and hidden under his shirt. “It’s just a month.”

As for me, faith is a nice idea, a quaint concept. Not something I fully embrace, well, at least that’s what I’d say if asked. I don’t really know where I stand other than on the wrong side of the football field if I make the wrong move.

“The playbook rules: no kissing, no touching. Eyes up, hands off. No flirting, no dating...” Grey starts.

“You’re no fun,” I mutter.

With a glance at the desperation hidden in Grey’s eyes, Declan says, “I’m with Chase. The rules apply unless you fall in love.”

“And ask her to marry you,” Chase adds.

Declan doesn’t disagree.

I rap him on the back of the head. “Thought you’d be on my team.”

“We’re all on the same team,” he says.

Between the words in Declan’s comment, I read the message loud and clear. Although I have a reputation among the ladies as being king player, it’s time to hang up my crown for a month. What fun is that?

Chase extends his hand. Grey sets his on top. Declan tosses his into the center. With a groan, I reluctantly follow suit. Then we chorus, “Cruisin’ for a Bruisin.’”

Grey’s phone pings with a message.

As we walk down the hall, I say, “All things considered, you have to admit, I have a good butt.”

“I’m not saying anything about your butt other than that I’m going to kick it if you so much as breathe in the same room as a woman during this month,” Declan warns.

“You can thank yourself for getting us into this situation,” I retort.

“The mooning prank was all your idea.”

“No, if I remember—”

We start bickering.

“Forget about it. What matters is that we’re going to a public relations etiquette program and we have to—” Chase starts.

Grey interrupts. "More like reform school."

"Charm school."

"Probation."

"No women. This is the worst," I say as we turn the corner.

"It's not prison. I'm sure we'll have some free time." Declan's phone pings in his pocket. He wears a private smile. No doubt the call is from his so-called best friend, Maggie. No way they don't share an undercurrent of attraction. Mark my words, they'll hook up at some point. Just hopefully not while we're on probation.

There is plenty of room in my life for women, just nothing long-term. Cain suggested I was jealous of him for getting married. More like relieved I haven't been tricked into tying the knot.

"Did Hammer say camp or glamp? Maybe it'll be at a luxury spa," Chase says.

"You'd like that," I tease.

Chase's phone pings and he swipes to his email. "I just got the travel info from Coach's assistant. Sounds like a fancy school of some sort. Finishing school."

"Like old-school etiquette?"

"Like sipping tea with our pinkies turned out." Chase demonstrates.

Grey swats him.

"What? I had three sisters. You'd better believe they made me sit in on their tea parties. Maybe this isn't going to be half bad..." Chase says.

"But it's not the same as the field time and practice that's going to get us ready for the season," Grey says.

"It says here that we'll still be training. They're sending a specialist or something," Chase says, reading the email.

"Yeah, I feel special," I say darkly.

Chase claps me on the shoulder.

"Oh, you are," Grey teases.

"Guys, we have just enough time to go home, pack, and meet up to take the flight to the finishing school in a remote country called Concordia. Ever heard of the place?"

More like enough time to not go home, pack, or take a flight anywhere. This is ridiculous. I do a one-eighty in the hallway and start back the way we came.

"Where are you going?" Declan asks.

“Going to talk to Hammer.”

Three sets of hands land on me and I brace myself for a team tackle. It doesn't come, but they do march me in the other direction.

I hem and haw, almost whine and plead, but don't go that far.

“No, we're a team. We stick together,” Grey says with the final word.

CATELINE



*A*fter a meeting with Everly, one of my new coaches, who I feel confident will do great after she gets over the preshow jitters, Pippa joins us in my office.

I expect her to be refreshed from some time off and ready to get back to work, but she was late and wears glasses today, which is unusual. But she settles in like a professional.

“Ladies, I apologize for not offering you more training time, but it turns out we’re getting four new students. Athletes who have bad-boy reputations.”

“Sound like rascals,” Pippa says.

Everly sits up straighter, as if preparing herself for the task.

“We’ll have our hands full, that’s for sure.” I pass them their introduction packets because it’s showtime.

Everly gazes at hers and once more, I notice the ring glinting on her finger. Her expression washes with sadness, then just as quickly disappears.

But there’s no time for thoughtful reflection. I have to rally the troops if we’re going to survive these new students who are sure to be arrogant, bad-boy, playboys. I reviewed their case files and it’s not pretty.

My jaw already clenched, I say, “Ladies, I’ve heard the term, insta-love, but I never experienced insta-hate.”

“Never?” Pippa asks with surprise and gets us sidetracked with a story about a ghastly-sounding woman dressed up in designer clothes and a sugary sweet smile that was sour and rotten on the inside.

I take a deep, fortifying breath and go further off track because Pippa always smells good, reminding me of the lavender fields back home. I snap

my head back into focus. “As I was saying, I have a feeling working with these boys is going to cause widespread insta-hate. Keep your wits about you. Be on alert. They’re pranksters. Don’t let them—”

“Don’t worry. I can promise we will not be experiencing insta-love.” Pippa shakes her head sharply.

“No, ma’am, madam, er, should we call you Miss Berghier, Cateline, or —?” Everly asks, as if suddenly nervous.

I straighten the papers on my desk. “You can call me Cate.”

“Does anyone call you Cat?” Pippa asks.

“Just my enemies.” My one and only enemy is Gaston, my ex, but not even he dared call me that.

After wishing Pippa and Everly good luck, I go about my daily duties, fortifying the manor for the arrival of the Boston Bruisers, and by fortifying, I mean warning everyone to watch their backs and watch out for backsides.

The moon-gate stunt is not amusing.

I spend the afternoon doing paperwork and preparing lesson plans and a week-long itinerary for each of the coaches and their clients. They’re like boys in need of reform, but it’s our job to transform them into dignified gentlemen. In the old days, learning the art of chivalry and having good manners was a given. Now, people simply accept a lower standard. Bargain basement-level stuff.

Not me, and apparently not their commissioner. Then again, he was rather rude on the phone.

Arthur quietly slips two pieces of mail into the basket by my office door.

“Thank you, Mr. Fitzgerald.”

“You’re quite welcome, *mon cher*.”

Arthur is as proper as they come and is like a grandfather to me. Although he isn’t French, he uses that little term of endearment, *my dear*, to indicate that although he’d like to stay and chat, duty calls. I know the feeling, yet appreciate him even more for everything he does around here.

I retrieve the mail. One of the envelopes bears the same return address as the one that poked me in the side. My visa is a matter that I’ll attend to but not now.

Believe it or not, I’d rather deal with the manor’s overdue bill notices and our new cavemen.

I spend the evening trying to find ways to cut costs around here. Even though we'll receive a sum for the four new students, that won't come close to digging us out of the red.

And what a deep hole it is.



The next morning, my hair is pinned in its usual bun and my shoes are polished. Mercifully, I'm back on schedule. However, my new student, Connor Wolfe, is late. Typical.

On the way to my office to find out if he's stranded on the side of the road or took a detour and got into more trouble, I meet Maggie, Giselle's friend. She's from the US like Everly and as bright and bubbly as a can of soda pop. Even if a little disheveled and damp, she's a breath of fresh air, eager, and friendly.

I quickly discern she had a close encounter with Declan, her pupil. My eye twitches slightly, and not because of emotion this time. No, it's the tug of stress. Without time for proper training, I can only hope we can corral these guys into gentlemen rather than ball-playing barbarians.

I tell Maggie, "It's our mission to make celebrities, prominent figures, and even football players classy again. There was a time, not long ago, when people would get dressed up for dinner, board an airplane, or just to take a trip to the post office. There, they'd hold the door open, greet strangers, and use proper manners. Now, we have a bunch of zombies, hobbling around the world with crumbs in their beards, sitting while a pregnant or elderly woman stands on the bus, and ignoring social graces."

"It's unacceptable," Maggie says in a scandalized tone.

I like her already, even if she seems a little nervous during our conversation, especially when she talks about her client. If the fact that she's all wet is any indication, he got her good.

Tapping my chin as I try to figure out what happened, I say, "Let me guess, a bucket of water over the door? Water pistols?"

Her nod is sheepish. I tell her to report to me if his behavior worsens just as the grandfather clock chimes. So much for staying on schedule.

Before I excuse myself, I tell her that on the commissioner's orders, we're preparing the team members for The First Annual Boston Bruisers Charity Ball. "We'll get these boys out of their sweats and into three-piece tuxes." At that notion, I'm suddenly warm all over. "Have you ever seen a man of stature in a tuxedo? It's a sight to behold."

"I know—I can imagine," Maggie replies as if catching herself from saying more.

Giving my head a little shake because I will not be envisioning anyone in a tuxedo anytime soon, I add, "That said, personal interactions with pupils is not tolerated and results in immediate termination."

With a nod, I bid her adieu and brace myself for these jokesters, then hurry to my office to find out why Connor is delayed.

The driver who'd met him at the airport doesn't answer. I check emails and hope he didn't get lost in transit or is gallivanting around the village and mooning passersby. Can you imagine? Actually, don't. The poor city of Boston already saw that sight. From what I've gathered, it wasn't pretty.

I stand at the broad window overlooking the town and the city beyond. Technically, Blancbourg is in a little village on the outskirts of Intherness, the capital of Concordia. Intherness is a city, but I've been to plenty of cities and this one has an old-world feel with quaint buildings along with modern structures. The royal castle in the distance gives it a fairy-tale feel. This village is straight out of a storybook. The manor itself is modeled after a famous castle in the Bavarian Alps.

Concordia is relatively small compared to most nations but has everything—the sea, mountains, lakes, rivers, and a vast wilderness to the north. I rarely think about life beyond the borders because I'm perfectly content here, but the new piece of mail about my visa, and what it would mean to leave, flickers and then fades when the phone rings, startling me.

Arthur's voice is low when he says, "I'm pleased to report the plumbing has been repaired. Slightly less so to inform you that a rather large man with a shaggy beard and a mouth like an ox is prowling the halls looking for you."

Sounds like a real beast.

Arthur hesitates, then adds, "Oh, and Miss Berghier, my apologies for bringing this up now, but you asked me to remind you about my request for the day off next week. You said you needed to check the calendar."

I'd forgotten that Arthur has to bring his wife to the hospital for a procedure and requested time off for that and to look after her as she recovers.

"My apologies." I glance at the calendar on my desk. "Yes, you certainly can. I should've told you yes right away. Family first." At the time, I'd been trying to balance the schedule and regret not telling him that, of course, he could have the time off. "Please tell my new client that I'll be right out."

Mr. Wolfe demonstrated that he doesn't respect my time, so he can wait while I study the calendar and try to cobble together a solution for who can cover for Arthur while he's gone.

The school is short-staffed and Regina Harrow, the bursar responsible for the school's budget, informed the Board of Regents that we're operating at a deficit. We're already on a shoestring and after the most recent meeting, there's no more liquid to squeeze out of the sponge.

I already had to let go of my assistant, Gemma Nelson, because of funding. But before that, she and I had been devising a plan to create an auxiliary online school of etiquette affiliated with Blancbourg to generate more revenue. When we'd presented it to the Board of Regents, Regina had been the only one to turn it down, leaving the proposal dead in the water.

Maybe because the Boston Bruisers are high-profile sports stars, if we produce a positive outcome from the Blancbourg program, perhaps more athletes, celebrities, and other businesses will use our services.

Unable to think of a solution to the school's financial woes, I stride down the hall to finally meet Connor Wolfe.

Outside the door, my pulse races and I draw a deep inhale. Standing outside the threshold, I catch my breath and collect myself. Pushing away the stress, I tell my heart to calm down.

When I enter, a man with a shock of wild, long brown hair, tan skin, and who is at least three times my size, sits in the chair with his feet kicked up on the table while scrolling his phone. He doesn't glance up.

My heart resumes its rapid pace, as if cautioning me against a dangerous animal, a beast of a man.

I step fully into the room, but he still doesn't acknowledge me.

Rounding the table, I glimpse over his shoulder to see that he's looking at images of himself on social media. His handle is *@ChicksDigWolves*. He then taps the screen and checks out content under *#BruiserButt*.

He lets out a low, lupine laugh—probably at a comment someone left. It's the kind of sound that would send shivers across my skin if I were in the woods. There are plenty of wolves in the forests of Concordia.

I clear my throat to get his attention.

He doesn't flinch or look in my direction.

I reach over his massive, broad, muscled shoulder and pluck the phone from his hand. Our skin brushes, sending a flame of warning through me.

He knocks his feet from the table and spins around to face me. Brown eyes that are almost copper, a perfectly proportioned nose, and the smuggest set of lips I've ever seen flash a wolfish expression that isn't quite a smile.

If I didn't know better, I'd think my heart skipped a beat.

CONNOR



*W*ithout a word, the woman standing in front of me plucks the cell phone out of my hand. My inner wolf stirs. First in defense, and now alert with intrigue, interest.

She is not what I was expecting.

When the coach said we were going to reform school, I had visions of a grouchy woman with baggy pantyhose, a hairy mole on her cheek, and a ruler in hand, scolding me.

Yeah, I have a pretty good imagination, but it turns out that in this instance, reality paints a much prettier picture.

I lean back in the chair, taking her in. Dressed in a stylish black silk blouse, a fitted navy-blue skirt that reaches her knees, and a black blazer with silver buttons, and matching heels with a little buckle on the toe, my gaze wanders down and then back up, soaking in every inch.

Vavavoom.

She's the opposite of my vision—except for the bun at the nape of her neck. It's a nice touch to give the impression of a strict teacher. She could also double as a feisty librarian if she had a set of eyeglasses.

But no, her eyes are dark. Sharp. Like she doesn't miss a trick.

Her hair is a deep brown, almost black like pepper, and shiny. I'd place a bet that it hangs in thick waves when released from the claws of her bun.

And her lips. The lips on this woman could kiss the sting out of a snake...or kiss the sass right out of me.

My voice is a growl when I say, "When I was growing up, one of my friends predicted that I'd marry the first girl to put me in my place." I've yet to meet that woman and the truth is, that friend was comparing me to my

brother, who, until recently was forecasted to always be a bachelor because not even a woman who could put him in his place would tolerate a world-class jerk like him.

Nope, that would be me, and proud of it too—the bachelor part, not the jerk.

He can keep that award.

“Betting is for people who have a blurry sense of objective reality.” Her voice is smoky and I detect a French accent.

Ooh la la.

However, she’s put me on the defensive. “Judgmental much?”

“No, just telling the truth.”

Despite her sharp tongue, the top of her lip is a perfect bow and the bottom is the *just right* amount of plump. She wears red lipstick and I’m not the type of guy who cares if I get a little on my collar.

She’s average height, but her willowy frame gives her the illusion of being taller. Despite her stature, she is every bit in command. She also moves with a feline-like grace that’s hard to ignore.

“Let me guess, you were a dancer.” A few of the cheerleaders for the team are former dancers.

“My past is none of your concern.”

“Just making small talk.”

“No, you’re trying to dominate the conversation. Identify who I am and put me in my place.” She leans over the table, plants her hands on it, and stares into my eyes. “Your objective is to conquer me.”

A long moment passes, but I prefer not to think of what I’m doing as *staring*. Rather, *admiring*. There is nothing wrong with appreciating the fine looks of a woman, even if she is my coach for the next month, and more importantly, just called me out.

We’ll pretend that didn’t happen.

But what I can’t ignore is that she’s staring back and not at all intimidated or tripping over my brawn, fame, or what that could give her. She is not like my female fans or any of the women I’ve dated for the past half-dozen years.

When she doesn’t release me from her tractor-beam stare, I clear my throat, giving into the impasse. “Can I have my phone?”

She holds it out of my grasp and turns it off.

I lean forward and could easily encircle her with my arms. When I was a kid, I was lanky, rangy. All arms, elbows, and knobby knees. I've since grown into my six and a half feet, filled out with rock-hard muscle, and am not above using it when I have to, or when I want to.

When it comes to women, that means flexing and giving them something to drool over. Without fail, that results in me getting what I want, no questions asked...and no callbacks because I like my lone wolf life; thank you very much.

She strides toward the door and sets my phone in a basket atop a small table. "We will review digital etiquette later. Until then, when in my presence, or when with anyone else for that matter, leave your phone behind or out of sight."

"Give it back," I order in a smooth tone, though I probably sound like a petulant child.

She inclines her head and her gaze sharpens as though shocked I'd make a demand like that.

"Don't make me get up."

"In this room, you obey my rules."

I rise to my feet.

We're close and I tower over her. She has to hinge her head back to meet my eyes.

Hers hold dark fire and I take it as a challenge.

My lips quirk with a tease, an invitation.

It isn't that I want to frighten her. But at this proximity, I'm curious to see how she'll react—her words tell me one thing, but I'm curious to see how her body responds. If she's interested, the month at this school could prove to be pleasant.

All I get is her dark-eyed death stare like nothing could get her to relent, not even Napoleon himself marching into her territory.

Then again, she did say that thing about not being conquered.

I tuck my hands in the back pockets of my jeans and turn up the volume on my swagger by one increment. That's usually all it takes for a woman to fall into my arms.

Her nostrils flare. Otherwise, she doesn't move a muscle.

Another moment passes. A stand-stare-off double whammy. We're both vying for the alpha position to determine who'll be the pack leader.

"Sit down," she commands.

“Feisty...” My gaze turns hard and I hold out my hand for her to fetch my phone and give it back to me.

Fearlessly and relentlessly, her eyes remain locked on me, but she ignores my wordless request.

I click my tongue. “I see this has turned into a battle of the wills. Thing is, I never back down. I might circle the wagons and come back later, but in the end, my endurance is unmatched and I always win.”

She draws a deep breath and her shoulders shift back slightly. “Well, Mr. Wolfe, I regret to inform you that this isn’t a game, so there is no winning or losing. It’s my understanding that your time here is the result of a poor decision. I urge you to make a better one, now and for the next thirty days, so you don’t face expulsion from your team. Please take a seat.”

“Touché.” I rake my hand through my long hair.

I rarely have to negotiate with a woman to get what I want. Granted, in this situation, she has a considerable amount of power because she’ll report to Hammer if I’m being disagreeable. Given the coach’s ultimatum about being kicked off the team, I don’t dare ruin anything for the other guys. For now, I’ll play along, because this dark-eyed beauty is mistaken.

This is a game and I will win. No, I’ll conquer.

CONNOR



The plan is to toe the line of obeying the rules here at reform school while pushing my teacher to the edge. Thing is, when she falls over, I'll be the one to catch her.

Our standoff continues until she speaks. "Mr. Wolfe, rule number one. No phone during lessons." Her voice is low, smoky, and accented.

"What do I have to do to make you give me back my phone?"

"You may have your phone back at the end of our session."

"And why is that?"

"My classroom, my rules. The phone is a distraction. When you are in here, your focus is on me and our lessons."

...And she's angsty.

I like it.

Nor do I mind the idea of focusing on her—at least when she isn't being a shrew. That makes me seem like a dog. Maybe I am, at least some of the time, but I'm well aware that if I let a woman know I'm a nice guy, then she'll want more than a good time. Words like *relationship* and *commitment* make me squirm.

I'm a lone wolf and intend to stay that way.

I kick my feet up on the table again. If I can't have my phone, I may as well be comfortable.

"Sit up," she commands.

I rock back and hammock my hands behind my head. "No thanks," I add, just to play the polite game.

With surprising strength, she sweeps my feet to the floor. Off-balance, I nearly fall out of the chair.

“You are not a wet noodle.”

I want to be mad, to stand up and scream, but the contrast between her serious expression and choice of words is the most unexpected thing. A laugh bubbles inside.

“You’re cute when angry,” I say without really meaning to.

I look for a flicker of recognition. Her cheeks are the slightest shade of rose, but I’m not sure if it’s from my comment or caused by my poor behavior.

Chin lifted, she says, “I am your teacher. This is my classroom. You will listen to me and do as I say.”

Returning to my position on the field, I say, “In that case, your job is going to be difficult. My old teachers would tell you that I’m not a very good student.”

“No? You’ve never had me as your teacher. This is a school of etiquette, Mr. Wolfe. You are being evaluated and as mentioned, your career rides on you successfully completing this program. I recommend you listen and do as you’re told.”

“And if I don’t?” I ask.

A vein of frustration appears on her forehead as she smooths her navy-blue skirt and lowers into the chair. She blinks her black lashes a few times. Black and blue. Boston Bruisers colors.

“Do you listen to Coach Hammer, Mr. Wolfe?”

“Yeah.” I lean back in the chair.

“Why?” she asks.

I temporarily lose focus, my eyes not sure whether to land on her thick lashes or her lush lips.

She clears her throat, indicating I answer.

“What kind of question is that? Isn’t it obvious? Because I want to win.” And I always do.

“Why do you want to win?”

My eyebrows dip and my lips twist as I lean forward. “Because I *like* to win.”

“Are you sure it isn’t because you don’t want to lose?” She emphasizes the last four words.

I shift back slightly, having never quite thought of it that way before. Her comment gives me pause, not something that happens often.

She shakes her head slowly, almost imperceptibly, as if she knows something that I don't. "Listen carefully, Mr. Wolfe."

The way she says the word *wolf*, almost with a little *Y* sound at the end, like wolfy, makes me want to smile. It's a heck of a lot better than the *V* sound a woman I dated with a different accent used. That made me think of the vampire movies my brother made me watch when I was a kid.

All the same, her red-stained lips remind me of blood. Like she's out for mine if I don't behave. Despite my size, strength, and agility, there is something about her that makes me shiver, but I brush it off as I kick my feet back onto the table.

"Third strike as they say in your sport." She writes down something in a leatherbound folder.

"My sport? My sport is football, sweetheart. We don't have strikes."

"Well, we do here. No feet on the table." She looks at my boots like I stepped in a dog pile on the way in. The woman's eyes slay.

"No phones, no shoes, no service. Any other rules I should know about?"

"We will get to those. First, please answer this question. What do you stand to lose if you fail this program?"

That's not something I want to think about. "I'm the kind of guy who acts first, thinks later. Consequences rarely keep me from taking action."

"Obviously. #BruiserButt is a point of fact."

For the third time in less than thirty minutes, this woman nearly brings a smile to my face. It's not the wolfish grin either. There's something under the surface of her harsh rule that's sweet, endearing. I don't expect I'll ever find out what it is, but that prim mouth of hers contrasts with the words #BruiserButt in the most curious way.

With my elbow resting on the table and my thumb under my chin, leaving my pointer finger to run along my jaw toward my temple in the classic thinking pose, I continue, "In this case, I don't plan to fail, meaning there's nothing to lose."

"There is always something to lose, Mr. Wolfe."

Again, with the truth. Sheesh. She's not wrong, as the word *playbook* drops into my mind like a thick tome. The pages flip, and the word grows in volume in the exact tones of Declan's, Chase's, and Grey's voices.

I can't let the guys down.

Not only that, but if my brother found out I was kicked off the team—it's the only thing that has me on the leaderboard. Well, and my millions. My success after years of failure means everything to me. The goal of getting to where I am kept me alive. My success is a gratifying sort of revenge after years of struggling to survive.

I sit up and square my shoulders.

Let's do this.

The corners of my new teacher's lips turn up ever so slightly. I fight against matching her expression or saluting her in a Pavlovian response at a mere crumb of her approval.

She says, "Now that I have your attention, if it helps you, you may think of me as your personal coach."

Oh, it's personal.

"Mr. Wolfe, I am here to guide you, help you overhaul areas of your life, and teach you manners."

"So no brawls?" I ask, unable to help myself. "No pranks?"

She doesn't say a word, as if her silence is enough of a response. "We have an interview now, an evaluation at dinner, and then, based on my findings, I will tailor a plan unique to you that we will review and perfect in the coming week. After that, we will be leaving the manor campus for real-life reform school where—"

"Freedom." I pump my arm and whoop.

"This isn't a prison sentence, so that is hardly the case. As I was saying, off-campus, I will be offering real-time coaching. You will have the opportunity to apply the lessons you learned here. You'll be evaluated and if I find you have made sufficient progress in the various areas of aptitude, I will give your actual coach and commissioner my final review saying you passed. If not..."

I shrink back into the chair. "You're all business, huh?"

"What else would I be?" She folds her hands one over the other in the picture of perfect poise.

I shift to put my feet on the table again, then think better of it. "I'm not used to women like you."

"Women like me?" With the posture and grace of a dancer, she turns away slightly as she speaks. If I'm not mistaken, I detect a faint smile.

What will it take to coax another one out of her? Then I call a penalty on myself. I'm not the kind of guy to *try* to get a woman to smile. They'll

get accustomed to wearing a rosy-glow-grin and come back for more.

I prefer to keep things simple. One and done. It's safer and smarter to keep her expression dialed to a stern scowl.

CATELINE



Working with Connor is going to be like herding cats, only he's a wild dog, a wolf if there ever was one. I have my work cut out for me.

"Shall we begin the interview?" I ask.

"This isn't a job."

"Have you ever had one of those?" The snarky little question pops out of my mouth before I have a chance to stop it. My life is a finely tuned balance, like moving across the floor in pointe shoes. I can't let the likes of Connor Wolfe throw me off or cause me to stumble. I won't let him see a ripple of frustration. I'll carry this off with the poise and grace with which I was trained.

He barks a laugh. "I've had many jobs."

"Given your arrogance, cockiness, and rudeness, I find it hard to believe you're employable."

"I didn't say I kept the jobs."

"Figures." A furrow tries to crease my brow, but I resist it.

He leans back and folds his arms across his chest. "I didn't say I was fired either. Rather, I made myself an asset, worked my way up, and then moved onto something bigger and better."

"Sounds like tenacity."

"I have it in spades."

"I don't doubt that. To take a beating on the field and keep going back for more..."

"I give the beatings, babe." He speaks with the confidence of ten men.

“Well, there will be none of that here.” He doesn’t intimidate me, but I trip over the word *intimidate* all the same. He talks a big game about women, but I wonder if he actually dates. If he’s the kind of guy looking for a life partner. Not that I should care. It’s none of my business, but I need to get into his head to best figure out how to approach our lessons.

With an annoyed little harrumph, at myself for such frivolous thoughts, and at him for being so difficult, I open his file and the interview questions. “Date of birth?”

“April fifteenth.”

I tuck my chin. “When is your actual birthday, Mr. Wolfe?”

“I just told you.”

I try not to laugh because he’s obviously messing with me.

“There’s nothing funny about Tax Day. As I said, I come to collect.” He chuckles low.

I continue to resist the furrow trying to dig into my brow. “That’s your real birthday?”

He pulls out his license and slides it across the table. Sure enough, he’s telling the truth.

“I’m surprised you know about Tax Day, given we’re not in the US.”

“I don’t. That’s my birthday too,” I say plainly.

His lip curls with a smile and he points his finger at me. “Ha! You got me. There’s no way we share a birthday.”

“Well, we do. Moving on. You’re from North Carolina?”

Tucking his license away, he nods. If I’m not mistaken, a shadow crosses his features.

“That explains the southern accent.”

“Appalachian accent,” he corrects. Then mutters, “Which I thought was dead and buried deep in those mountains.”

“Perhaps it comes out when you’re under stress?” Like how my eye twitches? That’s something I do my best to ignore, much like the way he looks at my lips when I speak.

“Or when I get ticked off,” he mutters, as though wanting to have the last word. Noted.

“Brown eyes, brown hair, six feet—?” But if I were painting a picture, it would be tan skin, copper eyes, and hair the color of a chocolate hazelnut spread. And let’s not forget well-built and with a swagger that can take over a room, bringing less sensible women to their knees.

“Six,” he says, drawing me from my thoughts.

“Six what?” I ask.

His eyes narrow like we’ve switched roles and he’s concerned that I’m the one not paying attention. “I’m six foot six.”

“And will fill in a tuxedo nicely.”

Connor does a double take. “What was that?”

That’s a very good question. One I will not answer. I’m in charge here, except, apparently over my thoughts and the nonsense that comes out of my mouth. Brushing past that blunder, I jump into the rest of the interview, asking him numerous questions, mostly about his education, career, and lifestyle. The purpose isn’t only to get to know him, but to determine his personality type as well.

My conclusion is swift. Connor Wolfe is an alpha male, through and through.

I set down my leather folder on the table between us, preparing to outline what to expect when he reads my title embossed in gold across the front. Or tries to.

“Cat Burger. Headmistress. Ew. That sounds gross.”

“Juvenile, to be expected.”

He drops his palms onto the table. Fortunately, I don’t startle. I trained myself to remain calm during Gaston’s mercurial moods.

“We’ve been at this for what? An hour. It’s taken everything in me not to ask what your problem is,” Connor asks.

I make a show of jotting that down in my notebook. “Demonstrates ability to exercise restraint.” Then I level him with my gaze. “For the next thirty days, you’re my problem, Mr. Wolfe.”

“I resent that, thank you very much.”

“Ah, I see you do know that phrase. In French, it’s *merci beaucoup*.”

“So you speak French and your birthday is April fifteenth. I’d say you’re older than me by a couple of years.”

“Younger by one year, but we will be together for thirty days.”

“And that’s a month too long.”

“I regret that you feel that way. Instead, you could think of this as a wonderful learning opportunity.”

“Listen, I’m used to women flirting with me and being more than willing to have a good time.”

“When we are done here, you can have all the good times you want.”

His lips ripple with amusement. “Is that a promise?”

It takes me a moment to realize what he did there and I fight the pink that threatens to shade my cheeks. Instead, I glower. A good, solid glower.

His lips quirk as if he knows exactly the effect he had on me.

Lengthening my spine and enunciating, I say, “By the way, my name is not Cat Burger. It’s Cateline Berghier.”

“Sounds fancy when you say it. Say something else in French.”

He’s really trying to get under my skin. The furrow in my brow digs in and won’t let go.

The moment stretches longer than is comfortable. If I’m not mistaken, once more, we’ve entered a staring contest. His eyes are impossibly bright around the iris. They are eyes that could mesmerize a weaker woman.

In a voice just above a whisper, I say, “I’m a professional, Mr. Wolfe. You can play all the games you want. I will not fold.”

When he replies, his voice is a growl. “I’ve been conditioning for years. As far back as I can remember. My singular purpose was to *endure*. That’s what makes me so good at football. I am persistent. Relentless.” His eyes swim in mine as he punctuates each word.

I won’t let myself go under the surface of their copper hue or his intoxicating scent, peppered with aftershave and clean cotton that’s been in the sun.

“I can out-lift, out-press, and out-run any of the other guys—even Grey who is the most focused on the field. He can catch a pass with his eyes closed—it’s like he and the ball are one. Chase, the QB, is a faster runner, but only for relatively short sprints. Declan has the agility of a mountain cat. He’s big, strong, and can turn on a dime. As for me, my strength is endurance. You’d do well not to forget it.”

“In that case, it will serve you well during the next thirty days.”

“In that case, I’m looking forward to showing you what I’m made of.”

If I were a ceramic ballerina, I’d have lost my balance and cracked because I blink, losing the contest.

Remembering that I’m in charge, I ask, “What position do you play, Mr. Wolfe?”

“Safety.”

Unfamiliar with the term, and feeling anything but safe in his presence with the way those wolf-like eyes follow me, I lift my eyebrow. “Please, explain that to me.”

He leans his forearms on the table and folds his hands like he could talk about football all day. Perhaps that will be my strategy. “I run the defense and lead the team in tackles. In other words, no one gets by me.”

“Interesting.”

“Are you a football fan? Usually, women are more interested in the players than the game.”

“A fan? Not in the slightest.”

“How honest of you.”

“Always. Dishonesty is for weak minds.”

“What about white lies?”

“There’s a difference between being insulting and being straightforward.”

“Seems like a fine line.”

“The finest.” I pinch my fingers together. “But when done properly and with grace, the truth is the kindest gift you can offer someone. It frees them from enslavement to falsehoods.”

The space between his eyebrows pinches like he needs to think about that concept. Not to worry, I will be demonstrating it throughout our time together.

My gaze slides across him, not sure where to pause—his penetrating eyes, quizzical lips, the dreadfully long hair, or beastly beard?

“Like what you see?” he asks.

I hardly stifle a huff. “No, but I invite you to change my mind.”

“It would be my pleasure. By the way, will I still be able to do my workouts while I’m here?” he asks.

At that, my gaze lands on his massive arm muscles, prominently displayed in his fitted black T-shirt. They’re chiseled and rock-hard. I press my lips together to keep my mouth from betraying me.

Yes, a man of his stature will look mighty fine in a tuxedo.

Connor snaps his fingers. “Ah ha. Did I just discover your kryptonite?”

I almost gasp. “My what?”

He points like he caught a bandit. “You know, Superman, kryptonite. Yours is man muscle. You were admiring me.”

I cannot tell a lie, so I remain quiet enough to practically hear the gears turning in Connor’s mind. He’s going to maximize his assets and use them against me.

“To answer your question, yes, you will still conduct your workouts.” My voice a little husky, I clear my throat. “Typically, we will have lessons in the morning and workouts later in the afternoon. Coach Hammer arranged for the premier trainer in the country to meet with you.”

“I expect you’ll be observing my workouts and taking notes, professor?” Dragging his tongue across his teeth, he wears that wolfish grin again.

I may not be familiar with Superman, but I am no Little Red Riding Hood and will not let myself be fooled by this Big Bad Wolf.

CONNOR



I half expect Cateline—the way she said it made it sound like a combination of Catelyn and Catherine—to be weak in the knees when she rises from the chair in the meeting room.

Nope. She's rock solid on a pair of toned legs. I get a little peek when the slit that runs up the back of her skirt to just above her knees shifts as she moves.

Definitely dancer legs. Strong. Lean. Beautiful.

If her reaction to my muscles is any indication, she sees the same in me. Though I'm big and brawny. One woman said my arms are like pythons. I test a flex to see if Cateline reacts.

Her throat bobs in her delicate neck when she swallows. "Mr. Wolfe, I will give you a tour of the school. If you'd please follow me."

At the door, she passes me my phone. I turn it on and a series of dings, beeps, and notifications erupt in an obnoxious symphony of digital sound.

She spins around with lightning-fast reflexes. I half expect her to bare a set of sharp claws. Cat indeed. My ears heat as I await her admonishment.

"I expect not to hear that again."

Stuffing it in my pocket, I say, "Yes, ma'am."

We enter the hallway, and she formally introduces me to the Blancbourg Academy d'Etiquette in Concordia at Blancbourg Manor, giving me a brief historical overview.

"It had once served the royals of the country, then was opened as a private finishing school only available to the nation's citizens before opening its doors to the global population less than ten years ago."

While she speaks, I get lost in how her accent caresses the words and highlights the passion behind them. This place means something to her and a moment too late, I realize I'm lost in the hallway, having no idea where we are in relation to the meeting room.

"Are you leading me to a dungeon?"

"No, that's beneath the west wing," she says without a hint of irony.

I stiffen then catch her subtle smile. There she goes again, saying something funny that's at odds with her serious character.

"We were looking to expand our services, but have since had to consolidate, so it is only your team members and their respective coaches that are here at present—" She hesitates as if wanting to detour from that part of the conversation.

I also realize that even though this is a tour of the place where I'll be living for the next while, she's also probably evaluating me. Am I holding open doors? Allowing her to enter rooms first?

She seems like the kind of woman to notice everything, including my slight accent. I wasn't joking, I thought it was among the many things I left behind when Appalachia spit me out. Apparently, I'm drawing out my *OO*'s and adding *R*'s where they don't belong. I had better get that under control. Don't get me wrong, I love those smoky blue mountains, but not the memories they hold.

Pulling me from my thoughts, Cateline continues, "Here, we offer image consulting, public relations, and social skills commonly known as etiquette. This will include digital etiquette, dining etiquette, social skills, modern manners, and more."

My phone pings as if on cue.

"Please silence your device, Mr. Wolfe. When in the company of others, it is important to offer your full attention. You do not need the distraction of your latest like, follow, or update. In this program, I will teach you effective communication, leadership, and—" She pauses in the hallway and her eyes rake over me from head to toe. "Appearance. It matters."

I'm wearing jeans and a black T-shirt. I left my blue Boston Bruisers hoodie with my luggage. Typical day-off gear.

Holding my hands aloft, I say, "I thought you liked what you saw."

She blinks, as if forcing herself not to glance at my arms, my chest, or any of my muscles.

She turns on her heel and we reach the end of a hall with doors on either side for various meeting rooms and classrooms. She calls them *salons* and *parlors* along with an actual salon for grooming.

I tug my long hair into a bun. Arguably, it looks like an eagle landed on my head and built a nest instead of the smooth bun she wears. Women typically praise my hair, but I've never been with one who also has a bun.

Cateline pauses outside the gym, outfitted with all the latest equipment and regular free weights on the far wall.

Arms crossed and stance wide, I survey the space. "This will suffice."

"We also have a pool, recreation room, ballroom, and of course, the dining room. We will be meeting promptly at six p.m. this evening."

"Like a date?"

From the back, her shoulders rise and fall on an exhale, as if disappointed or exasperated. I can't tell. She turns around and says, "No, Mr. Wolfe, like a lesson. Dating between coaches and students is strictly prohibited. Moreover, I didn't think you were the type to date. Rather, to conquer."

"You know nothing of my conquests."

"Nor will I. Moving on." She strides down the hall.

The décor consists of polished antiques, wood, brass, and glass. It's like a museum with displays and paintings that the patrons aren't allowed to touch. Cateline included. Except there aren't any signs or velvet ropes to keep people from the valuables. I suppose, since this is a school of etiquette, everyone should know better.

I'm not sure I do.

She climbs a set of stairs, putting her perfectly firm calf muscles on display. The desire to touch the goods grows in me. At the top, she stops in front of a window and gazes at a panorama of the city, sea, and mountains.

"It's beautiful," I murmur.

She turns to me as if grateful I'm not a lost cause and appreciate the vista.

My thoughts skip from the scenery to Cateline as the natural light highlights her features. A charge vibrates under my skin—and it isn't from my phone. I turned it off as instructed. It's caused by my new teacher.

Ordinarily, I hardly bother to ask a woman her name. I prefer to call them *babe*, *sweetheart*, *whatever*—less of a chance to make a mistake or mix them up. But I want to hear her say it again so I can get it right.

However, a different question comes out of my mouth. “Why will I need all of these lessons?”

“Etiquette aims to make people feel comfortable in one’s presence, to demonstrate the ability to be relied upon, and to know how to conduct oneself in any given situation. It’s about respect. Having integrity in all affairs, private and public, and in turn, demonstrating dignity.”

“I’m not the kind of guy who goes to high tea very often.” In fact, I’m a long way from my humble beginnings in the backwoods of North Carolina.

Had she been any other woman I’ve ever met, that would’ve earned me a giggle. Instead, she looks me up and down. Never have I felt so exposed—like she knows the truth of who I am.

I shift from foot to foot, wondering what would happen if I wasn’t the guy who earned the nickname, Wolf, at least when it comes to women.

“That is clear, Mr. Wolfe. But when a person knows how to handle themselves with comportment at high tea, at professional engagements, in front of peers and everyone else along the spectrum, it translates to all areas of their lives. They become stronger, they become a positive influence, a leader. You said you play safety, yes?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“You do it all, covering passes and opponents. You are a line of defense so the other players can do their job. When I do my job, you will be better able to do your job.”

“You mean you can teach me to prevent an opposing player from scoring a touchdown?”

“In a manner of speaking, yes. But not necessarily on the field. Also, in life. Ego aside and humility in its place, you will have greater clarity and knowledge of who you are by the time we are done. That’s sure to improve your game.”

“I’m a star player for the greatest team in the football league’s history. Learning how to drink tea properly isn’t going to change that.”

“What about endorsements, Mr. Wolfe?”

“I have a few.”

“How long is the average career of a football player?” she asks.

“Three years if they get injured. Eight if they stay in good shape. Though Grey is defying all the odds. He’s in his forties.”

“You?” Her question is as sharp as a knife.

“For as long as I can keep myself on the field.”

“What’s your plan after that?”

It’s like she tossed a rock in a lake with my name on it and it starts sinking. I never took the long view. It’s always been about surviving another day.

“Hadn’t really thought through my plan for the future.”

“Your birthday isn’t far off.” And if I’m not mistaken, she winks as she strides down the hall.

I practically stumble as I follow her like a puppy dog.

When I catch up, she says, “You may be a star on the field now, but someday that currency will be worthless. Have you ever heard the saying, ‘Your first impression is also your last impression’?”

“Do you mean *a lasting impression*?” I correct, wondering if something was lost in translation.

“No, I mean if you don’t make a good first impression, that will be the one and only you have the opportunity to make. In other words, your first and last impressions are the same because your opportunity, whatever it may be, will end there if you do not make a good impression.”

Nope. She has full mastery over my native tongue. Nothing wrong with her English. Who is this woman and why does she make me think so much?

“If you want a future and some amount of longevity, I recommend cultivating your character now. Create a polished and professional public image, including media, networking, and so on.”

A spike of rebellion shoots through me. “What if I don’t want to?”

“It’s your life.”

I stop myself from flinching. I’ve heard those words before. My father always told me it was my life. I could throw it away or throw down and do better. I pushed myself when all I wanted to shout back was, *It is my life and you’re not going to tell me what to do*. Yet, here I am anyway, a star player...

The memories shake me and I steady myself on the windowsill.

If Cateline notices, she spares my dignity. Waiting in front of an open door, she gestures for me to enter. “This is where you’ll be staying, Mr. Wolfe.”

“You can call me Wolf.” I have to get my head back in the game. There is something about her, Concordia, or who-knows-what that threatens to shift something inside of me.

“In this setting, I will address you as Mr. Wolfe. Or if you prefer, I can use your given name.”

I muster, summoning all my plays and calling on the alpha inside, the swagger that I effortlessly carry. “I’ve never dated a chick long enough to call me by my first name.”

She snorts. “That’s because you don’t know how to treat a lady.”

“Maybe you could show me.” *And I’m back!* The flirt. The wolf.

“To be clear, I’m not interested.” She presses her lips into a thin line.

“Maybe I could persuade you.”

Given the strained look across her brow, were she not an etiquette coach, she’d have rolled her eyes or slapped me on the cheek. “No, Mr. Wolfe. I will not be swayed.”

“The name Mr. Wolfe belongs to my father. My friends call me Wolf.”

“My friends call me Cate. You are not my *ami*.”

