

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

ELLIE HALL



THE

Swoon

LIST



A SWEET ROMANTIC COMEDY

THE Swoon LIST



ELLIE HALL

ABOUT THIS BOOK



That gig as a Disney princess didn't do me any favors in the popularity department, but my BGF made sure I kept the tiara.

Maggie

I failed at living the life of a fairytale princess after falling in a fountain and going viral on social media. I need a new job fast, preferably far away.

Desperate, I say yes to becoming an etiquette coach for rich and famous adults in need of refinement in a distant and widely unknown country. It's personal relations rehab and comes with a heaping scoop of anonymity.

My first client got in trouble for a prank gone wrong that turned into a scandal. Hashtag relatable, minus the prank part. That joke was on me. I get tasked with the hotshot, over-the-top football star...who also happens to be my BGF, my best guy friend.

Declan

We've stayed in touch since high school via text, but upon seeing Maggie again after all these years, she's no longer just the girl next door. Something sparks between us. Or that could be the firecrackers I lit in the hallway.

I'm the first to admit that I'm quick-witted and cocky, on and off the field, forcing her to channel her cheery princess personality to teach me how to be

a gentleman. Turns out I rather like these lessons.

When tragedy strikes, she gets a glimpse into my past that I'd kept hidden. Instead of driving her away, she doesn't leave my side. Can't say I mind. Unfortunately, if I get romantically involved, especially with someone as smart, funny, and cute as my best friend, I'm off the team.

Will we keep things in the friend zone or fall in love and wind up in the (happily ever after) end zone?

USA Today bestselling author Ellie Hall presents a romantic comedy with sweet and swoony sizzle in this closed-door romcom. If you like faith-friendly, heartwarming, Hallmark-style romance, you'll love this feel-good series. Each book stands alone but reading them in order provides a deeper, richer experience.

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READER NOTE



Longtime readers may recognize Maggie and Declan along with the Boston Bruisers from a previous series. Starting in 2021, I repeatedly got a nudge about whether to revamp, revise, and recover the football billionaire series OR not to revamp, revise, and recover the football billionaire books. Then the nudge became more of a shove as I debated the changes to a series I liked but didn't love.

The books were originally published in 2020 and were my first official foray into romantic comedy—the bad-boy/rascally football players get in trouble after a prank and end up having to go to “charm” school. But I missed the mark with the genre.

The guys were more jokester jocks than billionaires who were sent to reform school, which I didn't establish as a pillar of the series as much as I'd have liked.

Not only that, but while the original covers were great, they were on the darker side. If readers judge a book by its cover, sales suggested it was a pass. I also changed the titles and series title a couple of times. Have whiplash yet?

You may recognize some of the original titles:

To Swoon or Not to Swoon over the (Football) Billionaire

To Love or not to Love the Billionaire

To Crush On or Not to Crush On the Billionaire

To Date or Not to Date the Billionaire

Christmas Do Over with the Billionaire

As an author, what I value most is the quality of the books I produce for the reader. Do they entertain, provide an escape, offer a satisfying emotional

experience, and keep the reader turning the pages? What I respect is your time, so in order to do that, I needed to make sure my books hit those above-mentioned notes.

All of this is to say, it's as if this series wanted to be written, but the writer (me!) hadn't quite nailed down the details. These loose ends—and ever-changing (cough, covers and titles, cough)—have followed me all these years as I labored over revamping them.

I floated the idea to my writing bestie and she suggested I go for it. If that weren't enough, another author mentioned doing something similar. All of this felt like a confirmation that I should go for it.

So here we are, back in Concordia at the Blancbourg Academy d'Etiquette, but with a completely rewritten story and almost double the length. Readers might also recognize the fictional European country featured in *Only a Night with a Billionaire* and *Only Love with a Billionaire*, along with the *Wolf Shifter Diaries* by my pen name E. Hall.

I hope you enjoy this makeover of sorts and the shiny new Love List series where jocks become gentlemen, women get treated like royalty, and you get all the sass and spark in between.

♥Ellie

P.S. Football fans, if I got any of the details wrong, my apologies! Blame me and not my husband who already has a tough shake as a lifelong Vikings devotee. *Skol!*



Malarky

ma·lar·key

Noun: meaningless talk; nonsense.

MAGGIE



I close my eyes and imagine a quaint town at the foot of a mountain landscape. The Alps? Aspen? Anywhere with snow.

When that doesn't do the trick, I picture the Atlantic Ocean, the Arctic, one of those hydrotherapy cold plunge vats...anything to cool me off as I pose for literally the hundredth photo today.

"Your cheeks are so rosy," says a woman wearing Minnie Mouse ears.

I don't want to think about what my makeup looks like, but I hope I don't resemble a wax figure. That would surely scare the kids away. "Apparently, not even a princess is exempt from the effects of the Florida humidity," I mutter while plastering on a bright smile.

The camera's shutter snaps and then I flit over to the next family waiting for their photo opportunity. I subtly try to coax people into the shade, but the cameraman keeps drawing me into the sun.

"You're in the shadow," he barks when I edge closer to an awning over a kiosk.

I step to the left.

"That made it worse," he says, forcing me and the kids waiting in line to remain under the blazing sun.

"What's it like being married to Prince Charming?" a little girl asks when it's her turn.

My smile may very well melt off my face, but my job as Cinderella is to keep it firmly in place. "It's more wonderful than I ever imagined," I say in my best imitation of the soft and lilting voice of the legendary princess.

Thankfully, that answer seems to suffice. Either that or the girl's mother doesn't want her daughter to get any wild ideas about anyone riding in on a

steed and sweeping her off her feet. My real answer is, *It ain't gonna happen, kid*. Sad but true. The truth is, I'm not married to Prince Charming, or anyone for that matter. I don't expect a handsome gentleman to swoop in and come to my rescue—not that I need saving, except from the heat.

Then again, I have a best friend in shining armor. Declan would march in here with a solution that involves shade and air conditioning. Then he'd tell the stupid camera guy to *bug off*—he's originally from Ireland and that's some strong slang over there.

I sigh, suddenly missing him something fierce. Declan was always there for me and not just to tell Bruce Paxton, who made it his mission to tease me in high school, to get lost. We also had our favorite ice cream cart that we'd follow around Boston—it was the original food truck, if you ask me. The library on Mass Ave was our own personal museum of history. So many nooks and crannies filled with memories. Now, I'm on the other end of the country and he's—I've lost track. Probably wherever the Boston Bruisers go for off-season training.

A father who sweats through his T-shirt and two kids—a girl and a boy—are in line next. They both pepper me with questions about what it's like behind the scenes, working at one of the most famous theme parks on earth. I'm not at liberty to say. After all, I'm in character. Instead, I improvise and turn the conversation around, asking them how they're enjoying their visit.

The questions from the children don't stop, though.

On second thought, I could use Prince Charming to bail me out right now. Hopefully, the kids will get bored and move on when something shinier catches their eye. Then again, the sweat on my face has formed a fine patina.

"The line for the rollercoaster is only twenty minutes. Let's go," the boy says, glancing at a notification on his phone.

The family hurries away.

"Yeah, let's go," says the cameraman tasked with taking photos.

Elmo Eliot is new, barely out of high school, and hates his job at the happiest place on earth. And yes, I can confirm that's his real name because the scheduling app matches employees' legal names and there's no way to change it, which I discovered for myself because I prefer using my mother's maiden name.

So, with a name like Elmo, you'd think he'd be cuddly, cute, and likable. I don't use the word *hate* lightly, but every chance Elmo gets he

sneaks off and ditches his shift. He breaks cast member rules all the time as well. And he's straight-up mean.

Is he hateable? Very.

Ordinarily, I'd lock elbows with a coworker, but when he made me stand in the sun one too many times and got me in trouble for supposedly eating a Mickey's head ice cream sandwich when he was the one who took it from the vendor, I reported him. Also, he didn't give me a bite and it was sweltering out.

Can you blame me?

Somehow, he's managed to stick around. He also figured out I was the one to snitch about the rule-breaking. This earned me an enemy instead of an ally. But he threw me under the trolley, accusing me of taking it when management questioned him.

See? The guy is a jerky jerk face.

In my Cinderella-slippered feet, I glide toward a shady spot. It's near a fountain, so I have to be careful because of my costume, but I'm afraid if I don't find some relief from this heat, the next unsuspecting little kid that wants to meet Cinderella will find Cinder-egg-a fried on the sidewalk.

I shouldn't complain. At least I don't have to roast in a full costume with an oversized bobbly character head. Being naturally fair-skinned, I wear heaps of sunblock which causes a breakout every two weeks.

A couple of boys toss coins in the fountain next to me. I hesitate, worried about them splashing my gown, but it's somewhat cooler the closer I get to the water—much like the park's guest heat-relief stations, but without the cooling mist.

I pose for another photo with a little girl dressed in an identical, though miniature version of my blue dress. She also wears a blonde wig, which I know from personal experience is awful in the heat. Have to give the little girl credit for dedication.

She tells me her name is Tiffany and she'd recently finished cancer treatment. "I've always dreamed of meeting Cinderella."

Tiffany's mom has tears in her eyes, probably at helping to make her daughter's wish come true. We chat for a moment, and then the little girl waves goodbye before skipping toward a lollipop stand.

Drawing my hands together, I ball them up under my chin. It's moments like that which make me love my job. My character can bring so much joy to a person's life.

I sigh, watching the pair disappear into the crowd when a hand lands on my waist. “Hello there, Mozzarella.” A sweaty kid with greasy hair and a chocolate ring around his mouth wheezes in my direction.

Mozzarella? My stomach flip-flops because this can’t end well.

He waves a giant chocolate baton, a new treat from a hit movie, in my face. “Have a bite.”

“No, thank you.”

“Come on, you have to.” Then he whispers, “My friends dared me.” He grips my wrist.

“Hands off,” I warn.

“I’ll give you a kiss and wake you from your slumber,” the kid says, puckering his lips.

“You’ve got the wrong princess,” I mutter, having already lost my patience for his antics.

I eye Elmo. We’re a team, and if a park visitor acts inappropriately, he’s supposed to step in and notify security. Useless, he stands there on his phone looking bored or amused, I can’t tell.

The kid’s grubby hands reach for me again. “Do you know what Prince Charming called Snow White when the shoe didn’t fit?”

I blink a few times, confused.

“Big Foot.” His eyes are unfocused like he’s been working his way through all the sugar the park has to offer.

“Definitely not me.”

He grabs my wrist. “Come on, my friends dared me to get a kiss with you.”

Ew. My nostrils flare as anger sweeps through me. How old is he? Ten? Twelve? Eighteen? I can’t tell. He’s obviously hopped up on sugar. Where are his parents? His chaperone?

When he moves in for a hug, breaking character, I say, “Back off.”

He reaches his sticky hands for me, teetering closer. As I step to move away, my slipper catches on the inside hem of my dress and my heel hits the edge of the fountain. There’s nowhere for me to go.

No, no, no. Please no.

My arms windmill as I lose my balance. Although it’s the last thing I want to do, I reach for the kid’s shirt to keep from falling. But it’s too late. I topple backward into the fountain.

Splash.

The warm water spills over the side. It smells like disinfectant as it quickly saturates my gown. Already unstable, the kid lands partway on top of me as though we'd been embracing.

Elmo's camera flash goes off. It's then I realize he's captured the unfortunate moment on film. He's laughing too. The twit.

My surroundings blur and shift into slow motion as I struggle in the shallow water. It's like I'm reverse doggy paddling, trying to find my way to shore. All I can hear is a low hum in my ears.

My gown tangles around my legs and my wig dips over my eyes. It's bad enough the cameraman-kid took a photo, but I'm sure bystanders are filming with their cell phones too.

That low hum, what likely had been silent shock, all at once turns into titters, which becomes full-blown laughter. It hits me at top volume like a stereo dial turned to ten. The world speeds up again.

"No," I moan as reality races toward me.

I shove the kid off me and try to get to my feet. It's like moving through a vat of day-old oatmeal—not that I've ever done that. My soggy dress weighs me down. I tear off the wig so I can see, but that is a mistake because sure enough, people are taking pictures with their cell phones.

The weird kid who caused this problem leers at the cameras as though he can already see the taglines on the videos that will go viral in mere moments.

Mozzarella and Prince Chocolate-ring make a splash or Princess Takes a Spill.

No, he isn't Prince Charming. He's weird, greasy, and smells like cat pee. Or maybe that's the fountain. Wait, could it be me? I have to get away from him and the situation.

Struggling to my feet, I stagger toward the edge of the fountain, cheeks burning. It's not from the sun but the shame that I can't even take the heat and keep this job. I'm sure to get fired.

"That's one way to cool off," Elmo says.

"With no thanks to you," I retort, shoving through the crowd when they point like I'm a spectacle rather than a sodden character they'd stood in line to meet mere minutes before.

Whoever said fame is fickle was right. Not that I want anything to do with that. Nope. Playing Cinderella, I thought I was anonymous. But if anyone recognizes me, I'll have to move again.

Walking through the crowd of park visitors takes on a blurry, surreal quality and my stomach churns. It'll take a long time to shake the burn of humiliation. Then again, that's nothing new.

I enter a cast members-only door and then hurry to the underground tunnels leading to the dressing room.

At the end of the hall, I gasp when I see a woman wearing a drenched dress, standing there wet and mortified.

Oh wait, that's me.

If there's a hole around here somewhere, I'd like to crawl into it.

My long blonde hair mostly escaped the hairnet I have to wear with the wig, but bunches of it poke through in wet clumps. My eye makeup is a horrifying mess fit for a Halloween horror movie as it drips down my cheeks. The dress is completely ruined—that will likely come out of my paycheck.

A delayed and slow-motion panic seizes me. I turn in a small circle, trying to figure out an escape plan.

There is only one solution. Quit.

Sounds extreme, because any reasonable employer would understand that I didn't throw myself into the fountain, break character, and ruin the costume. There's likely security camera footage to support my case. However, that's the problem. There's camera footage—by the number of spectators gathered around with phones lifted—a lot of it.

It's one thing to wear full makeup, a wig, and a gown while having hundreds of snapshots taken of me and the guests.

It's quite another for countless people to record my “wardrobe malfunction” and everything that followed, then post about it online, possibly with my name attached to the commentary.

Don't worry, I'm not on the run from the law or hiding out from gangsters. All the same, I don't want my identity plastered all over the world wide web.

I've had enough fame and notoriety for one lifetime, thank you very much.

With a long exhale that reinforces that I'm making the right decision, I hastily change into regular clothes, but accidentally put my shirt on backward before telling myself to take a deep breath.

Chatter echoes from down the long hallway—my fellow castmates return for a shift rotation. Likely, they'll have heard what happened.

I sweep everything from my locker into the same backpack I've had since high school and hurry through an exit on the other end of the room, avoiding the princesses and characters who're capable of keeping it together and not making fools of themselves.

They'll never know I was here. They'll never know I left. I've learned to blend in and for once, I'm relieved.

Down the hall, I knock lightly on the cast manager's door, but there's no answer. While I ride an employee golf cart to the bus stop, I type a letter of resignation to my boss in an email. There is simply no way I can go back after that fiasco.

The suffocating humidity plasters loose strands of hair to my neck. Hopefully, I look just enough like your average, run-of-the-mill wreck that no one recognizes me as Bigfoot Mozzarella from the fountain.

DECLAN



They say I can charm my way across the football field. I prefer to think of it as pure, unfettered skill.

In the locker room, I have the reputation for enjoying a laugh. My pearly white teeth gleam behind my mischievous smile. “We could glue his hands together while he’s sleeping,” I suggest.

When the guys are silent, whether contemplating my suggestion or figuring out how to talk me out of it, I add, “With regular glue. Not extra-strength adhesive this time.”

“Declan, he’s our new center. We need him to have use of his hands,” Grey says, ever the practical one.

“Yeah. Coach Hammer says his hands are gold.” Wolf grunts as though 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 as if that’s up for debate.

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

Grey sniffs.

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

“You proved yourself,” Wolf says.

“So will Brandon.” Grey speaks like this is a foregone conclusion.

“We’ll see. 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—” Wolf goes on to use what the coach refers to as “locker room words” aka language he doesn’t stand for.

Coach Hammer keeps things neat and tidy around here—says it’s a family affair. He insists we wear suits pregame, doesn’t allow salty language or rumor mongering, and if he had his way, we’d all be happily married with families.

That’ll be the day.

Back to the matter at hand. I rub mine together. “Brandon Campos, the newest player for the Bruisers, will have to prove himself for sure. First, he’ll be initiated—carrying on the decades-long tradition of pure mischief and malarkey.”

The guys chant, “Malarky.”

“How about we replace his toothpaste with mayonnaise?” I wrinkle my nose because the idea alone grosses me out. After a late-night party, I ate fries with aioli—what Wolf calls Rich Kid mayo—and it didn’t sit well. Haven’t touched the stuff since.

Chase tilts his head from side to side. “We could always use the old standby.”

“No. We’re not covering the toilet seats with plastic wrap. Coach Hammer made me clean it up last time. Never again, man.” Wolf shakes his head.

“Doughnuts filled with mayo? Mayo in Oreos?” I suggest while trying not to gag. It’s moments like this that the remains of my Irish accent comes through.

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

Giving a sharp shake of my head, I say, “Forget I mentioned it.”

“I know what we’re going to do.” Wolf’s lip curls with mischief.

“Oh, boy. He has that look.” Grey turns his head slowly from side to side as if he’s already seen the slow-motion train crashing into the dumpster fire. “Whatever it is, I’m not sure I want to take part.”

I cuff him.

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

We huddle around Wolf and he tells us the plan.

I chuckle despite myself. “Brandon Campos is not going to be impressed.”

“Sure, he will,” Wolf says with a wink. “Let’s see. Macy, Stacy, Allison, Keisha... They all seemed impressed by my—”

Grey holds up his hand in the universal gesture to stop. “We do not need to hear about your latest conquests.”

Chase shifts uncomfortably.

“I think Rylen would approve,” I say.

We hash out the plan to prank the newest member of the team, throw our hands into the center of our tight-knit circle, and holler, “Cruisin’ for a Bruisin’”—the team slogan.

We convince Chase, the most amiable of the crew, to send Brandon a text inviting him to hang out in the team lounge at the Bruiser’s training facility here in Boston.

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

Wolf grins. “Perfect.”

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

Wolf stops short and shoots Grey a glare. An outsider would think the two men are going to throw fists, but it’s just one football brother to another, reminding him of who he was. Grey needs that from time to time, otherwise, he wanders too far down a lonesome path. He’s one of us, like it or not.

“Who started the newbie initiation, Grey?” Wolf asks a moment later as if to reinforce his point.

Grey Adams is the oldest player on the team, and arguably the best, because the guy can practically play football with his eyes closed. The game is knit into the fibers of his muscles. Imprinted on his palms. It’s in the platelets of his blood.

The linebacker doesn’t answer but holds his ground with a grimace.

“Who was the original mastermind behind all the pranks?” Wolf probes, knowing the answer.

Grey’s lips form a thin line and his jaw twitches.

“Don’t forget who you are. Don’t let it get you. *He* wouldn’t want that.” Without another word, Wolf turns back to the room.

Grey exhales and then nods. No more needs to be said for him to glean the meaning behind the reminder.

Despite our winning smiles, attitudes, and abilities, we don’t have good-boy pasts, which results in being bad boys at present. Chase being an

exception.

Following the play we just drew, which has nothing to do with offense, defense, or gaining yards, the four of us assume our positions while waiting for Brandon.

Footsteps echo from down the hall. It's go time. I live for this—for shock and awe. But mostly to make people laugh and feel good. Although, in this case, I don't think Brandon will feel good. More like want to wash his eyes with bleach, but that's the point.

I lean in. "On the count of three..."

The guys adjust their stances, preparing.

I countdown. As the door opens, I say, "Now."

...And at that moment, whoever stands in the doorway gets an eyeful of four Boston Bruisers' star players' backsides.

"It's a full moon in Boston," I shout over our laughter.

Wolf howls.

Someone gasps.

A camera flashes.

A low voice groans.

As the four of us turn around, it isn't only Brandon in the doorway. Pro league Commissioner Starkowsky, his daughter Elyse, and several other team officials stand with their mouths agape.

The commish, shielding his daughter's eyes, starts yelling.

We hastily make apologies. This was not the plan.

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—"

Starky's face turns purple. "Boys, you are excused," he blusters to us.

It all happens in a split second, but we flee from the lounge, dispersing like kids caught ringing the neighbor's doorbell and running.

In the chaos, one of the guys elbows my nose, leaving it bloody and bruised. I could be mad, but this is what I signed on for—I'll always take one for the team. They're my only family.

I can run a ball down the field with no problem, but it's harder to keep trying to outrun the past, and I've taken more than a knock to the nose to survive that.

MAGGIE



*A*s I walk a few blocks from the bus stop to the small apartment I rent, I can't ignore the nearly ever-present feeling of failure that only grows as the minutes pass. Being normal is a lot harder than they make it look on TV.

I rush upstairs, beckoned by the promise of cool, crisp air conditioning. Instead, what may as well be a furnace from the bowels of the earth's molten center blasts me. I check the thermostat and it registers forty-five degrees, then climbs by threes up to ninety-nine before descending. I adjust the controls and cycle the thing, yet the telltale hum of the AC unit clicking on doesn't come. I start poking the buttons, begging the thing to register the intense heat.

"Please, please. I just need my core temperature to drop to a manageable level. Meltdown imminent."

Getting hotter by the second, I stab the buttons, but the air conditioner continues to rebel as if someone woke up this morning and decided to make me as miserable as possible.

"Whoever you are, what did I ever do to you?" I whisper, my mouth so dry from the heat it's like I've been chewing on cotton balls.

Using the wall to keep upright, I slump to the bathroom and barely turn the shower dial to keep it as cold as possible. Despite my need to cool down, I yelp when I get in as the water splashes me, and not because of the spindly spider in the corner of the shower stall—I cannot reach it, so we agreed that if I don't get a broom to try to squish it and risk missing, it won't wait for me to turn my back and drop onto my head.

At last, relief comes and I let the water chill me to the bone. I wish I could say all my troubles and cares from the day wash down the drain along with the strange scent of the fountain water, but the frustration and humiliation cling to me.

Putting on a loose T-shirt and shorts, I slouch to the kitchen and take out an emergency box of cake mix. Usually, I bake from scratch, but it's too hot to do anything, including, I decide, to turn on the oven. I open the fridge, but I'm out of eggs anyway. Figures. I could try an applesauce substitute, but maybe cake is not in the cards.

Plus, I can't go to the market and risk being recognized for what's been quickly titled the "Cinderella Spill" by social media influencers. Nor should I spend money on eggs when my bank sent me a notification yesterday that I dipped below the five-hundred-dollar threshold for their free-from-fees account.

I have three hundred ninety-eight dollars, two coupons for a free round of putt-putt, and one lonely heart to my name.

I drop onto an overturned crate that held my cookbooks before I put them on the counter. It also doubles as a stepstool, recycling container, and in a pinch, a laundry basket. With my elbows resting on my knees, I survey the space. I've lived here for about twelve months and have hardly unpacked. Only a calendar hangs on the wall. Not that I have many belongings, anyway.

Over the years, I've moved a lot, and each time I gave away or discarded more of my possessions—roommates, charities, and friends are usually happy to take things off my hands, especially in the beginning when most of it came with a designer label. Though, I could really go for my Bruiser's hoodie right now because it's like a security blanket, but I'm sweltering again, and at risk of combusting.

After my last move, I managed to get everything I own into a regular-sized car. The frameless futon mattress was a tight squeeze, but I folded that thing like a taco and shoved it in the backseat, just like I would fit one stuffed with carnitas into my mouth.

When my friend Etta Jo had seen what little I possessed, she'd worn a look of concern, as if to suggest that I'm fixing to disappear. She's not entirely wrong.

Let me clarify—I don't want to disappear per se. I just want my identity to be completely my own and not come with attachments or expectations,

nor do I want to be my parents' meal ticket.

Is that too much to ask? According to my mother and father, yes. Then again, I rarely talk to them these days.

Thankfully, growing up, Etta Jo was only allowed to watch non-secular programming and Declan lived in Ireland, so neither of my closest friends know my dirty little secret.

The last time I was officially recognized in public was three years ago. I was at the supermarket, and a guy wearing a kimono, and nothing else, plopped a bag of cat food in his shopping cart and said, "You're Honey Holiday from Friends of the Family."

Thankfully, I don't particularly look like I did when I was a kid, but as they say, the internet is forever. Same goes for popular, award-winning TV series.

If you're wondering if I was the adorable kid with a memorable catchphrase on a hit show? *Ding, ding, ding!* You got it right. Alas, I'm fresh out of prizes and branded merchandise from the studio.

Like every good Hollywood scandal, my parents took all my money. Supposedly, they reinvested it in me and their production company.

At the time, I didn't mind playing Honey Holiday, but what came after made me want to put as much distance between myself and fame as possible.

Had I been able to be completely honest with my parents and say the truth out loud, it would have been, *It's easier to disappear on my terms than try to be seen and used or ignored*. For the record, my love cannot be bought with toys, jewelry, fancy clothes, and the latest tech.

Of course, they tried that.