There she goes with that French again, rattling me from within. “*Amour?*”

“*Non, ami*. It means friend. *Amour* is something else. Something I don’t imagine you are familiar with.”

With her tossing those words around, I glaze over, enchanted. That slap would come in handy right now.

“Catline Burger,” I say, butchering her name...maybe on purpose, because I can’t let myself go down this enchanting, flower-strewn path.

“Berghier,” she corrects.

“Burger. I could go for one right now, grilled rare, juicy.”

She wrinkles her nose. “I prefer *filet mignon avec pommes frites*.”

“Sounds fancy.”

“Steak and fries. But Mr. Wolfe, I’m what you call a slow cooker.”

“A Crock-Pot?”

She gets close enough that the slight breeze coming through the open window wafts her floral scent—if a field of lavender were made of diamonds left to sparkle in the sun.

“Yes. I am a slow cooker, a Crock-Pot. I am not a microwave. You don’t cook a burger or a steak in the microwave.”

“Actually, I have. But I don’t recommend it.”

“This life you have, it’s in the microwave. You should slow down. Stop to smell the roses, the lilacs, the lavender.”

“Yes, please.” I gulp.

She lifts her eyebrows.

I internally slap myself to snap myself out of this trance. “So Cateline Burger, how are we going to survive the next thirty days?”

“Berghier, it means shepherd.”

“Fitting.”

“We are going to survive by using what you said is your strength, endurance.”

“Sounds like a challenge. I’m up for it. We never got around to what I should call you.”

“My name is Cateline Berghier. You can call me Ms. Berghier.”

I’ll never be able to say her last name without making an embarrassing mess of it, so I change tack. “*Ms.*? I take it you’re single, then.”

“Mademoiselle Berghier,” she confirms.

My smolder escapes. “Since your name is Cateline, how about I call you Kitty Cat, or just Cat?”

Her arms cross in front of her chest. “What do you know about cats, Mr. Wolfe?”

“They don’t get along with dogs.”

“They also scratch.”

And with that, I’ve met my match. But this is far from over. No, it’s just beginning. A long beat passes as this realization sinks deep.

“Well, Cat, wolves bite.” I wink.

If she had a tail, she’d have flicked it, but she doesn’t so much as bat an eyelash. “You will find the guidebook for rules and expectations while here at Blancbourg on the table by your door.” At that, she sweeps from the room. I watch as she strides down the hallway, unable to ignore the sway of her hips. But she’s too serious and out of my league. A first for this wolf.

CATELINE



*H*ad I waited long enough to see Connor's face before I strode down the hall on the third floor, I'm afraid of what I would have seen.

Consternation?

Confusion?

Flame?

Fury?

I have a case of whiplash, and no doubt he does too. Never before has someone gotten under my skin so completely. Guys like him are all swagger and no substance. Gaston was like that. Only, I realized that when it was almost too late. I thought I knew him until he revealed his true motives—using me to get to the top while cavorting with other women. Yet, he tried to hold claim over me, to conquer me.

As for Connor, not only does he get under my skin, he sets it on fire.

See? Flame, fury.

But it's confusing too, because I've coached dozens of wayward, bad-boy celebrities, and never have I experienced this level of consternation which leads me to confusion.

Also, I'd like to make it public record that he has a man bun. I wear a bun. "There is only enough room in this manor for one bun, and it's mine," I hiss.

I slap my hand over my mouth as Pippa rounds the corner. Her brow ripples before she plasters on a friendly smile.

"Everything okay?" Before I can come up with an answer, she all but begs me to trade clients. Although Pippa is competent, I wouldn't pawn off

Connor “the Wolf” on her. I’m not cruel.

“Okay, I understand.” She sounds a little plastic, but it’s her first day with what’s surely an unruly and pompous football player, so there is bound to be an adjustment period for all of us.

“Glad to hear it. If you excuse me, I have—” I point vaguely toward the stairs. I’m so flustered, I don’t know what I have to do right now, other than my job.

Focus, Cateline.

I pound down the steps like a peevish teenager. I’m certain that, like Gaston, Connor sees me as little more than a good time, someone to *conquer*, which means he’s little more than a superficial jerk.

No matter whether the soft resonance of his Appalachian accent is charming or that his eyes are captivating—objectively speaking, of course. Those aren’t details from the interview that will help me better frame the training for the next thirty days.

And yet, I paid attention to them.

Letting out a little groan of frustration, I adjust my bun and march through the foyer.

If I were looking for a guy, which definitely is not the case, I’d want someone with depth, substance, and who takes me seriously.

But seriously, I’m not looking.

A pointy little thought pokes me in the ribs, reminding me that although I’m not looking, I did look...at Connor and his muscles.

I feel like growling, but that only reminds me of him.

As I pass Arthur in the hall on the way to my office, he gives a cordial little bow. “Thank you again for the time off, Miss Berghier.” He lifts his chin toward the administrative offices. “Good luck.”

That gesture and comment could only mean one thing. Regina has more bad news.

Arthur somehow knows everything that goes on at Blancbourg ahead of everyone else. It’s as though he has a sixth sense or has been around long enough—since the former king and queen of Concordia attended as students—to have seen every manner of triumph and calamity befall this place.

Although I headed up the opening of the school’s doors to the world, in recent years, our numbers and revenue have gradually declined no matter

how much money the Board of Regents approves for advertising. The funds evaporate more quickly than they offer a return.

And most recently, they seemed to have fallen precipitously off a cliff. One which I feel like I'm looking over. *It's a long way down*, my thoughts echo.

Bracing myself before knocking on Regina's office door, I draw a deep breath. It's an old habit from my days as a ballerina. At the curtain call, on an inhale, I'd leave everything that was going on in my personal life behind, so I could be fully present to whatever would come on the other side.

And because dancing is quite the workout and requires strong lungs—though I suppose a guy like Connor would disagree and say it's for sissies or something—I take a second breath.

Given Arthur's comment, I'll probably need all the help I can get.

Regina doesn't answer. Somewhat relieved, I pad down the hall to my office. When I open the door, ready to flip on the light, I hear shuffling. I press the switch to find Regina in a squatting position, as if she was sitting down or getting up from the chair at my desk.

We both remain quiet in alarmed or polite shock.

There is no reason to lock the doors since Concordia is so safe, but the faint tint to Regina's cheeks suggests she's been caught.

But at what?

I don't have anything to hide. Maybe she's curious about the boisterous football players. There is no escaping the fact that they're all good-looking, though Regina is at least twenty years my senior and married.

By most accounts, the position of headmistress should have gone to her, but the Board selected me from the pool of candidates.

By the grave look on Regina's face, one I know all too well, we might soon have to close the doors to the school completely.

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Harrow."

"Good afternoon," Regina says.

She never bothers to try to pronounce my last name. The employees of Blancbourg follow all manner of polite protocol, practicing what we teach. Although, somehow, Regina thinks it's okay to come into my office without an invitation.

"Looking for something?" I gesture to the files and papers on my desk.

Her cameo brooch glints. "Oh, um, yes. Just the balance sheet from last quarter."

“Why would it be in my files and not yours? Don’t tell me your computer quit. We can’t afford a new one.”

“I’m well aware,” she says shrewdly, as if it’s my fault. “No, but, um, I wanted to make sure the numbers match.”

“Why wouldn’t they? You’re the one who prepares the documents.”

“Right. But when things look this dismal, it’s best to double-check.”

I let it slide because I have bigger problems. Much bigger ones that are about six foot six and consist of over two hundred pounds of pure muscle. Connor is massive—with an ego to match.

Why am I thinking about him again?

He’s also stubborn, has unruly hair, and a beard that probably houses chipmunks. They’re cute. Never mind. Not chipmunks. More like rodents. Grubby-handed little rats.

“What may I help you with today, Mrs. Harrow?” My gaze flits to Regina’s hand when the sunlight catches the stones on her rings. Given her salary, she must’ve recently inherited some family jewels.

Next to her hand is a photograph of Connor Wolfe on the desk, one of several articles I gathered to prepare for the football players’ arrival.

“How are things going with your new client?”

“As expected,” I answer, unable to ignore the photo. In it, Connor is clean-shaven, being profiled for a wolf sanctuary that he operates. From what I’ve learned, each of the players on the team has a charity, following in the footsteps of Rylen Murphy—Boston Bruiser, billionaire, and recently married to his high school sweetheart.

The four guys here at Blancbourg probably harbor guilt for how bad they are and make themselves feel better by donating money to a good cause. No doubt, vanity virtue at its finest.

Regina’s eyes follow my gaze and she raises an eyebrow. “Some muscles, huh?”

“No mistaking those,” I say vaguely. Or the killer smile that verges toward looking perpetually smug, like he has all the confidence in the world.

I cannot lie or deny that Connor is an incredibly handsome man, if he’d clean himself up. Fortunately, I met the rough and rugged version—certainly not a match for me.

He’s a flirt and wants to manipulate me so, like with the charity situation, he can feel better about himself.

I stuff the photos inside the folder, close it, and will my cheeks not to flush.

Regina clears her throat. "I think we should review the budget. My projections suggest we're going to go over this quarter again."

"But we recently received payment for the new clients."

She waves her hand. "That money is already earmarked for overdue bills."

"This information should've been presented to the board earlier when we had the chance. Do you remember, I suggested we review the budget monthly rather than quarterly when we started backsliding into the red?"

"I am already doing the work of several people and generating those reports in addition to my load would be impossible."

"We're all managing as best we can, considering the circumstances. What do you recommend?"

Regina's answer is always the same. Cut costs. We're bottoming out at the bare minimum to keep the sizable manor itself going, not to mention it functioning as a school. "I think the landscaping company needs to be let go...or Arthur."

"No." My tone is firm.

The full-time gardener had been released and we hired a landscape firm to tend the grounds every other week—the once beautiful gardens are becoming a sad sight, indeed.

"The landscaping company has other accounts, but Arthur only has one job, his wife is ill, and he's been loyal to the school for longer than I've been alive. If more money continues to move out rather than in, it'll be the landscapers, the cook, the housekeepers, and then the additional teachers. Arthur stays with us until the end." My tone is unyielding.

"I understand you're sentimental, but that has no room in running a business." Regina simpers a smile.

A deep furrow slices my brow. I'm not sentimental at all, except once a year, which happened to be the other day. I'm intentional about keeping emotions separate from my professional life—not that I let myself experience many emotions much at all.

"I beg your pardon," I say as Regina's words dig in. "I'm not sentimental. I am compassionate."

I won't get into details with Regina, but Arthur Fitzgerald relies on the healthcare provided through his job to help with his wife's ailments. To lay

him off right now would be a hardship.

Regina crosses her arms and cocks her hip. “We need an additional thirty-four thousand dollars to cover operating costs, and I don’t see where else we can get it. The landscape service runs fifteen annually, leaving us with nineteen remaining to cover if we remove it from the budget. If we let Arthur go and no longer have to pay his salary, we’d have a surplus.”

My face is made of stone, unshakable. To some, that dollar amount might not sound like much, but in the last several years, since Regina took over as bursar from her previous role as junior headmistress when the position was eliminated, the school has had to count every cent.

“I’m sure our guests can figure out how to open doors by themselves and—” Regina starts in, slighting Arthur’s importance to the operation at Blancbourg.

I hold my hand up in the universal sign for stop. I’ve heard enough. “When do you need these additional funds by?”

“We have thirty days. That’s also when we have our next meeting with the Board of Regents. I requested a meeting because things cannot continue in this fashion.” Regina cuts her eyes in my direction, challenging me.

“I will come up with the amounts by then.”

“You mean you’ll try. Believe me, Cateline, I’ve tried. The money isn’t there.” Regina slides some documents across the desk.

I skim them. “Please email me the spreadsheets, account information, and anything else relevant to the budget.”

“Are you suggesting that I missed something? That I don’t know how to do my job? Might I remind you that I’ve been working at Blancbourg for seventeen years? I know everything there is to know about every aspect of every job. You’ve only been—”

“I’ve been here for almost eight years, less than half your time, as you’re so kind as to remind me with frequency. I, too, am familiar with the functioning of this school. I aim to keep it open so long as I am employed as headmistress.”

The financial straits are real, but given we pour the majority of our budget into advertising, I find it hard to believe our enrollment would be diving down so deeply.

Regina fingers her brooch. “Of course. I wasn’t suggesting we close Blancbourg, but—”

“What were you suggesting?”

“I already said. We need to eliminate personnel.”

I hold the door open. “Thank you for alerting me to this issue.”

Regina stumps down the hall.

I call, “Oh, and Mrs. Harrow, considering you’re well versed in the many roles and positions at Blancbourg, then you’ll understand that Arthur is indispensable.”

If the school had a mascot, it would be him. He attends to the guests’ needs, makes them feel comfortable, and is always cheerful. All of that, on top of countless behind-the-scenes duties. If anything, he’ll be the last man standing.

I set the papers aside. I’ll take the time to look at the budget later and get to the bottom of the lack of funds, where the money is going, and why it seems like there is never enough.

First, I have to deal with our current roster of clients since, for better or worse, they’re the current moneymakers. I have to be sure they succeed, even if it means putting up with Connor Wolfe and his man muscles.

CATELINE



After a brief check-in with the other teachers and getting status updates on each of their clients, I enter the inner courtyard to take a shortcut to the dining area. I'm lost in thought about the terrible first impression I got of Connor and how I can put my irritation aside so that he has a favorable outcome.

Connor has the kind of charm, good looks, and entitled swagger that makes it seem like his success was handed to him—he's on the top American football team in the league. The guy probably has a gold-plated toilet and a bathtub full of diamonds.

Meanwhile, I've had to fight hard for my success. Since the school is practically drowning in debt, I worry that I've lost my grip. That I'm failing.

A pointy little thought pokes me in the ribs, but before I make sense of it, loud voices with American accents echo from the balcony above the inner courtyard.

I don't mean to listen, but it's not like they have a volume button. The football players are all rowdy, raucous, and such...*boys*. If I were looking for a relationship, which I'm not, I'd want a *man*. Not someone immature like Connor or his teammates.

The voices filter louder. "We all have lady coaches?" one says.

"Figures the commish would tempt us with forbidden fruit," another replies.

"Let me remind you of the playbook, guys. The women are off-limits—they're our coaches," the first guy says emphatically.

“The only coach I answer to is Hammer.” That’s definitely Connor speaking in his smooth, Appalachian accent.

Figures he’d say something like that.

I soon realize only three of the guys are in the conversation. One of them must be out somewhere. Leaving the manor isn’t forbidden, but given what brought them here, I worry the missing member of the team is up to no good.

The first guy says, “The commish sent us here. Like it or not, he has more of a say in our careers than Hammer does. So, for the next month, these women are our coaches and nothing more.”

“Emphasis on women, but that’s all the more reason to behave,” the second one says in an even tone. I think it’s Grey, who out of the group, seems like the voice of reason.

“Hot women.” Again, that’s Connor. He imitates a wolf howling.

I pause by a statue draped in ivy. A full-body flush works its way through me. There’s no way he’s referring to me. I’m not hideous, but I’m not *hot*—at least, no one has ever commented on my attractiveness. As a ballerina, I was complimented on my poise, my weight (that was my mother), and how lovely I looked in costume. In town, guys don’t pay attention to me—I haven’t dated since leaving France.

The football players’ voices float back to me.

“Not hot women, they’re our coaches,” Grey says in his low rumble of a voice.

Chase must be the other rather than Declan, who has a slight Irish accent. He adds, “Would you date Coach Hammer?”

“Are you insane?” Connor asks.

“Remember what Hammer said? If one of us screws up, we’re all out. We abide by the playbook rules. No kissing, no dating, eyes up, hands-off,” Grey says.

“Those are all playbook don’ts. What about some dos?” Conner asks.

“Dos, as in *I do*?” Chase says with a laugh.

A chorus of it bounces off the stone walls of the courtyard.

“Unless you fall in love. Then it’s okay. If she makes you an honest man, then all bets are off.” I like what Grey has to say the most so far.

“Not going to happen. But *me-ow*, my coach is something. Tightly wound, a stickler for rules, so controlled—”

“Sounds like just the woman to tame the wild in you, Wolf,” Chase says.

“As I said, not going to happen.”

The sound of pushing and shoving—likely the guys teasing each other—tears me from the spot by the statue and I hurry to the dining room.

A few minutes later, Connor enters. At least he isn’t late, but he didn’t change out of his outfit from earlier and into something suitable for dinner. Obviously, he ignored the guidebook for rules and expectations for Blancbourg students.

The echo of his voice in the courtyard filters through my mind as he moves toward the seat opposite me. I will my cheeks not to tint pink. “Good evening, Mr. Wolfe.”

“What’s up?” As he lowers in the chair, his knee bumps against mine. He doesn’t apologize.

I grit my teeth to keep from commenting and to stop the sensation that zings from his point of contact right into my belly.

He takes a big slug of the water at his place setting and it dribbles onto his beard.

Is he some kind of barbarian? Raised in the jungle?

“Let’s try this again.” If nothing else, ballet training taught me patience and the value of repetition and rote.

Seated across from each other at a small table for two, Connor looks up as though alarmed. Either that, or he’s concerned about the neoclassical painting of a general leading a charge into a bloody battle behind my head. I can’t tell.

I instruct him on how to greet me properly.

He sighs as though I asked him to stop playing his video game and empty the trash. “Do I have to? I mean, seriously, can’t we just get on with it? I’m starving. Do you know how many calories a guy like me needs to feed these guns?” He lifts his right arm and flexes.

Do I fan myself at the sight? No, but with clenched fists, I don’t take care to avoid “accidentally” poking the heel of my stiletto into his shoe.

“Ow. I mean wow. Are all of the coaches like this?”

With a little hit of self-satisfaction at nailing my target, I say, “It probably shouldn’t surprise me, but in all the years of teaching etiquette, I’ve never had anyone so boldly suggest not doing the lessons. I’ve had lazy

students and clients who simply didn't understand, but you, Mr. Wolfe, are stubborn."

"The same could be said about you."

Brushing off his comment, I say, "I'm here to do my job so, *no*, we will not go through the motions. According to the information I received, you weren't given a choice, so I suggest you play by my rules or—"

"Or?" he asks, interrupting.

I press my lips together so I don't lose my cool. "If you'd simply let me finish speaking instead of challenging me like a toddler, I'd remind you of the—" I almost repeat what I overheard in the courtyard about the playbook.

Completely ignoring me, Connor cuts across. "Oh, right. The commish and his rules. Thanks for the reminder. So let me get this straight, I do what you say and we can get this over with?"

"It would be better if you learn and apply the lessons, but yes, that's about right."

"So, I have to follow your rules?"

"They're common rules of etiquette, manners, and deportment. If you read the guidebook in your room, you'd learn about our history and—"

"The rules, huh? What you said earlier about being a Crock-Pot. Let's just say that I'm a slow learner. It might take me a while to catch on."

"I understand and am equipped to prioritize multiple learning styles. There are visual learners, those who learn by listening, writing and reading, and of course, kinesthetic."

"Is that like learning by doing?"

"Yes, it's a very hands-on approach."

"Hands on like this?" Connor wraps his big fingers around my hand and plants it on his bicep. Then he flexes. A firm lump rises, pushing against my palm. It sends a spray of flaming arrows through me, piercing all my defenses and fortress walls.

He wears a very self-satisfied grin and I can't help but imagine his face in the photo without the beard. Then I come to my senses.

I jerk away. "What are you—?"

"As I said, I need to feed these muscles."

Cheeks burning and beading up with sweat, I turn from side to side as though looking for an exit, an ice cooler, anything to douse the flames

inside. Yes, I'm upset that he'd do such a thing, but also because of the way my body reacted.

I smooth my hands down my deep purple dress and then sit in the chair. "On second thought, we'll employ a hands-off approach. Please, take a seat."

"Why? You can't handle my hot man muscles?"

"Who uses the words hot man muscles?" As soon as *hot* is out of my mouth—a reminder of his comment in the courtyard—my blush deepens.

"Obviously, I do, babe. But because we're *not* going to go through the motions, you'd probably enjoy this more if you let down your hair. You're too organized, systematic, strict..." He trails off then waggles his finger at me. "Wait. Why did I get the headmistress and the other guys just got regular chicks?"

He's a rotten apple, alright. I sharpen my eyebrow like I would a pencil. "We are called teachers or coaches."

"But were you warned that I'd be the most problematic?" His smirk hints toward pride at the possibility.

"No, Mr. Wolfe. I figured that out myself."

"Just Wolf," he corrects.

He leans back as though fighting against sitting up straighter, even though slouching in the upright wooden chair has to be uncomfortable.

"What's your goal for the next thirty days?" I ask.

"To not ruin my career." But the dismissive glance and jut of his chin suggest he isn't going to give up on doing everything in his power to annoy me.

Little does he know, my arsenal for guys like him is well stocked. "That's a good start."

However, Connor probably consulted his playbook or whatever to figure out his next moves, because he's relatively agreeable for the next few minutes while I review dinner manners. "Do you have any questions?"

"Are you single?"

I will my jaw not to drop.

He smirks. "I'm asking for a friend."

I scoff. "Unlikely." His *meow* in the courtyard echoes in my mind. Time to raise the drawbridge and keep Connor out. "If I had to guess, it's more like you're trying to see how far you can push me before I snap."

“Not so. You’re hot, but I have a theory.” As he speaks, his eyes never leave mine, even as he rubs the rim of his water glass with his forefinger.

Somehow, he pokes at embers I didn’t know I had inside. I swallow thickly in hopes to put out any potential fires.

“What’s your theory?” I instantly regret taking the bait.

“That you’re hot but don’t know it. Haven’t been trained in the fine art of flirting and letting a guy be interested in you. Maybe I have something to learn from you about being more well-behaved. However, the same might be said about me. Perhaps, I can teach you a thing or two. Namely, that you, Kitty Cat, are hot.”

My temperature spikes and his comment confirms that he was talking about me when I overheard him in the courtyard. However, all he sees is *a hot chick*. Not a career professional. Not a teacher or coach or an intelligent woman with hopes and dreams. Well, maybe not that last part. I’m not sure what those are, because allowing myself to think that way is dangerous and will only end in disappointment. I have to focus on my job.

My heart stutters.

Connor’s eyes remain fixed on me and a grin curls on his lips. “No, really, I know a guy who likes uptight, smug, tough-to-crack women like you.”

I bristle but keep my cool. “What pleasant compliments. Your friend must have good taste, but in this case, my sincerest apologies because he won’t be finding out what he’s missing.” I hide a smile at the zinger.

His copper-brown eyes don’t leave me. No, they dig deeper, trying to find my vulnerabilities.

Blistering emotions grow inside as I realize what I’m feeling and I hate Connor for it.

He remains silent, not firing back. Instead, he cradles the back of his head in his hands. His biceps flex. Without meaning to, my gaze flits over them. The blazing heat of anger morphs as my cheeks warm all over again.

He knows exactly what he’s doing, getting me all flustered with his man muscles.

I’m left with no other option than to be like the general in the painting behind me and prepare for battle, because if there was one thing I won’t lose, it’s my heart.

CONNOR



Some would say beauty and grace are a blessing, but it isn't fair that I've been cursed with an attractive coach—Cateline, not Hammer—and have to keep my hands off.

It's been less than half a day since I arrived at reform school, and an itch steadily grows to run, throw a ball, and to spend some time with a woman. Just kisses would be fine.

Well, I am spending time with a woman, a dinner date, in fact, if it could be called that. Only, it's clear she's trying to convince herself she hates me.

"The body doesn't lie," I mutter.

"Pardon?" she asks in her smoky French accent.

My father's famous words, "*Life isn't fair*," resound in my mind as they so often do.

"Mr. Wolfe, before we share this meal, I'm going to step out of character for a moment and give you a few instructions."

"You're in character, Cat?" A strange hope flares inside that she's only pretending to despise me.

She presses her lips together, presumably at the use of the shortened version of her name. "We're playing the roles of dining companions. You're going to demonstrate that you know how to behave like a gentleman when in good company."

Her accent is so alluring, I'm at risk of losing consciousness and can hardly process what she says.

"You want me to demonstrate that I'm a gentleman instead of...what?"

She lifts and lowers one shoulder. “Instead of a—” She pauses as though trying to find the right word.

I brace myself because I’ve been called many things. In my youth, they mostly came from my father or brother and amounted to insults. As an adult, they mostly come from the women I pursue and are compliments. Whether we’re roleplaying or not, I’m curious about what *Cateline* has to say.

“Actually, I am not sure of the word in English.”

That isn’t the answer I was expecting. Despite the accent, her command of the English language is impeccable. Most native speakers don’t speak with such fluidity and clarity.

“Perhaps it has slipped my mind.” She shifts in her chair as though uncomfortable by this perceived shortcoming.

Interesting.

“The word is a noun and is where bears and beasts live in the wintertime.”

My eyebrows lift and an amused smile plays on my lips. “A den. No, a cave,” I guess. “Wait, you’re saying you want me to behave like a gentleman instead of a *caveman*?”

“Yes, that’s right!” She practically bounces in her seat as though we worked together to come up with the winning answer on a game show.

“You think I’m a caveman?”

She nods and smiles. “*Oui*. Have you looked in the mirror lately?”

Forcing myself to dismiss how she answered *yes* in French, which has that certain *je ne sais quoi*, and because I’m mildly insulted by her comment, I scrub my hand down my beard.

I’d like to storm out of here, beating my chest, but rally. My father and brother didn’t intend to teach me the art of war, but I’ve learned it by necessity to survive Dad’s harsh rules and the way he pushed me to my physical limits. As for my brother, he was just a bully. In the end, it made me stronger, which was the intention. It also made me stubborn, closed off, and battle-ready at all times.

Until now, this was merely a game between my new coach and me. Now, it’s war.

Some fights, I’ll jump into, fists flying. Others, I approach more strategically. This is the case with Cateline—not that I’ll physically fight

her. Rather, this is a battle of wills. And I'll win by proving to her that I'm not a caveman. At least not all the time.

"For the next two hours, we will act as if we are a civilized couple sharing a meal," Cateline says and outlines a few instructions.

I'm taking a long sip of water and nearly choke at the word *couple*.

"Make no mistake, I will be evaluating you and reporting to your superiors, Mr. Wolfe."

Given her accent, the words are like background music, and I'm drawn into the way the candlelight dances in her eyes even as I try to remember she's the enemy.

Shaking my head, I snap out of it, loosening the elastic around my man bun. I square up, imagining Cateline with Medusa hair and rotten teeth. That ought to get my head back in the game.

"Are you ready?" she asks, indicating that I'm to invite her to join me for a meal at a fine restaurant, even though it's just the dining room of the reform school.

I nod, fortifying myself. I can turn the charm on when I want to, but my style is more casual and less committal, like, *Do you want to grab a bite to eat?* Knowing that won't satisfy her proper sensibilities, I say, "Want to go out to eat?"

She narrows her eyes as though evaluating. "Good start, but add a little more. Perhaps, 'I enjoy your company. Would you like to join me for dinner?'"

"It sounds too formal. Too stuffy." I want to say, *too emotional*. "I don't tell women I enjoy their company because that would make them think I want to spend more time with them. Next would come requests for dates, trips to the movies, sporting events, concerts."

"Is that so bad?"

"Obviously."

She exhales through her nose and singsongs. "This only confirms that you're a caveman."

An annoying question floats into my mind. Do I enjoy Cateline's company?

She clicks her tongue. "To you, that may sound like too much, but to a lady, you're indicating that you'd like more than to satisfy your basic needs for food and spend time with her."

"Exactly. Would you like it if a man said that to you?" I ask.

The question is off-script and must catch her off guard because she tilts her head as though thinking about it. Then she snaps out of it and says, "Moving on."

"So about that dinner? I've never been told no." My lips quirk.

She practically rolls her eyes.

Part of me wants to appease her and say what I ought to, but I'm Connor "the Wolf." Rules are more like guidelines and the only lines I follow are the yards on the football field. Plus, it's mildly amusing to see primly put-together Cateline so flustered.

As the evening continues, the server brings various courses of the meal. I alternately behave myself and act naughtily just to keep her on her toes.

Sometimes my pinkie is in. Other times, it finds its way out.

I slice each bite of my steak and take a polite bite. Then I'll stuff my face with mashed potatoes.

I'll sip my drink and then slurp.

My hands will rest on my lap and then I'll plant my elbows on the table.

Cateline breaks in and out of character, correcting and instructing me. I wonder if it's giving her whiplash, or if she realizes I'm toying with her.

When the server removes our entrée plates, I say, "A lot of people think football players are all dumb jocks. What separates those who are professional and have a long career from those who are a flash on the field and then disappear isn't all skill and strength."

"Let me guess, it's endurance?" she asks after daintily wiping her mouth. Her lipstick has faded from the meal, yet I cannot stop staring at her lips.

"Yes, but it's also intelligence. The long-term successes observe things, don't rock the boat too hard, learn when to toe the line and when to prank their fellow players to have a little fun."

"I see you've given some thought to your future," she says, self-satisfied, given our conversation earlier.

The truth is, I haven't. The words just came out of my mouth, a truth I didn't realize I'd known all along.

"I'm not dumb. I've learned how to play the game on and off the field. I can schmooze and make small talk meaningful when I want to." Turns out, all along, I knew what I was doing, yet telling her this out of the blue makes me feel out of control.

She taps the air. "And yet, there is a rebellious streak in you."

“I prefer to think of it as independence.”

She nods as if she understands this intimately. “Like a cat.”

“Lone wolf.”

She snorts a laugh, as if we’re not as different as we thought.

I blink a few times and time slows slightly. Microwave off. Crock-Pot on.

In Cateline, I only see beauty. Yet inside me, exists a broken little boy that keeps me divided in two: Connor and Wolf.

Sure, etiquette is important, but for the first time in my life, what if I had something real, lasting? Something that isn’t pretense with a woman, indulgence because I’m a sports star, or a front to get the results I want.

In real life, sometimes I sit up properly and eat my meals with manners. Other times, I slouch on the couch and devour an entire pizza.

I’m a gentleman and a caveman.

Polite and a prankster.

Hard working and out to have fun.

But no one knows that about me because I only show one side. The side I know will achieve my desired outcome or the one my audience prefers—whether one woman or a stadium full of fans.

I never show the world the real Connor Wolfe. Maybe I’m not sure who that is or—I swallow a sip of water—perhaps it’s because I’m afraid of being left alone in the wilderness.

Even though Cateline browses the dessert options, it’s as if she has an audience with my interior thoughts. I don’t believe in telepathy, but it’s all spoken in her accent. Perhaps getting into my head is a style of learning she didn’t mention.

I shift position and rest my forearms on the table, gripping my hands tightly and trying to move back into the familiar headspace of carefree Wolf.

Keeping myself so divided makes me feel suddenly, achingly tired. It’s like I’ve been running a marathon against myself for my entire life.

And waiting for me at the finish line is the most unexpected sight: she’s slender, has espresso brown hair, and an olive hue to her porcelain skin that suggests freckles will pop if she spends time in the sun. Her dark eyes are watchful, but in them is a depth of knowing I’ve never before let myself look long enough to see.

And her lips...

It's Cateline.

CONNOR



A chill like a sharp icicle picks away at the truth and makes me pull on my hoodie.

“Mr. Wolfe, Mr. Wolfe,” Cateline repeats, drawing me from what feels like a trance. “Are you all like this? If so, we have our work cut out for us.” She muffles a huff of frustration, breaking out of character again.

With newfound clarity, I understand how exhausting it is to go back and forth—boomeranging between personalities. I’ve been doing it for going on a decade. Sometimes I’m *on*—all fire and bravado, and others I just want to rest. To fire up the Crock-Pot. But I can’t let myself, otherwise, I’ll lose.

Life has taught me to keep up the hustle, just as my father taught me that it isn’t fair. My brother too.

Once more, Cateline breaks into my thoughts. What do they put in the water here? Truth serum? Then again, she did say she only tells the truth.

“Trust me, consistently adhering to etiquette will give you a competitive edge. You’re capable, strong, and hard-working. Dedicated to your sport. Discipline says a lot about a person. You just need a bit of refinement.”

Was she paying me a backhanded compliment? And if so, why did it make me feel effervescent like the sparkling water at my place setting? More importantly, why do I care?

A voice of warning in a deep Appalachian accent replaces Cateline’s. I can’t let myself care. Pushing past all this introspection, my inner wolf bursts forth and blurts, “I like to think of myself as the total package.” That was an underhanded pitch. I couldn’t resist pointing that out to her, especially because she isn’t interested. At least, that’s her claim. But there was no denying how warm her palm felt against my bicep earlier.

Cateline lifts an eyebrow, which I've learned is one of her signature moves to mean she doesn't agree or is questioning something I say. "The total package? No, something is missing."

Her accent has an enticing quality to it. Maybe it's because she speaks the truth, but not one I want to hear. Furthermore, that's not what I expected to hear. However, I'm not going to give in and ask her what she thinks is missing.

"Mr. Wolfe, the root of the word *manners* comes from Latin. It means *of the hand*. You may think of it this way, manners teach us how to *handle* life. We do this with grace and courtesy. To make others feel comfortable and welcome in any given situation. I might add, that doesn't mean we lie or deny the truth and pretend, or are hypocrites. No, the truth always comes first, but because we've built trust, it's delivered and accepted with what you might call elegant ease."

I adjust my hoodie, the neck suddenly constricting, because if I've learned anything in the last hour, it's that I'm not entirely comfortable in my skin.

Don't know why.

Don't want to think about it.

Don't want to tell her either.

I only wish I hadn't mooned Campos so things could go back to the way they were.

Easy.

Normal.

Comfortable.

When I find my voice, I say, "Are you suggesting you're not comfortable with me? If that's the case, I can help with that."

She levels me with a dark-eyed gaze.

Again, it's as though she knows the exact thoughts that intruded earlier. Talk about rude.

I never considered myself a man of strong faith, but Declan and Chase have rubbed off on me over the years. On top of that, with every fiber of my being, I'm certain that something other than grit helped me survive my childhood. I'm also certain Cateline can't read my mind, yet she somehow sees my gears turning and gets the gist from all the grist in my internal mill.

"Mr. Wolfe, I'm suggesting you're uncomfortable with emotions."

"Is this some kind of therapy session?" I blurt.

“Not at all, but I’ve been studying your behavior for the last two hours. You know how to conduct yourself. But I don’t understand why you don’t choose to do so consistently.”

“Because I don’t want to.” My tone is all brat no brawn.

She’s gotten under my skin and she’s right. It makes me feel—exposed and vulnerable.

I shove up from the table, rattling the flatware and plates. “I’m done here.”

“No, we’re not done just yet. I ordered dessert. I think you will enjoy it.” The way she says it so simply is like a promise. One I don’t want her to keep.

I toss my napkin down in response.

Cateline rises to her feet and squares off in front of me, toe to toe. She has to crane her neck to meet my eyes, but she does so fearlessly.

I roll my shoulders.

“Do I need to get a whistle? Train you like a dog? This is my turf. You will listen. You will be tested and I only produce winning results.”

My jaw twitches. “You’re already testing me.”

“I have never had a failure leave through the doors at Blancbourg during my time as headmistress. It’s up to me to inform Coach Hammer that you passed and I intend to do so in thirty days.”

I fold my arms in front of my chest, meaning to put some space between us, but she doesn’t shuffle back. As slender as she is, Cateline holds her ground.

And I’m suddenly warm in this hoodie. I tear it off, pushing it into her hands. The hem of my shirt catches and she glances at my abs. Her cheeks are the color of raspberries and she sucks in a breath.

Looking at her is like gazing into a mirror, only the reflection isn’t of appearance, but everything beneath. She’s as stubborn and determined as me.

“What if I don’t care?” I ask.

“In order for you to avoid the penalties from your commissioner, you’d better find it in yourself to care.”

She’s right and I should back off, but I lean down, my face hovering over hers—eyebrows crossed, nostrils flared, lips pinched. She wears an identical expression but on a smaller scale.

“You will find it in yourself to care for yourself, for your future, and your team,” she adds.

We lock eyes, unrelenting. Both experts in the art of war. For the first time ever, I’ve met a worthy adversary. But she has a weapon that I do not. Beauty. Grace.

Endurance won’t help me now. I’m going on hope alone that I can resist it.

Her breath whispers across the skin on my arms.

It’s as though we’re caught in a desert wind with sand buffeting between us, rubbing us raw in some places and polishing us elsewhere like glass. But there’s dry heat too, warming us to the point of incineration.

My pulse quickens.

She drags in a breath.

My head dips closer to hers.

Cateline’s lips part and finishing her thought, she adds, “And you will abide by the rules of the playbook.”

The spell breaks. The comment sends me reeling backward. “How do you know about that?”

“I know everything.”

She knows too much.

“Which one of the guys told you?”

Her head shifts left and right. “You told me.”

My inner wolf reminds me that I won’t win by playing her game. Once more, I’m at odds with myself.

She clasps her hands as though pleased by holding this knowledge over my head.

I gaze at the flickering flame of the candlelight on the table, considering my next move. Give up because she’s right. Or live by the Boston Bruiser’s motto, *It ain’t over ‘til we’ve won*.

I straighten and resume my position in front of Cateline. In a low voice, I say, “My father once told me an old story about a captain who sails ashore to wage war. Instead of anchoring the ships, he orders the crew to burn them.”

She inclines her head as though curious why anyone would do something so insane—that had been my question too. My father burned the boats, that’s for sure.

I explain, "Retreating is only a choice when you have the option. If you burn the boats, there is no going back. You have no choice but to fight. To win."

Understanding ripples across her features. "That's how you live your life. Burn through everything in your way, never mind the wreckage in your wake."

"Never look back. There is only one way and it is onward."

"That means you don't look within."

My muscles tense. Never have I met someone so perceptive, fearless, right, and so dangerous.

Cateline wags her hand between us, accidentally brushing her finger across my arm. It sends a surge through me, like a fuse lighting a keg of adrenaline.

"You burned the boats."

"Aye." I stop short of offering a salute.

"This is war then?" she asks.

I give a sharp nod.

"Very well. Let the battle resume tomorrow. Seven a.m. sharp."

A tremor works through me because I've never faced off with a woman like her and fear it will destroy me.

CATELINE



*A*s I stride from the dining room, I'm one of those old-timey cartoons with steam coming out of my ears. The hair on the back of my neck lifts. From somewhere nearby, a wolf howls—there are plenty of them in the mountains. Likely, it's probably Connor being immature. He really knows how to rile me up.

With that handsome face.

Those copper-brown eyes.

The lazy grin.

His commanding presence.

I feel like a cat who found a ball of yarn and tied itself up in knots instead of being the stiff-backed, square-shouldered headmistress who untangles problems.

Never has someone twisted me up like this. There is something dangerously attractive about him, but equally obnoxious. I shouldn't play his games, but I cannot say no to a challenge.

That night, as I settle in my suite, the pile of unanswered mail sits on my table, hollering at me in an authoritative voice about my visa. The financial woes here at Blancbourg whisper from the offices below, and yet all I can think about is Connor.

Despite everything else going on, I'm going to focus on what I can control, and that's not letting the cocky and stubborn football player slip through the cracks because he only wants to play games that he knows he'll win. Connor will learn the rules of engagement when it comes to etiquette and successfully pass the program.

Then I'll deal with everything else.

When it comes to him, that's all I'm thinking about, promise.
Not his smolder or the way his eyes shine with amusement.
Not the attraction that hammered between us in the dining room.
Not how we come at each other in waves of hot and cold, hot and cold,
leaving me feeling like I can't decide between the sauna or snow.
I grab a piece of paper and write *Hate List*. That sounds too harsh.
Feeling bad because I don't actually hate the guy, I start over and replace it
with *The NOT Love List*. Using bullet points, I write:

- He's scruffy
- Towers over me
- Has big hands
- Is uncooperative
- Very stubborn
- We're incompatible (in every way!)

I underline that last part, then realize the bullet marks look a lot like hearts. Biting the pen cap, I think about the way he took control and planted my hand on his strong arm, I force myself to look beyond his appearance, trying to figure out why he rattles me so badly.

To my chagrin, I see a partial reflection of myself (not the hands, height, or hair—though we do both have buns). Rather, I see things about him that I thought I'd left behind in France.

Growing up, all I had known was dance and my ex, Gaston.

Dance, I loved. However, the harder my mother and coaches pushed, the less it gave back to me.

Gaston, I thought I loved, then very quickly realized I loathed. Mother forced me to be with him because of her aspirations for us to become ballet celebrities.

Connor's massive figure pushes Gaston from my mind. It isn't love or hate I feel for the football player. It's something else that I can't quite define. Interest? Attraction?

I get ready for bed and peel off my clothing, leaving it in a heap on my floor along with all my other outfits. I change into pajamas.

Restless, I lay in bed for hours before checking the time on my phone. It's well past midnight. I get the weather for the next day and then review my schedule. My finger slides to the official Blancbourg social media

account—Gemma set it up as a free form of advertising. I don't think Regina has ever logged in. I scroll through the feed and land on a photo of my cousin Giselle with her latest catch—Garrison, a football player for the Miami Riptide. I give it a like.

Without giving myself a chance to talk myself out of it, I search *Connor Wolfe*. Then I remember his username is *@ChicksDigWolves*. I roll my eyes.

"He is so self-absorbed," I whisper in *Franglais*.

His latest post has a timestamp of less than an hour ago. It's a selfie of him on a bed with a wooden headboard—an antique I recognize from his suite. He cradles his head in the crook of his elbow, propped behind him. His biceps pop. The smirk he wears is downright delicious. Dark lashes lower partway, revealing the same gaze from earlier. It's as though he's looking right at me through the screen.

I shiver even though I'm warm. My breath catches and I drop my phone onto the bed as a smoldering feeling heats my blood like lava. The boats are on fire.

The grin Wolf wears suggests he's already won the war. Little does he know that I'm made of tenacity, fortitude, and resilience. And that I'll fight to the end, even with someone as aggravatingly and agonizingly handsome as he is. Then my finger slips, awarding the photo a heart.

No, no, no!

Everyone knows that the cardinal rule of snooping on someone's account is to keep your fingers where you can see them. No sneaky swipes or accidental likes. My pulse pounds in my throat as I tap the heart to remove the like.

I spend the next ten minutes convincing myself there's no way he saw it.