When I was a junior in high school, Dad said my mopey face threatened to destroy their empire. Mom said I was starting to look too girl-next-door and we needed to do something about my "average look."

Not cool.

They kept the income that I generated during the five seasons of *Friends of the Family*. My parents saw me as a fast track to the world of the rich and famous. If I've learned one thing, it's that you can't microwave life. There aren't shortcuts that won't cut you off from what really matters.

Plus, I don't want handouts. When I made it clear that I no longer wanted to be a part of their dog and pony show, they sent me to boarding school in Boston. That was senior year.

Still sitting on the crate, I fight against the wounds of the past and mutter, “I’m a grown woman, educated, talented, but I’m living in this tiny space with about a dozen palmetto bugs—” On cue, one skitters by. I drop my head into my hands. Wisps of my blonde hair tickle my face. I blow them away when I spot a bag of chips, then I decide to whip up some frosting using already melted chocolate—thanks to the hot temperature in here. I take the bag of chips and the bowl of icing down the hall.

The day I moved in, Etta Jo and I made fast friends over our enthusiasm for baked goods and the Bible. She works at a local theme park too but has a side hustle, selling hand-lettered prints of Psalms online. I consider her penmanship art—largely a lost one—while mine is the kind of scratch that only chickens can read.

Etta Jo opens the door. “Chips, frosting? It’s a party.” Her southern accent immediately puts me at ease. It’s the kind that could deliver bad news, scold you for sneaking an extra cookie, or tell you where to bury the body and it would still be soothing.

I scurry inside so none of her precious climate-controlled air escapes.

“Too hot to bake?” she asks.

“Yep. Figured we could have chips and dip. Think of it like chips and salsa, only salty and sweet.”

She chuckles. “Are we breaking the rules on Official Cupcake Day? International Cake Day? National Baked Anything Day?”

“It might be Fruitcake Day.” I’m big on celebrating official days of all sorts—from pizza, doughnut, and dog days to kazoo day.

“Something happened. I can tell by the lack of lift in your smile that it isn’t good.” Etta Jo wrinkles her nose in friendly commiseration.

The truth is, I only bake when I have something to celebrate or when I’m upset. *Cake is comforting, people!*

Etta Jo dips a sturdy corn chip into the frosting.

I do the same. “It’s kind of like sweet queso.”

Once we’re a few bites in, Etta Jo leans back and says, “Okay, what’s going on?” Her kind eyes and accent get me to cave.

“I was just saying to myself, ‘I’m a grown woman, educated, talented, but I’m living in this tiny space with about a dozen palmetto bugs...’”

“Maybe the problem is that you were talking to yourself,” Etta Jo says with a gentle but joking smile. “Also, I have this natural palmetto bug deterrent I’ve been trying.”

“Does it work?”

She shrugs.

I dip another chip in the melty frosting. “You know me. I give my all. I pour everything into my job and—”

“And you got fired?”

My lips twist to the side because now that I think about it, my actions were rash. “No, I resigned.” That sounds less harsh than *I quit*.

She passes me another chip and I tell her the whole story, leaving off the part about why I’m camera shy—well, viral video shy.

MAGGIE



Just as Etta Jo starts to offer me the words of encouragement—that I’ll likely protest but probably need to hear—her roommate, Giselle, breezes in. “Ooh, frosting and chips,” she says as if that’s not a strange and surprising combination.

“Help yourself,” Etta Jo says, the picture of hospitality.

“The craziest thing happened today.” She goes on to tell us an outrageous story about meeting a football player from the Miami Riptide who’d taken her to dinner on his yacht.

“Maggie, don’t you know a football player?” Etta Jo asks.

Giselle leans in. “Ooh. Which team?”

My hand reflexively presses against the heart charm around my wrist—it used to be a necklace but the chain broke, so now it’s on a string. Declan gave it to me when we graduated and told me to follow my heart. He’d also said, “*No matter where we go, no matter what we do, I promise that I’ll always be there for you.*”

“Come on, dish up the juicy deets, Maggie.”

“He plays wide receiver for the Boston Bruisers.”

Giselle waggles her eyebrows suggestively. Etta Jo leans in as if I’d ever kiss and tell. Not that Declan and I have.

“We. Want. Details,” Giselle says.

“Starting with his name and vital statistics,” Etta Jo says.

“Especially the scandalous ones. Come to think of it, we hardly ever talk about your dating life.”

That’s because it’s as mythical as unicorns and as nonexistent as dinosaurs. And I’d rather forget about the guy I most recently fell for—

emphasis on fall, but not into a fountain. More like I stumbled over my better judgment.

As if reading my mind, Etta Jo taps the air. “Oh, wait, there was Sly the Single Guy.”

“A mistake of which we shall never speak.”

“The takeaway is always searching guys’ names online before you go on a date.” That’s Etta Jo for you, always looking for the upside.

I huff out an exhale, still resenting my ex. “Sylvester Zeman should’ve come with a warning label.”

“At least he didn’t post about it on his YouTube channel.”

“No, because while he capitalized on living large as a bachelor, he had a secret and thriving dating life, and that would’ve been bad for the brand.” I do not hide the disdain in my voice.

“I’m sorry you were one of his victims.” Giselle taps my hand. “I heard some other women started the hashtags #Don’tBuySlysLies and #ByebyeSly.”

It’s almost enough to make me laugh, but I’m not quite there yet. While I thought I had to pander to get a guy to like me, that doesn’t mean I ought to give him the keys to the kingdom, er, my van. By the time Sly was done with me, I was at risk of having to panhandle. The guy cleaned me out, taking my cake-loving dreams with him. Literally.

“We don’t care about that loser. Tell us about the football player.” Etta Jo’s southern accent is so encouraging, if I knew nuclear codes, I’d be at risk of revealing them.

“Not much to say.” That’s the truth.

She eyes my fingers which clasp the charm around my wrist. She bumps me with her shoulder. “Oh, come on. Tell us about the wide receiver for the Bruisers. I need to live vicariously through you girls. The last football player I spoke to was Augie Roberts, who was the star QB for Neil Marsh Regional High School in Willoworth County, Georgia. I’ll never forget the last thing he ever said to me.” She lowers her voice a few octaves. “‘Etta Jo, I know you and I would make beautiful babies as Mr. and Mrs. Roberts, but Mama always said my hair is going to take me places and I’d like to see where before I settle down.’ And there I thought it was his athletic skills.” She lets out a fluttery little sigh.

We giggle.

“So, when did you meet this football stud? How’d you meet?”

“Declan? Who said anything about him being a stud?” I ask.

“He’s on the Bruisers, of course he’s a stud—in a rugged, manly kind of way,” Etta Jo says matter of fact.

The team has a reputation, but I don’t think of Declan like that.

“He does have some tattoos.” Giselle looks at an image on her phone.

“Are you into tattoos?” Etta Jo shimmies.

Giselle raises her hand. “I am.”

It’s easy enough to read between the lines and see where they’re going with this. “If you’re asking if I’m into Declan, the answer is no. We’re friends. Just friends. It’s always been very clear where Declan and I stand: squarely in the friend zone. Forever. Always. End of story.” And if my smile says anything, it’s that I’m grateful for his friendship.

“Declan,” Etta Jo echoes. “I like that name. Sounds like it would belong to a strapping lad.”

Giselle and I both laugh at her southern-accented attempt at an Irish accent.

“He’s originally from Ireland, but we met in high school. We were both new to the private academy. We clicked.”

“You clicked?” Giselle says, as if sensing there’s more to the story.

“We were both kind of oddballs, I guess.”

Etta Jo and Giselle both pitch forward slightly and exchange a glance as if they’re asking each other *who’s going to handle this?*

In a deliberately slow version of her peppy southern accent, Etta Jo asks, “Can you define *oddball* because, see, I’m from outside Savannah and you’re from, well, I’m not sure where you were born and raised, Maggie. Bookmark that because it feels like something I should know about you. But back to the point, where I come from, an oddball is someone unusual, eccentric, quirky—”

“And ugly,” Giselle adds. “And you, Maggie, are not ugly.”

“Neither is Declan.” Etta Jo wears a smirk as she peers over Giselle’s shoulder while she scrolls what are likely photos of Declan Printz. “Nope. Quite the opposite, in fact.”

“You’d make a good couple,” Giselle says.

I roll my eyes. They aren’t the first people to pine over the football player. Not that I have, but I’ll give them a little more to the story to establish that he and I are only friends. Then the girls and I can move on.

“Forget last words, I’ll never forget Declan’s first words to me.” I lower my voice and try to imitate his slight Irish accent. “He said, ‘How did a California girl end up in dreary Boston?’ I wondered how he knew I was from California.”

“You’re from California?” Etta Jo asks with bruised surprise in her voice.

Oops. Shouldn’t have mentioned that. “Yep. I was born there. Anyway, he said it was a hunch.”

“The blonde hair and the sunny smile are giveaways,” Giselle adds.

Then he went on to say that I didn’t answer his question. My response? He was right. I said, “We shall never speak of it.” And made no further comment. But I had a question of my own. I asked, “How’d a tough-looking guy from Ireland end up in Boston?” He answered, “We shall never speak of it.”

Declan and I became instant friends and inseparable, but we recognized that we were both grappling with the past and knew better than to trauma dump on each other in order to bond. It was a laugh riot from the start, if only to chase away the blues.

Giselle scoots next to Etta Jo and they both ogle over more images of my best friend, commenting on how good he looks in his uniform...and out of it. Some athletes do amazing things and even end up in the Hall of Fame, yet their names are largely unrecognized except among super fans.

Then there’s Declan Printz, who parades around like the cock of the walk. I sometimes wonder if we just met now if we’d become good friends. But I know him and want to believe deep inside still exists the brown-eyed boy who made it his job to see to it I laughed at least once a day and who loved football more than fame.

I hang on tightly to my friendship with Declan, even though now we only text, which makes it feel like it’s slipping out of my hands because it’s the last real, good thing I had before I stumbled over mishap after mistake. I’m afraid if I talk much about it, I’ll lose him too.

“Why didn’t we know that you’re good friends with this guy?” Etta Jo asks.

“It’s not a big deal.”

“He’s obviously a big deal. A very big deal.” Etta Jo stares at the heart charm around my wrist as if she knows it’s from him.

“At the very least, we should’ve gone to his game the last time he played Miami,” Giselle says.

“You have your own football star,” Etta Jo replies as if she called dibs on Declan.

If he’d had his way, I’d have been at every game. He’d have paid my travel expenses too, but a gal has to learn how to make it on her own. I don’t accept handouts. I learned early on that the hand that feeds can also bite.

“Why aren’t there any pictures of you on his arm at an event?” Etta Jo asks.

“If you haven’t noticed, I’m not a Giselle lookalike.”

“Maybe Declan isn’t into women that look like me,” she says demurely.

“Have you looked in the mirror lately?” I ask.

“Have you?” she replies.

I grumble. “No, but if I go on social media, I’m sure to see a drowned rat.”

Etta Jo places her hand delicately on my arm. “My mama always says that someone else’s beauty doesn’t dim your own, and you’re beautiful, Maggie.”

“In a girl-next-door kind of way,” I mutter. This fact has been drilled into my mind since the end of my run playing Honey Holiday on *Friends of the Family*. I was cute but as I matured, I didn’t remain star-quality material, despite my parents’ attempt to keep me in the spotlight.

“Thanks, ladies. I guess I’m just feeling low,” I say, not wanting to be a downer.

Etta Jo scooches closer to me. “Why don’t you tell us all about Declan Printz?”

“Dish the details. When was the last time you saw him? What did you do? And most importantly, what does he smell like?” Giselle smirks.

I toss a decorative pillow shaped like a taco at her.

“Come on. Spill.”

“The last time I saw him...it’s been a minute.” I tap my chin, thinking back. “When we both went to college—then he was recruited—things gradually tapered off. Our regular time together came to a logical end. We replaced early morning runs along the Charles River, fish and chips on Fridays, and our regular hangouts with texting.” My reflexive shrug drops with a little pebble of disappointment landing in my belly.

“You mean you haven’t seen him in how long?” Etta Jo asks.

“When I was at CU Denver, the Bruisers played the Colorado Crush. We got together for pizza. Couldn’t see the game because I had a final. Also, he’d periodically send me concert tickets or gift certificates for pizza—that was our thing.”

“Diggidy do, that’s so sweet.” Etta Jo whacks me on the arm.

“Did he surprise you and show up?” Giselle asks as if waiting to hear a romantic meet cute.

I shake my head slowly. “It was always a solo show. Just me. He was busy building his career.” That little pebble sends out ripples when I remember how much I hoped he’d be there and now realize how disappointed I was when he didn’t appear.

“So, let’s get this straight. You hung out with this guy every day and you’re not married and don’t have a bunch of his babies?” Etta Jo asks.

My lips lower with a frown.

“Just saying, I’d marry him and have his babies.” Giselle nods.

Etta Jo looks me over. “Wait, hold up. Maggie. Did it never occur to you to marry him and have his babies?”

I roll my eyes. “We’re friends.”

Giselle shakes her head as if I passed over a treasure chest. “You’ve stressed that, repeatedly.”

“When Declan got drafted to the Bruisers, I knew he’d soon be famous. How could he not with his natural charm and charisma? His personality spans city blocks. Fills arenas. It should probably have its own postal code.” But if he were going to be a household name, I had to create some distance to maintain our friendship before it got swept away.

“And that’s a problem because...?”

I have to divert the conversation before we get too personal. “To answer your other question, it’s been about three years since we saw each other in person. It was his twenty-first birthday party.” I stuff a chocolatey chip in my mouth and hope their imaginations do the rest.

Jaws dropped, they stare at me.

“I took a risk and accepted Declan’s invitation, knowing I’d be lucky if I got a hello and a hug. He was so mobbed, there were so many people at the party.”

I only saw him from across the room, surrounded by gorgeous women and football bros before I signed the guest book and dipped out of there like

a melting ice cream cone.

“But you’ve stayed in touch,” Etta Jo asks.

“By text.”

Absorbed by the game and lit by the stadium lights, text messaging seems safest. Because if there is one thing I’ve had to protect myself from, it’s the spotlight. Even by proxy. Plus, there is the fear that under the pressure of fame and fortune, he’s changed. I’m afraid to witness it in real-time, so a text-based relationship seems like the obvious solution. Over the years in Hollywood, I’d seen that scenario play out enough times, and didn’t want to lose what we had.

The girls look at me as if waiting for me to explain.

“When Declan got drafted, I knew our friendship would take a hit, but I wanted what’s best for him. That’s what friends do, right?”

“Sounds like love to me. Just saying,” Etta Jo says.

“Just friends,” I singsong. “I thought you had to work?” I ask Giselle.

“More like work the football field. I want a football player too.” Etta Jo pouts.

“I don’t have a football player. I have a best friend.” I take another big bite of a chip with a double scoop of frosting as a hedge against further questioning even though my teeth feel itchy. The tag on my shirt pokes into my skin. Maybe I’ve had too much chocolate (is such a thing possible?) or perhaps the discomfort I suddenly feel has something to do with the conversation. I shift as if trying to edge away from these unknown and unnamed emotions.

Etta Jo pours more chips into the bowl. “Okay, if Maggie won’t share some juicy stories, the mic is yours, Giselle.”

She’s completely immune to Giselle’s magically sensational love life and seems quite content with her own, but there’s no denying we’re both mystified by how she always seems to find herself in the right place at the right time.

“Well, Garrison Wheeler and I met at table number nine.” Giselle practically swoons.

The thing is, Giselle always swoons, but the relationships never last. What do I want? Don’t laugh or judge. I want a Cinderella romance—minus the family drama. I’ve had enough of that already.

Etta Jo playfully rolls her eyes as if to say, *Stock up on tissues everyone, in about a week, girlfriend will have her heart broken.*

My woes, along with Declan, mostly forgotten, we discuss Giselle's love life. Etta Jo doesn't know the full story about how I feel about the rich and famous—not even Declan knows why I keep my distance from fame and fortune. But she is aware that I'm not interested in bling, but in the unbroken circle of the ring and what it symbolizes—a long-term, meaningful relationship. I'll take the fairytale romance, but not necessarily with an actual prince because renown and recognition eventually bring trouble, which I know firsthand.

"Giselle, does that mean you quit your job?" Etta Jo asks. "Big day. Maggie did too."

"I didn't quit, I resigned," I correct because I can't stomach the idea of being a quitter and repeatedly failing, even though it's my recent reality.

Giselle shakes her head. "I didn't quit either. I have a shift tonight."

"You weren't fired for taking off with a football player?" I wonder if Declan knows Garrison Wheeler.

"No, my boss is a Riptide super fan. I got her a bunch of merch and that did the trick. She was very understanding, probably hoping that free tickets to a game come next." Giselle coyly lifts and lowers one shoulder. "She said she would've done the same thing."

"Giselle has the best luck," Etta Jo mutters, then gives her roommate a recap of what happened to Cinderella at the fountain—aka me—who has the worst luck lately.

Giselle wrinkles her nose in a way that makes me think she saw the footage on the internet but didn't recognize me. "How awful. I'm sorry that happened. But if you need a job, my cousin is hiring."

Knowing Giselle, it's probably something wacky—lion tamer, rare stamp collector, door-to-door dog food salesperson.

"My cousin's pride and joy is the Blancbourg Academy d'Etiquette in Concordia—"

"Sounds fancy," Etta Jo says.

"The school specializes in image consulting, public relations, and social skills commonly known as etiquette. She recently expanded to include digital etiquette, but includes the classics too, like dining etiquette, social skills, and both traditional and modern manners."

"Like a finishing school for debutantes?" Etta Jo asks.

"More like celebrities and other high-profile figures. Her clients include baboons and cavemen, mostly."

We both laugh.

“Not actual baboons, I hope,” Etta Jo says.

As Giselle goes on to describe the finishing school and the open position, it actually doesn’t sound half bad, except for the celebrities and high-profile figures part. All the while, they both encourage me to go for it.

“You were a princess. Of course you can teach classes at a finishing school,” Etta Jo says.

I bite my lip, unsure. But the rent is due, and given Giselle seems to stumble across opportunities and windfalls, perhaps I should give it a shot. Worst case scenario, I don’t like it and I quit. “If I’m going to keep a roof over my head, maybe I should apply.”

Etta Jo picks up a chip slathered in chocolate, offering a toast. “To Princess Maggie and a bright future ahead.”

We clink and say, “Cheers.”

Giselle holds up her finger. “There’s just one thing.”

I tip my head to the side in question.

“It’s in Concordia.”

I’ve been all over the country and traveled abroad numerous times. It feels like my eyebrows burrow together on my forehead because I’ve never heard of Concord-what’s-it. “Where is that?”

“I have family there. Well, my cousin Cateline—Cate for short. Actually, she’s originally from France like me. She got a cushy position at Blancbourg Academy d’Etiquette of Concordia. When the former headmistress retired, Cat took over.” Like all of Giselle’s stories, there are a lot of glamorous details—she grew up in Paris after all. The difference between Giselle and other people that float in her atmosphere is she’s the real deal, works hard, and isn’t shallow. I’ve waded into those waters and can attest to the fact that isn’t always the case.

“Do they speak English in Concordia?” Etta Jo asks as if fearing the opportunity will require French, Russian, Greek, or a combination of the three.

“Of course. Concordians have their own dialect, but it’s English—the country is a few clicks north of the UK. Most of the clients are American.”

Some people would think Giselle is a liar because she lives in this crummy apartment building and works at a restaurant while traipsing through life, collecting famous friends, stories of wild adventures, and so many boyfriends we’ve lost count. The truth is, she *was* rich and a former

European pop star who left that life for one of relative anonymity here in the States.

Hashtag relatable.

She doesn't have to work another day in her life, but loves people. Just not the ones who mob her, ask for her to sign things, and follow her everywhere. She once said she just wants to be normal. I understand her aversion to the spotlight all too well.

"So, it's overseas?" I ask, awash with uncertainty.

Giselle pulls out her phone, taps a few times, and then shows us the map.

Concordia is indeed a remote island north of England.

"You're suggesting I move abroad? I can't." My mind races with the reasons that's impossible.

"Not that I want you to leave, but answer this: you can't or you won't?" Etta Jo asks.

She has a point.

Giselle passes me her phone, showing me the email from her cousin with the job offer. The pay is triple what I earned as a princess. The catch is I have to work closely with the client on a one-on-one basis for thirty consecutive days. Then I'll have a couple of weeks off before getting a new client.

"What's the currency conversion? Because that is a lot of zeroes." Etta's mouth forms an *O*.

"It's in US dollars," Giselle says.

"That's probably the family rate." My spirits dip.

Giselle shrugs. "You're family. One of the Berghiers." She winks.

But I'm not related to Giselle. I'm a *Prucell*. Even though I don't use my given name because of the connotations. I use my mother's maiden name, *Byrne*. The moment I made that decision, I also vowed to earn my own way in the world and not ride on my childhood coattails of fame or my parents dangling opportunities to earn money like a bunch of rotten carrots.

As if sensing my hesitation, Giselle says, "Come on, you'd be doing her a big favor. I'd love to jet over to Concordia and help, but I have to see how things go with number fifty-seven."

Etta Jo waggles her eyebrows.

"Is your cousin desperate for employees because they quit like the previous eleven governesses in the Sound of Music?" I ask, hoping she gets

the reference.

“The role isn’t for a nanny, babysitting children,” Giselle says.

“Celebrities are glorified kids,” I mutter.

“Cate needs extra help because she usually only has a couple of clients at a time but just got four troublemakers.”

Etta Jo adds, “You can think of Giselle as your fairy godmother. It’s very Cinderella-esque.”

“I don’t want to think about Cinderella.”

“Concordia is famous for its chocolate cake,” Giselle says as if that sweetens the deal.

It kind of does.

“There’s just one rule. No dating the clients.”

“Not a problem.” I don’t want anything to do with celebrities or public figures.

“The palmetto bugs won’t miss you, but I will.” Etta Jo gives me a side hug as if taking the job is a foregone conclusion.

“Then go with her,” Giselle says. “Explore the island nation.”

Etta Jo shakes her head. “I didn’t tell you yet, but I got a studio space in the new artisan building downtown. I sign the lease Monday.”

I light up, excited about what this means for her side hustle. We visited the old factory converted into an upscale mall for artists, craftspeople, and other creatives a few weeks ago and saw a space available.

“The light in there is amazing and—” As Etta Jo goes on to describe her good news, my mind wanders.

I’ve strived to become an independent person and the freedom it anchors me to. But right now, I feel untethered. A familiar sense of loneliness tiptoes close. I’ve managed to avoid it lately, but it’s looking for a way in, an open door.

But if I step through the one that leads to Concordia, maybe it won’t follow me.

MAGGIE



I'm originally from California, but even after all this time living in new places, I still don't know where I belong in the world.

Could I actually move abroad? This is one of those moments when I wish I had normal parents so we could discuss it, weighing the pros and cons.

Thankfully, I've always had friends like Declan and Etta Jo to stand in, but she's all but bought my plane ticket. I don't want to bother Declan with my woes because I know he'll drop everything to help. He's at the height of his career—I can't ask that of him.

I open the messaging app and scroll past *The Declan Printz* as he so aptly typed when I last got a new cell phone—over five years ago now. Yes, my device is a relic.

My finger hovers over the thread between my parents and me when my phone chimes with a message. My stomach does an excited little tumble when I see who it's from. Declan's best friend-in-need sensors must've been going off—or he's bored between meetings.

The Declan Printz: Would you rather take a pirate ship to Spain or a sailboat to France?

Maggie: Sail to France for sure.

The Declan Printz: I'd take my jet. Or the yacht. That would work.

Maggie: But that wasn't the question you asked.

I knew about the plane, but did he text to brag about a new yacht? The football bros must not only be competing on the field but with ostentatious purchases, considering, according to Giselle, Garrison owns the *Riptide's*

Playbuoy. I can only imagine what Declan named his vessel. Dismay makes my shoulders sag.

The Declan Printz: When have I ever followed the rules?

Maggie: Ha ha. Here's one: If you were offered a job overseas, would you take it?

The Declan Printz: Like a football job or something else like lounging on a beach in a speedo, or what I like to call a mankini?

Maggie: That doesn't sound like work to me.

The Declan Printz: I'd take it very seriously.

Maggie: But you said yourself, you don't follow rules.

The Declan Printz: Speaking of, I'm traveling abroad soon, unfortunately.

Maggie: Don't get deported.

The Declan Printz: I'll do my best but know exactly who I'll call if I'm only allowed to make one.

Maggie: Wait. What is a mankini? Never mind. I probably don't want to know.

A sigh escapes when my screen goes dark.

Etta Jo and Giselle break conversation mid-sentence and their eyes land on me.

"What was that?" Etta Jo asks.

"What was what?" I ask, eyeing the chip crumbs and remaining frosting streaking the bowl.

"The sound you made." Giselle demonstrates with a swoony sigh.

I shake my head. "Must've been distracted. I didn't hear it nor did I register your question."

"But you made the sound." Etta Jo's eyes narrow as the corners of her lips lift in a smile.

Pointing at myself, I look around. "Me? I didn't make a sound."

"You did," they both say at the same time.

"Didn't," I croak. Had a noise like that come out of my body, I'd know. Right?

"Ya did," Etta Jo says in her southern accent which almost convinces me she's right.

"Well, I don't remember."

"You said you were distracted," Giselle says plainly.

“I was texting with Declan and thinking about the job offer. Thank you, by the way. It’s a really big deal, so—” This time I puff an exhale. “So, there’s a lot to think about.”

Etta Jo’s head turns subtly from side to side. “So much makes sense now.”

I get to my feet and tidy up our chips and frosting feeding frenzy. “Maybe we’ve had enough sugar for one afternoon.”

Etta Jo holds up three fingers. “I’ve observed three reactions after you’re on your phone texting. One is the non-reaction which I can only assume is something mundane like a reminder to go to the dentist. Two, the slightly irritated with a side of sadness reaction, which I imagine might have something to do with your parents, who we all know you don’t discuss. I respect that you have your reasons. Then three, there are occasions when you get off your phone and it’s like you’re walking on clouds. On cloud nine. Much like right now.”

I wave my hand dismissively. “I’m not walking on clouds anywhere between here and cloud nine.”

“Totally blissy,” Giselle says, agreeing with Etta Jo.

“Swoony, after you texted with who we now know is none other than the one and only Declan Printz.” There Etta Jo goes again with her eyebrows.

I flop back on Etta Jo’s plush blue velvet couch. “Nope. This is what I imagine lying on a cloud is like. Those big, puffy cumulus ones.”

I sink a little deeper and close my eyes. Falling into the fountain flashes there like a high-definition recording. I imagine staying here for a while, letting my little inner troll take over and go full goblin mode, or some other fairytale beast with poor hygiene and a fierce chocolate cake habit.

When I blink my eyes open, they’re both staring at me.

“You can’t tell me there isn’t an itty-bitty—” Etta Jo starts.

“Teeny tiny,” Giselle adds.

“Sliver of attraction between you and Declan?”

I frown. “Swoony? Blissy? I don’t know what you’re talking about. No. That’s a ridiculous question. As for the first two text reactions, Etta Jo, you’re probably right, but the third is silly. “For the bajillionth time, Declan and I are only and always and forever friends.”

“Mhm. Sounds like famous last words.”

“Speaking of famous. Guess who just messaged me?” Giselle flashes her phone and we squeal at fifty-seven’s text to Giselle about wanting to tackle her with strawberries and whipped cream.

With the spotlight off me for a moment, the word *famous* lodges in my chest and has a hard time going down, because Etta Jo is right about my response whenever I text my parents. I go from a seconds-long high of elation like a little kid on the edge of the pool saying, *Mom, Dad watch me*, to the plunge into the frigid water of our non-relationship as I remember where I stand in their lives. Forget cloud nine, I’m at the back of the line as far as they’re concerned.

I haven’t seen or spoken to them in months, or has it almost been a year? Usually, texting them is better because they’re so busy. In fact, for my last birthday, their assistant phoned to wish me well on their behalf. They were traveling so they couldn’t connect. Likely story. Still, I feel the need to do so. There’s probably a deep psychological explanation for my desire to be seen and have their approval. For a relationship. A family. That’s not too much to ask, is it?

While Etta Jo and Giselle discuss Garrison’s text, I type up a quick summary of the job opportunity in Concordia, asking my parents what they think. Then, in a fit of annoyance at myself for caring about their opinion when they’ve made no effort to involve me in their lives, I delete it.

From across the room, Etta Jo whispers. “Quick, scroll away. Scroll away. Don’t let her see it.”

“But it’s gone viral. She can’t avoid it,” Giselle hisses back.

“It’s bad enough that some creepy kid pulled her into the fountain. So, embarrassing. She doesn’t have to relive it along with millions of viewers.”

Forget clouds of bliss and elation. Nope, I just dropped through them and am in a free fall. Of course, my friends have the best intentions to shield me from the video. But the fact of it remains, and will forevermore, on the internet. A strong sense to flee rushes from my head to my toes.

Then I freeze in what feels like midair. If millions of people have seen my disastrous drop into the fountain, that means Declan will too. Perhaps he has.

Perspiration beads across my forehead. Could this get any more humiliating? I’m actually shocked he didn’t tease me about it in our brief text exchange—he and I tease each other about everything. It’s the nature of our friendship.

Sadly, the Orlando area is practically at sea level, so there isn't a cave for me to hide in or a rock for me to hide under. Rumor has it, Space Mountain is the highest point, but no way am I heading back there. An overwhelming desire to run seizes me.

Thumbs hovering over the miniature keyboard on my phone, determination shoots through me and I tell my parents where I'm going, instead of asking for them to weigh in.

In the split second that I click *send* and the message goes from a white box to blue, a dense and foggy sense that I just sealed my fate and altered the course of my future flies through me like fast-moving clouds.

What that looks like? I don't know.

Where it is? I've never been there.

Is this a huge decision? For sure.

But if Cinderella taught me anything, it's time to be bold and daring as I leave today's defeat behind me and persevere for my future.

I already had my dream stolen from me. There's nothing else to lose. I've felt aimless since Sly drove off with my future, leaving me in the dust. It's a cloud of humid dust that I can't seem to wash from my skin.

I'm not elated like I'm on cloud nine as Etta Jo suggested when I was done texting Declan. She's been inhaling too many paint fumes. Rather, I'm resolved to take this leap into the unknown.

Wheee!

Here I go. Hopefully, my landing isn't like plunging into a cold pool—or as hot as Orlando.

I tuck my phone in my pocket. No sense in waiting around for a reply from my parents—it might take another year. Not that they care.

"Of course you should go with him on a scenic tour in a helicopter to the Florida Keys," Etta Jo says.

"I'm not a big fan of flight," Giselle says. "I prefer two feet on the ground."

Interrupting, I say, "I'll take the job."

She and Etta Jo do a double take.

"Really?"

"Seriously?"

"Yes," I nod, feeling a little fluttery with nerves, but unwilling to go back on my decision.

Over the next few days, this is only reinforced when I call my parents and they don't reply while I tie up loose ends and pack—not that I have much left and certainly nothing else to lose, especially now that the Cinderella Spill is officially viral.

DECLAN



None of us Boston Bruiser players lose sleep over what some have dubbed the “Moon-gate” incident as the actual full moon hangs high in the sky over the city.

Well, I lose a little, but I’ve become a night owl. My phone pings with messages about our prank that others have dubbed “Bruiser Butt” and I don’t doubt that the papers and press will churn out headlines, images, and articles by sunup.

So, it comes as no surprise when, the next day, Coach Hammer summons us to his office. From the other end of the hallway, Wolf, Chase, and Grey shuffle in my direction. Each of them wear varying expressions of dismay. Likely, they’ve already gotten an earful from family and friends.

We enter the room with the hardwood bookshelves and dark green rug. Hammer’s two-yard square window doesn’t provide a view of the city, but rather the practice field. It’s austere and demands respect. I almost feel like Mom sent the kids to Dad for discipline. Not that I’d know.

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

Grey grumbles.

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

“Come on, we’ve done worse.” I shrug.

“Guys, Elyse was there.” Chase refers to Starkowsky’s daughter who is a grown woman and has certainly seen her share of football players in various stages of dress, having been around the team her entire life. In fact, she’s a reporter and spends a lot of time in the locker rooms pre and post-game.

“Doesn’t seem like a big deal,” I say.

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

“He has a point,” Grey says.

“We don’t have daughters,” Wolf says.

“You know what I mean,” Chase hisses.

I laugh because the idea of us settling down and having kids is preposterous. About as likely as me ever eating mayonnaise again. We’re all so far from that stage of our lives, it’s laughable.

Though Chase and Grey eye me like I ought to rethink my priorities. I suppose French fries with gravy, or even ketchup, isn’t a bad combination.

Coach Hammer gets off the phone. By the way we all lean in, we each prepare to apologize, but Hammer holds up his massive hand, indicating we save it. He gets to his feet and starts pacing 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.”

“We totally should’ve just glued Brandon’s hands together,” I whisper.

Chase elbows me in the ribs, which is no joke because the guy’s arm is meant for gunslinging a football. Come to think of it, he’s probably the one who accidentally jacked up my nose yesterday.

Wolf lifts and lowers his shoulders. “Oh, come on. We were having fun. We thought it was just going to be Brandon, not the commish.”

“Elyse was mortified.”

“More like the commish was mortified,” Wolf says.

Hammer tilts his head at a *shut up and quit while you’re ahead* angle. “Connor.” All he needs to do is use Wolf’s given name to quiet him down.

Wolf steps back and clasps his right hand over left, standing at respectful attention. Coach Hammer is the only one who seems slightly capable of taming the wild in him.

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

Chase nods like the good little choir boy he is.

“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? Inconvenient and unnecessary.” Hammer

winces. “But mooning the commissioner, his daughter, our newest player, and a bunch of officials?”

“Hilarious,” Wolf says loud enough so only we can hear.

“Boys, there are consequences.”

“A fine?” Wolf asks, reaching for his wallet even though it would get docked from his pay. “I’ll pay for it. Whatever the amount.”

Hammer shakes his head.

“Penalty?” I ask.

“Community service?” Chase suggests.

This time I elbow him because I don’t want him to give the coach any bright ideas.

Grey remains quiet, as though he knows the punishment will be worse.

“No, none of the above. You’re going to finishing school,” Hammer says.

All at once, there is a flurry of questions and confusion, namely that it’s a joke. One of the guys barks a laugh.

“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 so we can read the headline.

Full moon over Boston.

“Catchy and fitting.” I chuckle.

Wolf joins me. Chase cracks a smile. Grey is as stony as ever.

Hammer stabs the paper with his thick finger. “You guys are terrible with the press.”

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

“The problem is we’re lacking in actual good press lately. You’re all cocky. Not at all humble.” A mite of disappointment enters Hammer’s voice.

“Oh, come on, it’s all hype,” Chase says.

“The fans love to see us getting rowdy,” I add.

“That’s a load of malarky,” Coach mutters. “They love the Bruisers because you’re the toughest team on the field, but you also have heart. Do good. Do the right thing—when I started, seventy-five percent of the guys on the team were married. Family men. Now...”

“We’re the Bruisers. We have a reputation to uphold,” Wolf says, gesturing to Grey who has been on the team the longest. “Tell him.”

The coach’s lip slants in an I-don’t-want-to-hear-it snarl. “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’d ever heard.

Coach adds, “Team players.”

Affronted, I straighten. “We demonstrate that weekly on the field.”

“Think of it like reform camp. Charm school. Etiquette lessons. You’ll be there a month.” Hammer’s lips press together in a slim line.

The room falls silent.

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.”

A long moment of silence erupts with protests.

“What about training camp?”

“OTAs?”

“The program you’ll be attending is the only organized team activity you’ll be completing if you want to hit the field in August.” Hammer, ever the picture of calm, grits his teeth as if he’s about to growl at us. He doesn’t need to say we’d better pass this program with flying colors or we’ll get sacked.

“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 join the rest of the team before the season starts.” Coach’s nostrils flare as if it pains him to say this, but he has to answer to the team commissioner.

All at once, we voice objections and try to talk him out of it—all except Grey who remains stoically quiet as always.

Hammer seems to only hear 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 slaps 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,” I say, unable to hide my gloating smile. What can I say? I take care of the goods.

“For an Irishman,” Grey mutters.

“Listen, my hands are tied. It’s this or walk, boys.” Hammer starts shuffling folders around on his desk, indicating the meeting is over because he has more important things to do than scolding his star players.

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

“All of our lives,” I echo because, for all my bravado, it’s true.

“Consider this probation.” Hammer grunts.

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

“Can’t you have your father talk to the commissioner?” Wolf asks Chase.

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

“Which is—?” Wolf asks.

Chase lets out a long sigh. “If he did, whatever the deal Starky offered, his would be worse, much worse.”

I gaze toward the ceiling as though asking for help.

“You’ll each be assigned a personal etiquette coach. If you screw up, you’re off the team.” Hammer cocks an eyebrow.

We experience a group case of whiplash at that command.

“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 cleaned 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.

“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?” I shrug.

Coach glares.

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

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

Grey stiffens.

Wolf glares.

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 Wolf’s voice.

The coach nails Wolf with a hard look. “A real man isn’t afraid to love, Connor.” He turns his gaze to the rest of the group. “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?” I ask.

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

We form a huddle in the hallway, all of us locked and loaded with complaints. 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. No one is happy.

Grey levels us all with his gaze. “Listen, you know what this team means to me. We’re going to follow orders.”

“Good luck keeping Wolf away from women,” I say.

“You’re one to talk,” he fires back.

Chase ignores this. “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.”

Wolf shifts away, never a fan of rules. Me neither, for the most part.

Chase tugs him back to 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. It may not have been a popular lifestyle choice, especially among the football team, but he honors his faith.

My hand wanders to the chain around my neck and hidden under my shirt. "It's just a month."

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

"You're no fun," Wolf says.

With a glance at the desperation hidden in Grey's eyes, I say, "I'm with Chase. The rules apply unless you fall in love."

"And ask her to marry you," Chase adds.

Wolf raps me on the back of the head. "Thought you'd be on my team."

"We're all on the same team," I say even though, in this circumstance, it pains me to do so. I don't quite have Wolf's reputation, but I'm not a stranger among the ladies.

Chase extends his hand. Grey sets his on top. I toss mine into the center. Wolf groans and reluctantly follows suit. Then we chorus, "Cruisin' for a Bruisin'."

Grey's phone pings with a message.

As we walk down the hall, Wolf says, "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," I warn.

"You can thank yourself for getting us into this situation," Wolf retorts.

"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," Wolf says as we turn the corner.

"It's not prison. I'm sure we'll have some free time." My phone pings in my pocket. For the briefest moment, I wonder if it's Maggie. Haven't seen her in too long—our texts don't come close to the feeling I used to get when I'd see her smile or hear her laugh. I'd get kicked in the shins if I revealed to the guys that I miss my best friend—and not because I'm being mushy like Hammer. More because they don't believe a male and female can just

be friends without an undercurrent of attraction. *Pshaw*. Maggie and I wrote the book on guy-gal friendships. We're pros.

So why haven't I seen her? Circumstance? Because it's hard to say goodbye each time? She has a new job and I travel a ton. Plus, the public appearances and the never-slowng pulse of my career. She's busy too.

Despite what the guys said, My Maggie-loo just gets me. But I regret drifting apart for the last few years. I can't quite remember the last time we saw each other in person. But she's my person, and the image of her with a ponytail and bright smile is forever etched in my mind no matter how much time passes.

I dismiss the message that looks like info about our politeness probation penalty because the only person I can talk to about this is Maggie and now probably isn't a good time to call.

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

"You'd like that," Wolf ribs.

Chase's phone pings and he swipes to his email. "I just got the travel info from the secretary. I think this is a school of some sort. Finishing school."

"Like old-school etiquette?"

"Like sipping tea with pinkies turned out," Chase says.

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," Wolf says darkly.

Chase claps him on the shoulder. "Good. 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 hear of the place?"

I nod, but the others remain silent because this just got all too real.

MAGGIE



The night before I leave, Etta Jo and I have dinner at the touristy restaurant where Giselle works. I'm hoping to get some more information about the job and what to expect, but between the full dining room and her flitting around the state with her football boyfriend lately, she's been scarce.

All I know is her cousin's name is Cateline, the finishing school provides room and board to its employees, and Concordia is famous for its chocolate cake. Sounds like my kind of place.

After enthusiastic goodbyes—Etta Jo is happy for my bold step into the unknown and I'm excited for her new studio space—I go to the airport early the next morning.

As I gaze out the window at an arriving airplane as it taxis toward the gate, a little thrill of excitement replaces my uncertainty. The flooding feelings of failure recede and the sadness and loneliness that occasionally crowd my mind and heart hide in the shadows.

I'm going on an adventure and won't miss the palmetto bugs either.

"Mommy, mommy." A little girl's voice trickles into my thoughts. "It's Cinderella. I saw her the other day."

I startle but quickly smile, slipping into character one last time. "Shh. I'm on a secret trip to..." I bite my lip, thinking fast. "To visit the Princess of Concordia, but I can't let my sisters know, otherwise they'll be jealous."

"They're so wicked," the little girl whispers. "What will you do while you're there?"

"I'd like to go dress shopping. Do you think I look better in blue or pink?"

“Definitely blue. I want to be just like you when I grow up.”

I ought to advise against that but hope crests inside. Maybe my directionlessness and uncertainty about what I’m supposed to be doing with my life is about to change. After all, I have a boarding pass in my hand.

When my flight is called, I wave goodbye to the little girl, but her words stick with me. *I want to be just like you when I grow up.* I am grown up and almost halfway through my twenties. Since graduating high school, I’ve had over a dozen jobs. I’m a woman who owns little more than what I fit into three checked bags and two carry-ons.

In the days since I fell in the fountain, there’s no avoiding the fact that I’ve become an internet meme, a laughing stock. Maybe Concordia doesn’t have YouTube. Or perhaps that’s just wish-upon-a-star thinking.

I recall my days working at the theme park and at the funny and meaningful things kids said. But that little girl’s comment is like an arrow, piercing my inner troll that routinely seeds my mind with doubt.

Who am I? What do I want to do? Am I a role model?

Almost eight hours and several thousand miles later, I still don’t have answers, but mountains loom as the plane descends in Concordia. They’re much like the ones I’d imagined when I needed to cool off on that hot Florida day not too long ago—or hide under. Either would’ve been fine.

Before I have a chance to get my bearings and admire the picturesque postcard surroundings, my phone beeps. I’m late for the meeting at the school. I glance at the time and realize I made a mistake calculating the time zone difference and it isn’t long before I have to meet my client.

I rush from the airport to a train, briefly taking in how clean everything is and the prominence of golds and blues, from the compartment to the signage. Once outside, I see that the Concordia flag, flying high and rippling in the wind, matches those colors.

As I hurry to find a taxi that will take me to Blancbourg, everyone is friendly and proper as though they too attended the finishing school. Despite this, being in a strange place, I’m on alert, flipping on my city-girl-smarts switch. A woman traveling alone can never be too careful.

But the taxi driver puts me at ease as I hear a snippet of his life’s story as the cab winds up a cobblestone driveway to a stone building that looks vaguely like a miniature version of the royal castle set in the Concordian mountainside—which interestingly also resembles the Cinderella castle. I blink a few times, getting major Cinderella vibes.

The fading light outside catches my reflection in the cab's window. I sink a little in my seat—looking more like the fairytale princess before her grand makeover—or after having fallen into a fountain. My hair is a frizzy mess and my clothes wrinkle like I just peeled myself off a waffle iron, but the air is fresh, the scenery spectacular, and for the first time in a long time, I can take a breath.

A strange sensation ripples through me. I stagger back. Not like Concordia wants to send me back. Rather, it's like I'm suddenly tethered, anchored, and sense that in my bones I'm exactly where I'm supposed to be. Which is odd since it all happened so unexpectedly and quickly.

A valet wearing a blue uniform with brass buttons leads me through the grand entryway of the school. There's an arch overhead supported by pillars and lots of shiny stone. Golden hardware gleams like it's recently seen a microfiber cloth.

I smooth my hair, which has been subject to humidity for far too long, and brush my hands down my waffle-ironed clothing. The interior of the building is fancy with polished wood, candelabras, and oil paintings. I don't quite feel like I fit in, given my rough-from-the-plane appearance, and cannot claim any etiquette teaching experience. But I'll keep this job even if it means I have to play the role of someone who knows what she's doing.

"By the way, I'm Arthur Fitzwilliam, the doorman, butler, and jack-of-all-trades here at the old manor," the man in the blue uniform says proudly.

"It's nice to meet you," I reply, introducing myself.

"If there's anything you require, please don't hesitate to inquire. I'm here to help."

"Thank you, sir," I add, hoping Cateline isn't behind a two-way mirror watching and evaluating me.

"Unfortunately, we're short-staffed. For now, it's just Miss Berghier, Regina Harrow, the bursar, the chef, Shonda, our on-call stylist at the on-site salon and spa, and yours truly. However, we do have a housekeeper, who now only comes biweekly. The other two new teachers are settling in and I expect you'll meet them soon. If only you'd seen this place in its prime," he adds softly.

"Thank you, sir."

"Miss Berghier is in a meeting at present, but you're welcome to get familiar with the manor, including the employee rules and guide to

etiquette.” His sharp nod suggests he runs a tight ship and expects me to behave myself. He excuses himself and strides down the hall.

I glance at the grandfather clock as it chimes. It’s probably the jet lag, but those few minutes passed in a flash and I’m hurrying downstairs to meet my new student like Cinderella when the clock strikes midnight.

In the center of the meeting room sits a table, two chairs, and a folder. Having missed the orientation, I do a panicked and brief internet research and assume I’m like a life coach for a wayward celebrity, CEO, or some other public figure. Hopefully, after my Cinderella viral sensation, they don’t recognize me. Before I have a chance to skim the file, laughter echoes from the hall.

I brace myself and then get to my feet for a proper greeting like a professional etiquette teacher. I never had one myself, but got the gist from the many events I attended when I was younger. However, this time, I won’t let myself shrink or shrivel like a wallflower. I won’t step back in time to my ten-year-old self who existed in my parents’ shadow.

I shift from foot to foot like a boxer, psyching myself up before I step into the ring. Standing tall, I tell myself I can do this. I’ll do it for the little girl I met at the airport. To make her proud...and that version of myself who was made to feel too small to be seen.

On another peal of laughter, the door to the meeting room flies open.

Water flies in my direction.

Before I wince and close my eyes, I catch a glimpse of a man with blondish-red hair. He’s made entirely of muscle.

Why did I close my eyes? Because he entered the room with squirt guns blazing. He howls like a cowboy from the wild west as he blasts the room and everything in it with water, including me.

Where was he on those hot days in costume when I worked at the theme park?

Doused, my first instinct is to shriek, but like Cinderella in character, I force myself to smile as I open my eyes. Then I gasp, because I cannot believe who fills the doorway.

DECLAN



*S*uddenly silence my maniacal laughter. “You’re not a dude.”

An extraordinarily familiar woman with blonde hair, peachy skin, and wearing a smile jerks back slightly. She wipes a wet piece of blonde hair from her face. A charm strung on a string around her wrist catches my eye.

“I am not a dude, Declan,” she confirms.

My mouth opens and closes as my worlds collide. “You’re not a stranger either.”

She blinks a few times, whether from the squirt gun water or because she’s as shocked as I am, I’m not sure.

“You are My Oh Mags Byrne,” I say, gesturing grandly and using one of many nicknames I have for my best friend.

Her smile is a strange mixture of shock, delight, and dismay.

I step closer, ready to scoop her into my arms in a bear-hug hello, but she stands frozen, as stationary as a football upright. Probably a result of my grand entrance which was not intended for her.

“What are you doing here?” we both ask at the same time.

She gestures, “You first.”

Wincing, I click my tongue. “About that. I, uh, got into some hot water back in Boston.”

She wrinkles her nose as water drips from the end of it. “Is that so?”

“Cold water. Uh, sorry about that. I thought I’d give the coach or whoever was here to greet me a Declan Printz dousing—”

She clutches a damp file folder to her chest and the situation comes into focus.

I lower the squirt guns. My new coach isn't short, but she's not tall either. She's fit, but curvy where it counts. Her gaze doesn't meet mine and her hair hangs limply around her face with no thanks to me.

Clearing my throat, I ask, "Is this the job overseas you mentioned?"

"Sure is, and it seems you're my client. Er, student." She steps closer and I catch a gust of sweet rosewater perfume.

"Then let the fun begin!" I lift the water pistols like a cowboy ready to conquer the west now that he's been reunited with his partner in crime.

She slowly shakes her head. "Declan, I need this job and I imagine the fact that we know each other would be a conflict of interest, so as of right now, we do not know each other. Got it?"

I frown. "You're asking me to pretend I don't know you?"

"I'm not asking. I'm telling you to," she whisper-hisses. "They're serious around here."

I glance around to make sure we're alone, then tackle her with a monster hug despite her orders.

She tries to shrug away. "Declan, the headmistress could walk in at any second."

"It's a risk I'm willing to take after not seeing my best friend in what feels like forever." I squeeze tight enough that I feel her soften a little.

"You're not going to let go until I give in, are you?" Her voice is muffled against my chest.

"Nope." Something crackles inside me.

At last, she wraps her arms around my midsection, hugging me back. She sinks into me as if she needs this embrace as much as I do. For approximately twenty seconds, I feel at home, at ease. Like if my football career doesn't recover from the #BruiserButt scandal, I'll be okay. A deep breath, the first in a long time, fills my lungs.

When we part, Maggie looks up at me, hazel eyes bright. Maggie Byrne is so sweet, she's the kind of girl that could give a guy a cavity.

"How long has it been? Someone was supposed to come to my birthday party but stood me up." I wag my finger.

"I was there, but the line to meet you was too long."

"Ouch," I say, mock flinching. "You're still wearing the charm I gave you at graduation. But it's not around your neck."

Her fingers reach for it. "Yeah, I guess so. The chain broke."

The crackling inside intensifies and spreads to my chest. “You should’ve told me. I’d have replaced it. And for the record, if you ever show up anywhere I am and there’s a line, Miss Mags, I want you to cut right to the front.” I reflexively grip her wrist and rub my thumb over the charm. If I had my druthers, I could buy her one covered in diamonds instead of this little silver thing—it’s a wonder she still wears it.