Despite the long day, I'm unable to sleep, so I decide to make productive use of my time. Still in my pajamas, I slide on my slippers and creep down to my office. Living in the same building where I work has its benefits and drawbacks. I can catch up on things whenever I want, but that also means I tend to work more often, since there isn't a distinct line between home and office. Given what appears to be a dire financial crisis faced by the school, I'd better get cracking.

While in the hall, I pause as a shiver dips down my spine. For a moment, I think I hear murmuring toward the kitchen, but it's probably the

wind or the old building shifting.

Once, a student was convinced the manor was haunted and slept with all the lights on. Arthur tried to assure the woman that it wasn't, but once the idea was planted, from time to time, I have thought that someone, or rather something, is sneaking around. Then again, I wouldn't put it past one of these football players to pull a late-night prank.

As usual, my office door is unlocked—locks won't keep ghosts out, anyway. I flip on the light and when I sit down, my computer comes to life. Strangely, a tab is open to an account used for reaching out to Blancbourg alumni. I haven't logged in lately. Typically, I send the invitations in early spring for the annual alumni luncheon—although, given the circumstances, I'll probably have to postpone it until we have more funds.

I sigh and after checking my email, I flip through the stack of papers Regina gave me. We both have access to all the accounts related to the school's finances, even though Regina primarily takes care of them. I'm determined to find where we can cut the budget to come up with that thirty-four-thousand-dollar number Regina indicated we need without eliminating any more employees—especially Arthur.



I'm drowsy the next morning, after staying up late and going over the bookkeeping.

Tangled in the sheets, I practically fall out of bed. As my feet hit the cold wooden floor, I stumble over yesterday's clothing (and some from the day before and the day before that). I'll make time to go to the dry cleaners soon.

I get ready and put on a flattering pair of trousers, a blouse, and heels.

After closing the door on my bedroom chaos, I glance in the mirror. My bun is perfect today, which brings to mind the last few days of stress.

A heaviness forms in my belly as I think about the past and the decision I made to leave the ballet company and go to college. Usually, I'm certain it was the right one, but a pointy thought digs into my ribs. What if it was the wrong decision? Unlike the Blancbourg program, there isn't an evaluation

to complete, a form to fill out, or a letter indicating I'm passing or failing at life.

I should trust my gut, but what if it's my heart I'm supposed to listen to?

When I get downstairs, Connor is waiting there already, standing at attention and with his hands clasped. His hair is a bit wild, like he didn't bother to brush it—then again, the standard look of the Boston Bruisers is rough and masculine like they'd just as likely be found on a football field as they would in the woods, doing manly things. They all have facial hair in various stages of development—mostly beards—unkempt hair, tattoos, and wear jeans, T-shirts, and hoodies with the team's logo.

Connor focuses on something out the window, highlighting his stature. He has a peaceful expression on his face as he turns toward me when the clicking of my heels on the granite floor stops at his side.

"Good morning, Mr. Wolfe," I say.

"Good morning, Ms. Berghier."

I dip my head back, surprised at his perfect pronunciation. "Well done. Have you been practicing?"

His lips curl with a smile. "I trust you had pleasant dreams."

I force myself to look away. "Actually, no."

"Sorry to hear that."

"Yourself? This old building has been around for a long time and with that comes plenty of ghost stories."

He shifts his weight. "Is that so? May I ask what you do when you can't sleep?"

"A hazard of this job is my office is located downstairs from my suite, so oftentimes I work."

"You don't go online, scroll social media...watch cute videos about dogs?"

I shake my head slowly, catching his meaning. He wants to know whether I saw the photo he posted on his account *@ChicksDigWolves*. "Nope." My lips pop on the last letter *P*. I'm a terrible liar and as a rule, never do, but the word just, well, popped out of my mouth.

He raises and lowers his eyebrows as I turn to lead him down the hall, indicating he saw the split second when I'd accidentally liked his photo. Probably. Or not. Could've been a coincidence.

Then why are my cheeks warm?

We pause outside a wooden door with a brass sign that says *Salon*.
Collecting myself, I take a deep breath and hold it open for Connor.

Like a picture-perfect gentleman, he gestures for me to go first.

Perhaps we're making progress.

Then again, I get the feeling that I too am being watched and that this man with wolf-like eyes knows something I don't.

CATELINE



“Good morning, Shonda,” I say when we enter the salon.

Our on-call stylist, who insists I call her Shonda and not Miss Morrison, organizes a shelf with beauty products. She smiles and we exchange pleasantries.

“I have your latest victim. I mean client. This is Connor Wolfe. Mr. Wolfe, please meet our staff stylist.”

The woman tosses her naturally curly hair and approaches, looking him up and down. “My, my. What are we going to do with you?”

Eyes widening and stepping backward, he asks, “What do you mean, victim?”

I cut my eyes at him. “You were doing so well. What you mean to say is, ‘Good morning, Shonda. It’s lovely to make your acquaintance.’”

Connor dutifully repeats the words.

“I see you have him trained well,” Shonda says.

“Working on it.”

She surveys his appearance a moment longer. “I think we can work with this. But first things first, the man bun has got to go.”

Connor backs all the way to the door, pressing himself against it. “You can do whatever you want. Just leave the hair.”

Shonda looks to me for a response.

“This is part of the program you signed up for,” I say.

“I didn’t sign up for this. It wasn’t my choice to come here,” Connor fires back.

Shonda casts me a look that asks, *Is he for real?*

“Actually, your actions have consequences. Your coach gave you a choice: come to Blancbourg, pass, and stay on the team, or, well, you could quit.”

“I’m not a quitter. It ain’t over ‘til we’ve won. But the hair stays.”

I sigh. “Fine. But maybe deep condition it and be careful, you might find a chipmunk living in his beard.”

Connor scowls at me, and then as if changing his mind in defiance of my backtracking, he says, “Chipmunks are cute. And you can cut the hair, Shonda. But I want to donate it to charity.”

Of course, he adds the last part just to dig a little deeper under my skin. Since first meeting, a few times I’ve worried that we have access to each other’s thoughts. Connor somehow knows to say the thing that’ll have me hurtling back into his hands like a boomerang.

“In that case, get your #BruiserButt in the chair,” Shonda says playfully and points to the swivel seat in front of a long mirror. She flashes him a smile as though she too heard about the mooning prank.

“I don’t see why this is necessary,” Connor mutters but obeys.

Shonda leans close to me. “Are they all like this?”

I nod. “I’m afraid so.”

While Shonda works, cutting Connor’s hair, trimming his beard, and giving him a manicure and pedicure, I instruct him on the importance of hygiene and grooming.

“I’m not an actual caveman,” he says. “I brush, floss, and—”

Shonda spins the chair, cutting him off before revealing his new look in the mirror. His gaze flicks to his reflection.

I quickly wipe the smile from my face.

“I did a marvelous job, if I do say so.” Shonda smirks.

“I guess I clean up good,” Connor boasts, smiling smugly at himself.

That Shonda did a marvelous job and that Connor cleans up well are both understatements.

Freshly shaven, bright-eyed, and with a haircut that left a little messy bit at the top makes him look like he stepped out of a magazine, off a runaway, or red carpet...out of a dream I didn’t know I had.

He still has the stature and bearing of the gritty football player I met the day before, but now he’s devastatingly handsome. Which is totally not fair. How can someone with such a cocky attitude be so attractive?

Connor brushes the hair just above his ears before straightening. Then he turns to me, eyes locked and loaded. “I may clean up good, but I’ll always be dirty.” He laughs privately.

This is what it must feel like to have eaten a whole lemon. “Please don’t say things like that, Mr. Wolfe. It’s unbecoming.”

Shonda laughs as though we’re an adorable elderly couple who frequently bicker, but always remember how much they love each other by the end of the day. Turning to me, she says, “I may be married, but you’re not. I’d get on that asap.”

“What we will be getting on is proper attire. Next up, the tailor.”

Connor rolls his eyes, then in Shonda’s direction, he wags his finger between himself and me. “Us? It’ll never happen.”

“Why’s that?” Shonda asks.

I brace myself for the answer.

“You’re both single, attractive, and stubborn as all get out—sorry, Ms. Berghier. Just speaking the truth, but I’d say you’re a perfect match.” Shonda grins like she just ordered an ice cream cone.

I value her talent and enjoy her personality—she’s friendly, fun, and cheerful—but I firmly disagree.

“We could never be together because wolves, well dogs, and cats are natural enemies. But in the meantime, we’re just having a little fun,” Connor says with a gleam in his eyes directed at me.

“I would call this tedious, rather than fun,” I mutter.

“That’s too bad. You’ll have to keep your pants on, Connor. Apparently, no one here wants to see a full moon.” Shonda winks at me and then whispers, “I mean, unless that’s your thing.”

Connor laughs like he just had a flash of brilliance.

“Whatever it is, don’t do it,” I order.

He practically smiles his face off and asks, “What? Are you going to put me in detention?”

I can’t even deal with this man.



After the trip to the tailor where I studied the wallpaper pattern to avoid looking at the cut of Connor's muscles, followed by a tense midday meal wherein he wouldn't stop needling me with the things Shonda said, reminding me that he is in fact a dog, we go to an empty classroom.

Seated opposite each other at a table, I open my folder. "Today we're going to discuss women." My tone is flat. To the point. I'm tired of his flirty comments and it's clear, after looking at his social media feed, that he spends a lot of time dating a lot of different women.

"I think I know my way around the ladies, thank you very much."

"Your way is flawed. Could use some improvement," I quickly correct myself.

He tucks his chin. "I've been with top models, actresses, and beautiful women of all types."

"Yes. I am aware. Your way is insulting. Your way is revolting. Your—"

"That's not what they tell me."

"Beauty isn't everything and neither is quantity, Mr. Wolfe."

"What could you possibly teach me, Cat?" He leans forward, casting a net of tension my way.

I meet halfway, narrowing the space between us, which has the unfortunate result of me breathing in Connor's aftershave and clean cotton scent.

"So you're an authority? Who was the last guy you dated? Tell me all about it." He clasps his hands and rests them on the table.

I may have little experience with men, but I know a few things. "Women want to be respected, treated with dignity, honesty, and care."

"Check, check, check, check, check." He motions making checkmarks in the air.

Ignoring this, I ask, "Do you have any siblings?"

Connor's expression turns stony. "A brother, Cain."

"Well, imagine that you have a sister, a cousin, a girl in your life who you feel protective over. She's sweet and innocent, and then some meathead clown decides it's the day he's going to defile her mind with a clear view of his backside. No, make that four geniuses who think it would be funny to ___"

"Are you talking about moon-gate? The commissioner's daughter? We didn't know she'd be there."

"She has a name."

“Elyse Starkowsky,” Connor says.

“That’s better, but all the same.”

He opens his hands, palms up. “Oh, come on. It was a harmless prank.”

“Harmless? How so? Now you’re here.”

He leans back a fraction. “I suppose you have a point, and because I don’t want to endure more of this conversation, I’ll concede. I won’t moon anyone ever again unless I have their consent.” The gleam returns to his eyes as his gaze shifts and lingers on my folder with color-coded tabs. “My, you’re organized.”

“It helps to have a system.”

“It must be exhausting, running this place. What with waking up in the middle of the night, working, and having to deal with guys like me.”

“Yes, it’s true, but it also has its rewards.” At the reminder, I fight off a yawn. He’s right, I am tired.

“You’re French, don’t you have something called a fiesta, siesta, or something?”

“Two different things, neither French. But yes, in some countries, there is a time of rest and restoration built into the day.” I tell myself not to be chatty and get back to business.

“What else do we have on the docket this afternoon?” Connor claps his hands together as if sensing my flagging energy, yet he’s just getting warmed up.

I almost startle. “You’ll be meeting with the trainer,” I say, relieved because that means I can take a quick, twenty-minute power nap afterward, but before we meet for dinner.

But first, we head to the gym. I wear leggings and a fitted athletic shirt, suddenly self-conscious that it’s pink.

“Are you a gym bunny?” Connor asks.

“No, but I’ll take this opportunity to get in some exercise while you meet with the trainer.”

“Ah, my favorite part of the day.”

I ignore how his gaze, with the blaze in his eyes, follows me as I start up the treadmill.

Trying to outrun my thoughts is futile as they spin in circles around the school’s budget crisis, my work visa, my overdue trip to the dry cleaner, and Connor.

I cannot fathom why women are attracted to him. He's a beast. When I glimpse myself in the mirror while I do squats and work on my quads, I look like a she-beast at the same time his eyes meet mine for the briefest moment. If I'm not mistaken, he wears a private smile.

The trainer has him doing a circuit on the machines. Connor lifts and lunges and explodes with power. His face is a picture of pure masculinity. I've never watched an American football game and suddenly wonder what he looks like on the field.

Done with my workout, I wander over to him while I pat my forehead with a towel.

"Working out some frustration?" The question is out of my mouth before I have a chance to stop it. I guess what they say about cats and curiosity is true.

"No, working out my muscles," he grunts as he lifts a heavily stacked bar.

"Looks like frustration to me." The teacher and analyst in me observe that this question is actually a reflection of my current state.

Am I frustrated? Yes. This man has clawed his way under my skin and found the exact buttons to push to make me red-cheeked and flustered.

"What would I be frustrated about?" he asks.

"That you're here and have to deal with me, for starters. Then there could be the deep need to prove yourself at odds with the bravado you show the world. Also, that your reputation as a lone wolf leaves you lonely at times."

With a grunt, he says, "I'll stop you there. I didn't come here for you to psychoanalyze me."

"It helps to understand the inner workings of my clients," I counter.

Connor cocks an eyebrow. "What about the outer workings? I think you like what you see."

I don't not like it. I clear my throat, thankful that didn't slip out. Instead, I just stare. My lips part a little, and not because I'm looking at his massively toned muscles. Okay, maybe a little.

"I'm surprised to see that you're a gym rat." He sets another plate on the barbell with a clank.

Eyes bulging, I incline my head. "Did you just say I look like a drowned rat?"

Connor's face falls. "No, a gym rat. You know, like someone who knows their way around weights."

I cast him a dark look. "Is that an American expression?"

"I don't know, but I'm serious. Look it up. If anything, it's a compliment." Then he has the gall to wink.

"Adversaries don't exchange compliments," I say, lengthening my spine and restoring my resolve...also wiping my lip, but it's sweat. Not drool. Probably.

Connor smirks like he knows all too well what just transpired. "I think the rules of engagement have changed. You just wait, I'll have you purring in no time, Kitty Cat."

"My name is Cateline Berghier. Miss Berghier to you."

He lets out a growly meow like he had the last word.

I start to storm off, then slow to a strut. One that'll make him have to repeat his workout so he can siphon off some of his frustration.

CONNOR



After training and showering, I make the mistake of answering the phone when my brother calls. He tells me to dress smart for the wedding.

“I have a tux. Several.”

“Naw. Can’t have you looking better than me. Not that you could. Saw at the Super Bowl that you still haven’t cut your hair. You look like a swamp rat.”

The comment makes me think of gym bunnies and gym rats. I appreciate Cateline’s strength—makes her a formidable adversary.

“At least I still have hair,” I retort.

“Just wear something with buttons and sleeves. Don’t be late. Oh, and if you bring a date, she’s dancing with me first.”

“Not a chance.”

Cain chortles. “Well, you’ve never been able to keep a woman happy, so I’ll be sure to show her what a real man is.”

My thoughts turn to Cateline as Cain kisses and tells—a stomach-turning tale about a girl he met at the local saloon. Hopefully, it was before Lizabeth came along. Then again, after what he did, I doubt he knows the meaning of loyalty.

“Sounds like the call is breaking up. What did you say about her commenting that you have bad breath? Didn’t catch that. Talk to you—” I hang up.

The last thing I want to hear about is my brother getting intimate. Gag.

Cat had been wrong about my frustration before. Okay, maybe she was a little bit right, because that woman has me chewing my cabbage twice—in

the manner of me rethinking what I thought I knew, who I thought I was.

But right now, my frustration compounds because I don't want to see Cain unless it's at the Enduro—in a survival setting where we know the rules and the stakes.

A wedding is a different animal altogether.

Moon-gate notwithstanding, I've always been respectful to women. I just don't do second dates, callbacks, texts, or snuggling. I'm not that kind of guy. At least that's what I've always told myself.

Granted, Cateline had a point about substance and personality being as important as beauty, if not more so. However, I left the notion of relationships in North Carolina along with everything else, so it doesn't matter. I don't need the lecture.

The rebel in me, as Cat pointed out, wants to resent the makeover. Freshly showered after breezing through the workout, I get a look at myself in the gilded mirror in the broad hallway of the school on my way to dinner. There is no denying that I look sharp dressed in this tailored suit, dapper even.

The fresh shave and new threads are an improvement over my long hair and favorite hoodie, but there is no way I'll get dressed up every day. I don't quite feel like myself—then again, I haven't since starting Cat's program.

What really throws me off is the haircut. Shonda did a great job, but I don't want great. I want the hair that I started growing the moment I walked out of my father's house. It became a symbol of my freedom and I hadn't cut it once.

So why did I agree to go through with the haircut?

My father kept his sons' heads shaved for our entire childhood and teen years. Until I decided to let it grow, I didn't know what my hair looked like. I'd never seen it past a quarter-inch long. When it came in brown and shiny, it was like a miracle—not one that I'd ever share with anyone because I don't want to seem girly. That's another thing my father wouldn't tolerate—feelings. Not even the happy or excited kind, which was especially tough when I was little.

Why am I letting this woman challenge me? Change me?

As I near Cat's office, excitement builds. Unless someone else has access to the Blancbourg social media account and was browsing @ChicksDigWolves, I'm certain she saw my selfie last night after

accidentally liking it—I saw the notification bubble—then quickly unliking it. Her finger must’ve “slipped.” Yeah, right into my hands. I’m ready for revenge. Nothing diabolical, just a good old-fashioned prank.

Placing my hand on the knob to the raised panel door to her office, I expect it to be locked, but it turns easily.

Inside, sits a wide wooden desk, a few chairs, cabinets, shelves, and plants. It’s classic and tidy. The view through the window, with the slowly setting sun hanging like a basket and golden light spilling over the mountains, is spectacular.

“Not a shabby show, Concordia,” I mutter.

I could get used to it here. Perhaps it’s the air, being far from home, out of my routine, or something else entirely, but I’ve been strangely introspective. Never mind. Thinking that way is too mushy, fluffy. Feelings have only ever gotten me into trouble.

I close the slatted blinds in the office and set to work. An hour later, while lounging in the courtyard, what sounds like a shriek suggests my effort has been noticed. The approach of a forceful clicking of high heels suggests it’s not appreciated.

As expected, Cateline rounds the corner. Instead of showering me with a flurry of crumbled sticky notes—I’d half expected that—she holds a neatly stacked rainbow assortment of the colorful pieces of paper that I covered her entire office with while she napped.

“Good evening, Cat,” I say as though nothing is out of the ordinary.

“What are these?” she asks, waving the blank yellow, neon, and pastel papers.

I lift my gaze from the sports article I was reading and tilt my head, examining her slender fingers and waist. My eyes float lazy-like up to meet hers. “Those are called *sticky notes*. The brand name is Post-it, I believe.”

“Let me rephrase. What were they doing all over my office? Every surface was covered. I didn’t even realize I had so many,” she says as an afterthought.

I had to borrow some from elsewhere in the building, but I reply to her question with an innocent shrug.

“This was a prank and as our resident prankster, I think it was you.” Pieces of her dark hair must’ve escaped her bun during the removal process and brush her cheek.

“Me? I’ve been reading this enlightening article on football analytics.”

“Really? What have you learned?” Her hand flies to her hip as though not buying it for a second.

“Are you challenging my knowledge of my own game?” I stand up, matching her posture.

“I’m challenging the possibility that you were sitting still and reading that for any length of time and not Post-it-ing my office.” Her accent pounds out each word.

“That’s quite the accusation. Before condemning me with guilt, do you have any enemies among your employ?” I ask.

She blinks a few times. “Not necessarily,” she says after a beat. “I knew I should start locking the door.”

“Not a bad idea.”

“Very well. I will see you at dinner. Same place and time.” Her eye twitches slightly, but so do the corners of her lips like she too has hatched a plan.

“Game on.”

CONNOR



I'd like to say dinner with Cat is short and sweet. More like short and tense.

Still dressed in the suit, I feel obligated to mind my manners. But that isn't the source of the tension. No, it's the way those few pieces of her dark hair remain free from her bun, the way she moves so gracefully even doing the simplest thing like putting pepper on her potatoes, and the way her accent curls over words like *aurora* and *serendipity*.

"Why did you leave France?" I ask, attempting polite conversation.

"At eighteen I went to London for university and then moved here directly after."

"Wow. You're part of the jet set then?"

Her lashes lower. "*Non.*"

"Right. I suppose then you wouldn't be working here."

"Actually, I might. I believe in the value of hard work *and* professional education. My father was a laborer. I studied to be a school teacher, but this position was available and I couldn't pass it up. The youngest headmistress Blancbourg has ever had." She lifts her chin with pride.

"Your parents must be proud of you."

Her lashes lower again and she shakes her head slightly as if she can hardly face that reality. "What about you being a famous football player and all? Your parents must think the world of you."

"Same answer. Nope. Well, my mother would be proud. She passed away when I was born."

"I'm so sorry." Sincerity rains over her features.

Something tickles inside as I realize I've never told anyone that before, not even the guys. Sensing I'm getting sentimental, I return to the safe zone and push Cat away. "My father was a lot like you actually. Strict, disciplined, and rather irrational."

"Discipline has its merits," she retorts. "But I take umbrage with irrational, and I have a distinct feeling that I am nothing like the man who raised you."

Cat is right about that. But I have to widen the narrowing gap between us as I feel *irrationally* drawn to her.

"Irrational? Yeah. You thought I put sticky notes all over your office. Why would I waste my time doing something like that?"

"Boredom? Because you're a rascal? Or you can't bear to do the right thing?"

"And what's that?"

"The right thing? Be kind. Contribute. Help in some way instead of wasting resources this school hardly has."

"My charity does plenty. In fact, since arriving in Concordia, I reached out to a local organization to aid animals—dogs in particular. I fund wolf preserves and animal rescues." I look around and add, "It doesn't seem like the school is hurting financially with its plethora of antiques, generous accommodations, and this gourmet food."

Cateline's nostrils flare and her eye twitches. "You know nothing of this place or what it means to give. Goodnight, Mr. Wolfe." She stalks toward the door.

"It will be. I'm a deep sleeper." I wink.

She mumbles something that sounds an awful lot like *woof*.

"Sweet dreams, Kitty Cat." And I sincerely hope she does, especially if she hate-scrolls her social media later and sees the selfie that I plan to post on @ChicksDigWolves, featuring a shot of my abs from the gym earlier. Maybe to keep things spicy, I'll include one in my new suit. I'll caption it *Meow*.



The next morning, I wake to an itch. An all-over itch. I scratch my arm and pull back quickly. Something bit me...or cut me. No, it's the distinct burning slice from a paper cut on my pointer finger.

As I slowly lift to sitting, sticky notes cover my entire body. I peel one off and it says *woof* on it. They all do. My jaw drops.

Did Cateline prank me back?

Before I remove any more, I snap another photo of myself and post it with the comment *I thought you'd enjoy last night's selfie with my new haircut, but perhaps you'll like this one better.* I add a cat emoji and post it to @ChicksDigWolves.

With thousands of likes and comments on the post from the night before, my fans adored the cleaned-up look. Cateline didn't slip up and accidentally like it, but I hope she'll see this one and be pleased with herself.

However, I have no idea how she pulled this off without waking me up. Then again, I trained myself to sleep through my father's rages. Plus, her name is *Cat*. With how gracefully she moves, and without those high heels, she could be stealth.

But this means that it's *double* game on.

After cleaning up, I meet Cat for breakfast, we have our lessons, and then I go hard during my afternoon workout, letting out all of my frustration from the call with Cain.

All the while, Cateline never made a peep about the Post-its or my photos on social media.

But I keep my eye on her, which isn't a hardship.

Tonight, her red wraparound dress with small white flowers hugs her in all the right places. She looks pretty, even if she's a little prickly.

As usual, she orders a slice of chocolate cake after dinner. It has a shiny ganache I notice she savors.

I wonder what it tastes like.

She looks up at me through her long lashes and blinks once, twice before speaking. "I understand you have an event later this week?"

"I realized this country is very wealthy, so I arranged a meet and greet. I'll be signing autographs and giving away Boston Bruisers merchandise. There's an optional donation, which will go directly to the charity I operate."

She nods as if she approves.

I freeze her with a long look.

She takes another piece of cake on her fork and asks, “You keep looking at my cake. You can order a piece, you know.”

“It does look delicious.” No, it’s her smoky, accented voice that’s delicious. I give her a long look, conveying my thoughts in the subtext.

“Would you like a bite?”

I really, really would. Instead, I say, “Would you like to join me?” My gaze remains softly on her and I dial up the smolder and play of my lips.

“What is this look you’re giving me?”

“You mean the long, lingering glance? I like watching you eat that cake.”

“And there I thought you were looking at me with disdain.”

“For eating chocolate cake?”

Her shoulder lifts slightly. “When I was a ballerina, my mother had me on a strict diet. Anyway, yes, I will be at the charity event. Glad to see you’re contributing.”

“Sorry to hear that.”

“That I’ll be there?”

“No, that anyone would criticize you for eating chocolate cake. You’ve made it into a fine art.”

Indicating dinner is over, she pushes her plate away and gets to her feet, giving me a long, suspicious side-eye. For once, I’m not messing around. The way she savors it, delights in it. Cateline is no microwave. Nope, she’s a slow cooker and I don’t mind sharing these meals with her one bit.

Before we part ways in the hall, I ask, “By the way, how’d you get in my room?”

Cateline wears a faint Mona Lisa smile, a picture of innocence. As she walks away, a set of keys rattle in time with the click of her heels on the marble floor.



The next day is more of the same, but I do sneak away to town to pick up some “personal items,” including a baggie filled with googly eyes intended for crafting.

I also pinch the headmistress's keys, unlock her office door, and then creep downstairs in the dead of night.

She'd noticed me *looking*, but this prank is going to make Cat feel *watched*.

As I get to work adhering the eyes to various objects, the old building settles and creaks. I'm jumpy and don't want to get caught, but the ghost stories Cain used to torment me with whisper in my mind.

When I stick the last set of eyes on the receiver of her office phone, my gaze lands on a financial document. Cateline mentioned the school was having money trouble. Red marker circles the sum of thirty-four thousand dollars needed by the bursar's office. A list in Cateline's handwriting catalogs how they've already cut costs to save, including laying off employees.

All of a sudden, the door opens.

I startle and shuffle back.

"Mr. Wolfe, what are you doing here?" Cateline asks.

She wears a fuzzy white robe and her long dark hair is in a loose pile on top of her head. I never expected her to look so comfortable, so adorable...or so shocked.

I don't answer her question.

All I can do is stare and stutter.

She caught me, and aside from moon-gate, that's never happened. Why am I so off my game?

She steps fully into the room, wearing bunny slippers and wrapping the robe tighter around her waist, then flips on the stark overhead lights.

I can't help it. My lips quirk with amusement.

"Attention. Up here," she snipes.

"But you look so—"

Gesturing around us, she asks, "What is the meaning of this? What are these?" She picks up one googly eye and then another.

I bite my lower lip. "I was watching you so you don't label me with notes that say *woof* again." Unable to suppress it a moment longer, laughter explodes out of me.

For one liberated and joyous moment, she laughs and then stops herself. "This is inappropriate."

"No, sneaking into my room and covering me with notes is..." Hilarious, but I won't admit that.

She doesn't move a muscle, neither confirming nor denying the prank.

"My last name is Wolfe, but do you consider me a dog?" I ask, referring to the *woof*.

"A real mongrel."

I step closer to her. "I think you like dogs."

Again, not even the hint of recognition with a blink, twitch of her lips, or the brushing of a stray hair from her neck.

"How'd you get in here?"

My gaze reflexively flashes to the keys on her desk.

"You took my keys." She snaps them up. Her brief amusement turns into anger.

As she stalks around the room in her fuzzy robe and bunny slippers, I hold back further laughter, but it builds inside.

"Go on," she says, gesturing to the door. "To bed with you."

I hang my head but don't apologize. As I pass her, I lean in, close enough that I can feel her warmth and the feathery wisps of the loose hair from her high, messy bun. "I was going to say you look cute." I wink because I am watching and I'm not teasing. Not at all.

CATELINE



*I*t takes me a long moment to process that Connor said that I look cute in my pajamas and not something rude that rhymes with or sounds like the word *cute*. I don't know what that would be, but it's what I've come to expect. My cheeks heat and match my pink bunny slippers.

My voice practically shaking, I say, "Mr. Wolfe, you're so hateable." That makes me sound like I'm the meanie, but I have to push back against the way he's making me feel.

"Hateable?" He steps closer, towering over me.

I eke out a nod. "Yes, hateable."

"Am not."

I tilt my head up. "Are so."

"Am not," he repeats, brushing the thumb of his massive hand across his lower lip, revealing a sneaky little smirk that I want to wipe right off that handsome face with my...with my mouth.

My face grows hotter. No, no I do not. I did not think that.

Instead of continuing this juvenile game of back and forth, he says, "Ninety-nine percent of women in the world would disagree, if that's what you really think."

"That you're difficult, disagreeable, and hateable?"

Wearing an infuriating smile, Connor says, "I'm enjoyable."

"Going to an amusement park is enjoyable. Watching the sunset is enjoyable. Eating chocolate cake is enjoyable."

"What about looking at selfies of me online?"

I open and close my mouth, unable to lie but not willing to tell him I saw the last few, including the one with the *meow* caption and my sticky

note handiwork. And fine, I also looked at photos dating back a few years in his feed when I couldn't sleep.

"As I said, I'm enjoyable," he gloats like he snared my bunny-slipped feet.

"Enjoyable is not the opposite of hateable."

"No? What is then?" he asks slowly, enunciating each word because we both know the answer.

I struggle to inhale and my heart does some ziggy, zaggy thing, probably because it doesn't like being cornered.

Holding the door open for Connor to exit, I lock my office and hold my palm open for the key. He sets it against my skin, fingers lingering there like he did earlier over dinner. His copper-eyed look is on me and it's long, stretching well past the seconds that tick on the grandfather clock.

Like I'm cute.

As if he likes what he sees.

Like I'm as delicious as chocolate cake.

I cannot stand this man. Much. I mean, maybe I can stand him a little. His selfies aren't bad bedtime stories and he looks good, freshly shaven in the morning with his hair cut. And I wasn't lying about men of his stature when dressed in a tailored suit.

Meow indeed.

But I have a lot on my plate, including the urgent mail from the embassy about my work visa and having to find over thirty thousand dollars, so there remains a job to keep.



Connor's pranks continue for the remainder of the week, which really doesn't help matters.

Though I can't claim complete innocence. To retaliate for the googly eyes, once again, I sneak into his room. The man is a heavy sleeper because I manage to paint his toenails pink. It's not a salon-quality job, but there is no mistaking the shout I hear the next morning. The guys tear him apart, which is rather *enjoyable* after having to spend hours getting the googly eye glue off the surfaces in my office.

To get back at me, he planted some dye in the bath faucet that dissolved when I ran the tub water. I'm still mildly green, but thankfully it didn't get in my hair.

My next move was to wrap his soap in nail polish so it didn't lather and I traded out his shampoo for mayonnaise—I got that idea from Declan.

But then Connor changed the clocks in my office, flipping the screen on my computer monitor upside down, and for good measure, he covered the sensor on my computer's mouse with a photo of himself—the one he took after his makeover. He also attached an air horn to the bottom of my desk chair so that when I sat down, it honked.

That nearly gave Arthur a heart attack.

It takes me a while to devise my retaliation. Meanwhile, Connor struts around like he's the grandmaster prankster.

Two can play this game, buddy.

I bide my time, letting him brace for the worst. He'll assume I've given up and relax. I let him think it's a victory.

When the meet and greet comes around, I offer Connor the opportunity to demonstrate what he's learned during our lessons in real time. I wear a fitted blue dress, black stockings, and black heels. To change it up, I leave a few pieces of hair loose from my bun.

His throat bobs when we meet. "You, look...good, Shorty. I like the Bruiser blue and black."

"Shorty?"

A lopsided grin grows on his lips. "Yeah, because I'm taller than you."

"You're taller than most people, Mr. Wolfe."

Then I get an idea. A diabolical one. As I consider executing the plan in a way that would make Marie Antoinette reconsider her life choices, another idea comes to mind. Don't worry, I wasn't going to actually cut off Connor's head. Just in the photos during the meet and greet.

I quietly plot his demise as we walk toward the event site in the village.

But when I see him interacting with kids and old folks, my higher nature gets the better of me. Instead, I make sure to capture some really good photographs, especially of him with the adoptable dogs. Women love pictures of hot guys with dogs.

After the meet and greet event, I say, "Mr. Wolfe, that was exceptional. You were a wonderful host. I was going to have the last word, or image, as it were, in our little prank war. But then I had another idea."

He leans in as if eager to hear what I have to say. This close, I try not to breathe in his aftershave and clean cotton scent.

My surroundings blur slightly and my heart picks up the pace, forgetting that I'm a slow cooker, a Crock-Pot.

"You were saying?" he asks as if realizing that I'm suddenly intoxicated by his scent, if such a thing were possible.

The man tests me, and not only my patience with the prank war but also my resolve to put out the little fires he sets ablaze all over my skin.

I start walking down the cobblestone street in the village by the school and he catches up with me. Our arms and hands brush, which only fans the flames.

From the manor, the city stretches in every direction—to the harbor and toward the royal castle at the foot of the majestic mountains before ending abruptly by the forest that stretches as far as the eye can see.

Steadying myself, I say, "I was going to cut off your head in all of the photos, but then I had another idea. How would you feel if I compiled them into a calendar, especially the ones with the dogs, to raise some money for Blancbourg?"

He hesitates.

I instantly feel silly and needy. "Actually, never mind. Forget I asked. Something like that would be better to go to your cause, for the animals."

He's silent for a long moment. Walking through the little village, an older pocket of the capital, works as a buffer. Every turn is enchanting. Ivy grows on the sides of the sandstone and brick buildings, little boutiques contain treasures and sweet shops with delicious treats line the lanes.

An ever-present smile blooms on my face anytime I'm here because it feels like home. In fact, my grin matches the one Connor has worn since we met this morning, wearing his team colors. As they say, when in Rome...or with a Boston Bruiser.

Finally, the man speaks. "I'll forget about your intended prank for now. You're welcome to create the calendar. But I'd be willing to help in a greater capacity if you tell me why the school needs the additional funds." All sense of suave rascal gone, Connor speaks deliberately and powerfully like he'd be happy to help and all I have to do is ask. Er, change my mind.

"We've hit some snags. Advertising costs are up. Revenue and enrollment are down. It's just business, I suppose."

"Is that all it is?"

“I don’t know what you mean?”

“Have you carefully reviewed the books?”

“Regina, I mean, Mrs. Harrow keeps them, so yes, I believe they’re in order.”

He grunts as the salty scent of dough fills the air and I push the calendar idea from my mind. I’ve always pulled myself up by my own pointe shoe ribbons. Always will.

I slow my pace outside one of my favorite bakeries that specializes in giant twisted pretzels. I rarely pass without picking one up, but typically it isn’t during work hours.

“Smells good,” Connor says.

We watch through the big front window as the master baker rolls the dough into a long log, picks up both ends and then in one effortless motion, he twists it to form a perfect pretzel shape before placing it on a tray.

“What’s your favorite flavor?” Connor asks, pointing to the display with plain pretzels, traditional with salt, and one with cinnamon and sugar on top.

“I’m a traditional kind of girl.”

“What about the dipping sauce? The spicy honey mustard sounds good.”

“I’ve never tried it.”

Suddenly, Connor’s hand grips mine and he drags me through the door. The place where his palm meets mine and where his fingers twine tightly around, sends a flare of warmth through my arm and into my cheeks, before doubling back to my belly. My heart ticks out an unusual rhythm—though it’s been doing that a lot lately, especially when under stress.

A bell jingles when we enter and Mrs. Gilbert, behind the counter, greets us. “Hello, Cateline. I haven’t seen you in here in a while.” The older woman, wearing an apron, looks Connor up and down from head to toe. “And who’s this handsome gentleman you brought to visit me?” She winks.

“This is Connor Wolfe. Meet Hildie Gilbert. She and her husband, Hans, own the shop.”

Connor extends his hand.

Hildie dusts flour off hers. “Best in town.”

“Oldest in town,” Hans calls from the window by the front where he continues to twist pretzels.

“Pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Gilbert. Cat almost walked by without introducing me.” Now, like at the meet and greet, Connor is all smiles as though an invisible spotlight shines on him.

“You mean Cate?” Hildie corrects.

His smile is charming when he says, “My apologies. Cat is my term of endearment for Cate.”

Hildie leans in and says, “Handsome, polite, and old-fashioned.” She waggles her eyebrows. “I’d say he’s a keeper.”

I’m about to explain that by term of endearment, he means term of belittlement, but Connor keeps talking. “If these are the best pretzels in town and I’m a keeper, that means we have to get one of everything on the menu.”

Hildie starts to laugh and then stops abruptly. “I don’t think he’s joking, but that just gave me the greatest idea.” She pulls Hans from the window over to us and then leans in as though in a team huddle. “What do you think about a mini pretzel and dipping sauce sampler?” She explains creating miniature versions of their signature pretzels plus sample sizes of each of the various dipping sauces. She bounces up and down with excitement.

“Now, Hildie, sometimes you get some cockamamie ideas, but this one is marvelous.” Hans smiles at her.

She beams. “What do you guys think?” She looks brightly at Connor and me as if we have a say in their business plans.

“I like it,” I answer.

“Sounds like you have a winner,” Connor adds.

“We have to do what we can to keep business going.” Hildie digs under the counter and pulls out several small ceramic bowls.

“You’re telling me,” I mutter. I know all about the struggle of keeping a business afloat, although Blancbourg is sinking fast.

“I have you guys to thank for the inspiration—you’re our good luck couple—and because of that, you get to be our guinea pigs.”

I wrinkle my nose and my mother’s strict ballet diet races toward me with reprimands about how many carbs I eat—that’s old news and one I’m mostly free of. But occasionally her voice is in my head, berating me for my dietary choices and comparing me to a certain curly-tailed animal. The one that oinks.

Tonight, I’ll have cake and ice cream, mère.

But back to the matter at hand. Firstly, Connor and I are not a couple. Far from it, in fact. And what does Hildie mean about being a guinea pig?

Before I can answer either question, Connor says, “What’s that face?”

“I’m not a *cochon*,” I say forcefully.

His eyebrows dip. “A what?”

“A pig. I’m not a pig. Mère used to say—”

Connor interrupts. “Wait, you don’t know what a guinea pig is, do you?” He chuckles like I’m adorable and goes on to explain the cute furry animal is also a term to mean we’ll be Hildie’s test subjects.

“Now, I have put the sauces in these cups for you to try. Obviously, we can’t make the mini pretzels right at this moment, but next time you come in, we’ll have them ready. I’m sure that a big man like this can handle a couple of jumbo pretzels on his own, so I’m not worried about them going to waste.” She nudges Connor with her elbow as she sets everything on a tray.

Connor and I sit at an empty bistro table on the other side of the bakery. The surface overflows with pretzels and sauces. Connor’s knees bump up against mine. That same thrilling flare as when he took my hand bursts through me. There is no escaping the contact because there isn’t anywhere else for him to put his long legs. So we remain here, knees pressed together.

Does he even realize it? Does he feel the same way I do?

Never mind those questions. More importantly, why do I feel this way?

Hildie brings us napkins. “I’ll have to come up with a clever way to arrange all the items, but in the meantime, I hope you two enjoy these treats as much as you so obviously enjoy each other’s company.”

With a private smirk, as if he ate up her comments, Connor says, “Thank you, ma’am.”

“Hildie, I am not a guinea pig and we are not a couple,” I say politely.

The corners of the older woman’s lips curl up. “Oh, you’re not a couple *yet*?” I don’t like the way she emphasizes the last word.

Before I can explain, the door jingles with customers.

“See? I am enjoyable,” Connor says with all the swagger of a gentleman and not a caveman.

I exhale through my nose. “I was going to say, who are you and what did you do with Connor Wolfe, but I see you are still here, as hateable as ever.”

His knees press against mine as he stares hungrily—whether at me or the pretzels, I’m not sure. “You keep telling yourself that, Cat.” He lets out a low chuckle and digs in.

CATELINE



Connor tears off a piece of the plain pretzel like a starved beast and plunges it into the dipping sauce. “Oh, that’s delicious,” he says around a mouthful.

I cringe. “Manners, Mr. Wolfe.”

He goes still and then sits up straighter. “My apologies.”

Swiftly moving on, I say, “The meet and greet was great. I didn’t realize there were so many fans in Concordia.”

He wears a genuine and appreciative smile. “Football is played professionally in the United States, but it’s a global passion held by many.”

“Many rowdy and rough people who enjoy watching men pummel each other.” I mean for it to come off as a joke, but it sounds like an insult.

Connor’s brow furrows and his expression drops slightly. “It’s so much more than that. What? Is it not civilized enough for you?”

“The truth is, I hardly know a thing about it. Enlighten me.” I prop an elbow on the table and rest my chin on my hand, hoping to rescue myself from the near-verbal penalty.

Connor gives me a thorough education on all things related to the sport.

Ordinarily, this would put me to sleep, but Connor’s obvious enthusiasm for the game engages me. His smooth Appalachian accent deepens as he tells me about Rylen, the running back, Chase the quarterback, Grey the linebacker, Declan the wide receiver, and a bunch of the other players.

He describes training, workouts, and game day.

When we’ve eaten all the pretzels, he stops and says, “I’m talking too much, aren’t I? Boring you probably.”

“Sounds to me like you love football.”

“Didn’t realize how much until I was at risk of losing it,” he says in a low voice.

“It sounds like a real brotherhood.”

“A heck of a lot better than my brother. But you’re right. I live and breathe football. This will sound crazy, but I even miss the challenge of supplemental training.” He goes on to tell me about some of the crazier workouts Coach Hammer has had them do like carrying logs on their shoulders across the beach, hefting boulders up and down the arena stairs, and once he even had them help him muck out the pond on his property—there was a real nasty water hyacinth infestation.