“Cut to the front? Ha ha.” The way she drops the sarcastic laugh suggests she’s not the kind of woman to wait in line for a guy, nor should she. In fact, if a guy ever made her wait in line, I’d introduce him to the Boston Bruiser bust-up. It would involve my fists and his ears.

“I’m not joking,” I say out loud as a dark thought creeps in. What if I’ve been that kind of guy to someone’s best friend?

“Joking? But that’s what you do.” Instead of the smile I want to see, her lips dip like she carries disappointment. It can’t be about #BruiserButt because that’s just par for the course. I think back to our most recent text and everything seemed fine between us, business as usual with our easy-going banter.

“Ready for your life makeover?” she asks, glancing at the contents of the folder.

“I don’t need a life makeover.”

Her eyes, not meeting mine, land on the water pistols. “Declan, I beg to differ.”

I’ve never seen this version of my best friend. Instead of a cheerful reunion, I get cold, dead-eyed, irritable outlaw Maggie.

Again, the water probably didn’t help.

“I’m, uh, sorry,” I start.

“Are you, though?”

I lift my shoulder because she knows me too well. “If it weren’t you standing in this room, then no. Not at all. I’m the kind of guy who brings the heat. I figured the guys would be in here with a team representative ready to give us a stern scolding about our behavior, so I wanted to cool things off.”

The words I speak, ordinarily met with an eager smile from the women I woo, are stale in my mouth. Out of place. Lyrics to a song that has grown old. Yet I said them anyway. I have to keep up my persona, right? But Maggie is different. She’s not some random chick. She’s My Mags.

“Is that really the first impression you wanted to make?” she asks.

“My first impression, and I’ll never forget the first day we met, you were wearing a white cotton tank top with yellow flowers. Your hair was loose and kind of tangled in a pair of hoop earrings. You wore cut-off shorts and sandals.” I glance down at her feet. “And you had a toe ring on.”

“We first met in Mr. Sanderson’s global history class and you asked me about being a California girl.”

Even though distance has separated us, I’ve never forgotten Maggie’s bright and sunny smile. “We officially met when he partnered us for that project. But we unofficially met the day before. You were walking toward Riverdale Dorm and I was coming from touring the dining hall.”

The space between her eyebrows pinches as if she’s trying to remember.

“We were walking toward each other. You were carrying a large ceramic garden gnome. Someone’s dog was loose with its leash trailing behind as it bounded toward you. I made a daring save Coach Hammer would be proud of and got ahold of the leash before it crashed into you and knocked the gnome out of your hands.”

Recognition brightens her eyes. “I remember that gnome.”

I press my hand to my chest. “That’s what you got from that story and not my daring rescue?”

“Thank you for keeping the dog from knocking me over and saving Bagwick Wiggletop,” Maggie says, lips quirking.

“Who?”

“The gnome. I traded him to a nice elderly woman in St. Augustine for a chocolate cake recipe that I made into cupcakes.”

“That’s weird. Should I be worried?”

“No, he has a good home. Coincidentally, she had a gnome named Brassy Bunnyhop.”

I burst into laughter and bright sunshine fills my mind. I can’t help but think Maggie and I have been on a collision course and now, reunited, I’m home after a long time away.

Her eyes flick to mine for a moment and her cheeks turn pink. Then she presses her lips to a thin line. “What did you say before? You bring the heat? Then you doused me with water?” Her voice sounds faintly like an echo.

I’ve never seen such a beautiful face crumble so fully, so sadly, so terribly, or so quickly. Maggie has always had a sweet innocence, a girl next

door quality, and I feel like the biggest jerk on earth for trampling all over it with my cocky behavior.

Then again, I didn't expect to find my best friend in Concordia. "I maintain my innocence. I didn't realize you'd be here. You texted about a job but not where."

"Yet here I am...and here you are." It's almost like she wants to say more but hides the words behind her back like a kid with a cookie from the cookie jar.

"And there I thought you'd be happy to see me."

"I wasn't expecting to see you and I am happy to see you now, but—" She pinches her damp skirt and pulls its cling from her curves.

I wince. "I'm sorry." Then without hesitating, once more I pull her into my arms, not caring that I'll too be damp from my water gun spree.

My thoughts land on how good it feels to have Maggie in my arms. To hold onto something, someone, who is a constant in my ever-changing life.

She doesn't hug back this time. "Not funny, Declan."

I let her go. "At least it wasn't a sports drink. That would've left you super sticky."

Maggie lets out a little growl. Admittedly, it's cute.

"If you want to dump a bucket of water over my head in revenge, you have full permission."

"Getting revenge when you least expect it would be more satisfying. But considering all the rules at this place, it's safe to assume we're not supposed to know each other, Declan. We have to fake not having a friendship," she whispers.

Shifting from foot to foot, I say, "I'm a football player, not an actor."

"Thank goodness," she mutters.

"And I apologize about the water guns. As I mentioned, I figured the guys from the team would be in here."

"Didn't you travel together?"

"The moment the plane landed in Concordia, I went to check out the city—Intherness."

"Meaning you went MIA. No wonder you were late." Disappointment laces her voice.

"The locals were nice enough. Unlike Wolf, Chase, and Grey, I'd heard about Concordia. Probably helps that it isn't all that far from Ireland. But I've never been here. From time to time while growing up, I'd encounter a

Concordian—they speak English but with a distinct accent that sounds like a split between British English and French. Though, it was never clear to me why they'd leave their home country. It's among the wealthiest on the planet, even though it's one of the smallest and most obscure. It has a timeless yet old-world feel. I instantly fell in love and thought of you—the two of us exploring the shops and cafes as we did in Boston so long ago. Too bad our trip here isn't under different circumstances.”

“Nice try, Declan. Trying to kiss up to the teacher? Not going to work.”

That wasn't my intent, though I admit that my stream-of-consciousness comment does sound a bit romantic. “Oh, so you play hardball? Conveniently, that's my specialty.”

“Ha ha.” She steps closer, but I don't see laughter on her face. “Listen, I need this job. I can't have you trying to sabotage me on my first day.”

I give my head a little shake. “Hold up. Let's catch up.”

“Remember our text exchange the other day—?”

“Yeah. But you didn't mention working as an etiquette coach. I'm just putting two and two together. When I imagined arriving at the Blancbourg Academy d'Etiquette in Concordia, I came up with a plan.” I wink. “Once my teammates were thoroughly saturated with my smoking water guns, the teachers would parade in and formally introduce themselves. I was just told to show up at eleven. I thought it would be funny—”

Wincing, she smooths her hair away from her face and opens her mouth to say more, but again, I interrupt. A viral video I saw on the flight flicks through my mind. “Wait, Maggie were you—?”

She dips her head, almost like she steps into her own shadow. It's as if she knows and dreads what I'm about to ask. Unlike the water gun thing, the woman dressed as Cinderella falling into the fountain with some creepy kid wasn't funny. The way he looked at the poor girl made me want to throw Cinderella's glass slipper at him, but I lock down my questions, suspicions, and anger because she seems uncomfortable and likely still upset. I'll address it later.

I change course, “How about we get you some dry clothes?” I unbutton my custom-tailored suit jacket. I may show up with water guns, but I'm no slouch. At least not when it comes to dressing properly. As soon as I was able to shrug off my uniform of hoodies and jeans, I invested in quality threads.

I loosen the top button of my pressed shirt, prepared to give it to Maggie. Looking up from the contents of the file—presumably a folder containing the misbehavior that landed me here—I start to unbutton my shirt.

Maggie waves her hands to stop me as her eyes widen. “My room is upstairs. I can go change.”

“Listen, I’m really sorry. I feel terrible. I truly thought—” Feeling awful, considering My Maggie-ee was quite likely the victim of the Cinderella Spill, I drape my suit jacket over her shoulders.

With an arched eyebrow, she says, “Apparently, you also thought the rookie player on the Boston Bruisers would be the only person walking into the room when you and the other guys on your team decided to moon him.”

“So, you’re playing bad cop? That was usually my role.”

“Someone has to keep you in line.”

“And that’s going to be you?” I ask with a smile and an air of disbelief.

Stepping closer, I can’t help but smirk because her eyes finally take on some light, glowing slightly as if she remembers the fun we used to have.

“Declan, I need this job and if I’m not mistaken, you’d like to remain on the football team. You have to be on your best behavior and let me be your etiquette coach, not your Maggie-whatever.”

“In my defense—wait.” Once more, she gives me pause. “You read the article where we explained what had actually happened?”

Various news outlets reported that we’d intentionally mooned the commissioner. Ordinarily, I don’t object because as far as I’m concerned, any press is good press. But in this instance, I’d prefer the truth and not end up on probation at a finishing school.

“What’s the real story?” she asks.

“We were just having fun with Brandon Campos, our newest player.”

“Of course you were.”

“You believe me?”

She shrugs. “Why would you intentionally jeopardize your job?” Water traces a path along the line of her jaw.

Letting out a breath, I step forward to wipe it off, but she shuffles back as though afraid that her boss might come in.

“Where did you fly here from?” I ask.

“Florida.” Her tone has a sharp form of punctuation at the end like she doesn’t want me to ask if she was the princess in the video or for any other

personal information. The two of us excelled at compartmentalizing the past back in the day. Probably why we became such good friends so quickly.

Though these days, I have no problem talking about myself—though the past remains there, buried deep down and far away. Although, a lot closer here in Concordia than across the ocean in Boston.

“Funny that we both ended up here. Almost like fate wasn’t pleased we hadn’t seen each other in so long.” I speak fondly, trying to stitch up my rude arrival, dodge the Cinderella incident, and resume our easy rapport.

Usually, Maggie has a great sense of humor, but I never pranked her directly. She was my partner in crime. She’s also smart, honest, independent, and has a natural beauty that...I give my head a hard shake. That sounds like girlfriend material. Haven’t done that in a very long time. A crackling inside finishes the thought for me. Maggie looks at me for a moment.

The crackling fills my ears.

This is new.

Different.

Unexpected.

So many of the women I encounter these days are overly flirty, fawn over me, and are only interested in doing things other than talking and genuinely laughing. Maggie isn’t like that at all. However, right now, she seems tight-lipped and closed-off. Logic suggests it’s because she’s my coach and wants to be professional, but my Maggie radar suggests something else is going on. Guilt skates toward me because I haven’t been a great friend.

“Do you want to go dry off?” I suggest.

She squares her shoulders and opens the folder. I glimpse a photo of myself looking like a thug. The edges of the contents are damp. “No, I’m fine, but this is one step down from a mug shot. Care to explain? Should I be concerned?”

“In the hustle to retain our dignity after we realized it wasn’t only Brandon who walked into the room, Chase accidentally elbowed me in the nose. I took it like a man.” I bring my fingers to the bridge, still slightly sore and scabbed over.

My phone vibrates in my pocket. I forgot to turn the sound back on after the flight. The message is from a girl I went out with the weekend before. I ignore it and return to the ray of soggy sunshine in front of me.

Planting my hands on Maggie's shoulders, I say, "How about we start over? As you said, we don't have to mention to anyone that we know each other. I don't want the headmistress to replace you with a shrew." I wriggle at the thought of being with an uptight school marm who wants nothing more than to slap my knuckles with a ruler. "That way there aren't any problems on your first day at work. It's a win-win, right?"

She bites her lower lip as if debating whether to fib or not. "That's probably the smartest course of action."

I reach to grip the lapels of my suit jacket, but it's over her shoulders. My insides crackle again at the sight of her wearing it, reminding me of the times she'd borrow one of my hoodies and it would come back smelling like sweet rosewater.

Yep, it's time to start over.

DECLAN



I clear my throat and say, “I’m Declan Printz, guilty as charged.” I grin because here I am, reunited with my best friend, and I can’t help but joke around.

A subtle smile plays on her lips. “Nice to meet you. I’m Maggie Byrne, your new lifestyle coach.” She scans a piece of paper in the folder like she isn’t sure where to go from here.

I peer over her shoulder at the file, getting a lungful of that same, familiar sweet rose scent mixed with my cologne wafting from my suit jacket. Up until now, I’d been nose blind to it but mixed with Maggie’s fragrance, I can’t help but want to take a bath in the combination—or hose myself down in it with a pair of squirt guns.

Stealing a glance, her eyelashes brush the smooth crescents of her cheeks. Her forehead creases slightly as though she isn’t sure about what she’s reading. Wisps of her hair graze her neck and she twists one with slender fingers as the water drips onto her collarbones.

My phone vibrates again, catching me on a hard swallow and I cough into my fist. It’s from another of what Wolf would refer to as Declan’s Damsels.

Little known fact. There’s the public-facing version of me and the private one. No one in the US, except Maggie, has ever seen a glimpse into that side of me, and even with her, it was limited. I left the past in Ireland. But whether it’s geographical proximity, Maggie’s presence—sharpening the image of who I was when we first met like an old Polaroid photo coming into focus—or simply a change in the air, I feel an inner crackling like something is breaking open.

It's a youthful, innocent, and fresh first-glance sense. The one I'd felt when I met Siobhan all those years ago—and haven't come close to feeling for anyone since.

Maybe not until now.

Maggie's voice floats back to me. "Welcome to Blancbourg Academy d'Etiquette of Concordia."

If I'm not mistaken, by the way she stumbles over the school's title, it's the first time she's spoken it out loud. I'm not going to lie. It's slightly adorable.

She sucks in a deep, shaky breath. Is she nervous or steeling herself in case I get any wise ideas?

A brilliant plan forms in my mind. "Forget reform school. We'll fake it. A double fake—pretend that we don't know each other and that we're going along with this etiquette nonsense."

Ignoring me, she continues, "We teach social skills commonly known as etiquette. This will include in-person interaction, print, and online."

"Listen, I know why I'm here, but don't you think we could just go through the motions of the lessons and hang out instead?" Truthfully, I don't want her to have to suffer through giving me the spiel. I know how to be a good lad but often choose not to.

She lifts her chin slightly. "To be quite honest, it's so I get a paycheck on Friday."

"What?" I ask, taken aback by her candor.

She gives her head a dismissive shake like she forgot to be formal. "I meant to answer how it'll help you. Sorry. As you know, it's my first day."

"I guess we're all beginners at some point." I recall how it felt when I arrived in Boston, started school, and my first time on the American football field. It was the same day I met Maggie Byrne. I step closer, intending to offer her comfort by bringing her gaze to mine.

She stiffens and doesn't look up.

Taking the folder out of her hands, I close it and set it on the table. I pull out the chair for her. She drops in and then I assume a comfortable position with my legs wide and feet planted on the floor opposite her. "Like I was saying before, how about we help each other?"

"What do you mean?"

"How about we come up with a mutually advantageous agreement?"

She tilts her head. “I thought we agreed to start over and pretend we don’t know each other?” Maggie whisper shouts.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. But we can skip the details. You give me a glowing review, but you don’t have to actually do anything. You still get paid. I can do my thing.”

“Declan, what’s your thing?” A hint of mockery enters her voice as though she decided I’m still an overgrown teenage boy with a propensity for being a rascal.

“Hmm. My thing? Let’s see, bad-boy football star.”

She snorts. “I should probably just do my job. We have to perform an individual evaluation first, provide regular updates, and make a midpoint review followed by the final review.”

“Are you sure I can’t persuade you to change your mind? We can pretend to be making over my life. I’ll just do my thing.” I brush my hands together like it’s a done deal.

“Your thing?” she repeats, sounding scandalized like I suggest we make a prison break or go hang out in an unsavory part of town.

“Yeah. There’s a sunny island about a thousand miles south of here.” I waggle my eyebrows, not opposed to a holiday in lieu of reform school.

“If you say anything about a mankini, I’ll—”

A long beat passes as though she’s entertaining the possibility. It gives me enough time to think about what my *thing* is. Football, for starters. Training. Hanging with the guys. Showing up at events, getting screen time, and shining in the spotlight. Dating—though that’s off the table for the time being per the coach’s rules. “My thing is having a good time. We could go sightseeing.”

As the moment stretches between us, I struggle to come up with anything—or anyone—that feels like a true anchor. A person who’d be my ride or die like they used to say when I was a punk teenager—a person who’d do anything for me. Someone I’d let see the real me.

I have the aforementioned stuff I do, but a peculiar thought breaches the surface of my mind. Were all the facets of my public-facing persona a way to create distance between myself and what I lost so long ago? What I believed I’ll never have again?

True love.

The only person who has come close to orbiting that hemisphere sits primly across from me as if she struggles between picking up our friendship

where we left off and doing the job she was hired for.

But really, what's my thing?

Maggie's voice picks up where that last thought ended. "When you can tell me what your *thing* is, perhaps I'll reconsider."

My jaw ticks with uncertainty. Ordinarily, I'd bargain and work my charm to get her to reconsider right here on the spot. But Maggie isn't the kind of person to haggle. Once she makes up her mind, she sticks with it, and she's nothing if not honest. Mostly. There was the time she and I snuck into the gym, made off with the school mascot—a giant ear of corn with eyes—and when questioned, she said she knew nothing of the missing item. Later, we used it as a pinata at a seniors-only party.

My shoulders drop. Not seeing a way out except potentially getting her in trouble with her new boss, I resign myself to going along with etiquette classes taught by none other than my best friend.

A part of me, however small, is slightly curious about what that might look like, including her life makeover plans, especially if she's part of it. Perhaps, I'll find my true *thing* with Maggie's help.

She closes the file. "We'll have an initial assessment, as I mentioned, followed by a week or so of lessons tailored to what you most need to improve. That also includes grooming. After that, we'll move out of the classroom and into the world, so to speak. All the while, I'll be evaluating you. This will culminate in a task for you to demonstrate that you've learned your lesson and will, ahem, keep your pants on."

I can't help but chuckle as she stops laughter from lighting up her face.

"Despite the unfortunate consequences, moon-gate was the biggest publicity event of the year. Game tickets and merch sales spiked in the last few days. When money is moving in the team's direction, no one complains."

"Except your commissioner."

"Right. Him and protecting the innocent and delicate eyes of his daughter, Elyse. Let me tell you, she's no stranger to the locker room."

"Do you know that first hand?"

I tuck my chin toward my chest "No. Starkowsky, or Starky for short, has been wanting to teach us Bruiser boys a lesson for a while, reform things, make us more of a family brand like we used to be."

I suspect it has something to do with Chase's family. His grandfather had been a power player in football—on the field in his youth and then

behind the scenes later. Chase doesn't talk a ton about it, but something happened somewhere in history that colored Starky's opinion of the winning Boston team as a bunch of bruisers. Then again, that is in the name. Or it could just have been that we always won. Rumors abound in pro ball that the games are fixed, much like professional wrestling back in the day. I'm on the field and know firsthand that no faking or kayfabe is going on. But if someone wanted to pay him off so we'd lose and their team would win, it would be easy enough to shift our championship trend if they stash away the star players at reform school.

Maggie clicks a pen and then flips to a page in the folder. "Shall we conduct this interview?" she asks.

Even though she's still damp from my foolish prank I notice, possibly for the first time, she holds herself with the grace and poise of a princess. Either that, or she's just really committed to her job.

She asks me routine questions that I've answered a million times: name, birthday, and so on. I reply with lazy answers because she already knows them and because in addition to the composed princess side, Maggie has a peppy energy just below the surface, biting to get out. It's like she's aching to shoot water guns and moon a bunch of strangers, but in the time since we were last together—going on a few years now—she boxed it up and stashed it in a storage unit back in Boston.

"So, what would you do?"

"Huh?" I ask, dazed, entranced, lost in memories of us, traipsing around the city, making memories.

I straighten, dismissing the crackling and an odd longing that suddenly fills me. Is it because I don't want to be here? Boredom? Because I'm an independent operator and have been told to follow certain rules, aka the playbook?

The playbook. I'm a jokester, a rascal if there ever was one, but no way can I do anything to compromise the guys on the team. Especially not Grey. The game is all he has left.

On second thought, in many ways, it's all I have too.

Maggie tilts her head to the side. "Declan, if this is going to work, you have to pay attention."

That's part of the problem. For some reason, right now, all I can pay attention to is Margaret Pearl Byrne and it scares me, so I'm better off

letting distractions keep me from probing too deeply about what that might mean.

She explains the personality test that will help her better understand my motivations, desires, and behavior. “It says here that if you don’t know how to answer, think back to when you were a teenager.”

I shift uncomfortably. That’s the last thing I want to do, unless it starts with when she and I met in high school.

She closes the folder. “Or not. We can just sit here in silence until you’re ready.” Her eyes narrow and her mouth puckers like she wants to scold me.

“Okay, ask away.” I gesture with a flutter of my hand.

She huffs.

For the next half hour, I comply and answer all her questions that have to do with how I’d respond or react properly in polite company.

Formally greet people until indicated to do otherwise? Check.

Speak clearly and succinctly? Check.

Keep a tidy appearance? I run my hand across the rough edges of my beard.

Thankfully, I don’t have to delve too deep into the past because my manners were rubbish until Aunt Maureen changed that.

“For now, you can go get settled in your room. I’ll have your results when we meet in,” she consults the folder, “the Seaview dining room at seven for our first meal together.”

“Like a date?” I blurt.

Her cheeks tint a light shade of rose. “No, you goofball, like an evaluation.” She stands to leave, holding her chin high even though she’s still wet from my water guns. “And no pranks allowed.”

I can’t help it, my lips curl into a smile, but I quickly wipe it away. I didn’t intend for her to be the victim of my water gun spree. I may routinely disregard rules, but pranking Maggie has always been off-limits. I was protective of her like a sister. But in the years that passed since we last saw each other, we’ve both grown up.

It’s impossible to think of Maggie as a sibling. Don’t have one of those.

Inside, there’s that crackling.

A twinge of interest.

I should make those feelings off-limits.

I can’t afford to get attached.

I ought to keep it to friends only.

Or faking that we're not friends.

I have to think of the team. But I won't deny that I am looking forward to spending more time with My Magg-ola.

MAGGIE



I didn't see a chance of rain in the forecast today, but I am drenched, and not too pleased about it either. I want to be mad at Declan for blasting me with the full force of his water guns, but my head fills with clouds.

Big, fluffy confusing—cumulus, sink right in and fall straight through swoony, blissy—clouds?

No. No, no! This is so not fair.

I'll admit that I was being prickly and closed off because of the grand entrance. Declan doesn't understand that beneath the clouds there isn't a safety net to catch me. Not only have my parents not reached out since I attempted to inform them of my job overseas. but I also can't take a handout from them and it's not because of pride. It's the expectation of payback. Not with an IOU. They'd want me to beg, grovel, and record it all on film for the grand return of Honey Holiday, aka their shamefaced daughter, after the stunt they pulled. It depends on which option they think will garner more views and money.

However, there's another part of me that's more than thrilled at the return of my best friend to my life, front and center, big and bold. There's no one like Declan Printz. *The Declan Printz.*

And maybe that's the problem. The clouds remind me of what Etta Jo was saying. Perhaps she wasn't wrong.

But she has to be, because if I've learned anything, it's that these kinds of clouds are like bubbles in a bubble bath. Wait long enough and they'll pop. Disperse. Leave as everyone else in my life has always done.

I could stand here, dumbstruck all night. I could dwell on what I've gotten myself into. Or I could just keep 'er moving as I've always done.

But as I step into the Blancbourg Academy hallway with its plush carpet, cream-colored walls with wood detail, and glowing sconces, everything has happened so fast that I spin in a circle, not sure which way is up or where to go.

Literally.

No matter how many turns I take in the winding, labyrinth-like halls of the manor, I can't escape my thoughts. I'm right back where I started. Declan is here. What is Declan doing here? Never mind, I know the answer to that question, but DECLAN IS HERE.

And I don't know how to feel about it. I may not be Cinderella, but her bluebirds seem to have taken up residence in my belly. How do I know? They flapped excitedly when Declan showed up.

Our periodic phone calls and regular texts were like cookie crumbs, the kind with a little chocolate chip in them, a trail leading us to someday being in the same town at the same time.

But now that time has come and it's like a full cookie jar plus an assortment of cupcakes, pastries, and brownies. All of it all at once.

However, this is a different kind of sugar high altogether.

I'm overwhelmed with I-don't-know-what. It won't settle inside long enough for me to identify its meaning or purpose.

Over the years, I've watched just about every one of Declan's games. But he was mostly hidden under all his gear, which was good, because not seeing much of him lessened the ache of missing my best friend. Wide receiver number forty-four was more of an abstraction streaking across the field.

After the squirt gun shower, my insides went swirly. My thoughts went twirly. I'm whirling and spiraling and I don't-know-what-ing. But I have a job to do and can't let our reunion cloud that.

Nor will I think about what Etta Jo said about clouds. Nope. My feet will remain planted firmly on solid ground, thank you very much.

All the same, I text her because I can't very well text Declan with this news.

Maggie: There's been a bit of a development. Do you have a minute?

Etta Jo: I'm up to my elbows in moving supplies for the new studio, but I'm all ears. Do tell!

Maggie: On the flight over, I'd vaguely imagined the finishing school consisted of wayward adults wearing uniforms—the girls in plaid skirts and knee socks and the boys in tailored jackets. I did not picture the beast of a man who also happens to be my best friend.