Thinking of how much I adored ballet until my mother made it torturous, I say, “Believe it or not, I understand.” An idea comes to mind. “I know a place we can go where you’ll get in a great workout. I’ll assure your coach it’s part of the program.”

“Nice. After all these carbs, I could stand to break a sweat.”

I gaze at the table. Only a crumb remains.

Connor dips his finger down and says, “Oops. Missed one.” He winks as he pops it in his mouth. Then leans in as though to brush a crumb from my face. “Missed another one.”

My cheeks warm and I look anywhere but at the man seated across from me who no longer looks hungry at all. He looks strangely satisfied.

There is something so sweetly flirtatious about his gesture that I try to hide my smile as we say goodbye to the Gilberts.

“Oh, don’t forget your extra one,” Hildie says, passing me a paper baggie with the H&H Pretzels logo stamped on the front. “And be sure to tell them about the new sampler!”

Connor lifts his eyebrow and I explain that it’s for Arthur up at the school to share with Mrs. Fitzgerald.

When we step outside into the late afternoon, Connor asks, “So? Where are we going?”

“First, we’re going to quickly stop by the school to grab your workout gear and then it’s a short walk up the hill from there.”

I debate whether to bring a change of clothes to the studio. My heart stutters as though exclaiming yes! But my mind quiets the desire.

Back at Blancbourg, Arthur greets us in his usual dignified way and Connor rushes upstairs to get his gear.

I give Arthur his pretzel.

He grins gratefully. “My favorite. As always, thank you.”

“How is Mrs. Fitzgerald doing?”

“Recovering nicely. Thank you for asking.” His voice trembles a bit.

Worry creeps through me. “You sure? Why don’t you take a few more days off? We can manage. We have all these strapping football players here to help and they can lug their own bags around.”

“I couldn’t, Miss Berghier.”

“Why not? If you mean that to be polite, please remember that I’m your boss. If I say you can take time off, I mean it.”

He shakes his head. “Mrs. Harrow mentioned I might be let go soon. We need the insurance coverage for as long as possible. I’ll keep my shifts, please.”

My hand lands on his arm in a gesture of comfort. “Oh, Arthur. You’re not going to be let go. Why would Regina say such a thing?”

“She’s been in your office all hours, trying to figure out the finances and I suppose I’m the expendable one.” He gazes at his well-worn but shiny shoes.

My jaw lowers a fraction and I stifle a gasp. “That’s absolutely not true. Arthur, you are the heart and soul of Blancbourg. Wait,” I say, belatedly catching something else he said. “Do you mean Connor, my pupil, has been in my office? If so, we’ve been doing harmless pranks.” I feel tremendously silly admitting this and unprofessional, considering that I just pointed out that I’m the boss around here.

Arthur clarifies, “No, I meant Regina Harrow. She’s been using your office for years. But lately, especially after hours. I assumed you were aware.”

I tilt my head, more worried than ever that Arthur needs a break. His wife’s illness is probably taking its toll.

Connor appears with a duffel bag. “Ready to get sweaty?” he asks.

I have the urge to offer a reassuring hug to the older man. Instead, I say, “Arthur, please take another couple of days off. I promise your job and insurance will be here when you return.”

At that, Connor and I go back outside even though I’d like to march over to Regina’s office and give her a piece of my mind—unless she’s in my office. But why would she be?

We climb a gentle hill, passing historic buildings, cottages, and Bavarian-style structures.

Connor pauses by a plaque outside of a home that's several hundred years old. "You might laugh, but I'll let you get away with it for not knowing what the expression *guinea pig* meant. But what does this mean?" He points to a word on the sign.

"That's a Concordian word, meaning historic but also sacred, I guess you might say. This home is believed to have hosted one of the early missionaries who originally brought the Bible to this island, so it must always be preserved." I go on to give him a brief history of the area and how they open up historic sites on certain weekends for locals, tourists, and people taking pilgrimages. I also teach him a few words native to the Concordian dialect.

"That's incredible to have such reverence. Every time I return to North Carolina, I hardly recognize my hometown, things change so fast. I guess, considering you know Concordian, French, and English, I can't give you too hard a time about not knowing the expression *guinea pig*." His eyes sparkle with mirth.

"Concordia only has a few words of its own and my English is just fine, thank you." I cross my arms in front of my chest. Upon leaving France, I had a handle on the language but made it my mission to be completely fluent.

"That's what I was saying."

Affronted, I add, "I'm sure there are words in English that you don't know." I turn away from the sign and face him. "*Mellifluous* for instance."

"I wasn't being sarcastic. But mellifluous? As in your voice is mellifluous. Try again." He nudges me with his elbow.

I try to conceal the tremble from his touch. "Ineffable."

He holds up his hands. "Easy there. That doesn't sound polite."

"Do you know the word?" I challenge.

He tilts his head then his lips quirk. "It means 'too great to be expressed in words.'"

Connor steps closer, gazing out at the vista. Warmth emanates from his skin. "Ineffable, much like this view." Then, in a lower register, he says, "Like you."

This renders me speechless, in any language.

A moment passes and then another as we stand side by side. I'll admit, I'm a bit discombobulated. I bet he can spell that word, no problem.

“I was the spelling bee champion in grade school. Memorizing the definitions helped me remember how to spell the words.”

“Connor, despite how immature you can be at times, I cannot picture you as a child. It’s like you were born this big.”

He chuckles. “Not even close.”

When we start to climb the hill again, I feel off-kilter, out of step, and like my heart is beating at a different tempo than it ever has before.

“Oh, I meant to say earlier, thanks for not cutting my head off in all of those pictures.”

“Even if I did, I do have one to paste back on. I found it on the bottom of my computer mouse.” I dig around in my purse and pull it out, sticking it on his shirt.

He barks a laugh. “You’re Cat and you caught a mouse. Get it, a computer mouse.”

I briefly recall Arthur’s comment about Regina in my office. “That’s the corniest joke I’ve ever heard.” All the same, I can’t help but laugh.

“Also, keep the photo so you can gaze lovingly at me while you work.” Connor passes the picture back to me and our fingers brush, sending my heart a pitter-patter.

“Shall we call a truce?” he asks.

I tip my head from side to side as though considering it. “You called me Shorty.”

“You’re shorter. I’m taller. That’s all.” He fights a smile as if gauging how far to push.

“Yes, you’re tall,” I say when I stop in front of a building with another historic plaque, but don’t agree to call a truce. Not just yet.

It’s been a long time since I’ve joked, laughed, and had an easy rapport with a guy. What changed so suddenly between us? I count my heartbeats. It seems to skip one. I press my hand against my chest.

“Everything okay?” he asks as concern filters across his brow.

“Yeah. Fine. Stress. That’s all.”

“What’s on your mind?” he asks as though genuinely interested.

“The future of Blancbourg. It looks like we might have to close soon. We’ve already cut expenses down to a minimum. Yet, Regina needs more money to balance the budget. You’d think with all the money we pour into advertising, we’d have more students and grow.” I shake my head.

Connor taps the air. “Have you ever tried getting the manor on the historic register?”

“It’s generally recognized as a historic site because it was the former royal manor before they built the castle.” I point in the toward the castle over my shoulder. “But it’s not official. I guess no one ever bothered to follow through with it. But even if we did, that would protect the building, but it wouldn’t make over thirty-thousand dollars appear so the school can continue.”

“No, but I’m guessing there are people here and tourists who’d love to see inside, take a tour, and hear about the history. And don’t forget about your Wolf and puppy calendars.” He winks.

My lips tip with a smile, but my twitching eye distracts me. “But it’s a school, not a tourist site.”

“True, and it could remain a school. Even with just the four of us on the premises, there are loads of unused spaces. I bet Arthur would give great tours. Just saying.”

“That is an interesting idea.” I want to linger on the way Connor makes my pulse race and how I’m slightly out of breath. It’s the stress of spending late-night hours reviewing accounts and not being able to trace where all the funding is going. “Something is off, but I’m not sure what.”

“I could help you get it sorted out.”

“You mean you’d like to do something helpful to contribute?” I tease lightly, referencing our earlier conversation and this time bumping him with my elbow.

“Hey, you can’t deny that I’m a giver.” He arches an eyebrow.

I don’t argue because he’s right and we’re finally getting along. “I think you have a great idea,” I say at last. “Must be the pretzels. Hildie had her sampler idea, I had the idea for the workout, and you might just help me save the school. Well, the building at least. It’s a great piece of property. I’d hate to see it fall into ruin or be demolished. The upkeep is time-consuming and costly.”

“We’ll go tomorrow to find out about the process.” Enthusiasm laces Connor’s voice.

We reach the top of the hill with a lane lined with two-story buildings. I lead Connor to the second floor of a broad, Bavarian-style one with dark wood timbers and cream-colored paint.

The faint sound of music sounds from behind one of the doors. I push it open and say, "Welcome to your workout."

Ten little girls wearing pink tutus tiptoe across the wooden floor behind an older woman with a shock of white hair. She wears all black and has her hair tied in a bun like mine.

Connor goes still, a hulking giant compared to all the cute kids, and his jaw drops.

CONNOR



A line of little kids stands in front of a wall of mirrors, finishing their ballet lessons. They stare and blink, their expressions shot with confusion as if they're unsure whether I'm a friend or a foe.

I feel like a troll, a beast, among adorable little fairy sprites, mostly dressed in pink.

Cat wears a triumphant smile. "We will call a truce when Madam Tissot is done with you."

I force myself not to laugh because this is absurd. "You want me to do ballet?"

"Yes, why not? It'll be good for you. Your coach will approve. Promise."

"You haven't met Hammer. His last name is fitting. He hammers us with his workouts."

"Just take one of your selfies when you're done and he'll have the rest of the team over here tomorrow."

I want to protest, to refuse, and to tell Cateline this is ridiculous, but I've never backed down from a challenge. Rubbing my hands together, I say, "Okay, let's do this."

A smirk spreads wide across her mouth and I have to admit, the sight is quite enjoyable. It's addictive and I want more of it.

After the kids' class is over, Madam Tissot, a petite woman with fierce eyes, says, "You brought me a giant?"

Cateline makes introductions and I get a strict, no-nonsense vibe from the ballet teacher, much like my first impression of Cat.

I clap my hands together, and ask, "What do you have for me, coach?"

“You may call me Madam Tissot.” With her French accent, she leaves the *T* off the end. “We will warm up then move to the barre.”

“If those little girls can do it, so can I.”

The two women chuckle.

For the next sixty minutes, Madam Tissot has me feeling like a pretzel and feeling all the pretzels I’d eaten. I wake up and work muscles that I didn’t realize I had—and if Cateline’s smile of appreciation while she watches me is any indication, I have a lot of them.

It isn’t lost on me that something shifted between us upon leaving Blancbourg manor. It’s as if there, we were locked in certain roles—two generals trying to gain the upper hand in the war— by going out into the world, we’ve let down our defenses slightly.

Maybe more than slightly.

Madam Tissot starts me with a primary practice of positions and then I do *relevés*, *plies*, and *tendus*. I’m strong but have to hold the barre for balance.

From a bench on the side, Cateline watches, her lips quirking every so often as though imagining me wearing a tutu. If Madam Tissot had one that fit me, I’d wear it just to see her smile and laugh—a rarity. Then again, she has a lot on her plate with the school and I suppose that I’ve been a bit of a handful...or right now, an eyeful.

I like that we’ve been joking around. It’s nice to see her playful side...and worth noting that she’s a master prankster. This one takes first place. But it’s the kind of tough workout I live for, so I can’t complain.

All the while, Madam Tissot explains that the practice will help strengthen my ligaments, improve my balance, and help me maintain focus, which will help me on the field.

The only problem is, it’s hard not to focus on Cateline seated across the room.

Once we’re out the door, Cateline says, “You did a great job.”

“Thanks. I always give it my all.” Sweat pricks my skin as we step into the cool evening. “I have a newfound respect for ballet dancers.”

“You think the other guys would like to give it a try?”

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves. Then again, I doubt they’d object if you were their teacher.”

“Ha ha.”

I stop myself from saying that I wouldn't mind seeing her in a leotard and watching her dance.

As we pass under a streetlamp, I glance down at Cateline at the same time she glances up at me. But we both quickly look away. Something is shifting between us and I hear my actual coach's voice in my head, reminding me of his rules during our thirty days of reform school. I struggle with whether to let things lead where they will or slide things between us back into their proper place with banter, hateability, and teasing.

I have to keep my head in the game and my eyes off Cateline. I've never backed down from a challenge. Then again, I've never faced this particular kind.

One that wears a faint Mona Lisa smile like she knows a secret, whose eyes sparkle when they catch in the light, or that has legs that slay.



The following afternoon, after lessons, I accompany Cateline to Intherness's version of City Hall to find out about registering the manor as a historic site. The woman behind the desk has ashen skin that matches her hair. If I didn't know better, I'd mistake her wheezy voice as belonging to a historic relic.

She takes her job very seriously and seems reluctant to share what sounds like the complicated process of registering a building. There are rules about usage, upkeep, repairs and changes, conservation, and maintaining the grounds in a distinct way. After we gather information and are given about a dozen forms to fill out, we exit onto the street.

Cateline's usually perfect posture sags. She looks exhausted, if not a little daunted.

"The pretzels here in Concordia are delicious, but I hear this place is famous for its chocolate cake," I say facetiously.

"Like the kind we serve at the school? It's the royal recipe."

"I think you could use a slice right about now." I nudge Cateline with my elbow.

"I'll have one after dinner."

"Is that a rule?"

“No, but—”

Taking her hand, I say, “No buts, unless we’re talking Bruiser butts. We’re getting you some cake.”

“We can’t have cake for dinner.”

“When you’re with me, anything goes.”

“But where are we going?”

“Good question, where do they serve the best chocolate cake?”

“They’re all good.”

“Okay, where can we go that’s quiet, private, and serves the best chocolate cake?”

Cat’s lips quirk. As if knowing we’re not returning to Blancbourg until I have my way, she leads us in the opposite direction and down a little lane bordered by flower boxes and dappled late-day sunlight.

The scent of bread, steak, and chocolate fills my nose. I could go for some of each. We stop in front of a bistro with checkered tablecloths and the kind of quaint that can only be found in hidden corners of places like Concordia.

We take a seat at a little wooden table under a canopy of grapevines strung with lights. I order us each a slice of cake but take mine with ice cream.

While we wait, I say, “Not to brag, but I think my charm helped at the historical registry office.”

“Maybe you could use it on Regina. I mean Mrs. Harrow,” Cateline mutters.

“Is she giving you trouble?”

“She’s the chief financial officer. Er, the bursar. The one who needs the thirty-four thousand dollars.”

“She needs it or the school needs it?” I ask as two plates topped with several layers of moist cake with frosting between and topped with glossy ganache appear between us.

Cateline takes a bite and her eyes close as she relaxes. “The school, of course. We just keep going deeper into debt. But Regina is entirely unpleasant about it. Like it’s my fault.” She goes on to tell me how the former junior headmistress was passed for over the job of headmistress which went to Cateline.

“We could prank her,” I say, trying to add levity to what sounds like a major stressor.

“If it were that easy, I’d have left a note on her desk that says the exterminator will be by to deal with the rodent problem. She hates mice.” She pauses a beat and then adds, “Don’t worry. There’s no rodent problem.”

“Or we could actually set a bunch loose.” I take a forkful of cake and ice cream. “This is good.”

“That’s going too far—the mice, not the cake,” she says with a laugh.

“You know where to find me if you need some help, Kitty Cat,” I reply with a wink.

When we’re done, we head back toward the school, but Cateline goes slow as if the closer we get, the more the reality of the financial predicament sets in.

“You’ll figure it out,” I say, meaning to be helpful.

She pauses on the street, obviously upset. “It’s just that our budget keeps shrinking while our expenses keep rising. We have a huge advertising budget but no new students—except you guys. We’ve cut so many costs. On top of that, she threatened Arthur with letting him go. No way.” Her voice rises several octaves as she gets upset. “And our week at the school is almost over, meaning I have to leave with you to parts unknown. I’d like to say I’m leaving Blancbourg in capable hands, but Regina—” Cateline cups the side of her face. “Sorry. I don’t know why I’m telling you this.”

Twilight falls and paints our surroundings a dusty shade of lavender. I peel her hands from her cheeks but don’t let go, letting our linked fingers hang between us. Warmth spreads from where my fingers connect to hers and up my arm before blazing in my chest.

My gaze dips to meet Cateline’s eyes. “Maybe you’re telling me because you trust me? Starting to think of me as an ally rather than an adversary? At least, I’d like to think so.”

“Are you asking whether our truce is official?”

“If that’s what you’re calling it, then yeah.”

Her lips twist with a flirty smile that I’ve never before seen. I’m intrigued and then hypnotized. Now, I’m struck as if by lightning. This woman has done something to me that’s at once electrifying and changes my molecular makeup.

But she leaves me hanging and starts walking again.

Our conversation turns easy and before I realize what’s happened, I’m in front of Cateline’s suite door as if I just walked her home from a date.

We exchange a bashful look as if realizing what happened.

In almost a whisper, I say, “Yesterday and today were different. Dare I say, *fun*, which is a three-letter word I didn’t expect to find in your vocabulary, what with the tight bun and all.”

Her cheek lifts in a half smile. “Takes one to know one.”

“A bun?” A laugh builds inside.

“A fun bun?” When she lets her laugh loose, it’s infectious.

We’re being silly instead of slick and strict and I like it.

A long minute passes before either one of us can keep a straight face.

“Thank you for your help today,” Cat says.

“What about tomorrow?” I ask, hoping we can continue the trend.

With her hand on the doorknob, she says, “Tomorrow, we have a meeting. Then we’ll be leaving the school for the real-world application of your lessons.”

I jolt, anticipating being torn from this idyllic fairytale of life in Concordia with Cateline. “Right. Almost forgot.”

My thoughts race with everything to come and how it’ll work with her there. But I can’t fail the team. I have to prove over the next few weeks that I’m a team player and can pass this program.

“Thank you for everything today, Connor,” Cateline says and disappears into her suite.

I stand frozen outside the door, because I realize that was the first time she called me Connor. I like the way it sounded in her accented English. I like it a lot...and maybe I like her too.

Worried about how that’ll work for the next few weeks, practicalities come to mind. I knock on the door, but she doesn’t answer. I try again and when there’s no response, I turn the handle.

From across the room, the bathroom fan hums and the shower runs. I hesitate, feeling like I’m breaking a rule, but I remembered something important Cateline needs to know about our trip off the Blancbourg campus.

Her suite is exactly as I expect—as neat as a pin. Polished antique furniture very much in keeping with the rest of the manor decorates the space. Perhaps, even the headmistress’s suite came pre-furnished. It’s nosy, but I take a spin around the space. To my surprise, there’s little in the way of personal touches other than Cateline’s purse on a table along with a few loose hairpins.

A door stands slightly ajar and from beyond, I hear faint singing. The door must lead to Cateline’s bedroom and beyond that, the ensuite

bathroom.

I push it open slightly and am shocked by what I see. No, not Cateline standing in a towel. That would make for an interesting turn to the evening. One which I wouldn't soon forget. Then again, I won't be able to ignore what I'm seeing until Cateline helps me make sense of it.

Then the shower goes silent, and I panic. Should I leave or tell her what I meant to? Legs frozen, my torso twists left and right, unsure which way to go or what to do. What if I startle her? What if I get kicked out of Blancbourg for being in a girl's room? Why am I being such a weirdo right now?

I realize I've wandered too far into Cat's lair. There's no going back. Standing in the doorway to her bedroom, the bathroom door opens. A little gust of steam puffs out.

"Hey, I didn't want to scare you, but—"

Of course, Cateline gasps. Her hand flies to her chest. Cheeks rosy, she says, "What are you—?"

"You probably ought to start locking your doors."

Wearing her robe, bunny slippers, and a towel on her head, it's Cat's turn to stand frozen, unsure what to do. Then her eyes narrow. "Wait a minute. Don't tell me you came back to prank me, especially after what a nice day we had."

"You thought it was nice too?"

"Well, yeah. It was. Yesterday and today."

"And as for tomorrow, that's why I came back. But first, what happened in here—?" I'm prepared to add a few teasing words about the mess at odds with her otherwise neat as-a-prim-pin appearance when something on a shelf catches my eye. I tilt my head slowly, eyebrow cocked in question.

"Actually, Cat, what do we have here? What is a *NOT Love List*?" My lips curl with a smile.

Her eyes widen and she lunges for me.

CONNOR



Cat stumbles in her bunny slippers over shoes, clothes, and who knows what else littering her bedroom floor.

“Give that back.” She’s all terry cloth arms and legs as she pushes against me, trying to get the list.

“Not a chance, Shorty. Or should I call you Shortcake?” I ask, holding it out of her reach.

She pouts. “I thought it was Cat.”

I wrinkle my nose. “Hmm. Shortcat? Nah. It doesn’t have a ring to it. Shortcake right now. Cat later. But put your claws away.”

“Give back the list,” she demands.

I wave it around. “You mean this *Not Love List*? Why should I?”

Arms crossed in front of her chest and the towel wrapped around her hair slightly askew, she’s so adorable I work hard not to crack a smile.

“That’s mine and it’s private. You’re not even supposed to be in here.”

“The first thing you learned about me is that I’m a rule breaker...and if I understand what I’m looking at, I’m not the only one.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” she asks with an indignant pout.

“It means someone, ahem, wrote a Not Love List and the subject is yours truly.”

“You have no way to prove that.”

“Let’s see. The first little heart-shaped bullet point says *He’s scruffy*. Then *Towers over me*. And *Has big hands*.” I make a show of tapping my chin. “Now, who could that be?”

I look at my hands, run one through my now not-so-scruffy hair and then step closer, so close I realize she must use lavender body wash.

Cat swallows thickly. "Yeah, well, it's about Arthur."

"Fitzgerald? Isn't he married? A little old for you? Have some standards, Cat," I tease. "It says *Is uncooperative* and *very stubborn*. I'd argue Arthur Fitzgerald is the opposite. He does not fit the profile."

"Just give it back, Connor." She reaches for the paper and our limbs tangle as I make a fuss, playing "Keep away." It's like taking a bath in a field of lavender and sunshine and never has anything made me feel so good.

Then Cat stumbles over something and her arms windmill. She tips backward. I reach for her waist, attempting to stop her, but grab hold of the tie around her robe, drawing her toward me. Unfortunately, the momentum sends me backward. Not letting go of Cat's robe, we both pitch toward the floor. I break her fall, providing her with a soft landing, but what feels like several of her shoes stab me in the backside. After pulling them loose, we're face to face.

Cat's chest rises and falls. Her eyes are dark, lids low. My breath is somewhere else entirely. All I can focus on is Cateline's proximity. Her beauty. How I want her this close, not just to get some jollies today, but tomorrow and the day after that. No, not jollies. Joy.

My voice is gravely when I say, "The last item on your list. *We're incompatible (in every way!)* I beg to differ, Cateline. It seems we're quite compatible."

She bites her lip. I wish I knew what is going through her mind. Her head lowers a measure. Our eyes dip together. Mine float to her mouth. If there were ever a moment, this would be it.

"Just give me back the list." She rolls off me and gets to her feet.

The bubble bursts as we both spot it lying innocently on the floor, partially spiked on a black high heel.

My lightning-fast reflexes come in handy and I get hold of it first. Like a football, I hug it close.

"I'll give it back after you explain yourself." I push to sit, surrounded by a mess of dresses, skirts, pantyhose, and some silky-looking things. *Ooh la la*.

She glances away. "It's none of your business."

"Considering I seem to be the subject, *au contraire*." I intend to lighten the mood slightly but butcher the French pronunciation.

She marches toward the door as if ushering me out.

“There’s no denying I’m right.”

“You shouldn’t have been in here snooping around.”

“I wasn’t snooping. There is a lot of paper on your shelf.” Scrapbooking materials? “And this caught my eye.” She did too, coming out of the bathroom, fresh from the shower, but this list made me curious. More curious than a cat.

“I should’ve added to the list that you mumble,” she mumbles.

“Do not.”

“You most certainly do. Sometimes.”

“So you admit your not love list is about me?” I tuck it into my pocket for safekeeping.

“I admit nothing,” she says in her smoky accent.

“Should I make up a hate list of my own?” I grab a piece of paper from the shelf. There are a lot of albums and little packages of embellishments.

“It’s not a hate list.”

“Hmm. I’ll use this red piece of paper. The color most often associated with love. Or should I say anger and *hate*?” I look for a pen and find a pack in an assortment of colors. “Do you scrapbook?”

“I wanted to take it up as a hobby. Turns out that I don’t have many recent photos.”

“We should do something about that.”

“Don’t tell me you’re going to print out all of your @chicksdigwolves selfies?”

“Maybe.” I wink.

“Listen, some people just don’t get along,” Cat says, taking the pen and paper from my hand. My skin scorches at her unintentional touch.

I step closer, avoiding a leather boot. “I don’t think you truly hate me. I think there’s interest. Maybe even affection.”

“Not so.” She shakes her head, loosening the towel, but catches it before it tips off her head. I’d love to see her hair down.

“It’s like we’ve been playing a cat-and-mouse game, back and forth, back and forth, bouncing between tolerating each other and wanting to—”

“Butt heads,” she finishes.

“Bruiser butt. He he.”

With a huff, she says, “You’re like a goat.”

“You mean the GOAT.”

“Is that like a guinea pig?”

“No, G-O-A-T. The Greatest Of All Time. Glad you finally realized it.”
Cat squishes up her face in frustration.

The corner of my lips tilt with an impish smile. “Let’s see. The first thing on my list: When she gets mad, she’s adorable.”

“Conn—Mr.—Just please.”

“I know, I know. You want me to leave. The path to the door is a treacherous obstacle course worthy of spring training. What happened in here?”

Arms crossed, Cat gazes at the ceiling.

“I see socks. Lots of socks. All singles. Looks like you need a fairy sock mother.” I start to clean up, tossing all the socks in a pile. Then, I straighten the shoes and find their matches.

“Stop,” she says in a small voice.

“No. Not until I feel confident you’re not going to break an ankle.”

“I’m not—”

This time, I interrupt. “You have to pack for tomorrow. That’s why I came back here. I’m going to be your fairy sock mother because you’ll need socks.”

“I can do it myself.” She reaches for the delicate black and white striped sock with a gold toe, run through with sparkly thread in my hand.

“I know you can do it. I’m helping. You’ll need to pack comfortable clothing. Things you don’t mind getting dirty. Plan for lots of time spent outdoors. Do you have anything like that?”

“Probably.”

“Think rain, mud, cold nights.”

“Where are we going?”

“To a wedding and—”

“Mr. Wolfe—”

I cock an eyebrow. “I’m Mr. Wolfe again?”

“You’ve always been Mr. Wolfe, even when you barge into my room uninvited.” Her accent slays me.

“You called me Connor before.”

She frowns. “I most certainly did not.”

“But ya did. In fact, you said, and I quote, ‘Thank you for everything today, Connor.’”

“I don’t sound like that.”

I give a half roll of my eyes at how stubborn she is. “As I was saying. First, we’re going to a wedding then we’ll be spending some time outdoors. Think of it as a honeymoon. From the groom.” One I will desperately need after spending more than thirty seconds with my brother.

“We’ve established that my English is very good, but you’re not making sense.”

“It’ll make sense when we get there. Here, pack this.” I pick up a red satin dress.

“You want me to wear that to a wedding? It’s so formal.”

“I’ll be in a tux.”

Cat’s lips form an *O*, but words don’t come out. Her cheeks tint a shade that’ll accent the gown quite nicely.

“Yes, we’ll be fancy and proper and all that. Then we’ll get some dirt under our nails. Some time in nature. Trust me, it’ll be just what the doctor ordered.”

“You think we’ll need to order a doctor?” Her lips quirk. She’s messing with me and my use of the expression.

“Ha ha.” Unless Cain gives me trouble, but I find that highly doubtful given it’s his big day. How he found a woman to tolerate him, I’ll never understand.

I let out a long sigh and brace myself for what I’ve always considered the biggest challenge of my life, bigger than a pro ball game. But I’ve had it wrong. Cateline is my biggest challenge. Keeping my hands (and mind and the other thing that supposedly lives in my chest) off her.

But I’m a Boston Bruiser through and through. I won’t stop until I win.

Win what? Her affection.

Playbook or not, I’m in trouble.

“See you in the morning,” I say and hurry from Cat’s room.

When I get to mine, I study her handwriting on the list. The bullet points that look strangely like hearts. The word *love* at the top.

If I cross out one little three letter word, it could be a love list.

CATELINE



Now Connor knows my dirty little secret. Well, not dirty. Messy. I'm a mess and use notes to keep my life organized. My head in order. I close the door to my room to keep the chaos hidden.

But I cannot be mad at him. Okay, maybe a little, because he really leaned in hard with the teasing when it came to the not love list.

He's such a butt. Not the GOAT or even a goat. They can be cute. I mean an actual butt. "Connor Wolfe is a big booty butt head."

I kick the pile of socks he made and flop onto my bed. My hair is loose and stringy after leaving the towel on for too long. My skin is dry because I didn't moisturize after he barged into my pig pen.

Maybe I am a guinea pig after all.

Typically, Blancbourg Academy d'Etiquette offers one week of training. However, the commissioner insisted we shadow the football players in real life for several weeks to make sure they're applying what they learned. Without students booked for the remainder of the month, I accepted because it meant more money for the school.

When we made this arrangement, I figured I'd be a glorified babysitter. Now, I'm not sure what it means. Something shifted between Connor and me.

His expression when I walked out of the bathroom was beastly...but like he saw Beauty—Belle. Me, for the first time. That sounds silly, but I don't know how else to explain it.

However, if I were a Disney princess, I'd probably be Mulan or Jasmine, given my dark hair and high level of independence. Without a

doubt, Maggie is Cinderella. Pippa reminds me of Snow White in every way except her general appearance. As for Everly, she'd definitely be Belle.

But here I have my head in fairytale clouds. I should know better.

Whatever happened in here just minutes ago, seems like something out of a fantasy. Especially when we fell and I landed on top of Connor. The way his gaze drifted to my lips like they were the most delicious thing he'd ever seen made my heart race.

Then again, he goes by Wolf.

A pesky thought pokes me in the ribs. *Yeah, just keep telling yourself that, kiddo.*

Maybe I will. But the fact of the matter is Connor Wolfe and I are incompatible. End of story. It's written in ink, for goodness sake.

The letter from the embassy that poked me in the ribs last week sticks out among the rubble and ruins of my wardrobe. I really should read it. Do something about it.

But for the first time in a long time, I'd rather clean my room and fold my clothes.



The next day, Connor and I depart Blancbourg to travel to the United States. I leave the school in Arthur's care, knowing it's in good hands. On the way to the airport, I pray I'll have a flash of insight into how to come up with the additional funds needed while I'm gone.

I'm sure Connor will be busy at times, so I'll be able to create the calendar which I can sell online. That should help some. But what else can I do to raise the necessary money?

When we get to the airport, we check our bags and then head over to security.

"Do they still say the United States is the land of opportunity?" I ask Connor while we wait in line.

"I'd like to think so." His lips curl with a private smile. "Though, I typically think of a place like France or Italy as having more of a romantic vibe."

While the guards check our bags, I hiss, “That’s not what I meant. I’m struggling over how to save my school.” But I don’t think he hears me because a uniformed man with a bald head and bulldog-like jowls interrupts.

“Miss Berghier, please step over here.” The security guard gestures to me.

My eyebrows pinch together. “Me?”

He nods.

Picking up my things, I follow the guard to a small room. Connor remains by my side.

“I obeyed all the guidelines for packing cosmetics. Don’t have anything forbidden...” I mutter, running through a mental list of flying rules.

“Cateline Berghier, may I please see your passport?” the guard asks.

“I showed it back there and was allowed through,” I thumb over my shoulder.

“Yes, some information belatedly came to our attention. The computer system has been misbehaving today.”

Panic wells inside. “Am I on a list? I’m not on a list. I promise I am not a criminal.” I turn to Connor and hit a brick wall, er, him. He stands so close, I’m pressed against his firm chest. He’s on my list, but that’s not what I meant. Perspiration dots all the places I can’t politely scratch in public.

Gripping my elbows and gazing into my eyes, he calmly says, “I highly doubt you’re on a list.”

“She’s on a list,” the guard confirms, consulting his computer. “It’s the final step before she’s issued a deportation order.”

I turn back around and press my hand to my forehead. “Whatever it is, I didn’t do it.”

“As a matter of fact, it is what you *didn’t* do. Miss, it seems that your work visa expired and you didn’t follow the proper channels to remain in the country. I regret to inform you that you may not return to Concordia until you become a resident.”

The words rush at me and this room is suddenly too small, claustrophobia pushes the walls against me. “But I live here. I work here.”

“You’ll be getting on that airplane and may not return until—”

“May I speak to an official?”

He grunts. “I am an official and you had ample opportunity to discuss this with an immigration case worker. Says here they started sending you

letters to your personal address and place of employment nine months ago.”

“I’ve been busy.”

“The good news is you have an additional three-month grace period to become a resident of Concordia or a reciprocal country, including the United States and Greenland—we have a shared interest in certain rare resources. Otherwise, you’ll have to remain out of the country for twelve months. Think of it like probation for not following our immigration rules. After that, you’re welcome to return and begin the process.”

“I can’t. I have to work.” I have a school to save. “My whole life is there, er, here.”

“Well, you had a chance to get this sorted out. The postal service verified the delivery of the notices. It appears you’ve been ignoring them.”

I sink a little because he’s right. “How do I become a citizen during the three-month grace period?”

He flips to a page in my passport and then looks at something on the computer. “First, you become a permanent resident. That takes eight years, so you’re good there. Then you either begin the process with a series of tests, verifications, and of course, renouncing your native nation’s status.”

“How long does that take?”

“Six months.”

“But you said I only have three.”

“Correct.”

“Then what do I do?”

“A husband would help.”

“I’m not married.”

“If you’re married to a citizen of Concordia or one of our reciprocal countries, you’ll be able to squeeze back in and apply for a green card.” The guard’s lips lift in a barely-there smile.

“I don’t know what to do.”

“Stay in the United States or get married and come back. Other than that, your only option is to return to France,” the guard says succinctly.

“But—” But I don’t know what to say or think or do. How did I let this happen? Oh, that’s right, I hid the truth of this situation in my room along with the rest of my internal clutter and things I’d like to pretend don’t exist. Oh, what could that be? Occasional loneliness and regret?

The guard flattens a page in my passport and stamps it with a big, red X. And under that, another with the date, but in black. The pounding of the

stamps falls in time with the words *loneliness* and *regret* echoing in my head.

He grabs the papers from the printer and passes them to me along with my passport. “You’ll find the information you need printed out. Now, please excuse me, I have more people on lists to deal with.”

I can’t look at Connor. This is humiliating. He’s my student. I’m his coach. I’m supposed to be setting an example of how to live responsibly.

Keeping quiet until we get on the plane—he upgraded me to first class to sit with him—I do everything in my power not to fall apart. Not to sob. “What am I going to do?”

A large hand lands on top of mine, gripping the armrest. Another tips my chin up, forcing me to meet his copper eyes.

I realize I’d been sitting as if bracing for a crash landing. Nope, that just happened, and publicly, I might add.

“Hey, you’ll figure it out. You’re a teacher at the former Concordian royal palace, maybe they can help. Or your parents. Or—”

I shake my head slowly. “No, Connor. There’s no one. But I don’t want to think about it right now. Can we just pretend that didn’t happen until, well, for a few days so I can think it through and get some more information on my options?”

“Of course.” He pats my hand but instead of pulling it away, keeps it there, giving a little squeeze during takeoff.

While Connor watches a movie and then dozes, I scour the internet for information about my situation. Unfortunately, the guard was correct. I have two options. Return to France for twelve months and a day then reestablish residency in Concordia, essentially starting the eight-year residency clock all over. My fear is Blancbourg won’t be there when I return.

Alternatively, I could get married to a citizen of Concordia, Greenland, or the US in the next three months and obtain a green card which would start the process of citizenship and allow me to remain in Concordia.

Connor was right. Arthur is taken and he’s too old, not that he was an option. But I don’t know anyone from Greenland. In fact, I don’t think I’ve ever met anyone from Greenland. I’ve always wondered why it’s called that, considering it’s often covered in snow, which is not green.

Focus, Cateline.

That leaves me with the United States. I puff my cheeks on an exhale. Before I was thinking that I might figure out a way to save the school in the

land of opportunity. Maybe I'll find a husband too.

I let out a laugh. Looks like I'll be going back to France in three weeks. I'd like to say I welcome a homecoming. Instead, something fissures and cracks inside like I'm straddling a ravine, torn between falling back or moving forward. Sadly, it seems like the immigration office will be making the choice for me.

CONNOR



*M*y stomach jitters and it isn't because I don't like flying. I'm just not overly fond of the destination. No, scratch that. Western Carolina is beautiful—though a bit hot and humid this time of year.

The truth is, I don't look forward to seeing my brother.

It just so happens that Cain's wedding coincides with the second week in the Blancbourg program. Secretly, I welcomed the excuse not to endure the ceremony. I'd almost begged Coach Hammer to keep me at the school for another week or two.

Sorry, bro. Team rules take priority and all that.

No such luck.

Silent concentration falls over me when we land. I have to prepare myself. Keep vigilant. Cain isn't a prankster so much as an evil mastermind. Forget being a bully, he's a bulldozer and rolls over, pushes past, or punches through anything in his path. Most notably, when we were growing up, me.

But if I don't show up, that would mean he won a game that started deep in the Blue Ridge mountains on April fifteenth, twenty-nine years ago. I didn't understand the sibling rivalry until I was older, but from the day I was born, which was also the day we lost our mother, Cain has wanted to see me suffer.

We might share the last name, *Wolfe*, but I'm a Boston Bruiser through and through. *It ain't over 'til we win*. Skipping out or not showing up at his wedding or the annual camping trip we've been competing in since we were young would mean Cain wins. Can't have that. Not after everything I endured.

Cat and I leave the car rental office in a Jeep. We drive farther inland and the mountains close around us. As is tradition, I stop in town to get some coffee. After the long flight, I'll need a boost before meeting Cain.

"Is this where you grew up?" Cat asks after we each get a coffee and muffin. I take note that she gets chocolate banana.

"Sort of. I grew up outside of town. The Wolfes kept to themselves for the most part."

"It's interesting to hear other people with your accent."

I snort a laugh. "And I'm sure they're delighted to hear yours." I know I am. Right now, it's the one thing tethering me from wandering down a dark path, locking down all external stimuli, and going deep into whatever part of my brain that helped me survive all those years.

When we head back to the Jeep, Cateline stops and chats with a couple and pets their dogs. She fusses over two fluffy little lap yappers. I chuckle to myself because I thought of her as a yipper when we first met. More like we bickered like cats and dogs.

"Come say hello to Beauty and Beast," Cateline calls to me.

Like a dutiful K9, I obey. The little male dog nuzzles me and quickly decides we're best friends. "This guy isn't a beast. He's a good boy. A very gentle, good boy."

I catch the edge of Cat's smirk then turn total softie. I love on those two dogs like nobody's business. Truth is, I love dogs of all shapes, sizes, breeds, and ages. Sometimes I think I'd prefer life with them and them alone. Much easier than human relationships.

When the couple, along with Beauty and Beast, move on, Cateline gives me a long look. "Didn't know you were such a dog lover."

"Shouldn't come as that much of a surprise. After all, my last name is Wolfe. I fund wolf sanctuaries—did that meet and greet and donated money to an animal charity back in Concordia."

"No, but those were little dogs. I'd imagine you to be a big dogs only guy."

"A dog is a dog. I don't discriminate."

"And that's why they call you Wolf, no *E*." The comment is a little jab, given my reputation.

But the truth is, I haven't so much as glanced at another woman in over a week. That might be a personal best.

"There was no subtext to my comment," I say.

“When you were a kid did you have a dog?” Cateline asks.

“Yep. Skittles was my best friend.”

“Skittles?”

“Yes, Skittles. I found him, bone thin behind a convenience store, eating a pack of the candy. Not the candy itself. Just the wrapper. I loved that dog. Have you ever had a pet?”

Looking sad, Cat shakes her head.

I don’t mention that Cain hated Skittles and did his best to get him to hate me. Didn’t work. That dog was loyal to me and it went both ways.

We head back to the Jeep and I consider whether to warn Cat about what we’re likely to walk into. Cain texted when we left the airport to meet him at Dad’s old place. I haven’t been there in a dog’s age, whatever that means. Left and never looked back.

Like her visa situation, I’d like to pretend this isn’t happening. Alas, I can’t very well ignore my brother and then show up at the wedding. It’s probably better we get out our aggression on neutral territory, if the shack where we grew up could be called that.

The wooded road closes around us and I slow as the pavement turns into dirt. I’m gripping the steering wheel so tight my arm muscles flex and just as I relax them, Cateline glances away. She’ll be seeing a lot more of those in the coming week.

When I put the Jeep in park in front of what looks like little more than an abandoned clearing in the woods, I draw a deep breath. “Okay. It’s showtime.”

Cateline gazes at the small cabin through the windshield as though she’s missing something after that comment—a stage, lights, an audience. There’s none of that and no people for miles.

“We’re meeting my brother Cain. He and I don’t really get along. He asked me to meet him here,” I say, anticipating any questions she may have.

“Looks like a horror movie set. You know the kind where they tell the woman not to go alone into the woods.”

“You’re safe with me.” I start to get out. “Oh, but, uh, if asked, we’re engaged.”

“What? No!” Cat hisses, as if I just suggested she run down Main Street in her robe and bunny slippers.

CONNOR



Still sitting in the Jeep, I say, “Okay, fine. We’re married. Pretend to be my wife.” I’m practically pleading with Cateline to go along with a little scheme I came up with mere seconds ago.

Because Cain and I have waged a lifetime war, why stop now? He somehow convinced a woman he’s marriable material and not a scaly beast that lurks in sewers. Why not me too? I never considered marriage, but I could be a good fake husband. No, a great one.

“Mr. Wolfe, I most certainly will not pretend to be married to you,” Cat retorts, affronted.

“Oh, right, you’re my coach. Blah, blah, blah. Then we’ll go with fiancée. I’ll even settle for girlfriend.”

“No, I do not want to get caught up in your rivalry with your brother. Also, I’m a terrible liar. Don’t you have a pool of women you can draw from?”

I link my pinky in hers and swing it between us. “Just you, Kitty Cat.”

Her mouth opens and closes like she’s not sure what to say then settles on, “The answer is no.”

I wince, hoping for the best as I get out and round to the passenger side to open the door for her.

“Thank you,” she says, hopping down.

Despite our surroundings and the shift between us in the last thirty-six hours, I’m still being evaluated as her pupil. Then again, I would’ve opened the door for her anyway. I want to show her that I’m a gentleman. Then my thoughts turn dark. If I were a true gentleman, I wouldn’t have taken her to the camp, er, place where I grew up. Instead, we’d go to a luxury hotel. I’d

lavish her with the finest chocolates and bouquets of flowers, we'd visit museums, have long dinners, and stroll along a private beach somewhere far from here.

However, Blancbourg program rules state that wherever I go, she goes, so here we are.

If Cateline can make it through the next week with me, anything is possible. Maybe even a visit to that little pocket of paradise.

"What is this place?" she asks, falling into step beside me.

A rickety screen door opens and slaps the exterior wall of the cottage. Six feet of aggression steps outside with his arms crossed and wearing the meanest scowl in the mountains. "Well, well, well. Look what the cat dragged in."

I glance at Cat and give my head a little shake. I never mentioned my pet name for her. Never mentioned her period. I make it a habit of talking to Cain as little as possible.

"Come to tell me the competition continues? I thought we were over that. Grown up now."

"I'd like to think so."

"But what do you got here? You getting married too, little brother? If that's the case, this little lady ought to know what she's getting into." Cain eyes Cateline like a meal. But he's the kind of wolf that likes to torment its prey first.

I roll my shoulders, watching for the slightest indication he'll make a move—the coil of muscle, the grit of teeth, or the change in the direction of the wind. Anything and nothing could cause Cain to strike. And I will come back with a hundred tons, multiplied by nearly thirty years, of what could politely be called frustration.

"Nope. Just here for your wedding."

"You wanted to see this old place before I level it to the ground?" His laugh is as dark as ever.

"That's your plan?"

"Or torch it. See, the new Mrs. Wolfe and I are going to build us home here."

"You sound so much like Dad." The words are out of my mouth before I can stop them. He looks like our father too, but I won't go so far as to point that out.

We had a complicated relationship with Dennis Wolfe. I learned early on to steer clear of him. Cain would warm up when Dad was in one of his good moods. But there was no telling when he'd turn sour, making us wish we had somewhere else to go, anywhere. Even if we retreated to the woods, he'd track us like animals.

Unfortunately, our shared misery didn't bring us together.

"So you settled the estate?" I ask.

"Nothing to settle. You said you didn't want anything to do with the property."

"You got that right. But you called me to meet you here. So what's up?" I ask.

Cain ducks into the cabin and I follow. I debate between telling Cateline to wait here. My pranks are child's play compared to the things my brother used to do.

Cateline stops in her tracks. Fear, concern, and something else—anger maybe—streaks across her features. "Is this where you grew up?"

I nod. "How'd you guess? The loving welcome? The resemblance?" I sense the shadows filling my eyes by the way she looks up at me. Specters from the past follow me wherever I go, but since leaving, they straight up haunt me during the rare times I've set foot on this property.

Placing my hand on Cateline's low back, I usher her inside. She's safe as long as she's with me.

My head grazes the rafters. It was by some act of providence that I shot almost six inches the summer before I started senior year. It was by sheer determination of will that I grew stronger than my brother and father. Ironical, since he'd been the one to push me so hard.

Cateline stands by my elbow, letting me be the alpha for now.

"Figured you might want one last look at our lovely abode. Yep. Home sweet home. Does the pretty lady know that you'd wet the bed well past ten years old? Or that you'd cry yourself to sleep? That you had lice and would ___"

"Enough, Cain."

"Why'd you bring the pretty lady if not to tell her the truth?" Even though it's darker in here than outside, I see he's still missing a tooth. "Did you come to prove a point? The big bad football player. Big paycheck. Big ego. Big baby. Always thought you were better than me. I'd hoped to have beaten that notion out of you."

I sense Cateline stiffen and then step even closer to me. I angle myself as a shield.

Later, I'll owe her an explanation. For the time being, I want to get the visit over with. "She's my coach."

Cain lets out a long peel of laughter. "That little thing? Not much more than a stiff breeze would blow her over." Typical of him to talk about her as if she isn't here. Back in the day, if I wasn't invisible, I was in the way and he always made sure I knew that.

"She's tougher than she looks."

Cain lifts his beady eyes to meet mine. "Is she tough enough to survive out there for a week?"

"What about your fiancée? Is she up for the challenge?"

"No, we're going on a honeymoon. Headed to Atlantic City for a week."

"No Enduro this year?" I ask barely hiding my shock.

"Nope. Hanging up my boots. I'm about to be a married man. But that don't mean you won," Cain says as if he has something up his sleeve.

"Actually, it does. I'll be the last man standing."

"If you survive." He chortles. "So the little lady is joining you out there in the woods?"

I grunt because I don't owe him explanations about where we're going or what we're doing.

"And that ring? Surely, you could do better than that, Richie Rich."

She purses her lips as if holding back.

"So like you, Connor, to pick up strays."

Cateline tenses beside me, but I'm a cannon, ready to destroy Cain if he so much as says another word. Then a delicate hand lands on my waist. I take a deep breath, remembering that my brother is pushing buttons, desperate to get me to blow so he can then show that he's the better brother, more civilized.

My lip curls into a sneer. "She is not a stray."

Cain tilts his head and looks at Cat. "Little lady, good luck with this weak, no good, piece of—"

Cateline holds up her hands. "That's enough."

"Oh, she speaks?" Cain's voice is oily, taunting, a piece of bait to take because he is always fixing for a fight.

“Yes, *she* speaks and *she* has a name. I am Cateline Berghier and you will speak to me with respect.”

“Or what?” Cain breathes.

I stiffen, ready to tackle.

“A little thing like you going to come after me?” he asks.

Even though birds chirp outside, the room is dead silent.

“No, Mr. Wolfe. I will carry on with my life and I will pray for you.”

Cain’s forehead wrinkles with confusion, as if that wasn’t what he expected to hear. “I don’t need your prayers.” But the words are hollow.

“Sure you do. You have the mouth of the enemy.” Those simple words are like a slap on the face and to add insult to injury, she continues. “You are a bully. A sad, pathetic man who thinks he needs to use his might to prove his worth. You may not see it, but the rest of us see it clearly and because of that, you will never receive the honor you so desperately crave.”

Cain looks like he’s going to float upstream or spit wasps, I can’t tell. “You don’t know a thing about me.”

“I know enough, and the solution to your trouble, sir, is to wipe the mud off your face and look around. You live in a beautiful place, have an amazing brother, and are about to get married. Instead, you’re stomping mad like the world owes you. I promise, it does not.”

“And there’s no arguing with that,” I mutter.

But Cateline is not done. “You could try to have a relationship with your brother, a generous, talented, and intelligent man. A man I am proud to call my fiancé.”

No stage. No lights. But mic drop.

More silence follows, especially from me.

Cateline turns, says a long string of words in French, and starts toward the door. “Connor. Let’s leave this wretched place.”

I take a long look at Cain. Where I’d once seen an intimidating, demanding, and intense man, the truth starts to take shape in the wake of Cateline’s comments.

My brother is a vulgar, sad, and lonely bully who is hiding pain of his own and has always taken it out on me.

I exhale through my nose. How had Cateline seen that in less than five minutes? I’d endured eighteen years, plus one week every year when we do the survivalist challenge with him because it seemed like the right thing to

do. I was terrified of his wrath, when really it's a mask for something else. An emptiness he doesn't know how to fill.

"I see she's got you trained up good. Go on then, go like the dog on a leash that you are. It's your life," Cain hollers.

"That's right. It is my life and it's a darn good one." Retorts, snappy comebacks, and words Cateline would scold me for using rise to my tongue, but I don't take the bait and keep my mouth shut.

Cain's mocking and menacing laugh goes silent as I exit the cabin. I watch my back, but the attack I expect doesn't come.

Cateline stands by the Jeep, looking like pure sunshine on an otherwise cloudy day. The tension in my muscles dissolves.

"Was this some kind of follow up prank?" she asks.

"No, that's still coming." I'm joking, mostly. Gesturing around, I say, "This was my life until I was eighteen. It took another decade, me showing my backside to the world, and being sent to reform school to meet you, and then come all the way back here to see the truth. Thank you, Cateline. I mean that."

"Thank you for what?" Her brows knit together.

"For unraveling that—" I motion toward the cabin

"I don't understand."

"We'll have plenty of time to discuss it later."

A dark thought enters my mind. Growing up, I never felt safe. Not until I left home. My father's anger and pressure kept me on edge. My brother was the other half of that dull blade.

I want to say that Cateline makes me feel safe, but that's not entirely true. I feel dangerous. Like I might do something crazy, like I could ask her to actually marry me. To spend a lifetime with her. To treat her like a queen. Like my bride. She brings everything I hid deep inside to the surface in the form of feelings I rarely, if ever, let myself feel. The kind that burn so good in my chest.

My eyes pinch at the corners as I say goodbye to that part of my life because I sense now, finally, it's really about to begin.

CATELINE



*A*fter the nightmare at Connor's family cabin, I half expect him to peel out of the driveway—if it could be called that—and drive aggressively back the way we came.

Instead, he's quiet, pensive, and ponderous like he had a breakthrough and only now realizes that behind every cloudy day, the sun still shines somewhere up there in the sky. That the truth is more powerful than lies, silence, or fear.

The way he glances at me makes me warm all over. Like I'm some ray of light. A revelation. I have clouds of my own that I hide behind, namely my citizenship situation. Why didn't I get it taken care of, knowing I'll have to return to France—the place I fled?

Cain reminded me of a barbarian that I once knew. I gave up my career in professional ballet to pursue a college degree. It was the logical and safe choice—and not only because a degree would secure me a 401k. No, Gaston had become possessive, demanding, and dangerous.

I shudder a breath, which breaks the seal on the silence in the Jeep.

"Did you hear the crowd go wild with applause?" Connor asks.

"What are you talking about?"

"Cat, you scored a touchdown."

"Remember, I don't play games."

"Not until you told Cain that you're my fiancée." His grin isn't wolfish. No, it's something else that I can't quite define.

"That was because your brother was being—" I look at Connor, now understanding why he is the way he is. Or was. He's changing before my

eyes. He seems lighter, more genuine. Like he's been dropping baggage left and right.

Connor takes my hand and rubs my grandmother's ring. "I'll get you a bigger, better ring. Promise."

"I don't need another ring because we're not really getting married. I can't marry a student."

"But the ring is on your finger."

"The wrong finger. Good save, by the way," I add.

"See, we're on the same team."

I'm about to respond, but pause on his words about being on a team. At different times in my life, I've desired marriage, a partnership, a covenant with someone. But I never met the right person. My thoughts poke me sharply in the ribs.

Like with the visa, I ignore them.

"This ring was my grandmother's. She gave it to me when I was eighteen. I think it was so I had something to barter if I got into trouble. She knew I was leaving. Or perhaps she knew I'd always be single." Then I realize I've shared this out loud. My throat thickens.

I've said too much. Gone too far out of my safe zone. Maybe I have been playing a game. Perhaps I am on a team. Team Connor-line? Catnor?

"You're not single anymore," he says.

"We're not really engaged."

"We are for the next twenty-four hours. Cain's wedding is tomorrow." Connor turns to me when we pause at a stop sign. "I cannot begin to imagine who he possibly convinced to marry him."

"I rarely speak ill of people, but I agree. Though perhaps he's different around her. People change," I say pointedly.

Gaze still on me, Connor says, "Yeah, they do."

Like words on a chalkboard, my objections disappear one letter at a time until all that's left is dust and us.

Windows down and music up, we breeze along the Blue Ridge Highway. It's so beautiful here, I cannot fathom the kind of pain Connor endured growing up. I shift in my seat so I'm facing him slightly—this big, brawny man. A man I admire for pulling himself out of that situation and making a life for himself, even if he was a bit of a butt-baring brute at times. A brutish, beast that I think I don't not love. A sigh escapes as I let myself realize this itty bitty fact.

Because I cannot help myself, I say, “My, my Mr. Wolfe, what big eyes you have.”

His lips twist with a smile as he glances at me. “Better to see you with, my Kitty Cat.”

“And what big hands...”

His fingers tighten on the steering wheel as if he’s resisting reaching out and placing them on me.

“And what big teeth.”

He chuckles. “Speaking of, I’m hungry. Otto’s, just down the street here, has the best burgers, Miss Berghier,” he says with perfect pronunciation. “Care to join me for dinner?”

“It would be my pleasure.”

We stop at a roadside stand with tattered menus taped on the windows, serving burgers, hotdogs, fries, onion rings, and about thirty kinds of ice cream. Connor orders us each a Blue Ridge Burger and one order of French fries and onion rings plus two milkshakes.

We wait by the pickup window and I ask, “Hungry?”

“Hungry like a bear. I got us each a milkshake, but you have to share yours because I couldn’t decide which one I wanted. The mint cookie is amazing but so is the chocolate banana strawberry.” With a sigh, he adds, “I forgot how much I love it here.” He looks around sentimentally.

“How do you know I’m willing to share?”

“Think of it as marriage prep. You’ll have to get used to sharing. Milkshakes, passwords, life.”

“Connor, we’re not—”

The girl at the pick-up window calls our number.

We each take a tray and I lead us to an empty picnic table with an umbrella.

“Uh, could we sit over there?” he asks.

“I need a little shade. I’m not used to the strong sun and humidity here.”

“Oh, right.” He hesitates and then sits, placing the tray with our food at an odd angle.

I draw it between us. He slides it back into place. I bring it closer and he pushes it back to where it was.

“What are you doing?” I ask.

“Um, we can take our food off the tray and leave it there.” His tone is shady like he’s hiding something.

“But the table is dirty. I’d rather have the tray between us.”

“You’re so fussy.”

“Says the guy who wants to marry me,” I tease.

“Alright, alright. Fine.” To my surprise, he relents.

I set the tray between us and we dig in. The hamburger is cooked medium rare and is topped with bacon, caramelized onions, and blue cheese.

I’m halfway done when Connor says, “You like it?”

Around a mouthful, I answer, “I love it. It’s the best thing—” I remove my elbows from the table and set the burger down then wipe my mouth.

“Someone forgot her manners.” Connor leans in. “I promise I won’t tell a soul.”

“Ha ha.” I grin as I pick up my burger. “But it is almost too good to put down.” But I do set it down when something scratched into the picnic table catches my eye. I trace my finger over the letters C-O-N-N-O-R followed by a plus symbol and the name *Anna*.

He swallows thickly and leans back.

“I see your misbehavior started early.”

“And there I thought you were going to ask me who Anna is.”

“Who is she?”

“Anna was my high school sweetheart.”

This information does something strange inside. On the one hand, it’s nice to know Connor got to experience a first love like that. On the other, I feel strangely jealous of her—she probably got to be all of his firsts, including his first kiss.

Then again, we are talking about Connor “Wolf.” He’s kissed a lot of women, but I sense Anna was for real while the rest were fill-ins, trying to give him what she did which begs the question, why is she a footnote in his story and not on his “team?”

He sets down his burger and says, “If you’re wondering what happened —?”

“You don’t have to tell me. Remember, I’m your coach,” I say, regretting it but also knowing I should at least attempt to keep things professional between us.

“My fiancée has special privileges. You get insider info, team secrets.” He winks.

“Just don’t tell me anything about Declan, Chase, or Grey. I’ve seen enough.”

He chuckles. “Anna and I dated in high school. Classic football player cheerleader story. Did you have those in France?”

“We had a variation,” I say, thinking darkly about dance and Gaston.

“As you saw, Cain and I were, er, are rivals. Even back then, we despised each other. Or more precisely, he had a vendetta against me. One night, after a big game, we were at a party. And in case you’re wondering, yes, Cain is older and still went to high school parties. The creep probably still does. Anyway, I found him and Anna hooking up.”

Giving the girl the benefit of the doubt, because where I sit there is no contest between the Wolfe brothers, I ask, “Is there a chance that he forced her or—?”

Connor leans back in the chair and crosses his arms. His biceps strain against the cotton hem of his gray T-shirt. “That’s the thing, I confronted her the next day. She said she’d always liked Cain, but he was older. I was easier. Easier to fool, I guess.”

I reach across the table and draw Connor’s hand loose. “I’m sorry. That’s so hurtful.”

“She ruined love for me.”

“That’s not true. She’s the one missing out. You’re better off without her anyway. I bet now she’s a real troll. A big wart on her nose, hair on her chin, missing teeth, and smells like low tide.”

Connor chuckles. “See? We make a great team.”

I’m afraid we do.

We finish our dinner and then drive to a nearby hotel. The receptionist recognizes Connor and makes a big football fan fuss, drawing the attention of a couple of other guests. I hang back while he signs a few items and then takes selfies with the fans. He gets an A+ for being personable and polite. No signs of the Wolf in sight.

From across the room, I watch him carry it off with ease as if his brother doesn’t hate him, he didn’t have the promise of young love and then have it shattered, leaving his heart broken. Meanwhile, he’s been walking around on the shards all this time.

Until now. He seems different. Like our time together has helped him pick up the pieces and fit them back in place.

I agreed to be his fake fiancée because there's no way I'd truly fall for him. That's ridiculous. His eyes land on me after he smiles at the camera, sending a spark of warmth through me.

Just as I join Connor and he hefts our bags to bring them to our rooms, a guy dressed in tactical gear approaches. In a word, he's intimidating and I prepare to take shelter, but the two instantly exchange a bro hug.

"What are you doing here, Andrew?" Connor asks the guy with a massive beard.

"Brought the family along this year. They'll stay in our camper during the Enduro, but I promised them a pool, so we came a few days early."

"Aw, you're such a family man. Good for you."

"I hear your brother is out for the count. Getting married?" Andrew's eyes land on me and all traces of intimidation are gone. He looks at me kindly, with respect, much unlike the way Cain did. "And you too, by the looks of it?"

"Yes, meet Cateline. The future Mrs. Wolfe," Connor says politely, carrying on with the charade. Perhaps he'll be at the wedding tomorrow. I don't know what Enduro means. I'll have to look it up later.

Andrew and I exchange pleasantries.

"Leaving the chase and entering marriage will be the best decision you ever made, man. Chelsea will be happy to see you too and meet you, Cateline. By the way, we're expecting baby number four."

"Will you be at the wedding too?" I have no idea what to expect from Cain's wedding. In case things go wrong, maybe I can befriend Chelsea and take shelter in the camper.

"Cain's? Oh, not a chance. No offense, Connor."

"None taken. Wouldn't endure it either if I didn't have to," he answers with no trace of sarcasm.

"No, we'll see you the next day. Game on, friends!" They bump fists and Andrew continues to the lobby.

I follow Connor as he carries our bags down the hall and opens the door, then sets them on the table. He closes the door behind us. It's a modest room and not necessarily a place I'd expect a famous football player to stay.

"Is this mine or yours?"

"Mine or your what?" he asks.

"Room," I say simply.

“It’s *our* room. Remember, we share things now.” He laughs.

I must look stricken because he grips my upper arms.

“And there are two beds. Don’t worry. The place is booked and the nearest alternative definitely has bugs. I want to get tomorrow over as quickly as possible so I didn’t want to stay too far away.”

I swallow thickly, meeting his copper eyes.

His lips quirk. “I trust you brought your robe and bunny slippers.”

I playfully whack him. “I trust you brought something to cover your backside.”

“Oh, come on. Everyone loves #BruiserButt. Even you, Cateline.” He smirks.

My jaw trembles slightly.

“I didn’t want to lose our reservation, so we checked in early, but we’re not settling in just yet. Come on. There’s something I want to show you.”

He takes my hand and leads me back the way we came. We get in the Jeep and drive out of the small town and toward the woods.

“Where are you taking me?”

“You’ll love it.”

Hearing him use the word *love* does something to me inside. I’ll love it like I loved the Blue Ridge Burger or how I do *not* love him?

My heart hiccups. “Ouch.” But that wasn’t why that word escaped my mouth.

Connor turns to me. “Are you okay?”

“Me? Oh, yeah. I’m fine. Just, um. Nothing. It wasn’t anything.”

Just a sharp poke in the ribs. It was the truth calling loud and clear.

I think I do not *not* love Connor Wolfe.

We drive through the woods until we reach a clearing. Connor spins in a circle before cutting the Jeep’s engine. Taking my hand, we walk toward the center of a field. The stars are clear and the moon is a mere crescent.

“Okay, close your eyes.”

“Um, are you going to summon wolves or something?”

He chuckles. “Definitely not. You’re safe. Trust me. This is going to be cool. We just have to be quiet and still. They should be coming back by now.”

From behind, Connor’s arms wrap around me. I can practically rest my chin on his forearm. I feel snug, like he’ll protect me from anything.

“Okay, open your eyes,” he whispers.

I do and then blink a few times as little specks of light wink in and out of focus. Glowing greenish-yellow points of light dot the field in every direction.

“What are they?”

“They’re fireflies, and if you look carefully, you may even see a blue one. They’re good luck.”

I sink back into his arms as we watch nature’s light show all around us. My body relaxes in the fresh, dewy night air and in this man’s arms. I was wrong about Connor. He’s surprised me in the best of ways.

His voice drawls to me like mist over water, like in a dream. “I’ve been thinking a lot. Turns out that I’m the luckiest man in the world.”

I crane my head to see Connor’s copper eyes spark, and ask, “Why’s that?”

“Because of right now. Because of this. You.”

“Now? This? Me?”

He takes my hand and twists me to face him. “I happen to know you’re a very good dancer. Care to teach me a move or two?”

“You already took a ballet lesson.”

His lips twitch at the corners. “I mean ballroom dancing, the kind you might use at a wedding.”

I think I got an accurate read on Connor’s brother and I doubt we’ll be attending a wedding reception with a ballroom. “How do you know I can dance?”

He scrunches his nose as if he’s not buying my demure reply.

I grip his back and join our hands and then begin to move, but before we get more than a few steps in, Connor takes the lead like he’s been doing this all his life.

“Wait a minute, I thought you wanted lessons.”

He winks. “I catch on quickly...and maybe I know a thing or two. I just wanted an excuse to dance with you.”

“Oh, yeah, what other secrets do you have, Mr. Wolfe?”

“Plenty, Miss Berghier. Plenty.” Connor’s feet go still.

So does the world. The air, the fireflies, and my heart stops as he leans in. I can’t help but watch his eyes and his lips, anticipating what’s about to happen. Telling myself I should stop it but not wanting to. Not at all.

Connor’s hands find their way to the pins in my bun and he starts to pull them loose. My head and shoulders relax as he runs his fingers through my

hair.

I let out an exhale I've been holding onto for years.

Connor's nose nuzzles my neck. His breath whispers across my skin before I blink my eyes shut.

His lips find mine and I see sparks behind my eyes, fireflies. The blue ones. His mouth and my mouth dance together as if they'd choreographed the moves without our knowing. The rhythm is easy, light, fun. I can't help but smile, breaking the kiss for one moment.

Our gazes catch and his grin is as wide as mine, like now we share a secret. Then our mouths crash together again.

The tempo changes, it's stronger now, more insistent, leading to the crescendo of the ballet. The big moment when desires and expectations the audience didn't know they had are met with triumphant leaps and spins. Only, this dance, this kiss, is all our own. It's for an audience of two and we know it.

It's just us.

The kiss deepens, goes to unexpected places that make me curious, filled with longing for more, another kiss and another, like stepping stones into a future when our lips meeting is a sure thing. A promise.

Connor's fingers find mine and they lace together before smoothing along my back and cupping the nape of my neck. He kisses me once, twice, three times marking me as wanted, wonderful, and his.

My hands do their own exploring and his muscles are more than I imagined. He is too. Not a big brute with bad manners. Not a bad-boy football player with a cocky attitude. Connor is wanted, wonderful, and at least in this enchanted field filled with fireflies, he's mine too.

Breathless, we part and he hugs me with his strong, capable arms, reminding me of one of the many trees surrounding us. Rooted, meaning we're together and he's not going anywhere.

Our gazes meet to confirm what just happened. He wears a smirk. My cheeks are pink from his stubble and letting down my guard, being free with him.

Hand in hand, we walk back to the Jeep.

I've spent hours dancing without any breaks, but nothing has ever made me as weak in the knees as kissing Connor Wolfe.

CONNOR



I wake up across the room from Cateline. Despite my desire to make her my wife in real life, something is different.

The electricity in the air.

The pulse in my veins.

I was a very good boy last night. Nothing that would cause a kerfluffle. Nothing that would get me kicked off the team. I miss the guys and throwing the ball, along with shooting the bull, but spending time with Cateline is a happy distraction.

My brother's wedding later today? Not so much.

I run through the nuts and bolts of holy matrimony. Vows to love, honor, and assist each other through sickness and health, for better or worse, richer and poorer.

Cain ought to quit while he's ahead because I'll eat my helmet if he makes it to their first anniversary.

Then again, he somehow hornswoggled Lizabeth into accepting his proposal. Well, presumably he proposed. I wouldn't be surprised if he hollered at her to get him a can of something cold and then said something like, *Marry me, woman*.

That's the classy kind of guy Cain is. Then again, I haven't always been a gentleman either.

Did he get Lizabeth a ring? I guess I'll find out.

I glance at Cateline, peacefully slumbering and wrapped tight in the blankets like a mummy. We're supposedly engaged and I didn't get her a ring. Then again, the news came just yesterday. Her grandmother's ring, a

vintage piece with a delicate but sparkly diamond in the center, seems more meaningful anyway.

I don't doubt that Cateline likes finery, given her extensive shoe collection and wardrobe, but I don't think she's in this fake engagement for the flash.

Bringing Cat to the field last night was a risk. Anna and I used to go there, but it was never like that. Cateline was genuinely enchanted by the fireflies...and I was taken by her kiss.

Not going to brag, but I've kissed a lot of women. And not one of them, not even Anna, ever made me feel the way I did last night. The way I still do.

I never thought my heart would beat again—the unique rhythm that's different than the one when I'm pounding down the field with a football.

Cateline must sense my gaze on her because she rouses. Blinking her eyes open, they land on me. I expect the slow spread of her smile. Instead, she gasps and clutches the covers to her chest.

"Cat, it's just me."

"Sorry. I haven't woken up in a room with someone in a long time. I wasn't expecting you there."

"Don't worry, I stayed over here...in the other bed."

She flops onto her back and lets out a breath, relieved.

"Not exactly the response I was hoping for from my fiancée."

"I'm traditional, Connor."

"I'm aware and respect that, but I wouldn't object to a snuggle." The kiss from last night comes into focus—and what a kiss it was.

"Please let me wake up first." Her voice is especially smoky, her French accent especially thick.

But the snuggle doesn't come. Instead, she gets an urgent long-distance call from the Board of Regents at Blancbourg and then has to fire off a series of emails. So far away, it's easy to forget that she runs a school.

All too soon, we have to get ready for the wedding. Per my brother's request, I wear a button-down shirt and dress pants.

Cateline emerges from the hotel bathroom wearing the red dress I picked up off her floor and dangly earrings. As usual, her hair is in a bun. I miss mine.

"You look dazzling," I whisper.

"And you look underdressed for a wedding."

“When I suggested you wear that, I wasn’t thinking about the dress code for Cain’s big day.”

“Then I’m overdressed.”

“No, you’re perfect.” I take her hand, lift it overhead, and spin her in a circle, checking her out.

“But I can’t outshine the bride.”

“You can in my eyes.”

“Oh, stop. Your wolfish lines don’t work on me.”

“Lines? Just speaking the truth.”

“And just how long will you be able to pull that off?”

“My, my, someone is prickly today.”

She lets out a short breath. “It’s just, things at Blancbourg aren’t good.” I’ll never get tired of hearing her voice say words like that or simple ones like *hello*.

Wolfe on Cateline’s lips is my favorite.

“I’m here to listen if you need to rant.”

She waves off my offer and finishes getting ready.

We go to the Jeep and I help her in, inhaling her lavender scent. I hold my breath until I get behind the wheel, if only so I can sustain myself until I inhale again.

“We’ll have to play a game,” she says.

“Football?”

“No. A we-don’t-despise-each-other game.”

“We don’t despise each other. And I thought you didn’t play games.”

“I don’t, but we’re posing as an engaged couple.”

“I know you tell yourself you hate me, but you don’t.”

Cat doesn’t refute my statement, so I add, “If we’re going to pretend anything, it’s that we’re not falling for each other.” Leave it to a guy like me to speak plainly.

I gauge her response and glimpse the tips of a smile at the corners of her mouth as she turns to the window, because if anything, we’re both falling. Hard and fast.

We pull up to the recreation center and follow the balloons around to the back. A pile of broken chairs sits in a heap and a rusty wagon bars part of the cracked sidewalk.

“Are you sure we’re in the right place?” Cat asks.

“Do yourself a favor and lower your expectations. This is Cain we’re talking about.”

“Surely his wife-to-be has a say in the ceremony and reception.”

“Again, this is Cain we’re talking about.”

Cateline grimaces.

We take our seats and the bridal march comes out of a pair of tinny speakers. If I didn’t know better, Lizabeth is being held at gunpoint as she walks down the aisle. The ceremony is short as they make their vows. But at the end, my brother and his bride smile and kiss. Cheering along with the rest of the guests, for the first time in my life, I don’t see pure evil in my brother’s eyes when he looks at his wife. Instead, I see light. Surprising. Strange.

There’s a buffet with good BBQ—apparently, Lizabeth’s father owns a smokehouse. Now, I see the lure for my brother.

Before we dig in, I call for a toast to the bride and groom.

I’ve fantasized in my mind about a moment of reckoning with Cain a million times. I’d tell him how much he hurt me. How brutal he’d been. How I hate him. Maybe it would come to blows. That might even feel good—to have it out.

Instead, I take the high road.

I make the toast short and as sweet as shoofly pie, wishing them both well and not saying anything that’ll rile up Cain.

If things were different between us, I’d joke, maybe play a slideshow, and a prank or two. But the best I can do is tell them that I hope they have a long and happy marriage.

Everyone claps and cheers.

Cain nods at me when I sit down and I have the fleeting thought that perhaps, after this, he’ll settle down and everything between us will be water under the bridge.

After the meal, the new couple has their first dance before everyone joins them on the makeshift floor. Streamers hang above and the tinny speakers play an upbeat pop song that everyone knows the words to.

To my shock, including Cat.

She pumps her arms like a chicken and moves from side to side like she’s done this dance before. I can’t help but smirk, which turns into a genuine smile before she pulls me alongside her and shows me the moves.

When the song changes, we slow dance like we did last night. When it shifts again, we follow suit, moving with the beat. We smile and laugh. The rest of the room fades and it's just us. This could be our special day.

When we stop to get something to drink, Cateline whispers, "You are a terrible date."

I balk. "How so?"

Her smile is secretive.

I counter, "You are a terrible liar. On the contrary, you think I'm the perfect date."

"No. Definitely not." She looks away as if to hide her grin.

"Okay, describe your perfect man."

"Why? Are you doing a survey? Writing an article? Want to learn how to behave? In case it slipped your mind, as the headmistress at Blancbourg, I'm an expert at helping people become the perfect gentlemen."

"And how have I fallen short?"

She shifts from foot to foot.

I step into her space and graze my hand over her shoulder and down her arm before taking her hand in mine and kissing it. "Cateline, this might be news to you, but I don't like perfect. I like real, even flaws. Bedhead, rosy cheeks from exertion, morning breath."

"Are you saying I had morning breath?"

"No. I liked watching you sleep. You were as peaceful and sweet as a kitten."

She discretely breathes into her free hand.

I tip her chin up so she's looking at me. "I like that tooth right there that's a little crooked and the way your eye sometimes twitches."

"I'm not sure whether to be insulted or infuriated."

"How about flattered?"

She shakes her head but that doesn't shake the smile off her lips, which are perfect, for the record. "You'd be a terrible husband."

"We're engaged. You're wearing a ring. Should we test that theory?"

"By getting married?"

I pause a beat as the words and their meaning catch up to both of us.

"I'd rather do it in a church," we both say at the same time.

Cateline goes quiet as if not expecting me to say that. Then she says, "Actually, I have a proposal."

I tug her close to me. “No, Cat. I’ll be doing the proposing. I’m a man. Traditional.”

“I mean, we could get married. It would help me with my green card. It might appease your coach and commissioner.”

“That’s an idea...” And not reasons I want to hear.

“You don’t want to marry me.” She pouts.

“Not for pretend.”

She bites her lip. “Let’s see how the next few days go and think about it.”

“We could, but so you don’t have to hold your breath and wait, the answer is yes, I’d marry you so you could get your green card.” I was hoping to marry her for more virtuous reasons, but I’ll also do a solid and help the woman out. The wolf in me agrees that’s the smart approach. Forget vows and all that. *Pfft*. That’s for guys who’re ready to settle down. Apparently, guys like my brother.

A man with more missing teeth than Cain asks Cat to dance.

Like a baboon pounding its chest, I want to claim my territory. Once upon a time, I made myself into a sovereign nation, independent, but would it be so bad to have a visitor to my shores? Maybe I want to be loved for more than my looks and football.

Maybe I want to marry Cateline for real.

CATELINE



The wedding yesterday was fun, but the proposal to marry Connor so I can get my green card gets muddled in my mind between truth and pretend.

Dancing with him was better than I could've imagined. Kissing him is a dream. But forever with a guy who goes by "Wolf?"

I glance at him as he loads things from a storage unit into the Jeep. Yes, his muscles set me on fire.

His smile too.

And his voice.

His copper eyes.

The exterior is amazing, but he goes deeper too. Much deeper than I expected. Do I want more? How much more? I'm like a greedy little miner digging for gold. I know there are gems there too—and not connected to the one that belonged to my grandmother that I'm wearing on my finger.

That's when I realize that I wouldn't say no to matching bands with Connor. To marry him for real.

He's silent and slows to let a truck pass on the narrow road.

I slap a mosquito. "You said we were going to be spending time outdoors. Define outdoors."

"The annual Wolfe family camping trip."

"Why do I get the feeling we're not going to be making S'mores around a campfire?"

"Because you saw what my brother is like."

"What about your dad? Mom?"

“Dad always said, ‘No one is coming to save you.’ Harsh but true, so we learned survival skills.”

“Was that part of your bedtime story routine? If so, I’ll stick with Little Red Riding Hood.”

He chuckles. “My father was a failed football hopeful. He pushed us boys hard. When he passed away, Cain carried on the tradition.” Connor doesn’t lift his eyes from the road.

“But before that? Your mother?”

“I’ll never know the whole story, but from what I understand, Dennis Wolfe built the cabin, dragged my mother out there, and convinced her to live off the land. They were completely off the grid. Nothing wrong with being self-reliant. I admire it, but he went to extremes. She got pregnant with me and didn’t make it. You’d think he’d have gone back to civilization, but instead, he went deeper into isolation.” Connor scratches the stubble that shades his jawline. “I think, in a strange way, he convinced himself that if he taught us to survive, he wouldn’t lose us as well.”

“But he did.”

Connor nods. “Dad was aggressive. Abusive. Made me feel like I never measured up. I think he and Cain blamed me.”

Understanding crystalizes. “The lone wolf.”

“Yeah. School was a different story when I’d play football at recess. Whatever my father lacked in talent and skill, I somehow gained. I was hooked. Obsessed. And pretty good at it, if I do say so.”

My heart aches for him. “Then what?”

“He passed away during my sophomore year in college. Except for my annual return for the camping trip, I left and never looked back.”

“Same,” I say softly.

But the Jeep barrels along the dirt roads, getting narrower and narrower until we pass more Jeeps, trucks, and SUVs lining the sides. At last, Connor comes to a halt, quickly unloads some gear he got at the storage locker, and then helps me out.

With a quick peck on my cheek, he says, “Wait here. Be right back.”

My palm presses against my skin. “What was that?” I whisper, only it sounds more like a giddy little whimper of surprise.

Before I have a chance to process the quick kiss, Connor jogs back to meet me. It’s hard to take my eyes off him, but I look around at my surroundings and my gaze lands on the sign overhead.

“What is this? Where have you brought me? Is this revenge for the ballet class?” My eyes narrow, my lips pucker, and my nostrils flare.

He claps his arm around my shoulders and says, “That’s the exact kind of grit needed to make it out here.”

“Out here? Where are we?”

“This is the boondocks, babe. I can get you the geographical coordinates if you’d like. It’s called the *End of the World Enduro*. Basically, it’s a week-long attempt to survive off the land. Started as a family, er, a father-son survival thing. Then it was Cain and me competing to see who could finish first.”

“Could you define *survival thing*?”

“My father threw me into it when I was about twelve. Almost died the first time. I’ve been coming back ever since,” he says as if it’s no big deal.

“You almost died,” I repeat.

He nods and picks up some of the gear. “You up for this?”

“I still don’t know what *this* is.”

“Wherever I go, you go, right?” His tone is rather blasé, like this is a trivial detail.

“It’s my job to follow my student for the remaining weeks of the program, but I imagined a guy like you would own an estate or a penthouse apartment. We’d go to the gym, maybe a few meetings, and—”

“Live in the lap of luxury? Not going to lie, I own a few things that stand in contrast to the cabin where I grew up, but this is the real deal. Something I do once a year. You in?”

I puff an exhale. People of all ages and dressed in various shades of camouflage and tactical gear mill around. They each have backpacks similar to Connor’s. Clouds blanket the sky, the air is thick with anticipation, and the hum of energy makes the hair on the back of my neck lift.

Connor winks at me. “Remember, you’re my fiancée. We’ll be in this together.”

“I don’t have anything to prove.”

He’s quiet for a long moment as if thinking about what I said, sifting it through the rough childhood with his father, the rivalry with his brother, and his need to be the king of the mountain.

“I don’t either. Except to you,” he says after a beat.

“Me?” I ask, not filtering my surprise.

“That I’m more than the bad-boy brute you met that first day at Blancbourg.”

I could tell him that I’ve already seen sides of him that have delighted and astounded me. Instead, I play along. “Okay, Mr. Wolfe, let’s see what you’ve got.”

“The End of the World Enduro is a challenge for survivalist types and people who want to prove that they can do hard things. Really hard things, like being set loose in the woods without anything but the barest basics.”

I shake my head, not fully understanding, but Andrew’s comment about the Enduro now makes sense.

“Imagine the world with no airplanes, cars, or technology. No electricity or running water. No modern conveniences. No money. How would we survive? It wouldn’t be with football wins or good manners.”

“Good manners are always essential.”

He nudges me with his shoulder. “So how would we survive? By sheer grit, by knowledge, by skills.”

“And you have these things?”

“Never leave home without ‘em.”

“And for some reason, you thought it would be a good idea to drag me into this? You look at me and think I’m a suitable companion to survive in the wilderness for a week? Are there bears? Wolves? Dangerous creatures in the forest? Are guinea pigs going to come after me?”

He cracks a smile and pulls me close, kissing the top of my head. “You have me.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of.” I survey the surroundings.

“Cat, when you look at me what do you see?”

I guppy my mouth, not prepared to answer that question.

He turns his hands up and says, “I know, I know. A devastatingly handsome gentleman. A prize specimen. A hunk who’s both intelligent and generous. Please stop. You’re being too kind.” He mock laughs at his facetious brag.

“Don’t flatter yourself,” I mutter, but he’s not wrong.

“Do you trust me?” Gripping my upper arms, he holds my gaze.

The answer comes without hesitation. “Yes, I do.”

He starts walking down a trail edged with long grass. I have no choice but to follow or try to find civilization.

“Well, you know everything I said is true. I am amazing,” he says when I catch up.

He is, but I’m not going to admit that he checks off all of those boxes and more.

But right now is not the opportune time for me to disappear into the wilderness. The school is in trouble and the stress of it has been causing pressure in my chest that’s getting hard to ignore.

I’d like to say my heart is all aflutter from Connor and our kiss, but the reality is, my life is a mess.

Before I can think more about that, we arrive at a clearing where loads of people gather, outfitted with survival gear like tools strapped to their belts, big boots, and all manner of bags and water skins.

Someone whistles for attention. “Okay, everyone, you came here to prove that you can survive the end of the world. That you have what it takes. Sharpen your knives and your senses. When you hear the drums, you may disperse.”

I imagine there to be the pop of a starting gun or something to signal the start like at a foot race. Instead, everyone falls silent. Maybe they’re saying prayers. I am.

My pulse thrums with uncertainty. What am I getting myself into? If I leave Connor now, that’s acquiescing to the fact that I no longer have a job at Blancbourg.

He shifts and then helps me to my feet. “Let’s go.”

Instead of the drums, all I can hear is the hammering in my chest.

“First things first. Water. Shelter. Those are the basics.”

“Food?” I ask.

“That’ll come later.”

A sense of uncertainty settles over me as the woods close at my back. I follow Connor for the next hour, gradually forgetting the clutter in my head about Blancbourg and my visa and imagining we’re on a regular hike. The rises and dips along the mountain ridge afford breathtaking views. If it weren’t for the challenge looming ahead, it would be peaceful here.

Finally, Connor stops and asks me to wait by a fallen tree. He comes back a few minutes later with a container of water.

Parched, I take a long sip. Then belatedly ask, “Is it safe to drink?”

“Of course,” he says. “I wouldn’t put you in danger.”

“Except to exact revenge for my pranks.”

He barely cracks a smile. “I’d never let anything happen to you. And to answer your question from earlier, this wasn’t planned to get revenge for the ballet class. I do this challenge so I don’t forget where I came from and to keep up on my skills, like how to build a fire without a match.” He winks. “You never know when it could come in handy.”

He’s lit a blaze under me, that’s for sure. But that blaze can just as quickly turn to anger. “If you knew about this, why didn’t you tell me? Were you mentally preparing? Afraid I’d quit? What about the sleeping arrangements?”

“My sleeping bag is big enough for both of us. Don’t worry. I’ll keep you warm.”

“Connor—” It comes out like a whine and I cut myself off. Early on, he told me his strength is endurance.

Yeah, well, so is mine, hotshot!

We find a shady spot and sit side by side on the ground.