Etta Jo: Elaborate on what you mean by beast who also happens to be your best friend.

Before I can, footsteps click down the hall toward me. There must be marble floors somewhere in this building.

Maggie: Can't talk now but PLEASE not a word of this to Giselle.

A willowy woman with dark hair and the posture of someone who's spent plenty of time balancing a book on her head as she walks down a set of stairs (also my imagined version of finishing school) turns the corner at the other end of the hallway.

Her hair is in a bun and she wears a white blouse with pearl buttons, a stylish red scarf, and a black pencil skirt. With sharp eyes, she surveys me, disheveled and drenched as if I'm someone in need of etiquette training. "May I help you?" She has a French accent that's stronger than Giselle's.

"Yes, you may," I say pleasantly. "I'm a new employee. You must be Cate." A moment too late, I realize I should've addressed her more formally and not by Giselle's nickname for her cousin.

Her eyebrow lifts sharply like a guillotine before it drops. "I'm Cateline Berghier, the headmistress at Blancbourg." She holds out her hand to shake. It's cold. So far, it matches her personality.

"I'm Maggie Byrne. It's nice to meet you. I'm friends with—" I'm about to say *Declan* then ask about a dozen questions or possibly quit, but Cateline interrupts.

"You're Giselle's friend from Florida." She saves me from blowing my identity.

I nod. "That's right. I want to thank you for this opportunity," I say, proof positive that despite my appearance, I am not a candidate for the lessons Blancbourg has to offer.

Cateline's eye twitches slightly and stress tugs her features. "We've been in desperate need of help." She pauses as though debating whether to elaborate.

"I'm happy to be here."

“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, to board an airplane, or just 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.”

Nodding, she’s not wrong. “It’s unacceptable,” I say in a scandalized tone when she pauses. While I agree, I’m discombobulated and taken off guard by her strong opinion (and to be honest, scary delivery). I guess my acting chops still come in handy.

“Would you believe that the last time I was in Boston, where these football players are from, I went out to dinner with an associate and every single person in the restaurant was on their phone at the table? Rule number one is no phones at the table. I believe your President Washington popularized rule number eighteen from *110 Rules of Civility & Decent Behavior in Company and Conversation*. There may not have been cell phones in Revolution-era America, but by golly, there were manners.”

“I completely understand your concerns.” I take the cue to simply agree with this woman, whatever she says, or risk being at the wrong end of a verbal lashing.

“But where are my manners? Have you been to your room yet?” she asks.

“My room? Do you mean the meeting with my student, er, client?” I’m hesitant to reveal to her how dreadful Declan was. Not only would that break our friendship code of conduct, but likely Blancbourg’s rules for opposite reasons. He and I agreed to a mutually beneficial arrangement. Declan Printz and I fake don’t know each other. We’re fake strangers. Not best friends. We’ll pretend we’ve never met until today.

Her nose wrinkles in what Declan and I used to call a *stink face*—it’s part condescending and partly disgusted at what she’s sure to call these football cavemen we have the unfortunate social responsibility to refine and tame.

I shake my head. “I mean, yes, I’ve been to my room to meet my client, but not the room where I’ll be staying here at the manor.”

Cateline starts down the hall, motioning for me to follow.

Note to self: pay attention and keep up with this woman.

“At the moment, we’re short-staffed so you got lucky and will have a larger suite than what we normally offer new teachers.”

We make several turns down various halls and up flights of stairs. The building has a classic, palace-like feel with lots of rooms and accessways. I lose whatever remains of my sense of direction. At last, we stop in front of a door with a brass plaque that reads *Regency Suite*.

“Here we are.” Cateline opens the door. Late morning light floods the space. She gives me a second and appraising look in question now that we’re not in the dim hallway. “I take it you understand the importance of appearance at Blancbourg. I deduce that what we have here,” she gestures up and down my body, “is a result of you meeting your new client. Not surprising, given the bad-boy football players’ reputations. I want a full report on him. He may try to charm you or convince you not to be forthcoming in your evaluations, but I want every detail.” The glare of warning she gives could sever heads.

I clear my throat. “Sure thing. He was a beast of a man-child, but I have no doubt Blancbourg’s methods will get him in shipshape.” My voice cracks because my fib telling could use some work. Also, man-child, shipshape, who uses those terms? Oh, right, me. Little Miss Liar McLie-y Pants who never met her client until today.

Cateline’s eyes flash. “Let me guess, a bucket of water over the door? Water pistols?”

I give a sheepish nod, feeling scrutinized and like I might get a scolding by association. I don’t want Declan to get in worse trouble, especially if Cateline is reporting to the commissioner.

“I’ve seen it all and will be keeping an eye on Mr. Printz. Please report to me if you need anything or if his behavior gets worse.” She practically growls.

“Of course. This is a lovely school and I’m honored to be here,” I say as if reading from Emily Post’s script of polite conversation. “Thank you.”

“It’s our pleasure and you have my apologies for not offering a formal orientation.” The grandfather clock chimes from downstairs. “I am running late, but I’ll quickly sum it up. You will start with coaching, practice, and then the application of our lessons. Since we’re dealing with football players, I recommend game-ifying it. While you want Mr. Printz to be a civilized human being and not a caveman, you want him to win. But

remember, you are always playing offense. You want to be several steps ahead and plan preemptively.”

I would not want to see what this woman would do if I lose. “Oh, and most importantly, our lessons will culminate in The First Annual Boston Bruisers Charity Ball where we will get these boys out of their sweats and into three-piece tuxes.” Cateline’s voice drops and turns breathy. “Have you ever seen a man of stature in a tuxedo? It’s a sight to behold.”

“I know—I can imagine.” I correct, because I recall Declan wearing a black and white suit with a bowtie at our private school’s prom. We didn’t go as friends but had other dates. Strangely, we ended up together that night anyway and went out for pizza, all dressed up, and in the rain. Then again, he’s certainly filled out with racks and racks of muscle since those days.

If I’m not mistaken, her cheeks turn the faintest shade of pink. Mine too.

Strange, because it’s drafty here in the hallway outside the regency suite.

“That said, personal interactions with pupils is not tolerated and results in immediate termination. As for The First Annual Boston Bruisers Charity Ball, you might say it’s the big one. A Super Bowl of sorts. Details to come.”

I tread water, trying to keep up with all this information.

“Thank you for your time, Miss Byrne. Best wishes in the coming weeks. If you’ll excuse me, my new client is tardy. This shall be interesting,” she says, turning on her heel and storming down the hall as though preparing to go into battle.

Given the water guns and how confusion about Declan drenches me, I better gear up for a fight too.

MAGGIE



I push open the door to the Regency Suite to a furnished space with hardwood floors, woven rugs, and polished antiques.

I set my purse and Declan's file on a table by the door. It tips off the side and the contents spill out. I gather all the papers and then take a moment and read the article before fastening Declan's photo under the paperclip. I trace my finger along the bruise on his nose. Looks like a mug shot or like Cateline dragged him out of a cave, kicking and screaming.

"Once a Bruiser, always a Bruiser," I mutter, referring to his team.

As I skim the rest of the file, which includes instructions for our meetings, I realize I have my work cut out for me. Not only as a teacher here at the academy, but in trying to keep up the façade that Declan and I don't know each other. I almost slipped up back there in the hallway when I thought about Declan at prom.

We were truly just friends. There wasn't a flicker of interest, even though I'll admit, he looked—how should I put it? Declan was *dashing* that night. His date was lucky, but stupid when she ditched him to dance with Hugh Kennedy. Meanwhile, Jason Windover left me in the lurch to play poker and drink with his buddies. I have to admit, I had a better time with my best friend than during the boring dinner with Jason when he repeatedly checked his phone.

Cateline had a point about old George Washington.

"Oh, Declan, how on earth did we both end up here, together again?" I whisper.

How am I going to keep up this ruse of not knowing him, while trying to do a job that's completely foreign, in another country, no less?

I slouch down and take in my surroundings. In addition to the living area, a small bedroom with a single bed and a tiny bathroom are on one side of the suite. It's smaller than my apartment in Florida, but so far, no palmetto bugs and the climate control is pleasant.

I get to my feet and wander to the window. My breath catches. The view makes me wonder just how close I am to the top of the world—to floating in the clouds. The mountain vista is unlike anything I've ever seen. They start wide and sprawling with a band of evergreens at the base, graduate to sheer rock, and then disappear into the heavens.

The mountains loom. They stand sentry. They're magnificent. I stare at the scenery and decide that I prefer it to flat land and the humidity that I'd left behind. Although I do miss Etta Jo and even Giselle. I snap a photo and send it in a group text thread to both of them with the caption: not a bad view.

With one last glance out the window, I spot Declan in the garden speaking with Arthur Fitzgerald, the butler. Leave it to him to make friends wherever he goes.

The valet stowed my belongings by a silk upholstered sofa. I plop down because I need a moment to catch my breath. To think. Must be the high elevation and this fresh mountain air.

I'm not thinking about Declan or how he may have recognized me as the Cinderella character who fell into the fountain from the viral video. Okay, maybe a little.

Humiliating much? Yes, a lot.

When we first met, we were instant friends, like we'd known each other for years, hadn't seen each other in a while, and then picked up right where we left off. That's the way it was. I expected when we reunited it would be like that again, but something is different now. I can't pinpoint what it is, though.

My thoughts dip into the past and worry grips me in its calloused hand. What if, between the last time we saw each other and now, he also saw the embarrassing home video that put my face on national television when I was too young to speak up for myself? My parents knew it would boost the ratings of their show so they humiliated me, their only daughter.

Early on, all I wanted was their attention, but after that incident, I did my best to be as invisible as possible.

However, lately, it's like the real me is trying to dig her way out and reveal herself.

When Declan commented on doing his *thing*, I couldn't help but wonder what my thing is. Trying and failing at all my jobs? Falling into fountains? Running? Hiding?

Baking when I'm upset? That's exactly what I want to do right now. Oh, the reliable rhythm of adding ingredients. The soothing stir of batter or the kneading of dough. The scent of something comforting in the oven. I want to mix flour and sugar and vanilla. Add butter, eggs, and oil and achieve a wonderfully delicious outcome.

I'd once dreamed of having a cake shop, which had morphed into a mobile bakery. Though that business venture failed like everything else.

I have to focus on my new job and my future. Not the man who attacked me with water guns, developed a haughty celebrity attitude, and doesn't care that he showed the world his backside.

The truth is, my tolerance is rock bottom for people who put the attention of strangers, fans, likes, and follows over what is important. Family. Integrity. Faith.

Declan is no exception, but I have a pretty good idea of who he is, at least deep down. In addition to being a stinker, he's also a good person, reliable, thoughtful, and gives the best hugs. It's the part he hides from the world, instead, showing them what they want to see. I hope.

I also noticed that he has muscles everywhere—new ones since we last saw each other in person. No surprise, given he works out multiple times a day. He probably also has them in his pinky finger. His hair is dark blond with a hint of red, but his beard is reddish brown. He has straight teeth with a narrow gap between the front two. His nose is crooked, but that's old news. In another life, he may have been a boxer or a Scottish Highlander.

All of it together makes him unique. Like he has stories to tell and isn't just another rough, tough, hot, bad-boy, football player.

I try to sink into the couch, but it isn't the cushy, soft kind like Etta Jo's, and resists me as though bouncing me back to the last words I'd thought like a Word Scramble.

Hot football player.

Declan, hot? Let me clarify. He's objectively hot. Half the country would agree. I lightly scold myself because not only does the mere thought of that tread on best friend territory, but threatens to trample our

relationship in a professional capacity. I'd lose my job over our friendship, but I won't lose my friendship by crossing that line and letting myself think that Declan is anything other than a cave-dwelling man-beast who happens to have a great smile and unnatural ability to make me laugh—except when he blasted me with water.

If Giselle, Etta Jo, and I were placed on a dating life scale with it running from prolific to scant, Giselle would be toward the former and I'd be on the latter end with Etta Jo sitting squarely in the middle. The couple of guys I've gone out with have been toads—and not the kind that turn into a prince when kissed.

But the last one, Larry, had also worked on the cast. It turned out he had a list, literally, and was checking off all of us ladies so he could boast that he'd dated all of the Disney princesses. Before him, I'd been set up by a coworker, at my previous place of employment, with a guy who'd learned who my parents are and was more interested in them than me. I moved to Orlando after that to avoid any further association. Then there was Sylvester, who ruined everything.

I shake those failures from my thoughts and Declan replaces them. The way he looked at me with his soft brown eyes that are at complete odds with all his sharp edges. The way he'd said *date*.

I blame it on the jet lag, the abrupt transition, and the shock of seeing someone familiar in a foreign place. I'm not here to check out football players. That's Giselle's territory. But I have no business entertaining these thoughts about my best friend, and especially not a guy who is mischievous, famous, or any other -ous.

Bottom line, I'm not interested in dating and even if I was, I wouldn't risk it. I have to keep my new job at all costs. There's nowhere left to go. I gave up my apartment in Florida and I have little more than the belongings I brought to Concordia.

More than anything, I refuse to turn to my parents for help.

The little girl from the airport floats into my mind. She'd said *I want to be just like you when I grow up*. The comment lodges itself in my mind.

It's not that I'm irresponsible. I've completely supported myself since I was eighteen. My independence didn't so much go against my parents' wishes, not that they ever really cared. Rather, they couldn't fathom why I'd give up a life under the lights, the Honey Holiday credits to my name, and

the endless quest for more fame and fortune. They just wanted to use me to keep the cash and cameras rolling. But it's hard, being on my own.

My inner goblin stomps around, trying to find a way in along with loneliness. I trace the stark, empty feeling back to my earliest memories.

The little girl at the airport meant that she wants to be like Cinderella when she grows up. While I've been there, done that, and am most certainly all grown up and swiftly breezing through my twenties, I don't feel like I've fully grown up. Who am I? What do I want? How can I give instead of take? These questions circle my thoughts.

Maybe I'm not a princess in title, but I'll rescue myself. I'll figure out a way to stop living paycheck to paycheck. To create a life I truly want instead of struggling to get by.

My first task, how can I turn a pumpkin into a gentleman?

Granted, Declan is as sweet (and salty) as can be. We have a friendship that involves teasing and the occasional prank. He's never been anything other than a gentleman to me, but I can only imagine the torment he's caused his teammates, never mind the women he dates. Then again, they line up to be with him, so perhaps there's another side to Declan Printz that I don't know.

The notion causes me to stagger back onto the firm silk sofa.

Casting those silly notions aside, *Take two.*

A book titled *A Guide to Blancbourg Academy d'Etiquette* along with a white card outlining my schedule for the week sits on the coffee table.

I flip through the book first, learning more about my role, appropriate attire, and tips for dealing with various personalities. The book also explains each of the lessons I'm to conduct, starting with *Dinner Table Dynamics* tonight. Thank goodness, because otherwise, I'd have no idea where to begin, other than with Declan cleaning up his beard. Cinderella's bluebirds could build a nest in there.

I consult the personality test we did earlier and match it with the key in the book, which offers strategies for dealing with and appealing to Declan's type: alpha male.

- Be direct
- Show no fear
- Don't tolerate man-trumps
- Challenge him to work toward a goal

- Calmly and clearly communicate

The takeaway? Remain best friends and nothing more, while pretending that we're not friends and don't know each other. Cue hysterical hyena laughter, because that is turning out to be easier said than done.

I hang his tailored jacket on a chair and shower, then dress. Most of my clothing is better suited to the Florida heat and humidity than Concordia's relatively mild weather. I don't have the funds to go shopping and buy a new wardrobe. A pair of simple black pants from when I waited tables and a white blouse with pink polka dots will have to suffice. Giselle had given it to me when I had to go to an event at my old job. Never mind a clothes horse, the woman is a clothes elephant. I slide on a pair of black patent leather heels to complete the look.

Declan's comment about *cooling off* reminds me of what the creepy kid said when he pulled me into the fountain. At first, embarrassment crushes me because there's no doubt Declan saw the viral video. He lives for that stuff. He's probably already hatching a plan to capitalize on it because we're the kind of friends who poke fun at each other.

Back in high school, he perpetually had pillow creases on his face when he'd come to first period and I'd tease him about it. I didn't come away unscathed because he'd comment about my cow eyes. He claimed it's because they're big. I don't know about in Ireland, but telling a girl she has a cow-anything isn't too kind.

But then the embarrassment reverses, blazing through me and lighting me up with determination.

I've cooled off alright. After the shock of reuniting with him and the fear that he'll recognize me from the viral video, my demeanor bordered on frosty. But that's what I need to do to keep our friendship from interfering with this job.

After getting ready, I take a cue from Cateline, and march into the hall, ready for war.

I follow a raucous round of laughter coming from somewhere in the vast building, hoping it will lead me to the Seaview dining room where I'm supposed to meet Declan. I take a few wrong turns but eventually find my way with a minute to spare.

A long table with enough space to seat at least twelve people spans the center of the room. A fireplace is on one wall with a massive oil painting

over the mantle, depicting an old-fashioned man—or is it a woman? I can't tell with the big curly wig and waistcoat. Windows fill the other wall. In the distance, the sun has nearly set over the sea, painting the room in muted golden light.

I've only seen a bit of Concordia so far but love it. It has everything from mountains, to ocean, a city, towns, villages, and the countryside.

The grandfather clock chimes. Candles flicker. My thoughts carry from the romance of this setting to why I'm here. I have a job to do and Declan is late. Not surprising given his grand entrance.

I have to compartmentalize the Declan I knew and the rich and famous, entitled guy he's likely become. I imagine the first big paycheck he got came with the stipulation that he value his time above that of other people. Typical. My parents are like that too.

A server brings me water and then hangs back, the picture of a wallflower. Much like I've been most of my life. But isn't that what I want? Not to be noticed? Then again, I don't particularly want to be lonely or invisible either...and certainly not stood up for the first official lesson.

I study the place settings, reviewing what I'll need to teach this jock when, at last, the door swings open. Declan enters as raucous cheering fills the room like at a football game. There is a pause then it sounds a second time and I think I hear them chanting his last name. *Printz, Printz, Printz.*

This is a new level of ego mania, even for him.

Declan pauses, pulls his phone from his pocket, and clicks it off. We have the same plain black protective phone case—the kind people have who frequently break their phone or can't afford to replace it if it breaks.

But there is a notable difference to bring to his attention. “Your ringtone is the sound of a cheering crowd?”

“Good evening to you too,” he says with a wry smile.

I catch my blunder. No way can I successfully coach him in etiquette if the first thing out of my mouth are words of criticism.

I square my shoulders. “Good evening, Mr. Printz. Thank you for taking the time to join me for dinner. In the future, please be punctual.”

Declan drops heavily into the chair. “Ah, yes, dinner at seven and dash out the door before twelve so no one risks turning into a pumpkin. Got it.”

Once again, his phone erupts with raucous cheering. I glance down at mine as it vibrates. When I see the name scroll across the screen, I hurry from the room.

DECLAN



I grumble because, of course, I didn't intend for my phone to blare the moment I walked into the dining room. That makes for grand entrance number two. Not exactly the foot on which I want to restart things with Maggie.

However, I've been getting calls all day. People wonder where I am, why I left town, and compliment me or criticize me for #BruiserButt.

Coach wants the other guys to keep a low profile, but the incident on top of the team's notoriety, and my prominent position in the spotlight, makes keeping off the public's radar nearly impossible.

What delayed me was an interview and photo opportunity with a local children's charity connected to the Touchdowns for Teens program that I fund. Likely, Maggie thought I was late because I'm irresponsible or self-centered, but I'd been doing outreach. Sure, I soak up attention and like to have a good time, however, I'm a man of my word. I'm also a person who always goes the extra mile.

A kid connected to the local branch of the charity had been in a terrible accident and subsequently endured several surgeries. When I stopped by earlier, he'd asked me an important question. He's struggling, so I couldn't just give him a quick, superficial answer and leave it at that. I had to show the boy how to keep going when his hope flagged.

We took a walk around the block. I pointed out the natural beauty surrounding us, and the impressive technology that's often taken for granted—cars, electricity, mobile phones. The fact that he can walk again. The former provided inspiration. The latter highlighted the fact that everything

that exists comes from somewhere—from creativity and the minds of people. People like the kid.

I wanted to show him that despite his struggles now, God has a plan for him. That anything is possible. The world is at his feet. He's back on his. He has a second chance to live. I know that lesson all too well.

I told the kid that he needs to find his *thing* and go after it like his life depends on it. It just might.

I was supposed to be at the dinner assessment at seven, and because I took the extra time with the kid, I'm ten minutes late. I get that in this situation it's a big deal, but she didn't have to run out of the room just when I arrived.

Dropping my napkin on my chair, I follow her. When I reach the door, she's on the other side of it, eyes closed, and drawing a deep breath as though she's at her wit's end.

The words *I'm sorry* are on my lips when she blinks her eyes open. Up close, and in the flickering candlelight, summer gold and threads of amber fleck her hazel eyes. They contain a soft sadness—something I want to turn into joyful laughter.

We stand there a moment, staring at each other like the hallway is a secret place where we can start over...again.

I think back to meeting Maggie for the first time, and like a scrapbook flipping forward in time, all the years of our friendship after that. It abruptly stops when our communication became little more than occasional calls and regular texts.

How'd I let that happen?

My heart thuds hard and then like I've been hit with a defibrillator's paddles, it jump-starts.

Thump, thump.

My hand involuntarily presses against my chest.

Maggie's voice is husky when she speaks. "We have to role play as if we're meeting for dinner. In this scenario, you arrive first, then I come in. Please demonstrate how you'd greet a dining companion."

If it were an option, I'd rather throw the rule book out the window and show Maggie a lovely evening for real. As friends, of course. Instead, I say, "So I can't use water guns this time?" I flash a winning smile.

"Definitely not." Her tone is firm, absolute.

My phone vibrates again. I ignore it.

She points to the table. “Ready for a do-over?”

“Definitely.”

I sit down and wait for her to come in as if she’s arriving to meet me at a restaurant. The way her hips sway, her hair swooshes, and how her eyes hold mine as though I’m in a crowded room and am the exact person she’s been looking for transfixes me.

Those hazel eyes make me want to rethink my life. Run for president. Be a better man. Win every football game—even the ones I don’t play. There’s depth and possible secrets, but nothing that could dampen the strange crackling inside.

When we’d re-met earlier, I noticed that even though My Oh Mags was flustered, she’d hardly looked at me. Maybe she’s embarrassed about the Cinderella Spill as if I’d ever, or could ever, criticize her for that. Perhaps she’s feeling awkward since we haven’t seen each other in so long.

Neither possibility lands quite right. Could it be something else?

However, now her eyes don’t leave me. The intensity buffeting between us glues me to the spot. What’s happening?

When she arrives at the table, she dips her head slightly toward the chair opposite mine.

I fumble, confused for a moment, and then realize that we’re role-playing. It’s not just a casual get-together with My Magpie and me as mere friends. I’m supposed to get to my feet when a lady enters the room, pull out the chair, and act like a gentleman—instead of a beast who had a temporary break from reality and was practically drooling over Maggie Byrne.

While I ensure she’s settled into the spot, my phone, now on silent mode, vibrates again. It intermittently continues while she guides me through the dinner lesson. When the server fills our glasses, brings the first course, salads, and the entire time Maggie prompts polite conversation, it vies for my attention.

Ignoring it and trying to ease the strange tension between us, I reply to Magers with my typical bravado, earning an ever-darkening expression of disapproval.

When she excuses herself to the ladies’ room, I glance at my phone to see who has been trying to get ahold of me. A vaguely familiar number blinks, sending an uncomfortable feeling slithering under my skin. When Maggie returns, I set my phone on the table.

She sits and when I look up, her eyes are damp and her cheeks are slightly pink. She remains quiet after the server checks on us.

My phone jitters on the table along with my leg beneath it. I wonder about the call from back home. More importantly, why does My Maggie-rific seem upset and suddenly quiet? My manners are fair to middling, minus the cell phone etiquette, so it can't be caused by our lesson.

I take a sip of cold water as silence laces between us. Did I do something wrong? Is she homesick, missing dinner with her boyfriend, or some other important event?

"Before, you called Florida home," I say.

"Home?" she repeats like I'm speaking a foreign language.

Did the call earlier, a reminder of the place I grew up, cause my accent to come back? "Yeah. Do you consider that home? Where you grew up? Somewhere else?"

Maggie lifts and lowers her shoulder slightly as though she doesn't want to talk about herself—quite a contrast to the Maggie I remember and the women I usually spend time with. Then again, in this setting, the roles are different. She's the coach. I'm the student.

"I'm making conversation. Hoping to score good marks on your evaluation later. As for me, I'm not sure if my home is Ireland, Boston, or someplace I haven't been to yet. I don't mean where my house is. I have several of those. I mean where I feel like I can—" My phone buzzes again as though warning me not to say more. A place where I could leave the persona at the door and be myself with people, or a person, who won't judge me for my past or my mistakes. Where I can be myself and not play a role other than husband—though that's probably a long way off despite Coach Hammer's suggestion.

Maggie lifts one sharp eyebrow and then jots something down on a piece of paper in her file. "You're quite attached to that thing, huh." She angles her pen in the direction of my phone.

"Staying connected." As I give it a jiggle, the falsehood of my words fills my mouth with a sour taste.