“If I get eaten by a bear or—”

Connor kisses the top of my head. Then he whispers, “It’s the wolves you have to watch out for.”

Yeah, I know.

CATELINE



The next days involve a lot of hiking and foraging. Connor shows me the difference between poisonous and medicinal plants, edible berries, and ones to stay away from.

To “survive” the Enduro event, participants have a passport, which brings to mind my predicament. But instead of it allowing participants into a country—like the one where they live and work, but I can’t think about that while trying not to die in the wilderness—we have to get a stamp after completing various challenges supervised by the organizers. There is rope and rock climbing, obstacle courses, and other events. One night, we have to stay up on watch because word is a mountain lion is on the prowl. Connor assures me it’s all part of the fun and games.

On the third day, a storm drives us toward a cave for shelter. Hail stones rock from the sky. While we wait it out, Connor sneaks glances at me and bites the edge of his lip.

Yeah, I’d like to kiss again too, but see, I don’t have access to my usual hygienic products like toothpaste.

He has chewable toothpaste tablets, but they don’t exactly provide kissable fresh breath.

Connor startles me when he says, “Hey, check it out.” At last, the sky clears and a rainbow appears, arching the sky in a blend of colors rarely seen together in nature.

His eyes land on me. “Just like you.”

“What do you mean?”

“A contradiction. A storm and a rainbow,” he drawls, his accent coming in thicker since returning to North Carolina.

“You think so? Well, you’re a bull and a China shop.”

“The expression is a bull in a China shop,” he corrects.

“I know that. You’re alternately like a bull and then surprise me with something more gentle, more—”

“I’m not fragile.”

“Definitely not physically.”

“Emotionally?” he asks, aghast.

“I’m just saying your heart was shattered and you’ve been working hard to protect the pieces ever since.”

“I’ll prove to you that I’m strong.”

“You don’t have to prove anything.”

“That I have unmatched endurance,” he adds as if I didn’t comment about not having to prove anything.

I sigh. “That’s not what I meant.” But he doesn’t let me explain myself, which lights my inner fuse. The one that kept me on the dancefloor long after everyone went home. That got me up before dawn the next day. That pushed me in much the same way Conner’s adversity pushed him.

Nonetheless, as we continue the hike, everything becomes a competition. A battle of egos. Connor even sings a famous little song about how anything I can do, he can do better. Well, I’ll show him. We tease each other with it back and forth, propelling us through the challenge and causing me to forget the challenges I face in real life.

On the fourth day, while on a hike, we get in a tight spot where we have to cross river rapids.

I stop and shake my head.

“What’s the matter?” he asks.

“I can’t swim,” I confess.

“Well, you don’t want to swim in that, anyway. Though I suppose we could both use a bath.” He waves his hand in front of his armpit. “Not there though. We’d get swept away, but I suppose you not knowing how to swim presents us with a problem. Also, I know who not to have on my team next time I do a triathlon.” He winks.

Well past adhering to etiquette, I roll my eyes. Then smooth my ponytail while wondering how much dirt and sweat are on my face.

The bonus of so much walking and being in the wilderness is plenty of time to think, which I do while waiting for Connor to assess the river situation.

I love Blancbourg and the opportunity it affords me, but now what? Will I be able to go back? Can I work remotely? On top of that, will there even be a Blancbourg for much longer? If Regina and I don't figure out the finances soon, the school will be forced to close. My one hope is that I think we'll be able to preserve the building with the historical designation, which provides some funding for upkeep, but does any of that matter if I'm stuck in France?

What's next aside from making it across this creek? That poke in the ribs suggests *ballet*, but I'm too old to join a dance company. Plus, I have a steady job at the school. So does Arthur and everyone else employed there.

In these last days, Connor's beard has practically grown back and he emerges from the woods having chopped down a tree to use for us to cross. He's big and strong and...mine? Is he mine or does part of him still belong to this forest, to Anna, to the past?

What about me? Can I move forward and if so, where? These thoughts land me exactly where I started.

"Are you building a boat?" I ask Connor.

"No."

"Okay, lone wolf, tell me what you're doing. What if something happens to you? How would I make it here on my own?"

"Nothing will happen to me and I took precautions. Even though it's against the rules, my phone is in my bag, but only to be used in dire emergencies. Not if you break a nail."

"I already broke all my nails." I snort. "You seem to be operating independently and according to your own rules. I don't even know what's going on. Teach me how to chop down a tree."

He chuckles. "You're adorable, Kitty Cat." He doesn't sound like he's teasing.

A warmth that's different from the humid day floods me. A dip in the water doesn't sound half bad.

After outlining how he's building us a bridge, he asks, "Explain how you escaped childhood without learning to swim."

"Too busy."

"With?"

"I had rules while you had chaos growing up."

"I didn't take all of the chaos with me. I've made a few rules since. Don't fall in love, never date a woman more than once, and don't stick

around long enough to develop—”

“Feelings,” I finish for him. “What about bringing a woman to the middle of the woods?”

“That’s a new one for me. I had those rules so I could rise to the top of the pack.”

“If you didn’t notice, you got there, football star.” I poke him in his very hard chest.

“Now it’s a matter of staying on top.”

“What would happen if you fell in love, dated a woman more than once, or stuck around long enough to develop feelings?” I ask.

Before Connor answers, he takes off across the log bridge like a tightrope walker. From the other side, he calls, “Your turn.”

I’d like to use my impeccable balance to cross this with ease, but I’m afraid of what’ll happen if I fall. However, more than anything, I want to hear the answer to my question, so I drop to my hands and knees and crawl across, willing myself not to shake because I’m terrified of being swept into the raging water below.

All the while, breathing is like trying to drink through a clogged straw. When I get to the other side, I collapse onto my back. My heart batters my chest. I gaze up at the sky, thankful to be alive, and a smile blooms on my face.

“You did it.”

“I did.”

Connor lowers next to me and we lay side by side, staring at the clouds sweeping across the sky. His hand finds mine and our fingers lace together.

After a while, I say, “You never answered my question. What would happen?”

He rolls to face me.

Blades of grass whisper between us. The water gurgles in the background, but all I can hear is the in and out of his breath. Of mine. Not quite in sync, but not entirely offbeat either.

Our eyes meet.

“What would happen? I’d be here with you, Cat.” A boyish smile washes over Connor’s masculine face.

My insides glow like I’m made of sunshine as we remain here a while longer, in the middle of nowhere and gazing at the clouds shifting across the

blue sky. At least for this moment, I relax. My heart slows. Everything feels just right.



On our way to the next checkpoint, our conversation flows easily, as though the rapids opened a floodgate.

“Favorite ice cream?” he asks.

“Chocolate. You?”

“Mint chip.”

“Favorite song?”

“Anything classic rock. Your turn.”

“Swan lake. The orchestral version.”

The list goes on.

“We’re so different,” I say when we still don’t find something we share in common: books to movies, country to city, and mountains to the ocean.

“We’re practically the opposite.”

“Football and ballet, for instance.”

“What if we never find something that we both agree on?” he asks with a laugh.

We stop for water and he lets me take a sip first.

“I think we’ve mistakenly thought we’re at war with ourselves, life, and each other.” I shift my weight as though considering something. “My instinct is to fight you. But I wonder if we might make this easier if we lay down arms and consider ourselves allies.” I hold his gaze. “It’s a good, reasonable option while we’re alone out here.”

“Haven’t we already done that? You’re my fiancée.” The corners of Connor’s lips lift.

“I mean officially. A peace treaty of sorts. I want to see you succeed and pass this class and not lose your spot on the team.”

“Oh, right. That’s what we’re doing.” His gaze drops.

“That came out wrong, but I want to be sure that this is real and not a result of us relying on each other in the wilderness. Yes, I’m your coach. Though, this wasn’t what I was expecting.”

“What were you expecting?” he asks.

“Press events, fancy dinners, and meetings where you were acting like a baboon and I had to reinforce positive behavior.”

Amusement lights up his eyes. “I think of myself more as a gorilla.”

“I thought you were a wolf.”

“Same thing.”

“Actually, Connor, you’re a man.”

On cue, he steps closer.

“A big, burly, handsome, capable man,” I add.

His copper eyes hook mine. “You know, I think we can find something that we both agree on.” His voice is like the wind rustling the branches of the trees overhead.

My heart flutters like the leaves on the branches.

Connor brushes his hand along my jaw.

My pulse races and my cheeks flush as it starts to rain, but neither of us moves from this spot.

CONNOR



A light breeze ruffles Cateline's hair as a delicate rain shower starts. "And what's that?" Cateline asks after my pronouncement that I've found something we both agree on.

My lips twitch with a knowing smile. "I want to kiss you and you want to kiss me."

She nods. "I do want to kiss you."

Like in the firefly field, but this time in the rain, our mouths crash together.

The world goes fuzzy. Yes, we're alone in the woods, but we may as well be the only two people left in existence.

There are her lips and mine. My body and hers. Her breath and my inhale-exhale.

My hand curls around the back of her neck.

Her hand fists my shirt, pulling me closer.

My pulse drags deeply, as though dredging the river.

Hers rises to meet it like a wave.

I kiss Cateline like it's the only thing that matters. She kisses like she cares profoundly. I do. I care so much.

Love swells in my chest. I've never felt anything quite like it as the kiss deepens. It goes to new places I've never been, depths I've never plumbed, and I never, ever want to leave.

Then eventually, drenched, I trace a trail of kisses along her jawline to her collarbone to her hand before pulling her into a hug that's so tight, so absolute, I want it to tell her that I'll never let her go.

She cranes her head to meet my eyes. Emotion flickers there. It's an answer to a silent question about us, our future. I think it's *yes*.

I find a suitable camp for the night and make a fire. We eat dinner and swap stories.

After another long day, Cateline soon falls asleep, curled up on the bedroll. She insisted I join her in the sleeping bag, but fell asleep before I could protest. Lying on the ground beside her, I figure the cold will only strengthen me. Eventually, though, I give in because I don't want her to get chilly.

I haven't broken the playbook rules *per se*. We've kissed, but it's different because I want another. A hundred more kisses with Cateline. I've never felt that way about a woman before. Usually, I'd already have checked out, bye-bye. Not inclined to see her again. But I want to see her every day for the rest of my life.

The outline of a future for us begins to take a hazy shape.

Her cheering me on at games.

Me treating her like royalty because she practically is.

I want to give Cat everything in life—take away her worry, make her smile and laugh, and listen to the rise and fall of her accent even when she prompts me to mind my manners.

The night is still and the sky is clear as I lay, looking up at the stars. I'd give Cateline every single one if I could. I glance over at her in awe. The smooth slope of her nose, her thick eyelashes, the fullness of her lips. She tamed the wild in me, yet that makes me want to howl. But I'd wake her up and that's not a very polite thing to do, so I let myself drift to sleep.

Sometime later, someone shakes me softly at first. I imagine it's Cain. My name floats to me through a dream. The shaking increases and the voice rises in panic.

"Connor, please. Please wake up." It's a French accent, smoky, familiar. *Cateline*.

I shoot to sitting.

Her face is pale in the moonlight.

"What's wrong? Is there trouble?" I scramble to my feet, ready to take on a mountain lion if I have to.

Her palm presses flat against her chest.

"Are you okay? Did you have a bad dream?"

She shakes her head. "No. It's my heart, I think."

I test her forehead. She's clammy like from a cold sweat.

"I'm dizzy and having a hard time breathing." Her voice is thin.

I've seen the toughest guys injured and sick—on and off the field—Cateline isn't a guy, but she is tough and just by looking at her, I can tell something is gravely wrong.

Shaky, she lays back down.

Anxiety rockets through me. There is no time to waste.

I grab my pack and pull out my cell phone. Participants in the challenge aren't supposed to have them and many of them don't even own phones or other technology to begin with. However, I brought it in case anything happened to me like a broken leg, thinking Cateline would need help if I got injured. I didn't imagine anything would happen to her.

I dial for emergency and explain the situation then send the GPS coordinates.

Gathering Cateline in my arms, I carry her to a nearby clearing. She's light and limp. I hold her tight.

"Hang on, Cateline. Help is coming."

She floats in and out of consciousness.

Adrenaline rushes through me. What happened? Does she have a fever? Did she have a preexisting illness she didn't mention and needs medicine? I'm so stupid for taking her on the Enduro challenge.

The hum of a helicopter grows louder as the long minutes pass. The rest of the challengers aren't going to be happy and I'm automatically disqualified, but I won't risk Cat's health or safety. Then I realize I already did. Guilt makes her heavy in my arms.

A searchlight sweeps the mountains and trees. I grip Cateline tightly. She's silent and still. If something happens to her, I'll never forgive myself.

Moments later, the chopper lands, flattening the long grass with the buffeting wind from the blades. It lights up the night as a pair of EMTs rush out, ask a few questions, and take Cateline into their care.

"Are you her husband?" one asks.

"Fiancée," I answer, praying she'll forgive me. Praying she'll be okay. If I weren't in a helicopter, I'd drop to my knees and beg God for mercy.

Soon we're back in the air, moving toward the nearest city.

The next twelve hours are the longest and most agonizing of my life. I don't know how to contact her family. Not knowing the no phone rule of

the Enduro, or even what she was getting into, Cat's cell phone died the first day. I plug it in. Unfortunately, I don't know the password.

I alternately pray and watch the door opposite the waiting room, hoping someone will exit and give me more information.

She's in critical condition.

She's in surgery.

She's out of surgery.

That's all I know.

Finally, the doctor appears. He gives me an appraising look. At first, I assume it's because he recognizes me. Then I realize I look like a caveman. I smooth the beginnings of the beard that has grown in the last several days.

"Mr. Wolfe, explain to me the circumstances of the patient's arrival."

"We were camping—the End of the World Enduro challenge. It was several days in. She woke me up, saying she was having a hard time breathing and her chest hurt."

"Surely you know that someone with her condition shouldn't have been doing that kind of activity."

"What condition?"

"A heart condition."

I frown. "She never mentioned that." Regret melts my defenses. I had no right bringing her out there to the woods. To me, it was a tough challenge—manly. To her, it was probably awful and as it turns out, life-threatening.

The doctor nods. "There's a solid chance she didn't know about it either. The good news is she's going to be okay. We were able to successfully stent the valve that was causing trouble. She'll be waking up soon and when she's ready, we'll need to ask her some questions."

"Thank you, doctor." Relief, unlike any I've ever known, sweeps through me. Tears well in my eyes.

"In the meantime, why don't you go home and shower."

I look down at myself. I'm filthy, covered in dirt and grass stains.

Thankful that Cateline is okay, I check into a local hotel, shower, shave, and put on a new T-shirt and pair of jeans. I'm exhausted, but there is no way I'll spend any more time away from Cateline than necessary. But the Jeep, with her luggage, is back in the woods.

My mind whirs while a car service brings me over. What did the doctor mean that she had a preexisting condition? Does she have medication she

forgot to take?

I get the Jeep and return to the hospital. The nurse at the desk does a double-take. “Were you the fellow sitting in the waiting room all night and day?”

“That was me. Muddy, sweaty, and covered in bug bites.”

“My, oh my. And I thought you were some kind of very tall vagrant. Were you trying to go incognito or something?” She must recognize me.

“No. We were camping and—” I grip the back of my neck and hang my head. “Is she okay?”

“She will be. Thankfully, you got here when you did. The doctor will explain more. You can go in now.” She points to a metal door. “Fourth on the right.”

“Thank you, ma’am.”

“Hang on.” She comes around to the other side of the desk and lifts onto her toes. “You’ll just have to take a selfie with me so I can show the girls who I met. Stacy down in the NICU is a big Boston Bruisers fan. Oooh. She’s going to be so jealous.” Her phone snaps the photo as she smiles.

The glimpse I catch of the picture is of a haggard, worried man.

The unit is relatively quiet except for the beeping and whirring of machines. The lights were bright in the hall but dim behind the curtains that cordon off the patients.

Cateline lies in the bed with wires and tubes coming in and out of her small and fragile-looking body.

Why had I ever taken her out there? I move closer to the bed, desperate with worry.

Her hand rests on the sheet. After lowering into a chair, I take her slender fingers in mine and watch her sleep peacefully. I came so close to losing her. What if I hadn’t brought my phone? What if there wasn’t service? What if I’d been too late?

I rest my forehead on the edge of the bed and my shoulders shake. I cannot let anything happen to Cateline or lose her. I can’t imagine life without her.

CONNOR



I'm not sure how much time passes with me sitting by Cateline's side when a nurse enters to check her vitals.

Her eyes flutter open and immediately land on me. "Hi." Her voice is scratchy. "You showered and shaved."

I nod because I don't know what to say—the welling of emotion inside of me is still so strong I fear I might break apart if I open my mouth.

"Earlier, the doctor asked if I was in love with a caveman." She smiles faintly.

The nurse in attendance laughs softly.

"I'm an idiot for taking you out there. I'm sorry, Cat."

"You saved my life, Connor. Thank you."

There were moments when I thought I lost her. My world felt like it was ending. I can't forgive myself.

"Everything looks good," the nurse says. "The doctor will be in soon."

The same surgeon I met earlier sweeps the curtains aside. "I'm Dr. Bradshaw. Our ballerina here is a very lucky lady. I'm going to explain the diagnosis and what transpired, but first I have a few questions. You up for it?"

Cateline nods, her eyes widening with attention.

Dr. Bradshaw glances over at me as though noticing me for the first time. "Are you the same guy I met earlier?" He points in the direction of the waiting area.

"Yes, sir. I'm Connor Wolfe." I extend my hand to shake. "Thank you for everything, sir." Even though I speak with feeling, the words aren't sufficient for the doctor's service.

“You took my recommendation for a shower very seriously. Nice to see you again in your improved state.” He doesn’t come off as insulting but rather relieved that he’s not dealing with an actual beast, or leaving someone as perfect as Cateline in its care.

Color rises on her cheeks as if she appreciates it too.

“Miss Berghier, I understand you grew up in France. When you were a child did you have frequent sore throats or cases of strep? In rare instances, these can lead to heart murmurs, which can cause different issues within the organ.”

“I did have sore throats, yes. I’m not sure the word for strep, though.”

I do a quick search on my phone and show her the translation. I’d tease her all day for not knowing the expression *guinea pigs*, but there is nothing funny about this.

“Yes. I do recall having that.”

“Does rheumatic fever mean anything to you?” The doctor explains while I look up that translation as well.

For the next few minutes, the doctor explains that she experienced a problem with an artery, preventing adequate blood flow. “Your records indicate, and your account of what happened maintains, that you had no knowledge of a preexisting condition. You are otherwise in excellent shape health-wise, so it’s understandable that you’d not be aware. To that end, you’re lucky because the procedure we performed was minimally invasive.”

I exhale a long breath.

“I have to ask, have you been experiencing irregular heartbeats or shortness of breath? Anything like that?” the doctor asks.

“Yes. I thought it was stress and maybe my heart trying to tell me something.” Her gaze lands on me. It’s soft and full of feeling.

“Further testing will confirm my suspicions, but I think what we’re dealing with developed over a long period of time, perhaps starting with a case of strep. It’s rare, especially here in the United States, but since you didn’t grow up here, I can’t speak for all communities’ prevention and treatment protocols.”

“Will I be able to dance again?” Cateline asks.

My eyebrows lift with surprise.

The doctor pats her leg. “Absolutely. Your heart is going to be as strong as ever. Another day recovering here and then you’ll gradually work your way back up with increased movement and exercise. You’re young and

otherwise healthy, so I imagine you should be feeling relatively back to normal in another couple of weeks.”

“Thank you, Dr. Bradshaw,” Cateline says.

I get to my feet and shake the doctor’s hand before stepping outside the curtain.

“You want to know if she’ll be okay?” Dr. Bradshaw asks.

Scrubbing my hand through my hair, I nod.

“It’s understandable that you’re shaken up. What happened would’ve occurred no matter where you were—camping or on vacation elsewhere. Getting her in the helicopter rather than an ambulance might have made all the difference. But yes, she’ll be fine.”

“I owe you.” I want to give the man who’d truly saved Cateline’s life more than a selfie or season tickets.

“Just doing my job.” He pats me on the back. “And you make sure you do yours and win the next Super Bowl. I have a bet with a buddy with your name riding on it.”

I crack a smile. “Will do, sir.”

The next few days consist of rest and recovery as Cateline’s energy slowly returns. We spend hours talking and I learn about her past—she’s whip-smart and was born into a relatively poor family.

“My mother thought dancing would give me more opportunities in life. She sacrificed everything and sent me to the premier dance academy in the country. They wanted me to marry a dancer named Gaston and for us to go on to be ballet greats. But that wasn’t what I wanted—I was hungry for something else, knowledge. Eventually, I had to choose. Dance or education. I’d have done what my parents wanted me to do, but I’d ruin my body. I’d be forced to retire young. Quick money, prestige, fame. But a flash. No longevity.”

I recall her asking about my future prospects. “I guess that’s sort of like football.”

“But you can go on to do other things in the sports world. It’s different in ballet. I had to choose. I worked three jobs, paid my way through school...and haven’t really danced or spoken to my parents at all in ten years.” Her voice cracks. “I was a small-town girl, raised the old-fashioned way, and sheltered. I left. I broke all the rules.”

“Do you miss dancing?” I know the answer since it was one of the first things Cateline asked the doctor when she woke up.

“Terribly.”

“Your parents?”

“Every day.”

“We’re not much different. But I suppose we made different choices. I picked football. Broken body, young retirement. Then what?” I hope whatever it is includes Cateline.

In the meantime, I know exactly where I’ll take her once she is well enough to travel.

CATELINE



*A*fter leaving the hospital, a week passes while I recover in a luxury hotel on the coast of North Carolina.

Connor waits on me hand and foot, even though I insist I'm fine. We take walks on the beach, eat heart-healthy food, and talk for hours. I'm thankful to be alive, thankful for him, and the kisses we share.

One afternoon, he comes back with a pastry box and a bag. Clearing his throat, he says, "I brought you some paper."

"The newspaper? We already read it." The hotel slides it under the door every morning. I do the crossword and he reads the sports section.

Connor jiggles the bag. "Fancy paper, embellishments, scrapbooking supplies, or whatever they're called. Things like that. I don't know." He looks sheepish, boyish, almost embarrassed. "Um, happy birthday."

Giving my head a little shake. "My birthday?"

"Your birthday? Yeah, as you said, we got the newspaper. Check the date."

"I don't think today is April fifteenth."

"My CPA made me quite aware of the date." Connor winces at the reminder that it's also Tax Day.

I double-check. He's right. "I don't typically celebrate it."

I expect him to make a fuss and he says, "Yeah, I understand that. How do you say the word *my* in French?"

"Mon," I reply.

"Mon," he says, trying to imitate my accent. "Okay. All the same, happy *mon* birthday," Connor says, slightly boyish and very cute. It's as if entering new territory with a woman and sharing something as simple yet intimate as

her birthday is a revelation. I don't quite get what he means about *mon* birthday, but I just go with it because he's being adorable.

"Thank you." I set down the paper, shocked that I lost track of time. This might be the most relaxed I've been in years. I usually know the date and time down to the second.

He scratches his cheek as though the translation didn't work to his satisfaction. "How do you say the prefix *non*?"

I laugh. "It's the same in English and French. *Non*," I answer, using the French pronunciation.

"Happy *non* birthday," he repeats.

"*Merci*," I answer, getting that he means it like an anti-birthday. He's recognizing my birthday and being sweet, even though I often get the birthday blues.

Connor presents the pastry box. "Figured it was too early for cake, so I got an assortment of pastries, croissants, and whatever this curly thing is."

"It's called a *palmier*," I say with the perfect French pronunciation. "Some say it's a pig's ear. I prefer an elephant ear. But don't worry, it's just made of the usual ingredients. But this chocolate *plié au chocolat* is the best." I pick up the pastry with its buttery folds of dough and custard and take a bite. My eyes flutter shut. "How did you know this is my favorite?"

"Lucky guess." Connor smirks.

"I've never told anyone this, but I have a chocolate tooth. It's like a sweet tooth, but just for chocolate. French chocolate."

"I kind of gathered that, Choco-line." He turns my hand over and kisses the inside of my wrist.

I giggle, then so enraptured by the pastry, I offhandedly reply, "You too." Then I pause and repeat it with more enthusiasm when I recall that he and I share a birthday and that's what he meant by *mon*. As in, it's his birthday too. "I mean happy *mon* birthday or *non* birthday to you too, Connor." I feed him a bite of the *plié au chocolat*.

"Oh, this is good. *Très bien*," he says with his Appalachian accent.

I beam a smile, but it just as quickly falls. "I feel bad, I'd forgotten and didn't get you anything or—"

He brushes his hand down my arm and the softness in his copper eyes suggests that being here together is enough. "I'm more of a bah humbug birthday kind of guy."

"Isn't that a Christmas saying?"

“And Happy New Year.”

I laugh. “I like that we share a birthday. That kind of makes it better. From now on we could call it our birthday, or in Franglais, *notre* birthday.”

He smiles and tries saying it.

I tell him about how Giselle and I have our own language—Franglais.

“How about not birthday?”

“From now on, we’ll celebrate our not birthday.” We’ll be sure to celebrate with dinner tonight whether Connor likes it or not. For now, I peek in the bag and sure enough, it’s filled with pretty paper, stickers, and little packages of sparkly and pearly supplies. “I cannot picture you in a craft store.”

“The ladies in there were all too pleased when I walked in. One dumped an entire container of seed beads on the floor.” He pinches his fingers together to show how small they are. “And before you ask, yes, I helped clean it up.”

“Good man.”

He pats his shoulder. “What can I say? I am the best.”

The smile on my face cannot be helped. “I agree.”

He kisses the top of my head, then says, “For the record, I can’t imagine you in a craft store either.”

My lips twist with confusion. “My translation abilities from English to French don’t always include reading between the lines. What does that mean?”

Connor’s eyebrows lift. “You’re fancy. Like a princess, but not at all delicate. You’re strong. Feminine. Disciplined. Gorgeous. Smart. Speak two languages. I’ve wondered, do you think in French?”

“Sometimes. I have some choice words reserved for you.” I follow up with a smile, so he knows they’re *très bien*, very good words.

“Do you dream in French?” Connor lowers onto the couch, wedging himself behind me and snuggling me in his arms. Here, I feel safe and peaceful. I’m glad this Boston Bruiser bared his butt and barged into my life.

Connor is passing the Blancbourg program with flying colors. He is friendly, polite, and helpful. In fact, the hotel staff adores him. He jokes that he’s giving the Boston Bruisers a bad name by going soft, but the softer side of him has always been there. Though, perhaps he never allowed it to come out.



With only a few more days until the end of Connor's time in the program, we eventually leave our little slice of paradise and travel to the airport. A matte black private plane waits on the tarmac.

"Is this yours?" I ask, wide-eyed.

"No. You can thank Declan for the lift. He's a flashy kind of guy when it comes to his wealth."

"And you aren't?"

"I have substantial savings, a condo in Boston and LA, but other than that, I invest and support wolf rescues and habitats."

Cream-colored padding and gold details line the interior of the jet. The seats are leather and are what I imagine it would be like to sit on a cloud.

"Before we take off, would you like anything to drink?" asks a woman with red hair, wearing a cream-colored suit, and a slim green scarf around her neck.

"I'll have water, please."

"For you, sir?" she asks Connor.

"Same." He turns back to me. "We fly in style, yet we drink water." He chuckles.

"Where are we going? You remember I can't return to Concordia."

He winks. "It's a surprise."

We watch a movie, but I can't stop thinking about the finances at Blancbourg. Connor dozes beside me. I admire his sloping nose, the line of his jaw, and the lips that have kissed me so many times.

He rouses and stretches his arms overhead. I grin at the sight of the cut cords of muscles that run from his triceps down to his forearms. My heart, steady now, beats out a different *thump, bump* than it did before the procedure.

"Are we almost there?"

"How do you say *almost* in French?"

I tell him and he repeats it.

A few minutes later, as the plane starts to descend, I ask, "Why did you ask how to say almost in French?"

"Welcome home," he says, pointing out the window.

“Home?” Flying in and out of Concordia isn’t as common as traveling by rail, but we’re in a private plane. However, the scenery is different even in the dark, and I can only imagine the officials will turn me away.

“Connor, where are we?” I ask.

“Orleans.”

“New Orleans?”

“No, the airstrip in Orleans, France.”

I’m not sure I heard him right. “France?”

As the plane lowers, there is no mistaking the iconic buildings, churches, and museums.

I gasp. “What are we doing here?”

“You missed dancing and your family. I want to take you home. And we couldn’t get clearance on short order to land in Paris, which is technically our first stop. So we’re nearby. You can show me the city, then we’ll head to Paris, then home.”

I wrap my arms around him because it’s unbelievably thoughtful, but the truth is, I feel torn. I had to fight my way out of the country because my mother didn’t want me to leave. How will she receive me upon my return? With open arms or cold shoulders?

A car brings us to the Four Seasons hotel where we’ll stay for a couple of nights before traveling to Paris and then to the small town in the Loire Valley where I grew up.

I’ve been to the city countless times, but never experienced such luxury. For once, I’m happy to be here instead of enduring whatever training, show, or performance was on my schedule. It’s overwhelming in the best way.

Swept into hearing my native language, smelling the city smells, eating crepes, and finally having what I consider real cheese and chocolate, I can’t help but gush at every turn as I give Connor a tour.

My heart feels full but not painful. I’m buoyant, not burdened. This incredible man helped bring me back to life. Brought me home, but first, we take the train to Paris.

Connor says he has another surprise. I glance at the ring on my finger. We’ve hardly spoken about my visa situation, but how can it not be front of mind given the fact that I cannot return to Concordia and that we’re in France?

The city overwhelms my senses as we emerge from the Metro. The feeling in the air is alive. The ground under my feet practically makes me

want to take a *grande jeté*. There was so much I loved about ballet, yet my mother took it away...then I went away.

Connor wears a wide grin and holds up two small pieces of stiff paper. "I got us tickets."

I've only been to the Opéra national de Paris on the talent side of the curtain. If Giselle were here, we'd both be squealing. Instead, it's just me.

When we enter the venerated and stately building, captured by the grandeur of it all, I feel like a little girl all over again. The lights, the balconies, and the gilded woodwork are magnificent. We have prime seats for the performance, Giselle.

"Don't you have a cousin named Giselle?" Connor asks.

"My mother and aunt competed over whose daughter would be the prima ballerina."

"Is there a ballet named Cateline?"

"No. My father picked it. My mother was furious, which made her even more determined to see me on that stage."

"And you made it."

"I made it," I answer, not feeling as bitter as I used to.

When the show begins, I watch with awe and reverence.

At one point, Connor leans in and whispers, "See that move? I can do that one."

I hold back a laugh, but smile and quietly scold him to be quiet. Yet, I cannot get enough of his joking, the way he smiles at me, and how thoughtful this trip is, especially when I'm supposed to be assessing his behavior. He gets an easy A, an outstanding five stars.

Afterward, I can't stop talking about the details and skills the dancers possess.

"So, you're happy?" Connor asks as we walk hand in hand along the canal on the way to dinner.

"This is much better than finding googly eyes in my office."

He kisses the back of my hand. "That's because it's not a prank."

We pause on a bridge.

"Connor, what is this?" I ask.

He kisses my hand again. "This means I'm happy because you're happy."

"No, I mean this." I wave my hand between us.

"This means I proved that I'm not a caveman."

“This means that you passed the program.” But there’s more to us than coach and student. However, I don’t want to think about what’s going to change when the thirty days are over. I don’t want to think about not being able to return to Concordia, having to close the school, and start over.

What will I do instead? Change has been happening and it started with my heart, led to Connor, back home now, and then where?



The next day, we rent a car and pass through Orleans on our way to my hometown.

It’s a snapshot, frozen in time since I was last here so many years ago. Old wine barrels overflow with flowers, Monsieur Martin sweeps the sidewalk in front of his patisserie, the bistro tables are as white as ever, and the pigeons peck for crumbs.

It’s as cute and quaint as I remember it, yet nerves dance in my belly, but they don’t perform a graceful ballet. It’s more of a stomp-march. The heavy feeling persists as I worry about seeing my mother again. My father works constantly, so it’s debatable whether he’ll even be home.

As the car rumbles up the rock-strewn road, a slender figure stands in front of the white house with chipped paint. Years of winter weather gusting off the river gave it a beating. A second figure joins the first. They’re stiff and unsmiling. Mère and Père.

Connor brings the car to a stop. “I take it the Berghiers aren’t known for their warm welcomes.”

“Are you referring to when we first met?” I ask.

His lips lift with amusement. “Though, it turned out okay. I think this will too.”

I’m not so sure. My hand rests on the door handle. “Did you feel like this when we arrived at the cabin?” I ask, gazing through the windshield.

“If you’re feeling numb, then yes. If you’re feeling nervous, then no, but I’m here for you.”

I let out a sigh. “More like somewhere in between. It’s like fizzy bubbles from soda when they go up your nose—”

He chuckles.

“Trepidation and a little bit like I’m eighteen all over again.” I sense I pressed rewind and am reverting to the girl I was when I left.

“Has it been that long?”

“It’s been that long,” I confirm.

“Just think, after my visit, I came out the other side better. Stronger. So will you.”

Connor exits the car first, walks around to the passenger side, and helps me out. We walk hand in hand to greet my parents.

My mother gives me a surprisingly warm hug. My dad pats me on the back.

They ask, “Is this your bodyguard?”

I laugh and translate.

Connor smirks. “You could say that.”

I explain that I’m his coach from Blancbourg and he’s a football player for the Boston Bruisers.

He looks like he wants to say more, but holds back because even without the language barrier, their expressions convey a lot. Relief and wariness. Joy and anger. It’s hard to tell. Connor was right. The Berghiers don’t necessarily wear their emotions on their sleeve.

They invite us inside for coffee. Even though I feel like I’ve stepped back in time, being back here doesn’t feel like home. It’s oddly formal and stiff, but not like the etiquette that I teach. It’s almost like I never lived here. Like I’m a stranger.

Connor remains a warm and friendly but protective presence. He sits upright and minds his manners. No kicking his feet on the table and rocking back in his chair.

After my mother brings coffee and biscuits, I tell my parents what I’ve been doing. When my aunt and uncle come up—Giselle’s parents—they exchange bitter words. My mother has always been jealous of her sister for finding her way out of farm life and making a new one abroad. Not that anyone needs to leave to be successful. Some people are meant to spread their wings and fly while others do better remaining in the nest. Connor and I are fliers, survivors, and success stories in our own ways.

I tell them about our trip to the United States and camping—I leave the part out about my visa expiring and not being allowed back in Concordia. Every few minutes, I catch Connor up so he’s not lost in the conversation. He cuts in a couple of times, adding details for me to translate.

My parents are noticeably aloof and don't warm to him at all. Perhaps I should explain to them what Connor means to me.

What does he mean to me?

His copper eyes meet mine and I melt a little. His lips are lifted in a friendly smile as he makes an effort to endear himself to Dauphin and Henri Berghier.

Good luck, buddy. I tried for eighteen years and couldn't pull it off.

But that aside, Connor is my future and I hope that I'm his.

We're relaying the story of when we crossed over the rapids, which, looking back, is a funny and fond memory of me crawling across a log, when the front door opens.

A gust of unseasonably chilly air ushers in a man with a curl to his lip. The low line of his brow is all too familiar. He's the sort that remained in the nest and right now I'd preferred he'd stay here, possibly locked in a birdcage.

My parents welcome Gaston like their long-lost son. They fuss over him and ask if he's hungry or thirsty, like he's their ticket to whatever remains of their dream for me to be a successful ballerina. I hate to state the obvious, but that ship has sailed. What Connor said shortly after we met about burning the boats comes to mind.

I thought I'd burned this bridge when I left, but in a few long strides, Gaston crosses the room and lifts me out of the chair like I'm a sack of grain. He exclaims in French that I'm as beautiful as ever and is pleased that I finally came to my senses and returned home.

Without thinking, I rattle off a friendly greeting in contrast to the way I feel—like a python chokes me. Like I'm a helpless, pathetic teenager again, subject to my mother and Gaston's desires. That I have to do what they say or else...

Coming to my senses, I push myself free from the arrogant brute my parents always wanted me to marry. He could use a few weeks at Blancbourg.

Gaston casts a dark look at Connor, who's gotten to his feet. He stands several inches taller than Gaston, but they're both muscular and well-built—the former from football and the latter from ballet and manual labor.

Connor extends his hand, all alpha, as if claiming his territory. "Connor Wolfe, nice to meet you."

Gaston tips his chin up slightly and scoffs. He doesn't offer his hand to shake. "I don't see a ring on her finger," Gaston speaks in broken English.

I press my shoulders back. "Let me remind you that I am not a thing to be bartered between families."

"No, you're a silly girl who leaves her family." Gaston looks down at me like I'm a shame to the Berghier name.

"I'm a woman from a silly family who wanted me to become a famous dancer so they could have more money," I say in French, not to be rude, but because I don't want Connor to see me at their mercy.

Gaston clenches his fists. "You abandoned them and me."

"You cheated on me multiple times. I went and got a college education and—"

"They sacrificed everything for you."

"I didn't ask them to do so. They made choices for me before I could make them for myself." The seams of my life unravel before my eyes. Everything I worked so hard for comes apart in this simple exchange. I feel trapped and like they'll try to keep me here all over again.

My pulse batters my chest and it's hard to breathe.

"Cat, are you okay?" Concern pierces Connor's eyes as he's likely thinking about my heart.

I nod and stifle a snuffle. I can't let them or him see me come undone.

"Come on now, don't make a scene, Cateline," my father says.

"Gaston has missed you all this time," my mother adds.

I take note that they didn't miss me.

"Now that you're back, we can pick up where we left off," Gaston says.

It's obvious my parents told him about my visit and still want me to marry him. Aside from us being former dance partners, it would benefit their status in the community.

Connor steps closer and his gaze sweeps over me. "Hey, Kitty Cat." His voice is low and gentle, bringing my focus to him alone. I block out everything else in the room. Apparently, he does too.

"When we were in Paris, you asked what this means." He motions between us. "You taught me to be a gentleman. You taught me to love you. I want you to be Mrs. Wolfe."

I wrap my arms around his neck and squeeze. Tears pinch the corners of my eyes, but they're the happy kind. For the first time since entering this house, I can breathe.

I plant a kiss on his lips and say, “I like the sound of Madame Wolfe.”

CATELINE



Connor turns to my parents. “Mr. and Mrs. Berghier, we came here because I respect your family and understand you have certain traditions and expectations. I want to formally ask for your daughter’s hand in marriage.”

I fall silent. All I can hear is the pounding of my heart. *My heart*. The one that had almost stopped. That came back to life thanks to Connor—in more ways than one.

My mother and father don’t understand a word. But I do. I understand every syllable. Every emotion. All the intention behind Connor’s request.

I translate for my parents, telling them that Connor Wolfe is a famous football player in America, that he took care of me when I was ill, and how amazing he is.

Knowing them all too well, their attention is on him being a famous football player. They see the potential for money and status.

Red-faced with anger, Gaston glares at us. “I should have conquered you when I had the chance,” he mutters.

A fiery wave of anger rushes through me, but before I can respond to Gaston, realization comes down like a stage curtain. Connor is asking my parents if he can marry me to keep up my green card ruse, so I can get citizenship and return to Concordia. He sees life here isn’t for me and would never want to see me with Gaston.

I’m not sure what’s real at the moment, except that Gaston is roaring mad. I tread lightly, afraid of what’s coming. Gaston is possessive and has a temper—yet another reason I was eager to leave home. For the first twelve

months that I was in Concordia, I half expected him to show up at Blancbourg.

But instead of screaming at me or smashing something, he storms out of the house.

The energy in the room shifts slightly. My parents are hesitant, yet polite, as I confirm our runaway romance.

But all the same, glasses come out for toasting. Congratulations are said. Gaston is forgotten.

That afternoon, friends and neighbors gather. The frowns that my mother and father wore change to smiles as food is brought to celebrate. There is music and chatter and laughter. My return home went from tentative to dismal, when Gaston appeared, to becoming better than any homecoming I could have imagined.

When I'm finally able to break away from the excitement, I find Connor gazing at the water along the river's edge.

I slide my arm through his and lean against his shoulder. "So, that was a surprise."

He wraps his fingers around mine and kisses the top of my hand. "I hope that was okay."

Connor turns to face me then kisses my forehead, my cheek, and then my lips. "I want to make you mine."

"All you had to do was ask. But not them. *Me*," I emphasize.

"But you're Miss Manners. I figured it was the right thing to do."

"Was that the real reason we came here?" I ask.

The corner of his lip teases a guilty smile. "Part of the reason."

I want to ask whether this is for show so I can return to Concordia or if it's real, but I only manage to say the words in French.

Connor's eyes sparkle, reflected by the string lights in my parents' garden that come on as the lavender dusk descends in the valley. "Will you translate?"

I could. I should. But I don't.

Pressing my palms to his chest, I rest my head there. "I don't know what to think."

"Are you happy? Please be happy."

I am so, so happy, but I'm not sure whether it's because I can return to my real home, to Blancbourg and save the school, or if it's because I have a long, long future ahead with this man. I know what I want the answer to be,

but I'm dealing with Connor 'Wolf' who has a reputation, and marriage isn't part of that.

"I don't want to steal you away from the places or people you love, but with only a few days left, we have to think about the future and how *we* fit into it."

Perhaps that's my answer, or maybe he's wondering how we're going to handle the immigration officials. My thoughts are as muddy as the bottom of the river.

But I don't want to think about that because it means more change, and there has already been so much. Plus, experience has taught me that change takes major effort. Leaving home, for instance. Going to college. Learning the ropes as a headmistress. I had to make sacrifices, scrimp and save, and all but sneak away. Instead of thinking about what's next and all the change, I seal the moment with a kiss, because right now is perfect.

If my parents had fireworks, they'd be lit because the kiss is explosive, sparkly, and the perfect kind that makes me want to *ooh* and *ahh*.

Connor's lips melt against mine, filling me with a kind of warmth I've never before felt standing here on the bank, in the house, or back in town.

I press my palms to his broad chest, feeling solid muscle underneath. Then I travel to his powerful arms, shoulders, and back, drawing him closer.

The kiss spans minutes, which may as well be lifetimes as we knit ours together—both of us helping the other let go of the past and consider a future together.