Her shoulders lower on an annoyed exhale.

"Since when do you care whether I'm on my phone or not? It's the primary way we've stayed in touch over the last few years. As I said, it's a way to stay connected."

“But I’m right here and, according to chapter three section b of the *Guide to Blancbourg Academy d’Etiquette*, it’s impolite to put your phone on the table and even ruder to be on the thing during dinner.”

“My apologies, me lady,” I say, thickening my accent as if I’m a gallant knight.

Maggie would ordinarily crack a smile at my joking. I expect her to break character, but her expression tightens and she stares at me like I’m testing her patience.

Even though she’s scolding me, a crackling inside suggests that I want to hear more of her voice. To chat and carry on like we used to. I have to trust that we will when my thirty days in reform school are up. But for now, I remember that this job means something to her.

Not only that, but maybe she’s changed...or something between us has changed.

A deep desire to make her smile and laugh fills my inner dashboard. That’s nothing new. But the lights and dials go wild. Fear of losing her makes me put on the brakes.

I lean in and whisper, “When you’re not working, can we be friends?”

“Of course. But when I’m on the clock or in this building, I’m the teacher. You’re the student. If we can do that, we’ll get through this.”

But a third option speeds into my mind. It comes with that crackling sensation. The coach’s rules flash like invisible sirens.

Yeah, yeah, yeah. For now, I’ll play my part. But the boundaries of what that is blur because it’s not against the rules to be best friends, and the definition of that term is broad.

But I make a last-minute change in play and will be a stickler tonight so no one suspects a thing...and so I don’t reach across the table and plant my lips someplace I might regret.

DECLAN



*W*ith a caveman-like grunt, I say, “I can’t help that people are trying to get in touch with me.”

I lean back in my chair and hammock my hands behind my head, assuming the position out of habit and in line with my bad-boy persona. I play the part of Declan the Showman so I can keep Maggie at a distance, so I don’t break the rules set forth by the coach, and so she doesn’t lose her job.

The headmistress will expect her to have a difficult student on the first day, especially after my grand entrance.

“You’re a popular guy, but the messages and calls will still be there when we’re done.” She picks up my device and sets it on a table by the door.

“No fair.” I get to my feet. “If my phone gets put in time out, yours has to go over there too.”

Am I joking? Mostly.

Flirting? Nah, not with my best friend or my etiquette coach.

I swallow thickly because rarely do I lie to myself.

“The rules are rules. You have an easy enough time following them on the football field—”

“Off the turf, all bets are off. You know that, Maggie Moo.”

“Miss Byrne,” she corrects.

“This place is practically a castle. How about Princess Maggella and I’m Declan, Prince Charming to the Boston Bruiser’s pack of rough hooligan football players.” I take her hand and kiss the top of it.

The crackling inside gets louder when my lips touch her soft skin. I sense a slight tremble underneath. Either that or she's afraid the intense headmistress is going to burst in on us.

Her face crumbles for a split second, tints pink, and then her eyes widen with what I want to call horror. "Mr. Printz. I have a job to do. You can't kiss me, er, my hand. But to be clear, I haven't been on my phone. I'm doing my job." She snatches her hand away and lifts her chin as though daring me to disagree.

"Technically speaking, I haven't been on my phone either."

"It's been buzzing nonstop." She presses her lips together to form a thin line.

"I don't think I've ever seen you upset like this."

She crosses her arms in front of her chest and taps her foot.

"It's adorable." I try not to smile.

Throwing her hands up in the air, she says, "Declan. Come on. Work with me here."

"Alright, alright, but admit that I haven't been using the phone." I move toward her purse. "It's only fair that both of our phones go on the table by the door."

She makes the cutest noise of frustration, grabs her purse, and slaps her phone down on the table. "Fine."

The air is charged like lightning builds in the distance, getting ever closer. From across the room, we stare at each other intently. I'd be lying if I didn't admit that my pulse is racing. Despite our regular text exchanges, something shifts between us. I'm not sure what to do with it, or if I like it. No, scratch that. I do. Maybe a little too much.

Without breaking eye contact, as though we don't trust the other not to go grab their phone, we both stalk back to the dining table. I want to wipe the look of frustration from her face and replace it with good-natured mirth, so I tuck my napkin into the collar of my shirt like a bib. The best friend in me wants to make her laugh. The bad-boy inside wants more of her corrections.

Her eyes widen and she marks something in the file.

I fiddle with the little arrangement of flowers between us, put my elbows on the table, and suck my teeth a few times just to see what will happen—just to be on the receiving end of her attention.

Expression impassive, Miss Byrne doesn't break character other than when I notice the subtle tightness in her chest as it rises and falls with each breath.

"Are you holding back a huff?" I ask.

"A huff? No. I don't know what you're talking about."

"Come on. No one is watching. We can just let down our hair."

"You've clearly let down your beard."

My hand in a V-shape, I run it along the scruff. "You don't like it?"

"It's a different look."

"Back in high school, I could hardly grow one. Figured it goes with the rugged Bruisers look."

She harrumphs like she doesn't approve. Noted.

"Hey, I'm just having a little bit of fun because you seem preoccupied since you returned from the bathroom."

She leans closer to me. "No, I'm annoyed because my so-called best friend isn't cooperating. Please, Declan. This is my job. Don't make it harder than it is."

"I don't mean to. But I did notice that it seems like having your phone out of your possession is making you nervous."

"Or maybe that's you," she fires back. "I'm starting to think you have a fear of missing out."

"FOMO? No Mo-Mo-Maggie," I say, drawing from my never-ending list of nicknames for her.

But my stomach dips with a concern of my own, considering the number on the caller ID. The last thing I want is for the past to catch up with me, especially after I've moved so far away from it. Right now, I'd rather not be tethered to my device, and sometimes feel like chucking the thing in the Charles River back in Boston, but I suppose it served its purpose by connecting me to opportunities, social media...and Maggie. But why did Mrs. O'Mealley call earlier?

Our entrees arrive. "How am I doing so far?" I ask as I purposely shovel bites of potato into my mouth.

I'm purely trying to get a rise out of Maggie, anything other than the crisp quiet she's slid into after her trip to the ladies room. I've broken just about every table manner rule that I can think of.

She reviews a list in her file. "So far, well enough." She eyes me carefully.

I don't mind that. Not one bit. She could look at me all day, which means I can return the favor.

Is that cracking inside attraction, or lightning striking down the notion?

Or perhaps she's doing everything in her power not to get ruffled by my immature behavior. Maybe she's testing me. After all, she did say it's an evaluation. She gave me a do-over. Perhaps I'd be wise to heed it. Certainly, I don't want any of this to get back to Coach Hammer or the commissioner. I check my watch.

"Have somewhere to be?" she asks.

I don't, but I also don't want the evening to end.

The server asks if we'd like dessert. Maggie quickly declines as though she's only tolerating the meal with me because it's her job. This is something I've never encountered before with a woman, no less my purported best friend. It throws me off my game. Sure something passed between us in the hallway, but other than that, she's as frosty as the snow on the peaks of the Concordian mountains, even now, during summer.

I straighten in my chair. "Listen, I want to apologize again for the water earlier. That was immature of me."

"Says the guy who knows which utensils to use for the various parts of the meal, but repeatedly talks with his mouth full, slurps his drink, and has been waving his fork around while talking like he's conducting a symphony."

"A symphony of delicious flavors," I say with a smirk.

Her nostrils flare.

My eyebrow arches. "So you noticed?"

"Are you purposefully making this difficult?"

My smirk deepens as I lean back in my chair. "Difficult? Well, it is becoming cumbersome to think of ways that I could get your attention, but I have a few more up my sleeve."

"Are you experiencing a delayed case of the terrible twos?" Her eyes flash as if she'd like to drop character and put me on the naughty step. "Why would you want to annoy me, Mr. Printz?"

I lean in close and say, "Because I'm being me. That was the plan, right?" Then, louder, I say, "Because this is ridiculous. I shouldn't have to suffer through etiquette lessons. I'm a grown man. We pranked the rookie. So what?"

But what I don't mention is that minus a few details, this is the best possible thing that could've happened. Granted, Maggereeno and I could've met up in Paris or some other city she loves, but we're together again—two peas in a pod, like Aunt Maureen used to say, even though she never met my Mag-ceptional best friend.

“So what? There are consequences to your actions.” She looks me up and down.

Well aware of consequences, I draw attention to my outfit, courtesy of one of the many designers who send me clothing to wear in public as free advertising for their garments.

“What do you think of the neon yellow suit, black suspenders, and blue shirt with the cardinal print?” It's loud and ridiculous, and I only wore it because, well, I wanted to know if the designer label would impress Maggie.

Plenty of women want nothing more than to get swag for themselves through me. Has she changed or is she still the kind of woman who could care less about the latest styles and trends? I used to know the answer, but she wasn't wearing her usual jeans and T-shirt look that I remember when I hosed her down with the squirt guns.

Without hesitating, she says, “It's hideous. Not something a grown man should wear.”

I love her even more for that answer. “The stylist who outfitted me before I left Boston said it brought out the warm tones in my hair.”

I've discovered that people treat me differently depending on whether they want something from me or not. Mag-Mag seems only to want to get me to behave. After my Aunt Maureen pulled me from the gutters in Dublin, she taught me manners and more, but maybe I forgot a few of them in favor of fame and the game—not the one on the football field. The one that has consumed me as I climb as far away from my past as possible.

I roll my fingertips on the table. “I would much rather have met up with you during the offseason under different circumstances.”

“We've both been busy,” she says, dropping character. Maggie clears her throat as if remembering she's not supposed to know me. “We're going to have to work on these things until you can demonstrate that you know how to behave yourself in good company.”

“Are you good company?” I ask, but I already know the answer. Yes, she is.

A sudden but adorable growl comes from her throat. It's an unexpected sound. Primal, intriguing, and far from Maggie's girl-next-door placeholder in my mind.

Playbook, playbook, playbook, I repeat in my head. I have to walk the tightrope between flirting and falling...

"Pretty much everything you did at this meal was what *not* to do. We're going to have to review until you learn the skills and you get it right. When eating and drinking, pace yourself at meals so your dining companions feel welcome and at ease." Maggie's tone is robotic as if she reads from a script.

I rock back in my chair and my eyes slide over her.

She presses her lips together and then hisses, "Declan, you're stuck with me for the next month whether you like it or not. Please don't make this so hard."

"Whether I like it or not? I assure you, I like it. Not the worst consequence since you're my teacher."

She swats me. "Shh. We agreed that we don't know each other."

"Coach, I don't think that's in your book of manners."

She presses her lips together as if torn inside.

Me too, Magie-lou. Me too.

"What about after thirty days?" I'm toeing the hard line Coach Hammer drew, but it's near impossible not to because of my nature, and because of this force of nature in front of me with her long blonde hair and earthy hazel eyes. I never noticed Maggie's lips until now. But they're, well, they're kind of shaped like a football. I mean that in the best way possible with their fullness and the way they curve.

"After the thirty days, it's probably best to keep our friendship quiet. I'd like to have a job next month too. I don't want this," she gestures between us, "to come back and bite me in the butt."

The crackling inside distracts me as a smile grows on my lips. "Well, it sure as heck bit me on the butt. Bruiser Butt,"

Maggie presses her hand to her forehead. "You're impossible. You know that?"

Arms crossed and rocking back, I say, "Actually, I'm interested in seeing what's possible."

Her eyes widen at the cryptic notion.

Forget Maggie's petite little growl, a manly roar grows inside. I wipe my mouth with my napkin and toss it on the table. If I stay here a second

longer, I'll say something that could get me kicked off the team for breaking the rules. Not that it would be the worst possible thing that could happen. No, I've already experienced the worst possible thing. But I won't jeopardize the other guys, no matter that the girl with the strands of sunset in her hair and sunrise sparkling in her eyes has woken something up in me that I thought had all but gone dormant.

As I exit, I grab my phone and then glance over my shoulder, snatching one more look at Maggie who clear out of the blue lit a fire inside me with her glowing skin, shiny hair, and a smile that is a gift to God's creation.

I stride down the hall in the manor once owned by the royal family of Concordia, across the polished marble floor, past the lace curtains, and the gilded frames.

When I was a boy, never once did I fathom that I'd make it among the rich and elite. I grew up poor, and it was always a gambit to get a dollar, a hot meal sometimes, and clothes that would keep me from getting the snot kicked out of me.

Somehow, I found my way. Still, I've never gotten used to the extravagance and never tire of it either. I've quickly become accustomed to the finer things: several luxury cars to my name, big boy toys, a penthouse in Boston, a mansion in Los Angeles where the team practices in the offseason, and even a place back home I haven't seen since I bought it with my first paycheck. Even if I don't live there, I wanted to be the first Printz to own a piece of property in the city that all but spit me out. I vow to return to Dublin someday, but not until Aunt Maureen needs me.

Back in my room, several newspapers are arrayed on the table. One with the headline *Full Moon Over Boston* catches my eye. I chuckle. Seems the news was a little late making its way to Concordia. Then I realize the paper is from Ireland. Perhaps my manager or someone on the team sent the paper over—that's the kind of mild practical joke I'd pull. I don't mind the press, even though they routinely accuse me of being a peacock, always preening and posing for the cameras. I used to relish the attention. More and more often lately, I find myself wanting to return home at the end of the day for a quiet night in. Am I getting old? They say football can age a man twice as fast.

I'm a known prankster, but never intended this one to turn into a scandal. Over the years, the team and I have been part of numerous

publicity stunts, bar brawls, and pranks—the Bruisers have a reputation to uphold as being the meanest and toughest team in the league.

Of all the things though, the mooning had to get photographed and splashed all over the news? It went viral. I wonder who captured the moment. One of the officials? The commissioner himself? Elyse?

Before Maggie imprisoned my phone, I'd glimpsed calls and messages from my agent, publicist, and a few updates from the guys talking about our new “coaches.” Then there was one from the foreign number. The one I recognized but don't want to think about.

Why did Mrs. O'Mealley call? Do I really want to know?

As a boy, I'd been bullied but quickly toughened up. Fell in love and just as quickly lost it. After that, I found myself in heaps of trouble—fighting and thefts mostly. Aunt Maureen took me off the city's hands.

I try to push the memories away as I've always done. But curiosity wins. I pull out my phone.

Oddly, the lock screen is of a highland calf in a meadow and not of me pumping the air after the team had won the Superbowl. The latest message is from *Dad*. I don't have anyone with that contact name. I've never met my father.

When I type in the password, it fails and I realize I have Maggie's phone.

MAGGIE



Dinner was a disaster. Not because Declan was utterly frustrating. But because my father had finally responded to the messages that I'd left, letting my parents know that I'd moved out of the country.

His response? He'd sent a thumbs up. That's all. No inquiry about why or where. No *Hey, how's it going, kid?*

I knew better than to expect more, but I'd hoped. Mom and Dad were never the cookies and milk kind of parents. Still, it stings. They've ignored me, except when I'm in front of the camera, going back for as long as I can remember.

However, Declan did not ignore me. He went out of his way to get under my skin. It's clear he knows how to conduct himself at a dinner table, even if he's the kind of guy who makes a splash when he enters a room—pun not intended.

My first impression of Declan, post-football stardom, is that he went from being an attention seeker to being a fame monger.

My second impression is that he didn't learn his #BruiserButt lesson and has thus remained a prankster.

My third impression is of a guy who has no regard for other people's time and zero consideration for table manners.

This is not the Declan I knew. Then again, I used to go along with his antics. We'd have unfettered fun because we were best friends. But time has passed and the dynamic has shifted.

Yet I know this isn't even the whole story. I saw there is more to Declan Printz than he lets most people see. I was reminded of that fact by the

honesty in his eyes when I'd returned from the bathroom and he sensed something was wrong.

When he'd strode into the dining room with his annoying phone cheering for him as though everyone should applaud his existence, I'd glimpsed the message from my father. However, I couldn't be a hypocrite and respond while simultaneously kicking Declan off his phone. But I couldn't stand not knowing what my father had to say so I went to the bathroom to check the message. I shouldn't have bothered. He doesn't care. I probably shouldn't either. But my parents' disregard hurts. For once, I'd like for them to applaud when I enter a room, or at least acknowledge my existence at all.

I guess, to them, I'm little more than a yellow thumbs-up symbol on a cell phone app.

My thoughts whir as I freshen up for bed, put on a face mask—flying always does a number on my skin—and then slip between the crisp sheets of the full-size bed.

Thinking of what the little girl in the airport said, I wonder who I would've grown up to be had my parents paid me genuine attention instead of leaving me with nannies, or alone, which was also common. The only time they noticed me was when I was in front of the camera.

Maybe it's time for me to let the hope go that they care and be my own cheerleader. I could ask Declan to connect me to the squad that performs at the Bruisers' games. Not that I'm equipped to wear a short skirt and shake pom poms. That's not me. But the way Declan looked at me when I strode into the dining room gave my heart a workout. It makes me question whether I'm part cat because all I want to do is purr. But I should know better, because felines and the bluebirds in my belly probably don't get along.

Ironically, my latest job is as a lifestyle coach when my life is in shambles. The etiquette school is for dignitaries, high-powered business people, the aristocracy, and football players who need to learn how to behave themselves. But perhaps I could coach myself to have more confidence, to feel stronger, better, and to get my future figured out.

I say a prayer, asking for guidance.

It infuses me with renewed energy just as a loud cheering sound comes from my purse across the room.

I startle and wonder if it's a sign for a split second before I realize, no. It's not a sign at all, but a mistake.

Declan must have grabbed my phone on the way out of the dining room earlier. I hadn't noticed because the look he gave me when I'd returned from the ladies room woke up something inside of me.

No, it couldn't be coy curiosity or the purr of interest.

Declan is my best friend and right now we suspended that relationship in place of pretending not to know each other so I can keep my job.

But the way he'd teased and flirted and charmed drew me in like a lion into his den.

Again, I should know better. The man cannot resist making a ruckus. Then the look he'd given me on his way out of the dining room sent a flurry of Cinderella's bluebirds aloft in my belly. With excitement, they swirled and dipped. But it's time they go back to make-believe-land because Declan Printz is a tease, a flirt, and a charmer. He's like this with everyone.

I'm not special. I'm just his friend.

I bound out of bed to silence his cell phone, but it's a much newer model than mine, and I can't find a button to stop it from buzzing. Text message notifications from women with names like Tess, Kate, and Candi scroll across the screen. There are also a few from guys whose names I recognize from the moon-gate article and one from my number.

This means Declan has my phone.

I press my hand to my forehead. Am I alive? Is this an alternate reality? Could things get more twisted up?

Never mind. I did not have that thought. No, I did not.

I try his old password—my birthday. To my surprise, it works. He still has my contact saved as *My Oh Mags*. He'd entered his into my phone, which he now has, years ago with the name *The Declan Printz*. And yes, my password is his birthday.

My Oh Mags: Heyyy. What are you doing? This is Declan in case you haven't figured out by now that we switched phones.

The Declan Printz: I'm lying in bed after a painfully long day with a face mask saturating my soul.

My Oh Mags: Are we just us now? You're off the clock.

I instantly wish I could unsend the message that regular friend Maggie would have said in reply. That's something I'd tell Etta Jo and not the guy I'm coaching. I'm supposed to keep things professional.

The Declan Printz: My apologies for having gotten the phones mixed up. It was an accident.

My Oh Mags: I don't believe in accidents.

The Declan Printz: I think you mean coincidences.

The speech bubble blinks for a long moment during which the face mask and the skin on my entire body suddenly feel too tight.

My Oh Mags: Actually, I think everything happens for a reason.

The Declan Printz: In that case, explain the reason you mooned a bunch of people.

He replies to my question with three laughing face emojis. Of course, that's his response. Everything is a joke to him.

The Declan Printz: You did it for laughs?

My Oh Mags: What's life without laughter?

With the phone in hand, I drop back onto the bed, but my feet remain planted on the floor.

When was the last time I laughed? I can hardly remember. Maybe when Etta Jo and I watched that romcom about the shy waitress who won a trip on a cruise ship and the captain who won her heart.

The Declan Printz: What's life without laughter, you ask? My life.

A second wave of regret washes through me like winter slush. I don't need Declan knowing that my life is one sad stop after another in struggle city.

But it's hard not to be *me* around him. All through dinner, while trying to be serious, I was at war with how we used to joke and laugh. Granted, he typically used a modicum of table manners. Being together again is like the best of old times, but I can't quite seem to find my footing because we've both changed. Plus, I'm supposed to be coaching him while pretending we've never met.

I stomp on the floor a few times like a toddler having a tantrum then abruptly stop because this is Blancbourg Academy and surely Cateline won't tolerate that kind of behavior. The less attention I draw to myself the better.

Except Declan wouldn't stop looking at me earlier, and I'm not sure I'm okay with how it made me feel. I lift my feet to stomp away this frustration again and then stop myself when the phone buzzes. Great, it's from someone named Brandi. My imagination paints a picture of who she is.

It's easier to write the truth from behind the safety of the phone screen. The thought makes my heart sink because Declan is right. What's life without laughter? Plenty of people laughed at me when I'd fallen into the fountain.

My Oh Mags: You don't have much laughter in your life? I'll have to do something about that.

For one confusing moment, I forget that he has my phone and I have his. But the intention behind his comment sends the bluebirds twittering around. I have to keep up these boundaries for thirty days. I can do this.

The Declan Printz: Please no, especially not if it involves mooning people and water guns. Also, Brandi texted.

Lessons in etiquette require seriousness, focus, and not a big football-playing clown to try to get under my skin or get me to crack a smile. Although he already accomplished the first one. That's mostly because my body and mind are confused about where we stand.

Friends first.

Coach and client second.

The presence of the bluebirds suggests something else third... No, I cannot entertain that notion.

"Bluebirds, back outside. Nope. You don't belong here. This is complicated enough," I whisper. "Go on, get," I add before I realize a voice texting feature was activated and the message sends with a little swooshing sound.

"No, no, no." I clap my hand over my mouth.

MAGGIE



*M*y body tenses as the speech bubble blinks on Declan's fancy phone, indicating he's typing a reply to the accidental voice text. I didn't even know that was a feature.

I eye the window, but before I can toss away Declan's device, it beeps with a message from him, still on my phone.

My Oh Mags: Is there a bird in your room, is that a figure of speech, or was it an encoded distress call?

The Declan Printz: Everything is fine. Really. I was just, um, trying to get a laugh.

My Oh Mags: That's the spirit, but if that's your sense of humor, we'll have to work on it. We've been apart too long. See? No accidents. Here I am, back in your life, to make you laugh.

The bluebirds spin loop-the-loops in my belly. Just please, no laughter at my expense.

Now, he's being a gentleman or more of a friend. But during dinner, it was like he was doing everything in his power to defy the rules of the table—chewing with his mouth open, rocking back in his chair, crunching the ice in his drink, and so on. I groan inwardly. This is going to be a very long month. The phone remains quiet for several long moments.

While I get my head on straight and my thoughts into order, I take charge.

The Declan Printz: You still awake, Declan? If so, I suggest we press pause on the make Maggie laugh campaign. At least for thirty days. This situation is complicated enough.

My Oh Mags: What's confusing is you're texting from my phone and I'm replying from yours. But if we can handle this, we can handle a few chuckles. I promise it'll be fun.

The Declan Printz: Let's rethink that. I insist you not try to get me to laugh. It's completely unprofessional.

My Oh Mags: If you haven't noticed, I'm not the kind of guy who listens when he's told what to do.

The Declan Printz: I've noticed that you're very contrary. Shall I try reverse psychology? What if I say yes, by all means, try to get me to laugh? Will you do the opposite?

My Oh Mags: Not. A. Chance.

I can imagine the defiance on his lips as if we were sitting in the room together and he had spoken the words out loud to me. I know Declan all too well.

The image of his mouth lingers. I blink my eyes a few times, but the sight of his full-lipped smirk remains.

His phone vibrates in my hand, reminding me we still have each other's devices.

My Oh Mags: You may wonder if there's another reason that I want you to laugh... Because I want to see you smile.

Same Declan as ever, but something is different. He's never spoken to me this way. We're just friends. This is flirty Declan, with his heavy eyes and a smolder that's hot enough to require the use of air conditioning, even in this mountain town. At least in my imagination.

But how did that image get there? I saw glimpses of it at dinner. Was he playing a role or is this real? I'm a former actress, so I should know.

The little bluebirds in my stomach flap their wings, as though trying to throw themselves into his words and get closer to the possibility in the comment.

We'll have to discuss the rules later. But right now, I'm focused on Declan's easy smile, his smirk, and the Cheshire cat grin that reveals his teeth—birds, watch out. But none of them seem like his real smile. There is more to Declan than he lets on. Maybe he's testing out some of his lines on me. Well, I can play back.

The Declan Printz: Why's that? Why do you want to see my smile?

The twenty seconds that pass while I wait for a response are like when Etta Jo counts One-Mississippi, Two-Mississippi in her southern accent but

when she's sleepy.

My Oh Mags: Because your smile is the kind that can light up a room.

If he said this to me in person, we'd both crack up, unable to contain our laughter because this is not something Declan would ever say to me in real life. Right? His phone vibrates in my hand with another text.

My Oh Mags: It could light up a city.