Soon after, my mother calls for me to greet a few more well-wishers. Word has traveled fast.

As I flit from one person to the next, an arm suddenly lassoes around my waist, pulling me toward the music to dance. I melt against him, thinking it's Connor until the rancid smell of wine and sweat assaults my nose.

Guests clap and cheer.

For half a second, my body is on autopilot, dancing with Gaston as I did for years. My senses catch up and I push him away, but not before he plants a big, sloppy kiss on my face, thankfully missing my mouth. I shove him, sending him staggering. I lose my footing and stumble into a brick wall. Gaston's buddies heft him back to his feet, encouraging him to go after me.

However, the brick wall is Connor, his expression torn between confusion and rage.

Gaston is an ox, a brute, and not someone I'd ever consider spending more than a required few minutes with. It isn't a surprise he's still single, though he's made his way through various girlfriends—even back when we were supposedly together as a couple. But I was young and naïve and didn't know better.

The time Connor and I spent in the woods with no distractions and then the hospital and my recovery, where we focused on survival, created a closeness and understanding that goes beyond words. But I'm not sure how to explain what just happened, other than I wish that it hadn't.

I didn't want to dance with Gaston or to have his hands on me. I certainly didn't kiss him back, but no one here has ever listened to me anyway.

Once more, feeling like a teenager on the run, I rush into the house. My pulse thunders in my ears. Memories from the past rise to the surface as I hurry toward my old bedroom. Gaston's advances on top of the hubbub have me spinning. I have to lie down for a few minutes. Since the surgery, I've felt better every day and wouldn't have been cleared to fly had the doctor not been confident in my recovery, but I have to be careful and take it easy.

This is sheer overwhelm. Stress. Confusion. My eye twitches as I flip on the light.

My mother kept my old bedroom the same as when I left. It's an unwelcome step back in time. Part of me is proud of the brave young woman who packed up and left. The other part feels like I've returned to the scene of a crime and risk being trapped here after all my efforts to escape.

I can't help but be annoyed at my parents for telling Gaston to visit and then jumping to the next best prospect to marry me off. They're so stubborn, so backward...or is it desperation?

Me becoming a successful dancer was their ticket to what? What did they so desperately want? My mother to win a war of wealth waged with her sister? My father not to have to work so hard?

Mère grew up in her parents' patisserie and is a skilled baker. Why didn't she ever get a job or take over when they retired? Because she wanted to be like her sister who married into money and didn't have to work.

But that's not reality. Instead, she pushed me until my feet literally bled. I sit down on the edge of the bed. Tears brim in my eyes as I look at the

awards for my performances still pinned to the wall. An old pair of ballet slippers are on the bedside table. The air is stale, so I open the window and then lay down. I'm just going to close my eyes for a moment and then I'll go find Connor, apologize for the scene, and we can leave.

Laughter and voices float through the night.

I catch snatches of my mother talking to someone. "We're going along with it because he's a famous football player and will bring us much wealth. But not the way you expect."

A familiar female voice says, "What about Gaston? He and Cateline are meant to be together."

"Don't worry. Cateline will end up with him. I will see to that," my mother assures the other person.

I gasp and my hand flies over my mouth.

"Are you sure?"

Mère says, "My daughter caught herself in a little snare. I will make sure she ends up with your son. She is in a predicament and I have a way out with the unsuspecting football player's help. Though she thinks he's her ticket out of here."

I jump to my feet, ready to storm out of the room, as her motives become clear. My parents aren't proud of my accomplishments, independence, or the life I created. They don't care a whit about the man I love. No, they're just looking for me to provide a payday just as they've always done.

Nothing has changed...nothing except me.

As I'm leaving the room, an envelope catches my eye. It's in my handwriting and addressed to me. I snatch it up just as I exit.

Once outside, I search for my mother, ready to tell her that I overheard.

However, a woman with pink hair, wearing a tight pink dress, and pink high heels marches down the front path toward me. "Cateline!" she calls, pointing.

Looking around, I wonder if there's someone else named Cateline nearby because I've never seen her before. I'm the only one here. "Me?"

"Yes! You, Cateline Berghier. Don't think for one minute that you're going to take my man."

My jaw lowers, but I should've known it would only be a matter of time before one of Wolf's women caught up with him, er, me.

CONNOR



*T*he team chant pounds in my ears. *It ain't over 'til we've won.* Even though Cateline and Gaston looked like the perfect pair when they danced briefly—he's tall and statuesque and she's petite and made of smooth lines—and are probably meant to be together, I'm going to crush the guy.

After he made his move on Cat, he turned to me like he was ready to brawl before his friends lugged him away. All I see is red, but without Cat in sight to stop me, I'm going to track him down and...

A slender figure with dark hair streaks into my periphery. Someone in pink chases her while aiming a stream of something white in her direction. I blink a few times, trying to make sense of the strange scene. Is this some kind of French engagement tradition?

Cat does a lap around the yard then rushes toward me and hollers, "Call her off. I didn't mean to come between you."

Frozen with confusion, from the other direction, a thick figure barrels into our midst before dodging me. Gaston races toward the river while the woman continues to chase Cat, spraying what I think is shaving cream.

Guests holler in French, but I can't understand a word of it. Some cheer while others shake their fists. This must be a foreign custom. Maybe?

"What's going on?" I ask, hoping someone can translate.

An older woman with slick silver hair and glasses pinching the end of her nose says, "Lover's quarrel." Her accent is thick.

"That's what I was afraid of, but I don't understand why Gaston is running away from Cat." At least, that's what it looks like.

“Ah, yes, you’re the lucky American gentleman. Regrettably, I was late arriving and missed the announcement.” She looks me up and down.

By my estimate, she’s barely five feet tall, but her smile is as tall as a cathedral’s spire.

“The football player?” she asks.

“That’s me.”

She makes a slight grunting sound of consternation. “Then you may as well know a bit about the family.” Even though she has a strong accent, her English is perfect. Then I notice her dark, sharp eyes.

“Are you Cateline’s grandmother?”

“*Non*. I was her very first ballet teacher when she still wore a smile on her face with every arabesque. Sadly, that faded the more her mother pushed her. She lost the love for it, I’m afraid. But she was quite the talent. My best student, and not only because she was perfect. She also had the most fun.”

“I’ve never seen her dance.”

“Oh, it is a sight to behold. A gift for the senses, really.”

“It’s too bad she doesn’t still dance.”

“Yes, indeed. Dauphin—Cateline’s mother—and her sister were fiercely competitive in everything. I don’t know why—same parents, same upbringing. They say every child comes with their own personality. Dauphin is stubborn, envious, bitter.”

“Yeah, I can relate.”

“You have children?” she asks, surprised.

“No, my brother and me, major rivals.”

“Ah, then you understand the situation. However, it’s only Dauphin that carries on the competition. It hasn’t been easy for Cateline. I don’t think she always realizes what she’s worth. Do you?”

“Yes, she’s worth the sun, moon, and stars. Everything.”

The older woman laughs. “You sound like a poet, not a football player.”

“I’m about to be a referee. It looks like The Pink Lady started a food fight. Is this customary at French engagement parties?”

She presses her hand to her chest and chuckles. “*Mon cher, non*. I think we’re watching a dramatic love triangle play out.”

What Cateline called a lorry when we were driving through the countryside, and I’d refer to as a truck, pushes a very small car covered in shaving cream toward the river. Gaston chases it, hollering in French.

The Pink Lady has abandoned her shaving cream and throws food at Cat, who dodges chunks of bread and cheese. The lady shrieks in a language that isn't French, at least that I can tell.

I rush toward Cateline, but the grass is slick from the shaving cream and I slide under the table. Cateline's ankles peek from under the cloth. I don't want to startle her by grabbing one, so I lift the fabric and gesture that she comes under to hide.

Yes, it's silly and juvenile, but I am out of my league, a stranger in a strange land.

Cateline scowls at me. "Call her off."

"Who is she?"

"I don't know. You tell me."

"How am I supposed to know who she is? I can't even understand her."

"Obviously, she knows you, Wolf."

"Wolf? Not Monsieur Wolfe or Mr. Wolfe. Now I'm just Wolf?"

Dishware clatters nearby and a few people speak in frantic French. The table jostles and I realize this is ridiculous. I get to my feet at the same time I realize what Cateline must believe is going on.

"You think she's after you because of me?"

"Why else would she be chasing me?"

My mouth opens and closes. "I don't know. But I've never seen her before."

"She's been spraying me with shaving cream. That seems like something you'd be involved in."

"Like a prank?" I ask as an olive bops me in the head.

Tugging Cateline with me, I duck behind a tree.

"She keeps saying something in Italian about a cat and fur." Cateline shivers. "I think she wants to shave my head."

I smooth my hand through her shaving cream-streaked hair. "Cateline, if I were involved, how would the woman have found me? How could I have orchestrated a prank this elaborate on such short notice?"

"You're you."

"I know, I know, I'm the king of pranks, but not even I could've pulled this off, given the intricacies and all the moving parts, what with the man in the truck pushing a car covered in shaving cream into the river."

Cateline looks over my shoulder toward the water and winces. "Fair point."

“And I’d hardly call it a prank, more like a soap opera.”

“It’s beyond dramatic.”

“And I’m going to guess The Pink Lady is upset with Gaston for rushing to you upon your return and filled his car, inside and out, with shaving cream.”

Cat’s lips part and she nods with understanding. “And that’s why she was chasing me. But what about the man in the lorry, pushing Gaston’s car into the river?”

“My guess is he is Mr. Pink Lady and is upset with his wife.”

She gasps. “That’s diabolical. It’s going to go viral.”

“And that’s our cue to scram, skedaddle.”

Cateline’s eyebrows knit together in confusion. “That means to get the heck out of here. I can’t afford another scandal. I mean, I can afford the lawyers, just not the headache or getting put on probation again.”

She nudges my shoulder with hers. “Come on, it didn’t turn out that bad.”

“That’s a fact. Want to go get a cheeseburger and milkshake? Do you have those here?”

Her expression lightens with laughter. “I think we can make that happen.”

As we sneak around the side of the house, Cateline’s mother spots us and calls her daughter over.

“I’ll be right here,” I say, leaning against our rental car and hoping The Pink Lady doesn’t have any more shaving cream.

The two exchange heated words and then Cateline storms toward me.

“It was a mistake to come here,” she says.

“Are you okay? What’s going on?”

Her eyes are slivers of disgust. “Come on. We need to talk.”

Whereas earlier, I felt sparks all over when with Cat, now they’re just cooling embers. The guests murmur as they shuffle toward their cars with The Pink Lady screaming in a language that isn’t French.

“Are you okay?”

Cat doesn’t answer.

“Are we okay?” I ask, worried that she still thinks I’m somehow involved with The Pink Lady. I’m not. Never seen the woman in my life.

Cateline stands stiffly, like she’s not sure where to go or what to do, but she won’t look at me.

I'm not okay. But it isn't my body that aches. No, it's the center of my chest. "After the kiss we shared by the water, I thought you wanted to be with me. After witnessing you and Gaston dancing and the game of chase, it looked like you wanted to patch things up with your old flame. Which is it, Cat?"

This sets Cateline on fire. Eyes wide and mouth sharp, she shouts in French.

"I'm confused."

"You are all the same. All of you cavemen!"

"Who's the same? Gaston is an arrogant brute. I'm more of an arrogant beast. There's a difference," I say, trying to lighten the mood.

"I need to go," Cateline whispers, grasping at the threads of her composure.

The plan was to stay here tonight, but we get in the car, if only for a quiet place to talk. At least that's what I thought she wanted to do, but she remains quiet. Stubbornly quiet. I set aside my ego, because more than anything, I want to fix this.

"Cat, I'm afraid I came on too strong, asking your parents for your hand in marriage. I shouldn't have sprung the marriage proposal on you like that. I thought it was the gentlemanly thing to do...and I have to admit, when the Gaston guy showed up, I felt jealous, possessive, and afraid that you'd go along with what your parents wanted if I didn't act fast. I don't regret it, but maybe I should've handled it differently—perhaps talked to you first."

She remains silent.

I let out a long sigh. "I thought you wanted to talk?"

"It turns out the embassy has been sending my parents letters about my expiring work visa, thinking they could get the notifications to me when I hadn't replied. They have an immigration official coming tomorrow."

"What does that mean?"

"That means they're trying to sabotage us. That means they know about the green card. That means everything is falling apart."

"They can try. They won't succeed."

"You don't understand. Earlier, I heard my mother talking to Gaston's mother. She said something about you being a famous football player who'll bring her much wealth. Then she said something about me ending up with Gaston and that she'll see to it."

"That is diabolical."

“It’s revenge. I’ve been caught. It’s over.” She presses her hands to her eyes. “I can no longer run away. I can’t return to Concordia, to my life.”

I scramble to reassure her that it will all work out, but she shakes her head slowly. Then I belatedly realize I’m not included in her future. I lean back in the chair. “Right. I see.”

Of course, a woman as beautiful, lovely, smart, and talented as Cateline would have a plan for her life, never mind a line of suitors waiting for her. It wasn’t only Gaston who eyed her and seemed pleased by her return. Countless men kissed her on each cheek and seemed to glow in her presence.

I’m so foolish. By falling for her, I broke my own personal playbook rules.

Never get serious.

Never get involved.

Never let things go past a first date.

I was ready to give her the world and all the stars in the sky. But I’m just a poor kid from a cabin. A caveman. Single by choice. A lone wolf.

Who am I kidding? I’m not someone a woman like Cateline would want—not that I can fathom what she could see in a guy like Gaston either. But I do understand her drive for success and her career.

I’m probably better off forgetting about her and focusing on mine.

CONNOR



Cateline tents her head in her hands. “I just need to think. How can I fix this? What am I going to do?” The questions seem less aimed toward me and more like she’s seeking solitary answers.

My thoughts repeatedly lead me to dark places. For once, I want to talk. “Was everything that happened these last four weeks part of the program? Part of my lessons, because if so, what did I do wrong? I thought that we —” My body weighs as much as granite under a riverbed.

“It’s like we’ve been running a race. Only, I’ve been running from myself. I’ve hardly had a moment to catch my breath after getting swept up in all of this,” she gestures between us, “and after the stay at the hospital.”

The stone in my chest cracks and splinters. This is the end. This is what it feels like to lose. We remain in the car, if for no other reason than we don’t have to face anyone else.

The garden lights remain on and the damp night air makes everything sparkly, full of potential, rather than the mess it’s become.

In another life, Cateline may have been my princess—my polite, strong-willed, ballerina princess with a kick-butt ability to prank, and an inner strength and endurance that rivals my own. We’re a perfect match.

She didn’t choose someone else. She’s chosen something else, her career. I think about the team and the game, knowing that when I return to the field, I won’t be the same.

Cateline’s voice comes to me as though from far away. “When I was a little girl, I would sit by the window in my room, listening to the tinkling water in the river. I’d gaze up at the stars, wondering what else was out

there. Wishing to find a way out. When I was in my old bedroom earlier, I found a letter.” She waves it in the air.

It’s probably a love letter from Gaston, expressing his true love—words I hadn’t been able to find quickly enough. Good thing, too, because I would’ve just embarrassed myself.

“I wrote it from my past self to my future self. A letter written so that if I ever returned, I would remember why I’d left.”

“Clever.” My voice is flatter than I mean. I can’t stay mad at Cat, but this does nothing to help me stitch up my heart. My entire body is heavy, dull, and completely emptied of everything except for disappointment.

“When I arrived in London, I had nothing except a different letter, acknowledging my enrollment in university. Then when I graduated, I went to Concordia. After years of barely getting by as I made my way through my studies, I had next to nothing. Less than I’d left France with. I’d sold everything but my ballet slippers, tights, leotard, and tutu. I knew if I failed, I’d have something to turn back to.” She gazes straight ahead through the windshield, hardly blinking, as though looking at her past and future simultaneously.

That’s it. She’s returning to her old life and there’s no room for me in it. Can I blame her? How many women had wanted more from me and I ghosted, not even bothering to return calls or messages?

Cat’s voice floats back. “I was alone and scared. I didn’t know what was next. I feel the same way now. If I hadn’t gotten the degree and the job at Blancbourg, what would that have meant for my future?”

Another car pulls out of the driveway, illuminating her face. Tears fill her eyes.

My reflection in the rearview mirror reveals a deep cleft between my brows.

“Connor, when we first met, seeing you, I saw parts of my past. Yet you’re this big, strong man. A specimen of physical conditioning, determination, aspiration...”

“You’re not a man, Cat.” I joke softly, hoping to at least get her to crack a smile to break this tension.

She shakes her head. “You don’t understand my meaning. I was the same as you once. Seeking perfection, but in the form of ballet instead of football. But like me, you’re after it for the wrong reasons and that is your weakness. I stepped away from ballet and gave myself space. During that

time, I received clarity.” The thoughts she conveys into words have an abstract quality, like they’re freshly formed, or she’s having a hard time translating them from French.

“Are you suggesting I quit football? No way. That’s out of the question.”

“Don’t be silly. Remember I asked you why you want to win? Just before I stopped dancing, I realized that my mother wanted me to win because she was afraid of losing. Even then, I knew that was the wrong approach. So I stopped dancing altogether. But now I understand. Dancing is in my heart just as football is in yours. I want to dance without the idea that there is a win or a lose—a finite amount of possibility of success. Do you get what I mean?”

I don’t hear anything other than a slow goodbye.

She continues, “I want to dance, knowing now that there is no winning or losing, and success can look like and mean whatever I want it to. I don’t have to associate dance with my parents’ vision for my future.” She lets out a long breath. “So, I ask you again, Connor. Why do you want to win?”

My eyebrows dip and my lips twist. “Is it because you think I don’t want to lose?” Right now, I don’t have a better answer.

Her expression is frozen, impassive. I hear an imaginary game show buzzer, *Bzzzt!*

I sense Cat slipping away. Maybe she wants to dance in an infinite reality, or whatever it is she’s saying, but our time together is finite—coming to an end before my eyes. I know it. She all but said it.

“I don’t know,” I whisper, trying again, hoping that she’ll accept me not knowing why I want to win. Her beauty and the fact that I’m losing her right now erase all other thoughts from my mind.

She leans forward and lands the softest kiss on my lips.

I shiver because it has *the end* written all over it.

She opens the door partway, about to exit my life. My chest clenches.

“For the next twenty-four hours, you are still my student.”

“And I’m going to pass the program and show you that you were wrong about your not love list.”

The corners of her lips tease a smile. “No, Connor. Before we can love each other, you have to do a little more growing up.”

“Does that mean we’re splitting up?” I ask.

She stares out the windshield, leaving me feeling empty and alone. The lone wolf. A howl builds inside as I remember who I am and why I don't date.

Horrible lies pour out of my mouth. "Yeah, well, I guess this is for the best."

There's more I want to say, namely the truth, to reveal my feelings for her, but they get stuck in my mouth. Until Cat, I'd never experienced love and as soon as I let my guard down, she saw that beneath all my brawn, I'm just a boy, just like my father and brother always said. It's no surprise Cateline wouldn't want a guy like me.

"I'm sorry for everything that happened here. I should go." I thought I'd done the right thing, but I'd come on too strong, too fast. The question I posed to her parents probably scared her.

"Thank you for saying that. Thank you for everything. I think we both need to take some time. Sort out our priorities." She smooths her hair and exits the car.

I can read between the lines. It's over. We're breaking up, if we'd ever truly been together in the first place.

I've taken serious poundings on the field, been tackled and concussed, but never has my chest ached so much. However, I'm a Boston Bruiser. It isn't over until I've won. I can't yet answer Cat's question about why I want to win, but I have a question of my own for her.

Before I shout it into the night, the door to her house closes.

CONNOR



It's late and I'm lost. Lost without Cateline, but I've already been driving for two hours and there's no going back. Finally, I see a small sign that says *Sanctuaire des loups* and pull down a long, winding road.

When I started donating funds to protect wolves, my focus was on the United States, but over time I expanded and have now helped establish sanctuaries in fourteen countries—my goal is twenty-four, which is my jersey number.

The whole giving back thing wasn't my original idea. It was Rylen's doing, mostly. He's our running back and was the first to break from the pack and get married. Should've seen the writing on the wall. Mr. Murphy, Rylen's dad, taught him and his brothers the importance of giving time, money, and any other resources available to someone or something in need.

I chose wolves.

It's late, but I called on my way over, and as the most generous donor, the custodian was all too willing to meet me. I enter an enclosed area where visitors can observe and, if they're lucky, see a white, gray, or reddish wolf—the rarest.

I sit here for ages, thinking, not thinking. Wondering. Pondering.

A wolf howls in the near distance. It's haunting and reminds me of how empty I feel. I shiver because even though I'm enclosed, it's a wild sound and I'd be a fool not to be on my guard.

But I don't move. I don't know where to go or what to do.

At last, I've lost. This is what losing feels like. A grave emptiness.

Eventually, my hands fold together in prayer. It surprises me, but I go with it. What's the risk? God being mad at me for staying away? For questioning? For my distance? For being afraid that if I gave myself to faith I'd lose something—myself? Nothing could be worse than this cold loneliness of being separate. Apart from Cateline, from my Creator.

Instead, as I pray, warmth fills me as I thank God for bringing me to this moment. To Him. I express gratitude that Cateline came through surgery. That her heart healed. I pray that He helps me put mine back together.

My thoughts float to the past, to my brother and parents. As I remain in prayer, an overwhelming sense of certainty settles over me—that my parents are at peace and that there has been another Father at work in my life all along.

In the distance, a wolf howls as if in confirmation.

But I still have a question. Why do I want to win?

When I get back in the car, I check the time. It's an ugly hour, but back home with the time difference, it's still early. Declan, Chase, and Grey are out with their coaches, the same as me. I try Rylen, hoping he's back from his honeymoon.

He answers on the third ring and tells me he's eating pancakes with syrup between workouts—one of our traditions. We rib each other as per custom then he says, "Soon you'll be back and we'll be throwing a ball around."

"Yeah, can't wait." My tone is as flat as, well, a pancake.

"Bro, you sound low," he says around a mouthful.

"You're not wrong. I've been catnipped."

"I think the connection is bad. You've been catnapped?"

"Catnipped," I correct.

"I thought you were getting schooled overseas."

"Yeah, I got catnipped," I repeat because all I can think about is the woman with dark eyes, a willowy figure, and lips that own me.

"Someone stole your cat? I'm surprised you have a cat. You seem more like a dog dude, what with being Connor Wolfe and all."

"No, c-a-t-n-i-p-p-e-d," I spell out. "Cat, Cate, Cateline. She's my coach. The woman is a Crock-Pot, meanwhile, I've been cooking with a microwave."

"Whoa, whoa, bro. Slow down. Are you okay? I'm now a happily married man, but I don't think you have any business calling a woman a

Crock-Pot. That's not friendly, no matter what language she speaks."

I give him an abbreviated low down of the last few weeks.

"If you were here or I was there, I'd take you in a team tackle."

"You could never."

"The guys would back me up. You realize that you're being an idiot."

"Because I broke my rules. The team rules."

"You mean the playbook? Declan mentioned it. But do you want to know when I knew I was in love with Rachel?"

"Not particularly."

He lets out a low chuckle. "I knew I was in love when I'd do anything for her. I'd dress up like Santa. I'd admit I was wrong. I'd move mountains. I'd make sacrifices. I'd do anything to see where that feeling for her might take me even if I was scared. Even if it meant she didn't love me back."

"You, scared?" I sink into the seat because the notion hits close to my chest. "I don't believe it."

"Yeah. We dudes don't like to admit that love can be scary. Not like seeing four of the biggest players in the league coming at you when you're running down the field with the ball scary, and not like getting an eyeful of the backsides of four grown men scary." He laughs.

I crack a smile, opening the floodgates as I give him a little more background of the last four weeks. But I skip the part about how the kiss with Cateline, the first one especially, blew my world apart. Her lips took every lie I told myself about the meaning of love, blasted them to bits, and revealed the truth. I'm not who I thought I was, the guy who's the first to walk away, a perpetual bachelor, and afraid of commitment. I want to be with Cateline and if I can't, I'll do anything for her, which is why I start driving back the way I came.

"I think you're in love, man. I guess the best way to understand it is that you know beyond a shadow of a doubt that you'd do anything to win her heart, even if it means losing something you thought was important. Even when it means that you might not get what you want," Rylen says.

The connection crackles. My heart bounces over a beat. At last, I know the answer to Cateline's question.

"Yeah, I've been an idiot."

"That's music to my ears," Rylen says, then we drop the call as I speed through the woods and back to my woman.

I'm the defense. The tackler. No one gets by me. Except Cat slid past, along with love. I love Cateline Berghier and will make sure she gets the future she wants, even if I'm not part of it.

Well, much.

I speed along the unfamiliar streets as the Loire Valley breaks with a lavender dawn that gives way to a soft peach sunrise.

It's too early to go back to her family's house. I may be an idiot, but I won't be rude, so I check into a hotel, shower, and lounge on the bed, setting my alarm. I should probably get a few hours of shut-eye. But as I drift, I no longer feel adrift. Even though there's no shore in sight, Cateline is my beacon, my lighthouse.

I've burned the boats. There is no going back. However, I'm not my father or my brother. I'm not the lone wolf in the woods either. Not anymore.

CATELINE



*M*y eyes are damp as I sit on the edge of the river. The rock under me has the same familiar contours, and the tinkling water trickles past with the rhythm I remember all too well. During my rare breaks, this is where I'd come when I felt overwhelmed or upset. I'd sit here and pray, seeking God. Seeking guidance.

Nothing has changed here except me.

Just as I'd found myself at a crossroads when I stopped dancing, once again, I need time to figure out my life.

Why would Connor want to marry me after seeing where I came from? The mess I'd left behind? Much like the one in my bedroom at Blancbourg, I'd closed the door on the past and hoped no one would ever witness it.

Fog drifts in as the hour draws later. I ponder my future at Blancbourg. Even if I can somehow return to Concordia, no doubt the Board of Regents will ask me to resign or fire me.

Just like Connor has his rules from the coach and the playbook among the guys, as the headmistress, I'm not supposed to be involved with any of our clients. In my defense, it was almost like the moment Connor and I left the manor, our relationship shifted, and then morphed again when we did the challenge and he saved my life.

I pull out my phone and dial Giselle, my cousin, wishing we were together. When she doesn't answer, I try my old friend Gemma. She recommended her former roommate, Pippa, for the job. I recall afternoons when the sun painted squares on the wood floor in her flat on Golden Strasse before she got married, and she and her husband bought a house just outside the village, leaving Pippa the apartment.

Gemma and I met when I first moved to Concordia and we'd gab for hours about work, life, and dating—her escapades, not mine. She always had tea and a plate of ginger cookies ready for our long chats.

We catch up and I hear her twins in the background, who just started preschool a few days a week, freeing up some of her time. She asks about our idea for an online etiquette program.

I bypass the question and ask her about the kids and family life.

"They're a handful, but the best kind. And don't worry, I'm already teaching them proper manners."

"I'd mind mine if it meant I could have one of your ginger cookies."

"Oh, and I've perfected the shortbread recipe too. Remember they were too crumbly?"

"I was glad to have suffered through all your testing. You never told me that I was your guinea pig." My heart lurches at the inside joke Connor and I have.

We both laugh and then I fill her in on everything that's been going on with me. "Initially, Connor's surprise trip to France was welcome. Then when everything happened with my parents and Gaston, I thought it was the biggest mistake. I love my family, but over the years I've had very little desire to go back. They're not the kind to forgive, forget, or set out cookies."

"I'm eating one for you, er, us. Anyway, what's that saying? You can pick your friends, but you can't pick your family? I'm sure they care, but their way of showing it—"

"Stinks like a codfish left on the riverbank in the sun."

"Ew. I'm going to put this cookie down now."

"The weird thing is, it was almost like coming back here woke me up. Renewed my resolve or gave me a second chance to think about what I really want from my life."

"And that is...?"

"I'm getting closer to the answer, but since college, I've changed, only it was so gradual, I can't quite pinpoint how."

"Makes sense. It's like when you see a cousin once a year you see how much they grow, but if you're with them every day, it's not something you notice."

"Exactly. This might sound weird, but on the anniversary of my decision to leave France and dancing—I check in with myself every year—

something was different. Then I met Connor a few days later and...I can't explain it."

"Oh, Pippa has a word for that. She calls it the heart fluffies. It's a particular kind of good feeling inside." I can practically feel her smile through the phone.

"I'm not a fluffy kind of gal."

Gemma laughs. "But you said that you've changed."

I let out a long breath, realizing she's right. "Going back to my family and seeing that they haven't moved on at all made me see more clearly. Then reading the letter I'd written to myself, reminding me to seek the desires of my heart and not solely the future my parents had mapped out, was like a highlighter pen emphasizing it all. But I still don't know what to do."

"Understandable. Have you been praying?"

"Yes," and as soon as the word is out of my mouth, I send up one for my mother, then go on to tell Gemma what I overheard her say. "She was already planning to sabotage my fake marriage to Connor and then sue him for taking advantage of my need for citizenship."

"That's diabolical."

"I know. Now, she has an immigration officer coming in the morning to expose us. Or something. This is such a mess."

"What's your heart telling you? God?"

I tune in as I've been doing for weeks now, even before I had the health scare. "There are two things. One is me, light on my feet, leaping and pirouetting. I miss dancing and want to return to the barre, but not to the stage. I want to dance on my terms."

"There are adult classes right in town," Gemma says excitedly.

"Madam Tissot is retiring and closing the studio. Plus, that would mean I'd need to be in Concordia. Not sure how, since I'm not allowed to reenter the country. And as for the other one—"

"Wait just a minute. You're a teacher."

"Probably not for long." Did Gemma hear a word I said?

"You're a ballerina and a teacher. You could be a ballet teacher."

My pulse quickens. "I could? I could." I leap from the rock and spin around, my thoughts whirring.

"I can't believe I didn't think of that. It's perfect." Then as quickly as my excitement appears, it fades as I drop back onto the rock. "But my heart

desires something else as well and I don't think it can have both, or this one at all."

"Is this *something* a *someone* who's tall, muscular, and has a slight southern drawl?" Gemma asks, ever perceptive.

A tall, muscular, and handsome distraction with a slight Appalachian accent. *Oui*.

Gemma continues, "I've learned in life that sometimes the right people come together at the wrong time. But that doesn't mean the right time won't come along."

We get off the phone and I start to brainstorm ideas about having my own ballet school. But where? How? Details come at me fast, but an emptiness remains. It's the size and shape of a wonderful distraction that brought me alive these last four weeks.

And it sounds and looks an awful like Connor Wolfe. I want him in my life, even if it's messy. Even with uncertainty. Even if I have to fake marry him, get my green card, and then convince him that I don't not *not* love him.



I'm in a fog the next morning. I shuffle through my parents' kitchen, pour coffee, and eat half a croissant before I hear a third voice in conversation with my mother and father coming from the living room.

I peek through the gap in the door and see a man in a light gray suit sitting tall opposite Mère and Père.

My mother spots me and calls, "Good morning, Cateline. Mr. Marais is here from the immigration office. He wants to discuss your citizenship."

I wince, wishing I'd stayed in bed. Remembering that Connor called me Miss Manners, I enter the room and greet the man like royalty.

We all chat for a few moments, and then Mr. Marais indicates he'll need to interview me alone. There's no doubt my parents will sit on the opposite side of the door and listen, so I tell myself to choose my words carefully.

"Please, Miss Berghier, tell me about your home life. Seems like a very nice place to grow up.

I agree and then add, “I love my parents, but they never saw my life as mine. They pushed me too hard from a young age—I forewent friends, school, and my own interests because they wanted me to dance. I pushed my body, ruined my feet, and rarely rested. They forced me into a partnership with Gaston Lazereaux. In front of them, he put on a good show. After all, he was a performer, but in private he treated me like garbage, something to be tossed aside, sometimes literally. I’m not a heifer, a cow, a commodity for families to trade for status.”

“I am very sorry to hear that.”

“Then I met Connor Wolfe.”

His eyebrow jumps sharply.

“Everything about him is different.” I leave off the part about our rocky start, but tell stories about how Connor and I laugh, enjoy each other’s company, and most importantly, how he respects me. “Connor would do anything for me.”

“And would you do the same for him?”

A car crunches over the gravel outside. My pulse leaps. Could that be him? Or is it Gaston? Someone else?

I nod. “I would. When we came here, I was afraid that we’d built a wall between us—one I feared we wouldn’t be able to cross the way we did the raging rapids. I was afraid of letting him in because I’d risk losing the person I worked so hard to become—independent, focused on my future goals, and not getting caught up in a man as I had with Gaston. But—”

“Do you still have feelings for Gaston?”

“Not in the slightest. But when I was young, I thought he was my ticket out from my mother’s pressure.”

“And do you feel that Connor is a ticket out of your predicament with your work visa expiring and your citizenship status in Concordia?”

I’m sipping my coffee and almost sputter it everywhere. “I never fell for someone as I have with Connor, but my heart is fragile.” I explain what happened when we were camping and how he saved my life.

“So perhaps you feel indebted to him. My research shows that he’s trying to clean up his image. Perhaps the two of you view this ‘marriage’ as a mutually advantageous arrangement. You marry him so you can obtain a green card and return to Concordia. He marries you to remain in good standing with his team.”

Wow, this guy is sharp, and so wrong, or maybe my mother planted the seed. His comment pokes me in the ribs as voices rise and fall from the other room.

I'm about to explain that I wouldn't take advantage of the system and that I want to marry Connor because I believe we're meant to be together even if it takes work, even if he doesn't see it yet.

"Cateline," someone calls from the other room.

I spin around.

Connor fills the doorway to the kitchen. His copper eyes are dark and bleary.

With a jerk of my head, I try to indicate that I'm in a meeting with the official from the immigration office, but he and I haven't quite perfected our couple's telepathy abilities.

He closes the space between us and whispers into my hair, desperation lacing his voice.

"I understand why you'd want to end this but—"

I turn back to Mr. Marais, "If you'd excuse me for just a moment. Connor came to make sure I took my medicine today."

Leading us both outside so neither the official nor my parents can hear, Mr. Marais calls, "Actually, this is perfect. Cateline's statements are sufficient. Now I can interview you both."

CONNOR



I give a polite little bow Arthur would applaud me for. “It would be my pleasure, sir. We just need to get Cateline her vitamins.”

The official-looking man dressed in a gray suit and with a sharp nose goes still. “I thought she said she needs her medicine.”

“Ah, yes, medicine, vitamins, it’s all French to me,” I answer on the fly.

“It’s for my heart,” Cat says shakily.

“And the bottle is in my luggage,” I add.

“You know, couples that travel together and all. Things get mixed up,” Cateline singsongs and bops her head from side to side. I’ve never seen her nervous like this, then remember when she said that she’s a terrible liar. I’d laugh and playfully tease her if this weren’t an important meeting.

“We’ll be right back.” I grip Cateline’s hand and lead her outside so the guy doesn’t try to stop us again.

When we’re out of earshot, I ask, “What’s going on?”

“I woke up and my parents were in the living room with him.” I go on to explain what I think is going on.

I open the trunk of the car, carrying on with the charade that we’re getting her vitamins or medicine or whatever.

As if we both realize no one can see us, time slows down, allowing us a few seconds to get our bearings. Without thinking, I wrap Cat in my arms and let out a long breath. I close my eyes for a moment and take in her lavender scent.

She melts into me as if she’d been waiting all night for this hug.

When we part, her dark eyes brighten with hope.

“I’m sorry for being an idiot,” I say.

“I’m sorry for telling you to grow up and—”

That’s all I need to hear. “What kind of toothpaste do you use?”

Confusion ripples across her features.

“He’s going to ask.”

“You mean, you’re willing to get the green card?”

“Willing? I want to.”

“To help me return to Concordia or so your coach doesn’t kick you off the team?”

“*Cateline, Monsieur Marais attend,*” her mother calls.

“She says Mr. Marais is waiting.” Cateline looks down at her hands.

I lace my fingers around hers and squeeze.

She looks up and says, “Colgate and my toothbrush is purple.”

I smile and say, “Same and mine is blue.”

Once back inside, Mr. Marais wraps his knuckles impatiently. “Miss Berghier, Mr. Wolfe, if you intend to pursue marriage, we must continue this interview.”

Cateline and I nod at the same time. He asks us about our individual and joint visions for the future.

I answer without hesitation, intending to continue in sports, perhaps helping athletes train, when I retire from the pro league. I even comment that ballet is a great cross-conditioning workout.

Cateline tells Mr. Marais about the letter she found written to herself from years ago. “It reminded me to pursue my dreams of independence, and not give in to pressure and expectations as I’d always done.”

“Is Mr. Wolfe pressuring you into marriage?” he asks pointedly and jots something down on a page in his notebook as if to report us.

“What? No, not at all. I wasn’t done. My love of dancing had turned into torture. I left ballet to find my way back to having my own life, but I was missing something. All that focus on work and advancement left me with an emptiness, a loneliness. The letter reminded me to follow my heart, only this time, it led me to love.”

She turns to me with warmth in her eyes and a smile as bright as the now fully risen sun.

“And what will you do while Mr. Wolfe plays football?” Mr. Marais asks as if he doesn’t quite buy our story. I can only imagine what Cateline’s parents told him.

“I will cheer him on.”

“But is that enough for your heart and your independence, as you so proudly claimed?” His tone is almost mocking.

I stiffen and my muscles tense.

Cateline lengthens her spine and I recall she’s more than capable of shutting someone down with words alone. “Actually, Mr. Marais, I intend to continue teaching.”

“Which is why you need this green card, so you can return to Concordia.” He scratches something in his notebook.

“I love Blancbourg Academy d’Etiquette in Concordia and the opportunities it has afforded me. Getting a job there saved me when I graduated college, didn’t have many prospects, and didn’t know where to go or what to do. But no, I don’t intend to teach there.”

“Another school in Intherness, perhaps?” the immigration official asks.

“No, I plan to teach ballet and have a school of my own.” She beams a proud smile.

I can’t help it, mine is wider. I wasn’t expecting Cat to say that, but can’t think of anything more perfect.

Undaunted, Mr. Marais asks, “How will that work with the football schedule?”

I lean forward, “Mr. Marais, if I may. The Boston Bruisers have a team saying, ‘It ain’t over til we’ve won.’ We’ll figure it out.”

“And what will you win?”

My lips buckle together before I answer because the dude is persistent. In the Bruiser spirit, I guess I appreciate that. “The idea is we don’t give up. Even when the score is stacked against us. Even when we face obstacles. Cat and I came through a life-and-death challenge. We work well together, communicate, and we’ll win no matter the opposition.”

“So you see this as a working relationship?”

“No, sir. It’s a relationship that works.”

He closes his notebook, apparently done with the interview, and then asks one more question, “Why do you want to win?”

“Funny you should ask...”

Cat captures my gaze. Of course, she wants to hear the answer as much as I want to give it.

“Not long ago, I wanted to win because I was afraid to lose. Because I wanted to be the best. To hear people say that I was better than everyone else. In reality, the only person I’m competing against is myself.”

“Are you saying you and Cateline are in a competition? That you are the only one that matters?”

“No, sir. I wasn’t done. Why do I want to win? My answer is simple. Because I want to be a better man than I was yesterday. On the field, I want to win for myself, my satisfaction, and the joy the game gives me, but I also want to win for the team.” Taking Cateline’s hand in mine, I add, “But in a relationship, it isn’t a matter of *me* winning or losing. It isn’t a *me* anything. It’s an *us*. I want us to win because that would mean Cateline has what she wants and needs to make her life full and happy. It’s an honor that she wants me to be a part of that and I will do anything and everything to see to it that we grow together.”

He tips his head from side to side as if content with the answer. “Miss Berghier, if you’d please excuse us, I have a few more questions for Mr. Wolfe.”

When she leaves and we’re alone, I blurt, “Purple.”

The immigration official’s brow furrows. “I was going to ask if you expect to win the playoffs this year. I need to seed my fantasy football team.”

My jaw drops, then I wink. “Oh, we’ll be winning, sir.”

Just like with the doctor, the pressure is on. But I have a feeling the upcoming season is going to be record-breaking.

CONNOR



I’ll admit, there’s a little swagger in my step when I leave the interview with Monsieur Marais, the immigration official. I hope he gives us the green card stamp of approval, but before I get ahead of myself, I find Cateline sitting on a rock along the river’s edge.

“Hey there, Beauty,” I call.

“Are you suggesting you’re the Beast?”

“You tamed me.”

Her hand cups my cheek. “No, you’re not a beast. You’re a handsome man who surprised me with his depth, manners, and kissing abilities.”

I feign shock. “Those came as a surprise to you?”

“Well, no. I guess not. But can we leave the whole Wolf thing behind?”

“Wolf thing? What do you mean? I’m Connor Garrett Wolfe with an *E*.” I wink.

“And I look forward to being Madame Wolfe with an *E*.”

“Cateline Wolfe. I like it. We’ll no longer fight like cats and dogs. No fighting at all, not even battles waged within.” I brush my thumb along her lower lip. “You brought the two separate pieces of me together, Kitty Cat.”

Her smile is demure and I make a note to get her accustomed to accepting compliments.

She says, “I liked your response to Mr. Marais about winning.”

“I’d tell you the same thing, but I have a question.”

The sunlight catches her eyes and she squints.

“Early on, you told me that you’re always honest, that dishonesty is for weak minds.”

She nods.

“But I think I caught you in a fib, Kitty Cat. A little white lie, if you will.”

Her eyebrows lift with surprise. “I stand by what I said, but what do you mean?”

“When we met, there was lots of room in my life for women, just not relationships. And there was no room in your life for men because you had to stay focused on your career.”

“At the time, yes...” she lengthens the word, waiting for me to drop the truth bomb.

“This is true, but you told me that I’m hateable and I think you were lying.”

She closes the space between us, leaning into me. Chin lifted and eyes soft, she says, “No, Mr. Wolfe, you are very, very lovable.”

“So we can get rid of the not love list?”

“We can feed it to the fish.”

“So you like that I’m scruffy?” I ask, recalling her little heart bullet point items.

“You cleaned up nicely.”

“What if I grew back the hair?” I motion to the length it was pre-Shonda’s evil silver scissors of doom.

She slugs me in the arm. “There is only room in this relationship for one bun.”