My Oh Mags: The whole world.

My heart races, the bluebirds fly in circles, and Etta Jo's comment about clouds comes to mind. Another text beeps on his phone.

Brandi: Where are you tonight? I miss you.

My heart stills. Cinderella's bluebirds crash-land in my belly. Declan is probably buttering me up and flattering me so I'll give him a positive assessment, along with telling his football coach and the commissioner that he passed the program. May as well quit while I'm ahead. I send him a text.

The Declan Printz: Here's something that will make you smile. Brandi is looking for you.

I send a screenshot of the message.

My Oh Mags: Brandi?

The Declan Printz: She misses you.

My Oh Mags: Should I know who Brandi is?

The Declan Printz: You tell me. She texted you on your phone. She must be someone in your contacts. Oh, wait, she sent another text. She says that it's lonely in the hot tub without you. Forget my smile, right now, you'd see my gagging face. Ew.

My Oh Mags: Show me.

I have to read those two simple words a half dozen times for them to make sense.

The Declan Printz: You do know this is Maggie, right? Not Brandi.

My Oh Mags: Even though all your texts come in with my name on them, yes, I know that I'm texting Margaret Pearl Byrne. My question is why the gagging face? You don't want to picture me in a hot tub?

If we were having this conversation face to face, my mouth would open and then close, open and then close at a loss for words.

Is Declan flirting with me? Does he think I'm Brandi, his girlfriend? Is this a dream? I'm so far from the girls he usually dates, it's laughable.

Ah! I see what he did there. He wanted me to laugh...at myself. I get it now.

The Declan Printz: Nice try. I'm not taking the bait. Want me to tell Brandi that you miss her too?

I'll show him just what he's missing. Using his phone, I search on the internet browser for *Declan Printz's girlfriend*. The tab quickly populates with photos of him and a string of different women on his arm in each one. Still gripping the device, my hand falls heavily onto the bed. I regret that search immensely.

My Oh Mags: No. Do not text her. I repeat, do not text Brandi. Please.

Seems like a strong response, but if Brandi is the jealous type, he probably doesn't want her to get the wrong idea.

The Declan Printz: I should bring you your phone. You probably want to reply to Brandi yourself.

Declan and Brandi don't quite have a ring to it, but I hope they're happy. Truly, that's what friends want for each other. If Brandi has his heart, so be it. I can live with that. Mostly. As long as she lets him eat pizza, wear what he wants to instead of that nauseating neon suit, and when it's warm out, puts the car windows down and belts out old Journey and Bob Seger songs with him.

My Oh Mags: Sure, but on the subject of getting you to laugh, open up the photos app.

Open the photo app on his phone? No. I'd rather staple my fingers together. There are probably pictures of him and Brandi looking cute on vacation, both of them dressed up for fancy football-related events, and celeb photo opps.

My face squished up tight, I wage a mini battle of whether to do it. Declan is my best friend, surely he's not out to crush my spirit. Knowing him, there are probably some silly photos on there, and if not, some blackmail material. He he.

I tap the app. The most recent photo, dated earlier today, catches my eye. Declan stands with a teenager with scars on his face. A sign in the background indicates it's a recovery center here in Concordia. The timestamp indicates it was taken shortly before he was supposed to meet me for dinner.

Never mind blackmail, he has an alibi. I can no longer be mad at him for arriving late, but nothing about the image makes me laugh. Instead, my heart thumps, reminding me how precious life is.

My Oh Mags: Scroll up and you should find a picture of me wearing a face mask. They say charcoal is good for the skin. Got to keep up my good looks. You know?

There is an image of Declan wearing a bright blue robe with a gray mask on his face. It appears as if he's at a spa. Involuntarily, the space around my eyes crinkles as I smile, reminding me that I too have on a face mask. It's tight now and I imagine it looks like a parched desert. I send Declan a selfie with my face mask.

The Declan Printz: You almost got a smile out of me.

My Oh Mags: You're adorable.

The Declan Printz: If by adorable, you mean straight off the set of Attack of the Mud People, then sure.

My Oh Mags: Get Maggie to smile and laugh take two. Action! Now, keep scrolling. There's a photo of me in Indonesia. You'll know you're there when you see me in a pair of Bruisers branded board shorts. Reply when you're done laughing.

I feel weirdly snoopy being on his phone, but I could use a laugh so I scroll. I slide past loads of photos of him and other celebrities, football players, and him on the field. However, I don't see any with him and other women, or family for that matter. Not that I'm looking that carefully.

Okay, fine. I am because I'm wondering how Declan and I managed to maintain our friendship all these years without me noticing how, um, attractive he is.

There. I said it. Thought it. Whatever. Now, I can't unthink it. Or unsee the manly athletic build without an ounce of body fat. Muscles everywhere. Soft brown eyes at odds with everything else about him. Blond hair with a hint of strawberry—my favorite fruit.

At last, I come to a string of photos with sunsets, beaches, and a waterfall. I stop at an image of Declan seated on a rock, face twisted, wide-eyed, and next to a monkey wearing the same expression...and strangely enough, wearing the same Boston Bruiser's branded boardshorts. I guess he's not the only prankster on the team because someone got those on the monkey.

Seeing Declan shocked like that sends a roll of laughter through me, but what gets me going is that it looks like the monkey felt the same way as Declan did. Like they'd accidentally sat down next to each other, glanced over and both thought *what are you doing there?*

My Oh Mags: Either you're hysterical right now or selling my secrets to the media.

The Declan Printz: Are there secrets on this phone?

My Oh Mags: Keep scrolling toward the beginning. I lost a few of the photos of us after my phone went for a swim, but managed to salvage the good ones.

He adds the winking face.

I scroll to the beginning. Sure enough, Declan saved photos of us—school uniforms, playing hooky, at a concert with me on his shoulders so I could see. Some are sentimental, some funny. Emotions cascade toward me, making my eyes fill with liquid. But they're not sad tears. More like gratitude, joy. I'm thankful that there's one person in this world that cares about me. Remembers me. Has carried me with him in his pocket all this time.

Take that, inner troll of loneliness!

The Declan Printz: I've never seen these. Can I send them to myself?

My Oh Mags: Only if you do me a favor. Will you please listen to the most recent voicemail?

The Declan Printz: I don't know if that's a good idea. I'm not exactly interested in what Brandi has to say.

My Oh Mags: It's not from Brandi. It's from the mother of someone I used to know.

Something about his request makes me think it's important and private.

The Declan Printz: Maybe you should listen to it.

My Oh Mags: I don't want to.

Without being able to see his face and read his expression, I'm not sure what to make of that comment.

My Oh Mags: I have a feeling it's bad news.

The Declan Printz: ...Or maybe your old friend heard you were in Concordia and wants to visit you.

My Oh Mags: Ever the optimist. That's but one thing I love about you, My Milgo Maggins.

Love? He means that in the general sense of the word. Like I *love* chocolate cake. He loves pizza. Like that.

It doesn't mean anything else because that's not the kind of love friends share and I don't want to do anything to make Declan someday erase the photos of us on his phone.

It's late. We both probably have jet lag. But tired and prone to making impulsive decisions like eating half a cake so the sugar will keep me awake—when I was working two jobs, one at a bakery, I'd do that with the day olds or it was sleep-city for me—I will protect our friendship at all costs.

The Declan Printz: Meet me in the hall. I should give you your phone back.

I don't want to overstep bounds. Whether the message was good news or bad news, he ought to listen to it himself.

My Oh Mags: Do you mean to go to the hot tub? I didn't pack board shorts.

The Declan Printz: This is Maggie you're talking to. Not Brandi.

My Oh Mags: I am well aware.

Yep, the stress is probably getting to him. Or he misses Brandi and knows that tomorrow morning we'll pretend we don't know each other so I don't lose this job. We'll also pretend he wasn't flirting with me or whatever this is.

The Declan Printz: I mean I'm going to give you your phone back. I'm probably not the best candidate to role-play and pretend to be Brandi.

My Oh Mags: Brandi who?

The Declan Printz: Ha ha. Brandi your girlfriend.

He sends me a five-second clip of him laughing hysterically. I don't know what to make of that other than he thinks I'm hilarious—as if I could fill Brandi's shoes, er, high heels. All the women in my internet search were in high heels, probably so they didn't look too short next to him—like I do.

My Oh Mags: Your dad just messaged you.

My stomach swims as it often does when I think about my parents. Part of me gets excited and the other part fills with the kind of dread that comes before crushing disappointment. It's the kind that could drown a person who only knows how to doggy paddle.

The Declan Printz: Are you reading my messages?

My Oh Mags: You read mine. But no, a notification slid down from the top of the screen.

The Declan Printz: What did it say?

Maybe if he tells me, it'll soften what's sure to be a blow from whatever my dad relayed.

My Oh Mags: As I said, I didn't read it, but I'll only tell you if you listen to the voicemail.

The man drives a hard bargain. But nervous anticipation makes my hands clammy and no one wants hand sweat on their cell phone screen.

The Declan Printz: Please meet me in the hall in five minutes.

First, I rinse off the face mask and pull on a bulky hoodie. This seems like the kind of place to wear a robe, or not set foot outside my room without being fully dressed. But it's the dead of night, surely Cateline doesn't roam the halls making sure we're all in our rooms after hours.

While I smooth my hair, I mentally analyze the text exchange. Etta Jo would argue that Declan was flirting. But he does that with everyone...except me.

Then she'd say, *Until now.*

I must be really tired because I'm having imaginary conversations with my friend halfway across the world. But I don't stop.

See, Declan Printz is dangerous for this reason. He'll charm the spots off a cheetah. He flirts with cheerleaders and grocery checkout cashiers alike. He even once charmed a squirrel. It was to coax it out of the road to safety so a car didn't flatten it like a pancake, but still. The guy's flirtatiousness knows no bounds and no one is immune.

I tap the air with my finger. "I know!" I'll get some kind of repellent or have a special treatment to turn off whatever this is.

This? Attraction? Pfft. No way. Not us. We're friends.

I only take two turns down the corridors before I get completely lost. The antique sconces flicker dimly on the walls. I hold my breath as I pad along the plush carpet on the upper floor. Downstairs is wood or marble. I belatedly realize that *meet me in the hall* could mean any number of places. The old manor probably has miles of hallways.

A creak and a whooshing whistle come from somewhere behind me. A shiver pebbles across my skin. I glance around but nothing more than my long shadow skulks in the near darkness.

As I round a corner, a scraping noise makes me whirl around. Cold sweat beads on my forehead and I feel mildly seasick. A sharp bang follows. I spin, expecting to see Declan pop out of the darkness like a Jack in the Box.

However, the hallway is empty. The manor is probably haunted.

I'm going back to my room and I'll tell Declan to come get his phone. I back up slowly, not quite sure which way to go when I bump into something solid and warm.

Just as a scream rises in my throat, a big hand clamps down over my mouth.

DECLAN



The last thing I need to happen is for Maggie to startle, scream, and then have the headmistress find us in the hall together during this late hour. I know all too well how that would look. It would mean Wolf, Chase, Grey, and I are off the team. Rules broken. Lives ruined.

“Shh,” I whisper in Maggie’s ear, trying not to let how warm and soft she is in my arms distract me. However, that isn’t too difficult, considering she’s elbowing me and trying to kick her way free.

“Hey, it’s me.”

She says something, but it’s muffled.

I clarify, “I’m sorry if I startled you, but if anyone catches us out here, my career is over. I’m going to let you go, just please don’t scream.”

She nods rapidly like she’ll do anything for me to let her go. It’s notoriously hard to get a read on someone via text, but when Maggie turns around, the way her eyes linger on me a moment longer than necessary suggests something grows between us.

Why wouldn’t there be?

She’s gorgeous. I’m not a beast.

Okay, maybe part beast.

But our senses of humor have a one hundred percent match.

Minus the water gun incident.

As far as I’m concerned, we’re compatible. But there are the Coach’s rules. And the whole friendship thing. Wouldn’t want to ruin that.

I release my hands and hold them aloft to show that I mean no harm. “I realized it was you and that you’d probably be startled, so I—sorry.”

She smooths her hair and casts me a glare. “You were right about that.”

“Is it weird that every time we meet, it results in some kind of calamity?”

“And how each time it’s your fault?” she retorts.

“Mine?”

She makes a pair of pistols with her hands and says, “Pew, pew, squirt, squirt.”

“Fair. But I didn’t mean to startle you this time.”

“Well, maybe it was a good thing we haven’t seen each other in a few years because it’s been less than twenty-four hours and we’ve had two calamities, as you said. Those probably aren’t good odds.”

The crackling within dies like water dumped over a fire. Something inside me sinks like the rare times the Bruisers lose a game or mess up a major play.

Gripping the back of my neck, I say, “I meant what I said about wanting to make you laugh, certainly not scream.”

Maggie guppies her mouth like she wants to say something, but whatever grows between us has changed the game. I know the playbook inside and out, but I’ve never been on the field with someone like her.

“Here’s your phone.” She holds it out.

I don’t take the device from her palm. “I’m hungry. Want to raid the kitchen with me?” If I took a selfie, there’d be mischief written all over my face.

“Hold up. You want to go to the kitchen? Isn’t that forbidden? I’d have thought, even in this distant, relatively unknown country, word would’ve gotten around that you’re banned from kitchens, universally.”

“I’m not sure it’s a global rule.” At least, not anymore. Still, the reminder of why that’s the case burns me up inside. That’s a poor choice of words, even if they weren’t spoken aloud. I dismiss those old, sticky thoughts.

“I’d advise against testing it.”

I wink in the near darkness. “I’m feeling lucky.”

“Even after being sent here?”

“So far it’s turned out alright.”

“Says the guy who pelted me with water guns upon his arrival.”

“To be fair, I did not expect you, Magoo.”

I detect her lips quiver with a smile, even in the shadows.

“You said you were worried about getting in trouble.”

“I think I already am,” I mutter. “Coach Hammer said if any one of us does anything to jeopardize our time here, if we mess around or mess up, we’re all off the team. The guys and I made a pact. Called it the Playbook.” My lips quirk because, in any other circumstance, I’d totally break the rules, but I’m loyal to my teammates. They’re my family. Maggie too.

The corners of her lips dip. “Explain exactly how going to raid the kitchen like two kids at a sleepover is not asking for trouble.”

“It’s only trouble if we get caught.” I tap her elbow with my elbow. “But the kind of trouble the coach was talking about is, er, the lady kind.”

“Well, good thing Brandi is an ocean away.”

“Brandi who?” I echo the text I sent from Maggie’s phone.

“Ha ha,” she says dryly.

I could never flirt with Maggie the same way I did with the Brandis of the world. Maggie makes me feel different. I don’t care about Brandi. I sound like a jerk, but I’m not exactly sure who Brandi is—there are loads of girls and team groupies—they call themselves the “Bruiser Babes.”

Maybe Hammer put Brandi up to it to test me.

My resolve is like iron, though Maggie has the ability to melt even the strongest metal...and maybe hearts too. But a staggering thought hits me which could break mine. Is she dating someone?

Maggie could never be one of “Declan’s Damsels” and not because she’s lacking anything. No, she’s gorgeous and smart. A babe for sure. She can spin circles around Brandi and any woman I’ve ever dated. That’s why our friendship has endured all these years. Why, even after all this time apart, we pick up right where we left off. Well, almost. I’d argue we picked up...and then some.

“Maybe Wolf gave Brandi my number.” So many of those women were after one of two things: a moment in the spotlight or money. Sounds callous, but time and time again, they’d proven it to be true. So, I made it a rule to keep things simple, superficial, and brief in my dating life. Feeling used lost its appeal rather quickly.

“Come on, it’s ice cream o’clock. I bet there’s some around here,” I whisper.

“I prefer cake these days.” Maggie wears a pout.

“Ice cream and cake go perfectly together.”

She rolls her eyes.

But before she can protest, I say, “Come on, I think I passed the kitchen on my way up here.” But I take making My Magatha smile seriously.

“What about the strict rule of you not being allowed in kitchens? That it was a federal law.”

My heart dips briefly, but I won’t think about that now. Not ever if I can help it. I grip Maggie’s hand, meaning to pull her along because I imagine she’ll try to scurry back to her room. I expect her to jerk her hand away, but it slides perfectly into mine and stays there.

My voice is rough when I say, “Rules were meant to be broken.”

Retracing my steps becomes an exercise in concentration because that crackling fills my ears and my chest. When was the last time I felt this way? I know exactly when because it was the only other time.

After a few more turns, I manage to find the kitchen, despite my better sensibilities. When I press the door open, Maggie lets go of my hand, leaving me suddenly cold. Maybe I don’t want ice cream. Perhaps I prefer cake too.

DECLAN



*A*lthough the old manor house is like taking a step back in time, the kitchen is modern. The polished stainless-steel glints in the light filtering through high windows. It's nothing like the kitchen that made me avoid them so many years ago.

"Let's see here. Where do they keep the desserts?" I say in a low voice.

We stop in front of a giant walk-in freezer.

"There's your ice cream." Maggie points.

"I think it's more of a cake kind of night after all, but where would it be?"

She taps her chin, and my gaze trails down to the Bruiser's logo on her sweatshirt. My chest crackles.

I say, "I hear the chocolate cake in Concordia is world-famous."

Sensing my eyes on her, she looks at me and then down, eyes widening.

"Nice hoodie." Gripping the hem, I give it a little shake.

She bites her lip. "My best friend gave it to me."

I nudge her with my shoulder. An invisible little flame grows between us, warming me through.

"Best friend, huh? Then I should know your favorite kind of cake these days. Is it chocolate? Vanilla?"

"Love and like, respectively, but they're not favorite status, though I haven't tried the Concordia chocolate cake yet."

"How about black velvet?"

"Nope."

My eyebrows crimp. "Those are classics."

"I've only had that kind once."

I rake through my memory, trying to remember us eating cake together. “How can you know that something isn’t your favorite if you’ve only had it once?”

She lifts and lowers a shoulder. “You might go to a theme park only once but know it was your favorite.”

“Like Disney World?”

She goes still.

Having seen the viral video, I sense it’s still a sore subject, but we’re friends. We can talk about anything. “Mags, I saw the video when you fell into the fountain. You make a beautiful Cinderella, dry or wet. In light of that, I truly am sorry about the water guns and all that. It was bad timing.”

“I haven’t seen the video. I couldn’t bear to watch it after living it.” Her voice is small.

“If I’d let you hang onto my phone any longer, you’d have seen bloopers of me doing some ridiculous things on and off the field.”

Her frown goes deeper.

“I’m sorry someone captured that moment. Even though I don’t care that the world saw my rear end, it wasn’t like I wanted it to go viral, or be on the front page of every paper—physical or digital. So, in a way, I understand.”

She exhales through her nose. “I suppose you do. But that kid who fell in with me was a greasy, grubby, gross—”

“Want me to track him down and give him a taste of vanilla and chocolate?” I ask, holding up my fists.

A smile peeks on Maggie’s lips. “No, he was just a kid.”

“I’m human, so I know it was probably embarrassing—”

“How about humiliating, insulting, and dangerous?” Hurt laces her voice.

“All of the above, but if that’s the worst you have in the past, the biggest skeleton in your closet and you survived, I say you’re doing okay.”

She nods, but something about the way she shifts away, suggests there’s something more. After all, we made a silent, but mutual agreement not to talk about our pasts. I’m certainly not proud of mine.

“Now, how about that cake? Tell me your favorite kind. I regret that I don’t know this piece of Maggie trivia.” I bump her with my shoulder.

“You’ll laugh when I tell you.”

“You know me, Magita, I’m all about laughter.”

I turn a corner in the kitchen, but it's a dead end. I spin around and we collide. Our hands brush and the crackle turns into a blaze as if stoking the embers from when we held hands earlier.

"Your hands are cold. It's a definite no on the ice cream." My voice sounds unusually gruff. I want to rub her hands between mine to warm them up, but worry that could make things awkward or it would be unwelcome.

"This old building is drafty."

The near darkness in the kitchen and her proximity after all this time gives me courage. I clasp both her hands in mine and draw them close between us.

She wears a shaky smile and stares at our fingers as they link together. The crackling inside me grows.

With a straight face, I say, "I would never laugh at your favorite kind of cake. There is absolutely nothing funny about cake. Except for last year, the guys made me a chocolate birthday cake that resembled a certain emoji. Wolf brought a roll of toilet paper instead of napkins, if you catch my meaning."

Her lips twist with a suppressed smile.

The light of the moon through the high window illuminates her face. Her skin is fresh from the mask she'd used and her eyes shine bright.

Our gazes lock. It's an unspoken stare-off like a thumb war or arm wrestling. But the winner will get the satisfaction of seeing my best friend, who has become a beautiful woman, smile. Yeah, it's a game I intend to win. Call me greedy, selfish, whatever, but there is nothing quite so satisfying as a genuine Margaret Pearl Byrne smile.

The corners of her eyes crinkle then her lips crack before she tips her head back with a full peal of laughter.

I laugh too and then quickly shush us both.

She glances from our hands to my eyes.

I'm not sure if this is like in the hall during dinner and we're having a real moment. But I'm determined to make it into one so I kiss Maggie's knuckles and after each peck, I say "If your favorite kind of cake is a secret, it's safe with me, Cinderella."

Her breath catches.

Mine stops altogether.

What's happening? What am I doing?

Playbook, playbook, playbook, I repeat in my mind.

“Cinderella?”

“Yes, my favorite fairytale princess. Oh, wait. Don’t tell me you’re one of those women who go around declaring they don’t need a prince. That they’re not a damsel in distress. Let me make this clear. No one *needs* a prince. Whether you want one, and everything that comes along with it, is another story. And I’d argue that this Printz is pretty wantable.” I wink.

Maggie’s exhale is shaky but she follows with a steady inhalation. “If you know me at all, then you’re aware I’m not impressed by fame and fortune.”

“Clearly,” I say, recalling her reaction to my designer garb.

Maggie glances down as if suddenly shy. Then as if gaining resolve, she says, “Someone loyal, caring, and kind. A friend and a teammate. Someone, who above all, knows who the true King is—our Lord and Savior.”

Biting my lip, I take a risk. “I can think of someone who checks off those boxes.”

“If it’s anyone on the Boston Bruisers, the answer is no.”

“No?” I ask.

“No,” she repeats. “They’re like your brothers and that’s a strictly platonic relationship. Imagine if I dated one of your teammates and things didn’t work out. They never do,” she mumbles, then more clearly says, “that would be awkward. Maggie plus any football player equals platonic.”

My shoulders dip. “Platonic?” I ask.

“Platonic,” she repeats.

“Sounds like a science term, astronomy specifically, or the symptom of a disease. Official definition: the absence of anything that would make a person happy.”

“What dictionary did you use?”

I tap my temple.

“I’m pretty sure platonic means the absence of romantic affections,” she says.

“In that case, like you and me?”

She tucks her head back. “You and me?” she repeats.

“Is that what this is?” I ask.

“Oh, right. Us. Yep. Purely platonic. That’s what this is. Nothing more. Yeesh. Of course. Duh.” Her eyes dart everywhere but at me.

A long beat passes while I have an internal fistfight with myself before dropping my hands and then pointing. “Look. The fridge. I wonder if

there's a cake inside."

Another wall hosts several stainless-steel doors with long handles.

I should probably close myself in the freezer first to cool off. Stay in there for a day or two, because My Mag-amor just froze me out. *Platonic*.

Rolling my shoulders back, I can't leave the ball in play.

Must. Finish. The. Game.

"Ah-ha. Which do you think is the lucky door? One, two, three, or four?" I ask.

"I'm going to go with four."

"Like lucky player number forty-four." I pull the door open and sure enough, it holds all manner of desserts from cheesecake to pie to parfait.

Maggie's eyes widen. "Found the cake."

It's chocolate topped with swirls of whipped buttercream and little white candy pearls.

"That's perfect. It's official cake day. Or it was yesterday. Actually, I have no idea what day it is." She sounds genuinely excited and like time doesn't matter.

That makes me smile inwardly. "The best times I've ever had in my life were when I've forgotten what time or day it is."

Her shoulders sink slightly as though the comment pinches something inside.

"This looks delicious. Care to split a slice with me?" I ask, wanting to bring back her smile.

"Usually, I share, but tonight, my dining companion had the worst manners, and I lost my appetite. I hardly ate a thing and am starved. You can have your own." As she elbows past me and helps herself to a big piece, I detect the faintest smile.

As she balances it in her hand, I grip her waist and pick her up before setting her down lightly on the stainless-steel table.

She makes a little yelp of surprise and then quickly brings her empty hand to her mouth. "I forgot that I shouldn't make any noise," she whispers.

I hoist myself up beside her and then take a big bite of cake. She takes a tiny one. She closes her eyes a moment and then her legs swing as though she's a little girl who'd snuck into the kitchen for a midnight snack and is clearly pleased with herself.

Another thing that I've always loved about Maggie is that she's playful, whimsical, and will do something like this and just have fun. So many of

the women I've known in recent years think of fun as schmoozing, tipping back champagne, shopping, and tapping my credit card to pay for it all.

Maggerita blinks open her eyes as I stuff the rest of the piece of cake in my mouth. "You're lucky I'm not grading you on this for manners. You inhaled that thing." Despite claiming hunger, she's barely made a dent in her piece.