In one swift motion, I pull the pin from her hair and it cascades over her shoulders in shiny ripples of silk. I lean in and inhale. “Your hair is beautiful and so are your eyes, nose, your lips, all of you.”

Her mouth twists. “You haven’t seen my feet. Ballet did a number to them.”

“I love them all the more. What about my height? Is it off the not love list?”

She lengthens against me. “Better to reach things off high shelves, my dear,” she says in a deep voice, in an adorable imitation of the Big Bad Wolf.

I chuckle.

“And your hands. Better to touch me with. Along with your lips.” Cat plants a soft kiss on mine.

“I like this new list so far. As for being uncooperative and stubborn?”

“I’ve rethought those. You’ve worked on both and I crossed them off a couple of weeks ago.”

“Last one...”

“I would say we’re very compatible.”

“In every way?”

“In every way,” she repeats.

A small grin flits onto my lips. Hers lift at the same time. Our gazes flicker and spark. Inside, the wolf no longer makes demands. He’s satisfied, full, and complete. And if I’m not mistaken, a little purr escapes Cateline’s throat.

“So, we’re going to do this?” I ask.

“You tell me,” she answers.

Taking a deep breath, I say, “Miss Berghier, I would enjoy the honor of your company at dinner.”

“Do you mean, am I hungry and do I want a bite to eat?” she translates into Connor-speak.

We both laugh.

I slide her grandmother’s engagement ring off her finger and pinch it between mine. “And, Cateline, would you do me the honor of being my wife?”

She grips my jaw and says, “*Oui*.”

We sink into a long kiss. I circle my arms around her, drowning out any sense of doubt or hesitation and leaving only love on the surface.



The next days are a flurry of wedding preparation. Apparently, Mrs. Berghier had everything planned, intended for Cateline and Gaston. Thankfully, I don’t understand French because they do more than a little bickering.

Cat confides that she loves her mother’s plans, just not that they were made with Gaston in mind. In the end, I think the two make up because the general tone turns from coarse to gentle, and the wedding is a fresh field of lavender, light, and has delicious food.

Personally, I never thought much about my wedding, so as long as Cateline meets me at the end of the aisle, I'm a happy man.

We hold the ceremony at a little stone chapel in town. It's nothing like Cain's and part of me wishes my brother were here, so he could see that his life doesn't have to be one long battle.

There are flowers everywhere, including a wreath of lavender in Cat's long, flowing hair. I hear every word the minister says, but cannot take my eyes off this woman—her warm dark eyes, the lift of her cheeks as she smiles, the soft brush of her lashes when she blinks, the gentle slope of her neck leading to a white satin gown that hugs her figure.

The words, "I do" are out of my mouth almost before I'm supposed to speak them.

Our kiss at the end is one for the history books, and pronounced husband and wife, we stride down the aisle amidst howls, hoots, and flower petals.

If the guys could see me now, they'd tackle me after I exit the church. Unfortunately, they're all busy, though I do get calls, texts, and well wishes, including one from Coach Hammer who asks me four times if this is some kind of prank.

The reception is in the Berghier's garden and thankfully, nothing like our engagement party. Cat's cousin Giselle has her parents bring a chocolate cake from Concordia, there are more flowers, and the little glowing lights on all the tables remind me of fireflies. There's no sign of Gaston. I'm guessing he's still cleaning shaving cream out of his car.

Cateline and I dance almost all night, and before it's over, a little yap, yap sounds from the driveway.

Someone shouts in French about a chin or a *chien*, then I realize this is my cue and quickly settle the arrangement I made at the spur of the moment.

"Cateline, I got you a wedding present," I say, snuggling a little white bichon frise puppy close.

She squeals with delight and gathers the dog in her arms as the little puppy's tail wags uncontrollably. "You got this puppy for me?"

"Technically, she's for us."

The dog licks Cat's cheek and paddles her paws in the air with excitement. "She's a marshmallow fluff, a floofy floof of love." Cateline says a bunch of words in French.

“She already has a name.”

“You named her?” Cat’s eyes widen.

“If that’s okay. Her name is Bijou. It means jewel.”

She laughs. “I know that, silly. It’s perfect.”

“It’s what you mean to me. You are the jewel of my life, Kitty Cat.”

She kisses me on the cheek and then fusses over the dog. “My little Bijou. Oh, but wait. I have something for you, Connor.” Cateline rushes inside and returns with a wrapped box.

I pull the ribbon and open it. Inside, is a scrapbook with a photo of us on the front. I look closer and realize it’s one from @ChicksDigWolves and one of her side by side.

“It’s the story of us, starting at the beginning.”

I flip through, finding mostly empty pages, but a few from our time in Intherness, then North Carolina. “And lots of room to make new memories.”

I kiss her on both cheeks. “I love it.”

“This has been the perfect day.”

“In every way.”

“There’s just one thing, where are we going on our honeymoon?”

“I thought you’d never ask.” I produce a letter that came this morning from the immigration office. I intercepted it when Mr. Berghier got the mail.

“Did you plan something?” Cat asks.

“Sort of. What do you think of a homey-moon?” I ask before I announce that her green card was approved.

She does a ballet leap into my arms, wrapping her legs around me. They’re like a pair of vices, but I spin her around and we cheer with excitement.

She expresses her gratitude and relief then asks, “Wait, what is a homey-moon?”

“So glad you asked.” I wink.

CATELINE



*A*fter Connor's thirty days in the Blancbourg program are up, we travel to the United States to do paperwork and for the First Annual Boston Bruisers Charity Ball.

I've never been to Los Angeles and as the plane descends, the city lights sparkle before they abruptly stop at the sea.

The air is warm even though it's after nightfall. The pace is the opposite of where we visited in North Carolina and I feel like a cat watching someone bounce a ball back and forth. There is so much to see, to hear, to do.

A car service brings us to a fancy hotel where the other players are staying. Connor is at ease, yet he carries himself with more pride than he did when we first stepped through the doors at Blancbourg. His smile comes a little easier and when a gaggle of women who call themselves the Bruiser Babes strut by, he doesn't even look their way.

No, Connor's gaze is fixed on me and remains there when we go shopping for a blue gown the next day, when we eat at a famous sushi restaurant, and when he takes me on a tour of the off-season Bruisers' training facility.

And it's hard not to admire a man of his stature when he meets me after a spa day of pampering in preparation for the ball. He's dressed in a perfectly tailored tuxedo. His hair is trim and he's freshly shaved, but it's the way his muscles tease the tux's fabric that has me aflutter.

"Like what you see? I do." Eyes combing me, he plants a kiss on my cheek, takes my hand, and spins me in a circle. My dark Boston Bruisers blue floor-length gown in a mermaid fit flares at the bottom. The ruffles lift

a little, revealing my silhouette. It has a V-neck in the front and a V-cut in the back, providing me some air conditioning, because Connor's eyes eat me up, making me warm all over.

"What did you do all day?" I ask.

A couple of guys pass, and their eyes land on me. Connor draws me close. He's an alpha, a wolf through and through. It's a little possessive and I like it.

There's a growl in his voice when he answers, "Thought about you."

"What else?"

"Worked out. Played football. Thought about you."

I kiss him on the cheek and say, "You mentioned."

After taking a limousine to the First Annual Boston Bruisers Charity Ball, we sweep along the blue and black carpet, past photographers taking photos and reporters asking questions.

Connor flashes his smile and wedding ring, confirming that he's no longer on the market. "The only Wolfe you'll see is on the field."

He squeezes my hand as we go inside.

I've been in countless ballrooms in my life, but the charity ball is by far the most upscale and formal event I've ever attended.

It's all glitz, glamour, and a long list of who's who, consisting of athletes, celebrities, and public figures.

I'm thankful for my background in etiquette and how to interact in this kind of setting. But instead of spending much time making small but meaningful talk with strangers, Connor whisks me onto the dancefloor.

We slow dance and pick up the tempo to the fast songs. He even knows the pasodoble. I'm a bit rusty and it wasn't part of my classical training, however, I picked up a lot over the years. But where did he get these moves?

When we return to a waltz, I say, "Who knew you enjoyed dancing so much?"

"Only with you, Kitty Cat."

And there we remain for most of the ball before getting in a limo and going for burgers and milkshakes at In & Out. Of course, we share.

We end the night on the beach with the waves washing to shore and a kiss under the stars that threatens to cause a blackout in the city at our backs.



Upon returning to the manor in Concordia, Arthur greets me with a gracious smile as always.

“You gave us a bit of a fright after we learned about your visit to the hospital,” he says, helping me with my bags. “I’m glad to hear you’re feeling better because I don’t know what we’d do here without you. You run a tight ship.”

The sincerity in his eyes makes me feel appreciated. In a way, Arthur and his wife are like grandparents to me. I spend holidays with them and always bring Arthur a pretzel when I shop in the village.

“Thank you.” I can only manage a smile because I’m not sure how much longer any of us will be there.

During the flight back, I caught up on emails and notices. The budget looks graver than ever, but I also had a chance to dig deep into the various accounts owned by the school and discovered some unusual discrepancies.

“How is Mrs. Fitzgerald faring?” I ask.

“Quite well—” Arthur holds up his finger to say something else, but someone cuts across him.

“The world traveler decided to return.” Regina approaches, appearing as if she’s ready to pounce. “You know, instead of you and the other teachers gallivanting all over hill and dale with your pupils, had you been smart, you would’ve redirected the travel expenditures back to the school, kept those football jerks, I mean, jocks, here for the remaining weeks, and spared me from having to let A—”

What Arthur said about running a tight ship reminds me of Connor’s story about burning the boats. “Actually, Regina, I was hoping to have this conversation with you in my office. Surely, you’re familiar with those four walls.”

A shadow of guilt crosses Regina’s eyes, but she lifts her chin, defying any further acknowledgment.

I smooth my hair as I settle behind my desk.

Regina takes the seat opposite me and says, “Arthur has to go.”

“During my time *gallivanting*, as you said, I’ve had some time to think about our mission at Blancbourg and our approach. In fact, it concerns me

that we've been so preoccupied with cutting the budget instead of coming up with ways to earn more money." I jiggle the computer's mouse to bring it to life. I half expect one of Connor's pranks, but we called a truce.

"That's easy for you to say. You're not the one in charge of the fiscal duties." Regina huffs.

"No, but I am in charge in general and what's of great concern are several accounts I found in the expenditures section of our budget. There's Cameo Advertising. I'm not familiar with their work." My gaze flits from one of Regina's many signature cameo brooches pinned to her blouse. I lift my eyes to meet hers. She looks away. "Perhaps you can give me their contact info."

Regina blinks a few times.

I angle my computer monitor so the bursar can see. "There are several other accounts with high advertising budgets and yet when I looked them up online, I couldn't find their websites or credentials."

"They're privately owned."

I nod. "I'd like to talk to whoever your contacts are and discuss the return on investment."

"You can't. I'm the bursar."

"As the headmistress, actually, I can."

"They're out of town."

"Gallivanting, I suppose." I didn't want to think the worst, but when I pored over the files and accounts during my flight, red flags raised my suspicions.

"It's not my fault that you're ill-equipped to run this school. Ever since you've been the headmistress you've been running it into the ground. I knew you were a clueless—"

I get to my feet. "Excuse me. As an employee of this school, I expect you to uphold our rules of etiquette. Speaking disrespectfully is not what we do here. If you have a problem with me as the headmistress, you can bring that up with the Board of Regents."

"I have. I told them you've been cavorting with your pupil and stealing money."

I sit back down. There is no denying I overstepped with Connor. However, I'd never steal.

"We all remember when you came here with nothing. It makes sense that you'd sneak your way in and then pilfer from our coffers." Regina

glowers.

“That is a serious accusation.” I keep my tone even.

“We all know about your character. Poor girl. Finds her way into a posh job—what was rightfully my job—and gets greedy.”

An ache that’s been present in the pit of my belly since I left France grows. “It would be better to have this conversation with the Board present,” I repeat.

“I agree. That’s why I called an emergency meeting as soon as I learned you were returning. They should be here any moment.” Regina sweeps from the room.

I feel like crumbling, retreating. But I burned the ships. There is no going back. No choice but to win. I square my shoulders and march to the meeting room.

The Board of Regents, consisting of three men and one woman, sit expressionless at a long wooden table with Regina in their midst.

Following the usual formalities, they bring the meeting to the first order of business. Regina’s accusations. The bursar makes her case, accusing me of stealing funds.

“I’ve told her time and time again if something doesn’t change, we’ll have to close the school. She doesn’t care about this place. Rather, she pursues her single-minded quest for riches. She’s a liar and a thief and not fit to be the headmistress. I move that we fire her. Who’s in favor?” Regina raises her hand. “Aye.”

“Mrs. Harrow. You know our process. Ms. Berghier, please state your case.”

I take a deep breath. “I refute these claims completely except for my involvement with my pupil, Connor Wolfe. We unexpectedly developed a relationship. However, our contract was over when we made things official.”

“We will consider whether to suggest you resign.”

“I understand. But did you have the opportunity to review the emails I sent each of you earlier?”

The four members of the Board nod and one opens a laptop. “Yes, we did and are surprised Mrs. Harrow made such outrageous claims against you when it is clear she is the one diverting advertising money from the school, funneling it into fake accounts registered under false names, and

then forwarding it to her private foreign accounts.” The board member looks up over wire-rimmed glasses.

A second board member adds, “We were able to confirm the paper trail.”

Regina blanches, sputters, and then pushes from her chair and hurries out of the room.

That woman is a troll. How delusional could she be to think she could pass off thefts like those to me? A little twinge of victory sparks inside, but the ever-widening pit of worry that threatens to swallow me whole surges. I may no longer have a job. Despite Connor’s salary, I need something of my own.

The board assures me they’ll be taking legal action against Regina.

“If I were to resign, may I recommend a replacement?” I ask. “Gemma Forbes, my previous assistant, is brilliant, knows everything about my role, and has some forward-thinking ideas for how to move the school into the global, internet-based community.” Gemma and I spoke again and I gave her the heads up that a position might be opening soon at Blancbourg.

“Ms. Berghier, in light of all of this, we have to commend you for many years of loyal service as well as successfully registering the manor as a historic site.”

I nod at the triumph that’s mostly thanks to Connor. Had he not thought of that, I wouldn’t have been able to help in such an impactful way. As I get to my feet, the reality of being free, of having the opportunity to do whatever I want, battles against the emptiness of the risk I’m about to take.

“Ms. Berghier, we want to thank you for fighting for Blancbourg,” one of the regents says.

“And may I ask,” the lone woman on the board says, “If you don’t remain here, what’s next for you?”

A familiar, excited tingling works its way across my skin. Unable to help it, I sashay toward the door and do a *grand jeté*. “I’m going to dance.” I gave it up to find myself and it’ll be the thing that brings me back to myself.

Connor waits for me in the hallway. He extends his hand for me to take. It fits perfectly inside and we step into the sunny afternoon.

“Where to first?” he asks as we begin our homey-moon—our house-hunting adventure in Concordia. I learn that a homey-moon is not to be confused with moon-gate or what Connor said is a trip with his homies, aka

the guys. It's a stay-at-home honeymoon, kind of like a staycation, but ours has a little twist.

"I can't wait to play tourists, visiting the regional sites as well as looking for a nest to call our own. There are so many options—a home in the mountains, the seaside, or in the village..."

"And some of the historic buildings," Connor adds, confirming an appreciation for Concordia's history.

"But when we find a house we love, we're going to settle in and make it our own."

"I like the sound of that. First, how about we go get a pretzel, Mrs. Wolfe?"

"Didn't expect you to be hungry, Mr. Wolfe."

"Everything changed that afternoon we stopped by the bakery."

"What do you mean?" I ask.

"It's when I realized you're the only woman I want."

My smile reaches my eyes. "And you have me. I'm all yours."

Our lips dance together in a kiss that promises many to come...and yes, they still make me weak in the knees.

When we part, Connor smirks, because he knows the effect he has on me. But my grin isn't far behind because he knows he finally won by making me Mrs. Wolfe.

EPILOGUE



*I*n much the same way that I'd poured myself into solving the mystery of the missing money at Blancbourg, I also work tirelessly to get my new business up and running.

Madam Tissot, the former owner of the ballet school, was incredibly gracious and relieved she wasn't letting all of her dancers down after years of teaching. She passed me the keys to the studio along with her client roster when she retired. How to run the place is another story, but so far the transition has been relatively seamless.

In fact, only a week after Madam Tissot passed the torch, I'm hosting an open house in the old/new studio so Madam Tissot's former students can get to know me and find out more about the classes I'll be offering. I want to act fast so I don't lose the interest of the previous students and families.

I've been busy all morning preparing, but I take a few minutes to freshen up before everyone arrives. I wear a simple pair of black leggings and an off-the-shoulder pink sweater. Even though I want to look the part of a serious teacher, for once, I leave my hair down. I've been gradually feeling my way into the new version of myself which has all the grace and poise of my old self, but I want to convey to my new students that ballet can be fun too. My mission is to instill the love of dance in my students first, and then the rigor can come later if that's the track they want to pursue.

When I get back to the studio, a massive bouquet of flowers sits in the entryway. There's no card, but it's windy today. Perhaps it blew away.

I string up pink balloons outside the door and get bonked in the face a few times. I'll let the kids know they can each take a balloon when they

leave. Inside, I hang other ballet-themed decorations. By the door, I set up a table and fluff the tablecloth skirt that looks like a tutu.

Hildie offered to bake ballet slipper cookies and is showcasing her new pretzel samplers. Gemma is bringing her twin girls and told me they made what she called chocolate berry pops for the occasion. I'm also serving pink lemonade with pink and white striped straws.

Arthur and Mrs. Fitzgerald are the first to arrive and others filter in moments after I open the doors.

I greet them and say, "Thank you for the flowers. They're beautiful."

Mrs. Fitzgerald wears a confused smile. "I was going to thank you for the flowers while I was at home recovering."

"No, I mean those flowers." I point to the bouquet of pink and white roses. "They're beautiful and smell heavenly."

Arthur shakes his head. "My apologies for the confusion, but we didn't send those."

My eyebrows knit together as I look around at the people gathered—mostly families with daughters and a few sons interested in dance, former students, and of course, the Fitzgerald.

I welcome everyone and thank them for coming. I tell a little bit about myself, my background, and what kinds of classes I'll be offering, then I open up for questions before we do a mini-lesson.

The kids love it and I feel at home back in the studio, but on the other side of the dance line. I encourage the kids and have a feeling it's going to be rewarding to watch them learn and grow in ballet.

Afterward, I chat with the parents and everyone enjoys the refreshments. With only a few guests remaining, I finally have a chance to chat with Gemma. I ask her about the flowers.

"Who could they be from—?" Then I fall silent.

A large, imposing figure stands in the doorway. Connor's hair is trimmed, his face clean-shaven, and his eyes are the copper-brown embers that make my heart pirouette. He wears a black T-shirt, sweats, and an enormous pink tutu.

The little girls giggle.

The mothers ogle Connor from the waist up.

I stare, slack-jawed.

"I heard the best ballet teacher around just opened a studio and I'd like to sign up for my first lesson."

I rush across the wood floor and leap into Connor's arms. He picks me up and squeezes me tight. I plant a kiss on his lips.

"What are you doing here? I thought you had training."

"I did. I do. But I couldn't miss opening day. Declan let me jet over here. Literally. While I wait for mine to come from the factory."

I nearly choke on my lemonade. "Your what from where?"

"I bought a private jet so I can see you whenever I want and vice versa."

"Connor," I stammer, shocked at the extravagance. Now that we're married, I've had a glimpse into his finances. Despite his reputation as being a bad boy football player, the man hardly spent a cent in the last eight years of earning the kind of annual income most people are lucky to see in their lifetimes, but this seems extravagant.

"And here I can only offer you some fruit, lemonade, and cookies."

He leans close, "No, Cateline, you offered me a future together that I could never have fathomed."

I bite my lip, suddenly feeling shy in front of anyone close enough to have overheard this conversation. Then again, they've all probably seen his #BruiserButt.

Taking me by the hand, he says, "Come on, let's see what you've been doing for the last eight days and four hours." He glances at his watch. "And twenty-three minutes. I want all the details." He smiles wide.

I introduce him to Gemma and then lead him into the main room, telling him all about my vision for the school.

"It isn't super strict like the academy I went to. However, I'll teach the classical style, but there will also be modern and formal dance options, games, parties, and pizza nights...this program may not be for dancers who desire to join the national tours, but for those who dance for the love of it. Then again, I could train someone to become a professional if they desire to do so."

"I'm so proud of you," Connor says.

I beam. For years, I'd yearned to hear those words. They never came, not even when I'd made it to the premier stages in France did my parents tell me that I was good enough.

"I want my dancers to feel the joy, day after day, even when it's hard sometimes, rather than end up walking away as I did."

"But you found your way back."

"It's all because I followed my heart."

Connor kisses me on the forehead and together—with him in the hilarious tutu—chat, with the remaining visitors. He is sure to let everyone know that ballet even benefits football players like him.

We're at the studio until well after nightfall. After locking up, Connor leads me in the opposite direction of the village.

"Where are we going?" I ask, because it seems like Connor knows his way. "Are you hungry?"

"Not especially. I had quite a few of those cookies Hildie made. They were delicious."

"Me too."

"But I would like to take you to dinner if you'd care to join me, Mrs. Wolfe."

"It would be my pleasure, though we should probably change." I giggle and tug on the tulle of his tutu.

"First, there's something I'd like you to see." Connor's voice is as velvety soft as the night sky.

The glowing lights from the village fade at our backs as we reach a clearing atop the bluff. The sky is clear and the stars start to blink on like little individual lights.

"Funny, I never came up this way past the dance studio. It's beautiful."

Connor wraps his arm around me, pulling me close even though the summer night is warm. "When we were camping, I'd gaze at the stars after you fell asleep. It was then I realized how truly, deeply I loved you. How I'd do anything for you."

In the distance, little pinpricks of light dance along the horizon. They're brighter than stars and seem to be moving closer.

Reminding me of the fireflies we saw in the field, I watch with curiosity.

In a matter of moments, hundreds of illuminated bamboo lanterns light the night sky and float toward where we stand on the bluff.

"What is it?" I ask.

"It's for you. I can't move mountains, but I can cross them and oceans. I can't grant you wishes, but I can bring down the stars." Connor's voice is rough yet poetic, and mine. All mine.

The lanterns float closer as though pulled by invisible threads.

"You did this for me? For us?"

Connor nods. "I did this because, for the next year, we'll be like these lanterns, lighting up and drifting in and out of each other's lives."

My shoulders drop a notch. Because of my new business and his career, we decided we're going to win at being in a long-distance relationship. Still, it's hard.

He smooths a piece of my hair between his fingers. "But after the season is over, I'm retiring."

I gasp. "What? You can't do that."

"I seem to remember a certain headmistress asking me about longevity and my long-term career goals."

"Yes, but you're—"

"I'll be thirty on my next *not* birthday. That's getting old for a safety. But don't worry, I have plans for a football adjacent empire. But first, we have to start building our team." He winks.

"Can't wait to hear about it. But I thought we were going to have a ballet company."

"Maybe a little of both."

I shake my head "We can't have twenty kids."

He winces. "That might be a tad out of reach."

We both laugh.

"So what's your football adjacent business plan?"

"Still working out a few details, but it'll involve kids, Concordia, and the best game on earth."

"Do you mean like a summer camp?"

"Yep. There will be football, of course, but also a zip line, lake activities, hiking, biking, and a footrace. It'll be challenging and character-building, but also fun. Maybe a little muddy, though not as intense as the Enduro."

"Will there be tutus?"

"If you're asking whether I thought it would be cool for you to offer a ballet day, then yes."

"I'll bring my black and blue tutu," I say.

"You have one of those?"

I wink.

Connor squeezes me close in a side hug. "For now, I want us to enjoy this." He gestures to the lanterns.

"It's beautiful." I turn in a circle, marveling at the light all around us.

“And so are you, Cateline.” Connor adjusts his position to face me. The backs of his fingers brush my wrist, arm, shoulder, and then he caresses my jaw.

“I love you,” I say.

“I love you too.” His voice is low and true.

Pippa’s warm fluffies that Gemma described fill me up.

Connor leans in close enough that I can feel his breath on my cheek before kissing me once on the lips. Then he curls his fingers around mine, gazing intently into my eyes.

His are lit by the glowing light, all copper-brown and sparkling.

He tips my chin up and my throat bobs as I swallow.

The wind sweeps through my hair and my cheeks feel rosy.

“Cateline, would you like to dance with me?”

“There’s no other dance partner I’d rather have.”

As the lanterns envelop us in warm, glowing light, Connor tilts his head back and howls, then kisses me, sealing the moment.



Want more from the Bruisers and Blancbourg? Read a sample from ***The Crush List***, Pippa and Chase’s story, featuring secret crushes, forced proximity, slow burn, he falls first, and a happily ever after.

CHAPTER 1: PIPPA

When I was growing up, my favorite thing to do was to play dress-up. My sister, Phoebe, and I would sneak into our mother's closet and try on her gowns and high heels. Ah, to be a kid again.

Teetering around, we'd call each other *darling* and I would try to get our brother to pretend to be Prince Phillip from *Sleeping Beauty* so we could dance, but he'd always refuse. It may have had something to do with how we'd call him *Felipe* with the French pronunciation like *fell* plus *leap*.

If that weren't bad enough, invariably, we'd argue because even though we understood it was make-believe, he thought it was dumb for someone named Phillipa (me), to marry a guy named Phillip.

He probably thought we were making fun of him because it was around that time when he insisted that we call him Freddie instead of his given name, Phillip.

He and I are twins and yes, our parents named us Phillip and Phillipa, respectively.

He's Phillip Frederick Thompson, aka Freddie, and I'm Phillipa Grace Thompson, aka Pippa. Or, Princess Calliope Avington Twinklebelle. What can I say? I was five.

Suffice it to say, Phillip became Freddie and was the cool kid. Everyone calls me Pippa for reasons unknown and I'm the awkward one. And then there's Phoebe, the third Thompson sibling who I'm debating whether to call in for backup. She's the one you want in your corner whether you're going into battle or playing a board game.

Even though Freddie is about a minute older than me and Phoebe is the baby, technically making me the middle child, she's the most mature of the three of us. She's our nursemaid St Bernard from Peter Pan, making sure her Darling little Lost Boys, erm, boy and girl, don't stray too far off the beaten track.

Once, while on holiday in Qatar, I met a man who claimed to be Captain Hook. Let's just say that after that incident, Phoebe made sure I didn't wander away while we were shopping in the *souq*.

Invisible glue holds me to the edge of the bed in my childhood room, which Mum has kept largely the same after I moved out. While here

visiting, I went through an old box and found my journal, containing many of my original rules and lists, most notably, *The Crush List*.

I experience that same little internal quake I always did when thinking about my crush. Seeing him caused a full-on temblor. Thankfully, it's been years since I last made a fool of myself in front of *The Crush*. Then realization spikes my inner seismograph.

Referring to one of my rules, I dial the worrisome thought back because there's no sense in jumping ahead when I already have a more imminent social situation to deal with that requires my sister's immediate help.

Biting my lip, I press *call* on my cell phone.

Phoebe reliably answers by the second ring. "Do you need bail money? The number of a dating coach? Or a cookie recipe?"

"Ha ha," I say dryly though a dating coach isn't the worst idea. "I need you to convince me to attend a soiree hosted by one of Mum and Dad's friends."

"In that case, go meet Mum and Dad. Wait. Where? Why? Are you home or are they in Concordia?"

I give her the rundown about how I made a quick trip to London because I needed to visit the dentist.

"Dr. Gundry? He's still—?"

"He's alive, well, and still has the hairiest hands of anyone I've ever seen. But he also does great work and a girl with a fake tooth needs the best."

"Oh, Pippa. Not another one."

"No, the same one."

If you're wondering why I have a fake tooth, ask Freddie to explain what possessed him to drive a toy train into my mouth at a high rate of speed. We were eight years old, and I had only finally stopped singing the *All I Want for Christmas is My Two Front Teeth* song.

Okay, I didn't lose the entire tooth but a chunk of it flew across the room and landed in Dad's tea. Thankfully, the other remained in my mouth fully intact.

"Is Freddie there?" Phoebe asks.

"No. I think he's in Marrakech."

"Still globetrotting before he and Aimme say I do?"

"They're calling it their pre-honeymoon." The thought that struck moments ago comes at me with a shake-inducing aftershock.

“They’ve been abroad for months. If you ask me, he’s trying to put it off. Can’t say she’s my first choice for sister-in-law,” Phoebe mutters.

I’d agree, but for reasons of my own. A tall, handsome reason who more than likely is Freddie’s best man. Also, I’m not entirely convinced Aimme is *the one*, but telling my brother would break some of my rules about remembering to be sensitive, avoiding being overly honest, and taking care not to over-share my thoughts. I didn’t come with a factory installed with a filter, so I had to make up rules and lists to live by.

“If Freddie were there, he could go with you and commiserate about how snooty everyone is at the party and then he’d have to pay damages from his youthful missteps of breaking your tooth by being your wingman. Scratch that, I think being engaged disqualifies him from wingmanship.” She has a point.

“The real question is what does Aimme see in him? What did any of the girls back in high school and all the women since see in Sir Frederick Dorkingsworth?”

Phoebe chuckles at the name we used to tease him with. I prefer not to think about how my dorky brother grew up to be what is commonly referred to as a stud. *Gag. Ew.* Ladies, I’ve seen him pick his nose. I won’t tell you what he did with the booger.

“Are Mum and Dad waiting for you?”

“No, I’m having anticipatory nerves. It’s tomorrow.” When I was a kid, my parents’ friends would call me *The Shy One*. Not so. Yes, I’m an introvert, but I’m not nervous around people—okay, there’s one person that has the ability to trip me up, sometimes literally, but let’s not talk about him. It’s more like I need a cheerleading squad consisting of quiet church mice to encourage me to willingly involve myself in gatherings large and small.

“Why don’t you rip the bandage off and convince yourself to do it, get it over with? Then you can retreat to your happy place.”

“You know why.”

“Lady Libby the Love Liaison?”

“Lady? Ooh. That’s a new addition.”

“Got to appreciate alliteration.”

“Mum would love the title, *Lady*.”

“She would,” Phoebe confirms. “But I’m not sure she’d appreciate our name for her.”

After college and moving from England to Concordia, I've had a good excuse to miss many of my parents' fancy functions where Mum tries to play matchmaker. But since I happen to be in town for this event, I can't respectfully decline even though I'd much prefer to be at home in my jammies making candles or watching my favorite series.

"Give me a status update. Have you done pre-game primping? Spa day? Or are you procrastinating on the sofa with Ted Lasso on pause?"

She knows me so well.

I love the show even though football, or soccer as my US friends call it, reminds me of American football which makes me think about my stupid longstanding crush. I contemplate tearing the page with the heading *The Crush List* out of my journal.

"I have the dress."

"That's a start, but let me guess, Mum laid it out for you."

I don't deny it.

"Okay, next step, stand up..." Step by step, Phoebe walks me through the prep process we perfected for getting ready for a party. Yes, my reluctance is that strong.

I'm an introvert born into an extrovert world. When my social battery runs low, it short circuits. Sure, I work with people at my day job, but that is mostly on my terms. I can go home to recharge. Fill up my senses. Make candles. Watch Ted Lasso and pine over Chase Collins.

I mean forget that he ever existed.

But I can't at the moment because I belatedly realize that he's going to be at Freddie's wedding. And because we're both in the wedding party, that likely means we'll have to interact. The last time that happened, I spilled milk all over his term paper.

And yes, I cried over it.

While I apply a face mask that promises glowing skin, Phoebe carries on the conversation. "Listen, if Oliver Boxworth is there, don't mention my name."

"Ooh. Sounds like a new story. Phoebe and Boxy, sitting in a tree—"

"Phillipa," my sister says in a stern voice like I'm testing her patience.

"You know you've loved him since third grade."

"No, I hate him and—"

"And that's why you refuse to call him Boxy like everyone else?"

"I refuse to call him anything, anytime, anywhere."

“So Mum is still trying to see you two get married?” I take an educated guess because that is so like our mother.

“Enthusiastically so. But she’s tried a new tactic I should warn you about. It’s like reverse psychology but folded in half, doubled, and then turned inside out.”

While Phoebe outlines a complicated strategy our mother employs and how that brought her and “Bossy Boxy” together at a cricket match, nerves tumble in my belly.

The Crush List sitting on the bed is like a flashing neon sign for another, much bigger, gathering I have to brace myself for in the fall and *The Crush* will be there.

Forget the Smythe’s party, with Freddie getting married and Mum targeting Phoebe, she’s likely riding a maternal high of seeing her adult children getting paired off. That leaves me as her quarry.

“You know that Dad goes along with everything Mum says when it comes to her goals for our love lives. Is there such a thing as a *hate* life because I cannot stand to be in the same room as that—” Phoebe goes on a tangent about Oliver Boxworth. My bets are on them tying the knot.

But back to Mum and Dad.

How do I say this nicely? Libby and Thomas Thompson are characters. Erm, unique? Eccentric? All of the above?

My parents are only a few steps away from the ivory tower of the British aristocracy. They haven’t been given the keys, yet. However, they do travel in the same circle as dukes, earls, and other titled gentry. And I mean that literally. They were recently yachting with the Marquess of Porthampton in the Mediterranean.

I adore my mother and father, but to say they’re out of touch is an understatement. Until six months ago, Mum hadn’t set foot in a grocery store in about nineteen years. She has “the help” do the hunting and gathering, as she likes to say.

From the pieces of the story that I’ve tried to put together, under duress, she needed something and went to the local market—she still won’t reveal what it was. Five hours later, Dad received an urgent call from the manager. She’d gotten lost in the dry goods aisle—perhaps fixated on the many options for paper towels, what with the ply count and whether to get a full sheet or partial. Don’t get me started on the printed, seasonal styles. I’m all too familiar with how decision-making can lead to overwhelm.

As for my father, he likes to believe that he's a man of the people. However, if he turned on the radio, he wouldn't be able to sing along to a single song. And yes, I specifically mean radio. He doesn't know what music streaming service apps are.

This isn't to criticize. No, Mum and Dad are wonderfully unique, kind, and generous. They're just a bit quirky. #Relatable.

Gemma, my roommate before she got married, was watching the first episode of a television show that was called Something-Creek. I can't quite remember. I sat there spellbound because the main couple was a facsimile of my parents, but before they lost all their wealth. The characters, not my parents. Nope, Mum and Dad Thompson are swimming in the stuff if such a thing were possible, but that seems like it would result in paper cuts. Mum drips in jewels and Dad seems to replace his golf clubs with each outing. But it's new money, which doesn't carry quite the same currency as old money—at least in their circle.

However, what they're missing, and my mother reminds me of this with frequency, is a son-in-law. And by that, she means she wants grandbabies to spoil.

I'm not opposed to that at all, however, I have yet to meet anyone that isn't a billboard for my parents' arrival among the elite—someone who fits their mold or who will clinch a connection to elevate them fully into that world.

Or, and more importantly, someone who understands me because I've also been called quirky.

Standing in the bathroom of my youth, which is still well-stocked with luxury bath and beauty products—because my mother wouldn't have it any other way—my limbs somehow go limp and freeze at the same time as a second realization sends the wiggly little line right off the Richter Scale.

"I might have to dance with him."

"Who?" Phoebe asks, still on the phone.

"Him."

"Boxy?"

"No, *him*. I might have to dance with him at Freddie's wedding."

"Does *him* have a name?" she asks then she clicks her tongue as if piecing together my inner monologue that's along the lines of *Abort, abort, the mission. Do not attend your brother's wedding because more than likely,*

the maid of honor—that's me—will have to dance with the best man. Save yourself!

"I can't do it," I whisper.

"Pippa, Freddie's wedding is months away. We have plenty of time to prepare. Don't worry about having to dance with Chase, talk to him, or anything right now. Focus on the present."

That reminder helps the dust a little bit. Not future tripping is among my many rules.

"Could you please meet me tomorrow?" My tone is one turn on the dial before begging.

"Here's what you're going to do—" Reliably, my sister comes through with what she means to be encouraging instructions to help get me ready for tomorrow.

My mother has a chaise longue in her dressing room that would come in handy right now because I feel like I could collapse. Tomorrow? I can hardly think about tomorrow when I'll have to see Chase Collins at Freddie's wedding.

"How about we get ready and then go together? You can be my wing-woman," I ask, doubling down.

"I'm up to my elbows in thesis research on the other side of the city." Phoebe is a graduate student in digital forensic science at King's College.

"That's never stopped Mum from insisting you attend things before."

Phoebe clears her throat. "She thinks I'm in Brussels. Please, pretty please, Princess Calliope Avington Twinklebelle don't tell her I'm here."

"Have you been sleeping in the library?"

Phoebe doesn't reply.

"I just don't want to go," I all but whine. "What if something happens?"

"I understand you need a minder at events like the Smythe's party, but just watch where you're going, hold your head high, and avoid liquids."

"It's supposed to rain tomorrow."

"Pippa..."

"I know, I know. You need to get back to studying. It's just that—"

"You can do this. You've gone to swanky soirees countless times. You're an etiquette teacher. You know how to hobnob."

A laugh bubbles out of me at her word choice. Phoebe also commented that I need a minder. As in an escort, bodyguard, chaperone. All of the above. It's not that I get into trouble. No, it typically finds me. Phoebe calls

me the absent-minded professor. But my degree is in chemistry. Meanwhile, my head is in the clouds.

“Pippa, don’t flake out on them.”

“Are you calling me flakey?” I ask, fake insulted.

“Not flakey but definitely a biscuit.”

“I could go for one right now. Oooh. I bet I could make a biscuit-scented candle.”

“Pippa, go exfoliate. Then call me tomorrow when it’s time to shave your legs.”

“Thank you.”

“That’s what sisters are for.”

But it takes me a full minute before I set aside my nerves and talk myself into leaving my little haven on the sofa and get ready to scrub my skin so I dazzle my parents’ friends and strangers alike.

Actually, I better adjust my expectations. I settle on not sizzling, setting anything on fire, or causing anyone to summon the fire brigade. Knowing me, that’s probably more accurate.

Keep reading!

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I appreciate you reading and my hubby for helping with football details.



ALSO BY ELLIE HALL

♥All books are clean and wholesome, Christian faith-friendly and without mature content but filled with swoony kisses and happily ever afters. Books are listed under series in recommended reading order. ♥

-select titles available in audiobook, paperback, hardcover, and large print-



The Only Us Sweet Billionaire Series

Only Christmas with a Billionaire Novella (Book .5)

Only a Date with a Billionaire (Book 1)

Only a Kiss with a Billionaire (Book 2)

Only a Night with a Billionaire (Book 3)

Only Forever with a Billionaire (Book 4)

Only Love with a Billionaire (Book 5)

The Only Us Sweet Billionaire series box set (books 2-5) + a bonus scene!



Hawkins Family Small Town Romance Series

Second Chance in Hawk Ridge Hollow (Book 1)

Finding Forever in Hawk Ridge Hollow (Book 2)

Coming Home to Hawk Ridge (Book 3)

Falling in Love in Hawk Ridge Hollow (Book 4)

Christmas in Hawk Ridge Hollow (Book 5)

The Hawk Ridge Hollow Series Complete Collection Box Set (books 1-5)



The Blue Bay Beach Reads Romance Series

Summer with a Marine (Book 1)

Summer with a Rock Star (Book 2)

Summer with a Billionaire (Book 3)

Summer with the Cowboy (Book 4)

Summer with the Carpenter (Book 5)

Summer with the Doctor (Book 6)

Books 1-3 Box Set

Books 4-6 Box Set



Ritchie Ranch Clean Cowboy Romance Series

Rustling the Cowboy's Heart (Book 1)
Lassoing the Cowboy's Heart (Book 2)
Trusting the Cowboy's Heart (Book 3)
Kissing the Christmas Cowboy (Book 4)
Loving the Cowboy's Heart (Book 5)
Wrangling the Cowboy's Heart (Book 6)
Charming the Cowboy's Heart (Book 7)
Saving the Cowboy's Heart (Book 8)
Ritchie Ranch Romance Books 1-4 Box Set



Falling into Happily Ever After Rom Com

An Unwanted Love Story
An Unexpected Love Story
An Unlikely Love Story
An Accidental Love Story
An Impossible Love Story
An Unconventional Christmas Love Story



Forever Marriage Match Romantic Comedy Series

Dare to Love My Grumpy Boss
Dare to Love the Guy Next Door
Dare to Love My Fake Husband
Dare to Love the Guy I Hate
Dare to Love My Best Friend



Home Sweet Home Series

Mr. and Mrs. Fix It Find Love
Designing Happily Ever After
The DIY Kissing Project
The True Romance Renovation: Christmas Edition
Extreme Heart Makeover
Building What's Meant to Be



The Costa Brothers Cozy Christmas Comfort Romance Series

Tommy & Merry and the 12 Days of Christmas

Bruno & Gloria and the 5 Golden Rings

Luca & Ivy and the 4 Calling Birds

Gio & Joy and the 3 French Hens

Paulo & Noella and the 2 Turtle Doves

Nico & Hope and the Partridge in the Pear Tree



The Love List Series

The Swoon List

The Not Love List

The Crush List

The Kiss List

The Naughty or Nice List



Love, Laughs & Mystery in Coco Key

Romantic-al

Romantic-ipation

Romantic-plicated

Romantic-ilicious

Romantic-issued at Christmas



Visit www.elliehallauthor.com for more.

If you love my books, please leave a review at your favorite retailer's website! Thank you!

xox

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ellie Hall is a USA Today bestselling author. If only that meant she could wear a tiara and get away with it ;) She loves puppies, books, and the ocean. Writing sweet romance with lots of firsts and fizzy feels brings her joy. Oh, and chocolate chip cookies are her fave. Ellie believes in dreaming big, working hard, and lazy Sunday afternoons spent with her family and dog in gratitude for God's grace.



LET'S CONNECT

Do you love sweet, swoony romance?

Stories with happy endings?

Falling in love?



Please [subscribe to my newsletter](#) to receive updates about my latest books, exclusive extras, deals, and other fun and sparkly things, including my FREE short story *New Year with a Billionaire*, a sweet romance along with access to my bonus content library!

Go to www.elliehallauthor.com to get your copy!

Facebook & Instagram @elliehallauthor