"This is not an authorized lesson so I'm off the hook, but you are not," I say, wanting to remain in this secret space where we can be ourselves, best friends, and not have cameras, etiquette teachers, or anyone else intrude.

"What do you mean?" she asks, swiveling to face me.

"I want you to listen to that message on my phone."

"Declan, I can't. It's private. None of my business."

I clasp my hands in my lap. They're suddenly sweaty with nerves as the past floods back and I anticipate whatever the caller has to say. "I need you to." I need someone else to filter the message for me.

"Why?" she asks. "The other guys on your team are here, why not have one of them do it?"

"Because they're not you. Because they rely on me for my constant strength and focus."

"Do you mean the content of the message might show weakness?" She's smart and quick to pick up on what I can't say. When I don't reply, she says, "And you trust me with that?" Maggie points at herself and then licks some frosting off her finger.

Despite the subject of this conversation, my mouth waters.

"I trust you because you didn't jump on the opportunity to use the fact that you had my phone against me."

"Why would I do that? Who would do that?" she asks aghast.

"Maggie-ums, you're smart and perceptive, but you have no idea how ruthless people who want a piece of fame and fortune can be. As much as the media gives to my career, they could just as easily take it away. I keep up the bravado publicly and toe the line with Coach Hammer, but despite my persona, I get the point that the commissioner is trying to make. I don't want the team to be cast into the shadows because of me..." Because of the real scandal of my past.

"I don't know, Declan." I'm not sure if it's a statement or a question.

"Please?" I ask. The desperation in my tone jolts me with a shock of unreality, but so had the call I'd received years before from that same

number. Typically, I'm not the kind of guy to say please or to be vulnerable with anyone, but Maggie draws something out of me that I can't explain.

"What if the call is good news? Something pleasing. A charity event or birthday invite or an upcoming visit from your old friend?"

I tuck my head back and snort. "You could be right. I guess I just expected the worst." I say it, but I don't mean it. Whatever it is, it's pretty close to the worst.

"Someone once told me that life is the way we perceive it. If we expect bad things, that's what we'll see. If we anticipate good stuff, we'll get more of that." The corner of her mouth lifts in a half-smile.

"Makes sense."

"That someone was you, silly." She passes me the phone. It's as heavy as a sack of bricks. I'd know, my old trainer used to have me haul them.

Maggie inclines her head, indicating I listen to the voicemail.

I debate and then pass it back to her. "Can't."

"Won't."

"You won't listen to it?" I ask.

"I mean you *can* listen to it. You're choosing not to. You *won't*."

"Fine. I admit that. I'd just rather not. Even if it's good news."

"How about this? We'll play rock paper scissors. The best of three has to listen to the message."

"Okay. I'm good at this." I'm a winner. Only, this is a game of chance. I try to get into the mind of my opponent. Is Maggie a rock, paper, or scissors kind of gal? I should know this. On the outside, she seems like paper, but on the inside, she's solid, especially given that bit of wisdom she dropped about perception. Not because I said it but because she remembered it. Maybe needed it at some point.

Sure enough, she goes with scissors. I opt for rock.

"Rock beats scissors," I say with confidence.

We tuck our hands behind our backs. She goes with scissors the next time and I opt for paper.

"I won, but now we're tied. Whoever loses the next round has to listen to the call," she says.

We repeat the motions. I produce scissors. She picks paper.

"I won," I say, hopping to my feet and doing a victory dance.

"You know that's obnoxious," she says, but she's smiling, a full-blown Maggie Swaggy smile.

Yep, I won. I pass her the phone, suddenly feeling hopeful. Maybe it is a call about a birthday or celebration or something involving cake.

With a huff, she taps the button and holds the phone up to her ear, listening.

Her eyes dim. Her shoulders drop. She tries to keep her face like stone, like rock, but I watch as it crumples like paper.

And at that moment, it's like I've been burned and searing pain fills my entire body all over again.

MAGGIE



*T*he woman with a thick Irish accent, who left the message Declan must've instinctually known he probably wouldn't want to listen to, says things not meant for my ears.

I clear my throat. "She says you should call. It's important. Right away. No matter what time of day or night." The partial truth slips off my tongue. There is no way I can tell him that there was an accident. That someone might not make it. I pass him the phone.

When we held hands in the hall, when he kissed my knuckles, his palm was warm, sure and strong. Now his hands feel clammy. Limp. He doesn't take his device.

"*Important* could mean any number of things. A housewarming party, a new addition to the family..." I bite my lip because the caller's grave tone suggested it was bad.

"You sure?" he asks as though not quite believing it.

I thrust the phone in his direction. "Go ahead. Call."

"Nah. It's too late. I'll do it in the morning." I press his phone into his hand, sandwiching it between our palms and obstructing us from holding hands again even though now seems like a good time to reach out to my best friend.

Even if it's bad, he should probably know. "Promise that you'll call?" I ask, worried that not telling him everything the caller said is the wrong decision.

The rest of my hunk of cake sits sadly on the stainless-steel table.

Declan glances at the number on the screen as though debating whether to listen to it himself.

A rush of panic sweeps through me.

He clicks delete.

Dread and relief are like two ends on a seesaw. "It's late. We should head back," I say.

He tucks his phone away. "Thank you."

"Of course. That's what friends are for." But the guilt comes at me like a linebacker with a vendetta. A true friend would be there to hold his hand through it, but something has changed between us. If I'm not mistaken, it's gone beyond the bounds of platonic and into another orbit where men are from Mars and women are from...well, I'm originally from Los Angeles, but that's not going to help me now.

"Promise me you'll return the call," I repeat.

He nods and then spots the rest of my cake. "You're not going to finish that?"

"All yours."

The hungry look he gives me makes me wonder about my appetite.

Declan gobbles it up, every last crumb. His smile tells me it's delicious, and that everything is okay between us. And that he doesn't know that I hadn't conveyed the entirety of the message. We near the exit to the hallway and I want to hit rewind but I can't...or I won't.

"I've always loved how easy it is to talk to you," Declan says.

Maybe so, but it was hard not to tell him the whole truth about the call, the past, everything. I feel like telling him right now. To spill my guts and heart. But that sounds like it would be a lot to clean up if it turns messy like every other time I've opened up to anyone. Instead, I tighten the stitches around my fragile parts and keep all my feelings inside.

"Oh, here," he says, passing me my phone. "Almost forgot."

Our hands brush when I take it, sending those bluebirds alight.

"By the way, you looked beautiful in the Cinderella costume, but I also liked the photo of you lounging by the pool." He winks.

It takes me a moment to figure out what he means. "Wait. You looked through my camera roll?"

"You can't blame me for being curious."

I feel more exposed than I did when I fell into the fountain.

"You got to see mine. I got to see yours. Seems fair. Win, win, right?"

"Declan," I growl.

"What's on deck for tomorrow?" he asks.

Through gritted teeth, I say, “We’ll be reviewing digital etiquette.”

“Perfect. Now that we have our phones back, we can practice.”

I’m not a football expert by any stretch, but I’m pretty sure we’ve crossed the line of scrimmage. He’s been so unexpectedly sweet since we went into the kitchen. He left an imprint everywhere his hands had touched: palms, fingers, knuckles. And the kisses he’d given each of them after he acknowledged the viral video sends a rush through my veins all over again. It travels to my chest and belly. The bluebirds go bonkers.

“Anything else on the docket so I can be prepared, Coach? Any more midnight escapades around the school? Is there more cake in our future?” ...And he’s back. I don’t have a watch, but I estimate it took him less than three minutes to slide right back into being Declan the Showman.

“We’ll cover how *not* to make a grand entrance.”

“But that’s what I do.” He flashes a cocky smile.

“Not anymore and not according to your coach and commissioner.”

“Well, I don’t imagine they said anything about making a grand exit. I’m good at that too.” In one swift motion, he picks me up under his arm and hurries down the hall.

“Put me down,” I hiss. “I’m not a football.”

“Printz is going long. Will he make it to the endzone?” he whisper-shouts.

We round a corner, go up a couple of flights of stairs, and he still carries me as though I’m as light as a feather, er, football.

“If I tell you what kind of cake is my favorite, will you put me down?” I beg, barely able to stifle the laughter in my voice.

Declan comes to an abrupt stop, setting me on my feet. We stand toe to toe, but I have to lift my gaze to his—it’s like staring at the sun through the treetops. He smooths a few of my perpetual flyaway hairs. His lashes brush his cheeks as he gazes at me.

My pulse goes from trot to gallop.

His lips quirk.

He’s hardly out of breath from his race up the stairs, but I can’t catch mine as I bask in the heat from his muscles.

“I should know this, but what is your favorite kind of cake?” he asks.

I search his soft brown eyes. I’ve never known anyone like Declan, but fear if I lose myself in him, I’ll lose my best friend.

I swallow a lump that feels like a naval orange. His gaze alone has the potential to destroy me. But it's his lips at that moment that threaten to undo me. Then they move. "So, what kind of cake is your favorite?" he repeats in a low, husky voice.

"I love chocolate, but carrot cake is my favorite."

He cracks a smile. "You were afraid I'd laugh, but strangely, that sounds delicious right now...and so do you, Mag-oochie. This was the perfect midnight snack."

That wasn't what I expected him to say, but more to the point, I wasn't expecting to agree—not about the cake or about sharing whatever non-platonic interplanetary, axis-changing, supernova event this is.

I lean in, drawn by a gravitational pull or something equally irresistible. But then a shadow crosses my thoughts—could be space trash or a foreign spy satellite. Whatever it is reminds me of my particular situation. Backing up, I extend my finger and tap his chest. "We're forgetting something. We don't know each other. We're not friends. None of this happened."

Declan's shoulders drop with each word uttered.

He may be the football player, but putting that boundary between us makes me feel heavy, like I'm wearing full game gear with pads and all.

I hurry to the Regency Suite without another word.

On the other side of the door, I catch my breath even though Declan had been the one to carry me all the way upstairs.

In an exhausted daze, I collapse onto the mattress.

My inner troll, who'd been hiding since Declan and I had texted, crawls out from underneath the bed, ready to remind me about my loneliness and how I'm better off sticking to the shadows. I know firsthand how bright the lights of fame can be and decided a long time ago I want nothing to do with them. So, it'll just be the troll and me forever.

Despite my swirling thoughts and questions about what transpired since I was last lying here, the time change sends me directly to sleep and wakes me much earlier than I'd like.

As I recall last night, I groan. The truth comes to me as if from a dream. But nope, this is stark, non-platonic reality.

I'm attracted to Declan.

My best friend.

My client.

We shared a moment. More than one. And I'd kind of lied to him about the voicemail. I left a mess in Florida and find myself in another one.

As I get ready for day two at Blancbourg Academy d'Etiquette, I come up with some *icks* to quell the feelings about my BFF.

Declan doing everything he could to break the rules of etiquette at dinner the night before, most notably, chewing with his mouth open is at the top of the list. That was a definite turn-off. But it doesn't quite do the trick.

He'd sucked his teeth, slurped his water, and probably would've belched repeatedly had we sat there any longer. If I picture it happening, perhaps that'll dampen my desire to hold his hand again, to feel his lips move from my knuckles to my mouth, to be swept away by Printz Charming.

Because Declan Printz is charming, that's for sure. Our sweet late-night interaction takes center stage, casting the icks behind the curtain.

As I quickly scroll through my phone for any news, messages, and to find out what official day it is—official hug day—I pass a report about moon-gate. Declan is vulgar, rude, and gruff.

Icks all around.

But it's hug day, and yesterday's hug from Declan was divine, like being wrapped in a cotton candy cloud.

I square my shoulders, banishing further thoughts of him from my mind and march into the hall, all business.

Telling myself to forget about Printz Charming, I arrive five minutes early to the classroom indicated on my schedule. I send Etta Jo a quick text update, leaving out the details of last night. I add that it's official hug day and send her a virtual hug.

Declan appears, exactly on time. I ignore the slant of his brown eyes, the cut of his cheekbones, and the fullness of his lips. I focus on the mussed hair, the wild beard, and that his shirt is untucked.

"Good morning," he says.

"Good morning," I repeat, also ignoring the zip of excitement that rushes through me at the sound of his voice with the subtle Irish accent. "According to my notes, we need to cover grooming habits, dating, and I think we should continue reviewing table manners."

"Good, I'm starving," he says.

His gaze slides to me and all I can think about is our midnight rendezvous in the kitchen—when he'd said, "This was the perfect midnight

snack.”

Suddenly, I’m hungry too.

MAGGIE



For the remainder of the week, Declan and I work on deportment, greetings, digital manners, and how to carry on a conversation without flirting—his downfall, except when it comes to me, of course.

My inner troll has strong opinions on this.

We're just friends. Sheesh. Don't be weird about it.

Oh, I'm the one being weird. No. I promise. We're friends and there aren't bluebirds flitting around in my stomach anytime he enters a room. I don't think about how his eyes remind me of maple syrup and the soft touch of his lips when he's done speaking. That does not make me wonder what they'd feel like against mine.

My cheeks remain red because I'm not used to the sunshine here. It's different than in Florida. Must be stronger during the summer to make up for the long, dark winters this far north.

As our lessons progress, I'm starting to wonder if Declan is capable of not flirting.

On Monday, Official Hug Day, he told Cateline she looked lovely which earned him a glower from Wolf.

On Tuesday, when we met for breakfast, he said, "*Still waiting for my hug.*"

Come to think of it, he did that on Monday too. I gave in and the hug lasted a little longer than usual, but I figure he's just homesick. Missing his penthouse and glitzy life.

On Wednesday, he complimented the Blancbourg chef on her lumpy oatmeal. I couldn't help but wonder if that means something else even though he claimed his aunt made the best oatmeal—lumps and all.

Then yesterday, he greeted me by saying, “*Morning, Coach.*” He mumbled something about how Coach Printz has a good ring to it. Was he referring to himself or me? As in, Maggie Printz? This is probably something I should dismiss or take up with Etta Jo. I pull out my phone and start to type, then delete. She’ll just talk about swoony, blissy clouds, gloat, and make me bake her a cake.

While waiting for Declan in the hallway, something nearby makes a hiss, or is it a sizzle? Followed by several rapid bangs like rat-a-tat-tat.

Panicked, because I’m afraid we’re under attack, I spin in a circle and start down the hall, then double back when smoke fills the corridor.

Did someone let off firecrackers? Yep.

Declan emerges from the haze like an action film star walking away from an explosion. Except he looks different. His bushy beard is shaved, gone, caput, revealing his smooth cheeks, strong jaw, and a tiny dimple on his left cheek that I almost forgot about.

Then I realize he must’ve been with Shonda at the in-house salon for a makeover and guide to grooming habits.

With every step he takes closer, my body betrays me with a full, head-to-toe, flush.

“This was a very bad idea,” he says, eyes locked on me.

“Are you taking responsibility for the firecrackers because Cateline is going to—” But instead of speaking fluidly and sternly like an intimidating coach who’s reprimanding her client, I stammer like I’m two seconds away from being the star in a period piece and swooning onto a settee.

“No, well, yes.” He smirks and winks and I don’t know what that dimple does, but it’s as if it’s popping just for me. “I worry that causing you to look at me like this is the bad idea.”

“Look at you like you’re going to pay for the destruction of property and breaking rules, no less, fire codes?”

Declan’s lips quirk. “Come on, say it. You know I’m hot.”

My eyes bulge. He has the bravado of a silver-screen heartthrob.

“See? You know it’s true.”

Status update: Cheeks on fire. Lips rubber. Body shaking—at least when he runs his hand through his freshly trimmed hair, because I’m imagining it sliding through my fingers. Wait. No, I’m not. I am not thinking about my best friend that way.

Have I mentioned that we're friends? Platonic friends. Just two normal people.

"What, you don't like my freshly shaven look? Because I'm pretty sure you do. I thought I cleaned up rather nicely."

"Declan," I grind out.

His response is merely a look that says he knows exactly what he did to me and it has nothing to do with the firecrackers.

"Leave it to Declan to exit the salon with a bang," a deep male voice says from behind me.

I turn around. It's Wolf, followed by Chase and Grey. The three massive football players stand shoulder to shoulder filling the wide hallway behind me with Declan on the other side.

"Where there's smoke, there's Declan." Chase's lips twitch like he's trying to hide his amusement.

Grey frowns as if he disapproves. Then again, he always looks grumpy.

"You can blame Maggie. She made me do it," Declan says.

I point at myself as if he could be referring to anyone else. Declan steps closer and I back up against the wall so I'm not a football player sandwich. If the three guys behind me charge at their teammate for causing trouble, I'll be trampled.

"Wait, Maggie?" Chase asks.

"I thought she was Miss Byrne." Grey, ever formal, polite, and sullen, does not belong here.

"Maggie Byrne?" Wolf looks me up and down as if making a connection.

I give my head a subtle shake as if begging him not to recognize that Declan and I know each other, which has the potential to cause me to lose my job.

Guys, this is a secret relationship, er, friendship, and it needs to stay that way.

"The one. The only. The legendary." Declan smiles proudly.

"This is Maggie?" Wolf says.

Are they confused? Upset? Shocked? I can't tell. I should've been directing my telepathic begging at Declan not to blow our cover.

Wolf looks me up and down. In fact, my blazing cheeks suggest they all are.

This genuinely confuses me.

“Declan has talked a lot about you. But he never mentioned—” Wolf cuts himself off at a sharp glare from Declan.

“Eyes over here, Connor.” Declan’s tone is a low warning.

I see why when I risk a glance as Wolf’s eyes eat me up like I’m little more than a slice of Little Red Riding Hood’s chocolate cake.

“But you never mentioned—” Chase starts then thinks better of it.

“She’s his best friend, boys,” Grey says in a way that suggests something I can’t quite define.

Yet those are my sentiments exactly. Or should be.

“That’s right. Maggie is off-limits. And this conversation is not to be repeated. We can’t have the headmistress find out we know each other. Conflict of interest,” Declan says authoritatively.

“Why? Because Maggie will automatically pass you? Not fair,” Wolf says.

“It’s in your best interest that I get a good review,” Declan says.

“I am not going easy on him just because we’re friends. Best friends,” I clarify, in case they have other ideas. “He faces the same Blancbourg scrutiny as the rest of you. Promise.”

“Fair enough.” Grey leans against the wall with his arms crossed. His foot vibrates like he wants this conversation to be over.

“Right. You’re friends. We get it.” Wolf grins.

“My best friend,” Declan adds, affirming my fear. No, it affirms my hope because I don’t want to mess things up. We’re just friends and that’s how it’ll stay ‘til death do we part.

“Yep. Off-limits. Maggie is just your best friend. Keep telling yourself that, cowboy,” Wolf says over his shoulder.

“She’s just your best friend. Your pretty friend,” Chase mutters as they walk away.

The wallpaper glue must’ve seeped through the floral design because I’m stuck. Adhered to the wall. I’m convinced I’ll never be able to move again.

“Hey, don’t listen to them.” Declan startles me from wondering how I’ll be able to conduct daily life functions from my new home in the hallway.

“Don’t listen to us about being pretty or—?” Wolf starts.

“All of you, vamoose,” Declan orders. “And not a word of this to anyone.”

Muttering and tittering among themselves, they obey.

If it weren't for the lingering smoke from the firecrackers, I'd think Declan's cheeks turned a slight shade of pink. "Should we be concerned that a fire alarm didn't go off? A sprinkler system?" I sense something unspoken between his words.

Miraculously, I remove myself from the wall and stalk closer, amused by this turn of events. If I'm not mistaken, Declan is being protective of me. Defensive. Possessive?

"Is it because you know I'm hot?" I ask, repeating his earlier question and directing it at him.

His jaw lowers and lifts. "I'm sure there's a fire extinguisher somewhere nearby."

"You'll have to ask the headmistress and talk to her about how you plan to clean up this mess."

"What mess?"

"That your teammates are aware we know each other."

"They won't tell."

"Sounded to me like you've told them about me before now. Me, your best friend."

Declan's eyes flash. "They're a bunch of animals."

"A bunch of attractive animals," I say with a grin to see what'll happen.

"They clearly thought the same of you."

"Let me guess, you don't like that."

"Not. At. All," he grinds out.

"Well, I'm not going to do anything to risk my job, or yours, so you don't have anything to worry about from me. But in response to your question when you came out of the salon, you know what they say about the company you keep." With a wink, I sweep down the hall as if my long skirts bustle around me and my hair flows back with the wind.

I'm not sure where that bold bit of flirty drama came from, but I'll regret it later when I'm trying to sleep. For now, I'll pretend that for once, I'm not the average girl next door. Rather, I'm the belle of the ball.

Oh, but wait. We have class this morning, so I turn around and return to Declan's side. He remains where I left him in the hall, blinking slowly as if struck dumb, then gives his head a shake. "Couldn't stay away, huh?"

My mouth waters and my head spins slightly as if I'm lightheaded. Hungry. I suddenly want another midnight snack.

Focusing for the rest of the day requires repeated reminders to close the tabs in my brain. But when Declan speaks, a new one opens up, querying why the subtle lilt of his accent makes me lean in.

Focus, Maggie.

Then another pops open when I notice the size of his hands and the callouses. We're only in our twenties, but I'm surprised he doesn't wear a ring. Well, a non-Superbowl one.

At lunch, he asks, "Do you want to know what my favorite kind of cake is? Maggie cake. Like Patty Cake."

"Like the nursery rhyme? I think it's Pat-a-cake."

He laces his fingers through mine and lifts them as if we're going to play the hand-clapping game. "Maggie Cakes. I like the sound of that."

It's hard to ignore how his rough hands feel against mine and the shiver it sends through me. My voice trembles more than I'd like when I say, "As in a bakery?"

"Didn't you used to want to open one that was a combination of the spot on the corner of Commonwealth Ave and that little hole in the wall on Newbury Street? Part bakery, part coffee, lots of books and cozy nooks?"

I'm working. I should not be thinking about how my hand fits inside Declan's like a glove. And I cannot afford to think about my dashed baking dreams. That door is closed. Locked. Far, far away.

"Declan, you're a distraction," I blurt.

He slides his hand down his face, revealing a subtle smile. "You know what they say about the company you keep."

And I'm dead. I didn't know a swoon could kill a woman, but apparently, it's true. You've been warned, ladies.

Oh, and for the record, Declan's beardless makeover didn't help matters.

MAGGIE



Later, with my head still in swoony, blissy clouds, Etta Jo texts, asking me how things are going in Concordia.

Etta Jo: I miss you and your random cake deliveries.

Maggie: I miss you too! This is top secret, but remember when I mentioned who my client is?

Etta Jo: Sweetie, don't hate me, but that week was a whirlwind of moving into the studio and a huge order. I can't quite remember who you said. But let me guess. A hot celebrity who asked you to be in his next feature film? A tech billionaire who throws hundred-dollar bills at you for fun? Wait, wait, one of Giselle's football players who is a total stud?

Maggie: Very funny, but you're close. It's Declan, but no one can know that we know each other. Giselle didn't mention her cousin is terrifying. I don't want to lose my job.

Etta Jo: My lips are sealed. Oh, I heard about the #BruiserButt scandal. Those sure were some full moons! Wink, wink.

Maggie: Things are going fine.

Etta Jo: Good to hear.

Then the text bubble blinks a few times to indicate she's writing more as I scramble to come up with why I randomly said things are going fine.

Etta Jo: Funny, I didn't ask how things are going. Do you mean fine as in Declan Printz is a total stud?

My stomach lurches because she's a little too close to the truth.

Maggie: We're just friends!

Etta Jo: Just keep telling yourself that. Giselle is still dating Garrison from the Miami Riptide. She mentioned she was glad he didn't have to go to reform school like the guys from the Bruisers. Then she went on to tell me that Wolf, the guy Cateline is coaching, is driving her nuts.

My thumbs hover over the keypad on my phone because I'm not sure how to respond. I can't tell her my feelings just got very confusing. Can I?

Etta Jo: It's awfully quiet all of a sudden. Are you swooning over there?

She's caught a scent and is not letting it go.

Maggie: No! He wears the tackiest outfits—designer stuff. He also sometimes spits when we're outside. Gross. Oh, and I noticed he doesn't always wear socks. Also, he's not very good at spelling. Not to mention his table manners are lacking. Total beast. Not dating material after all.

Etta Jo: Half of the females in this country would disagree, but it sounds to me like you're trying to talk yourself out of something...just sayin.'

I listed off everything I could think of to counter the fact that Etta Jo isn't far from the mark. But there are clouds around me and in my head. A softness replaces the density of my bones. My blood has transformed into something that resembles marshmallow fluff.

Is this what attraction to Declan feels like? Or is it a combination of jet lag, adjusting to major life changes, and the dry wasteland of my dating life?

I'm like one of those Smokey the Bear National Park signs that says *Fire Danger Today: Extreme...*and even more so since Shonda in the Blancbourg salon cleaned up Declan's beard.

Etta Jo sends back a laughing emoji and then a heart-eyed emoji. When I still don't reply, mostly because I'm not sure what to say, she texts again.

Etta Jo: I bet you also have a list of things that you like about him—your swoon list.

I don't. Not really. Okay, maybe, but it's not like I'd write it down. Fine. I do.

- That he's a reliable friend

- His sense of humor and ability to have a good time and make me smile...and laugh
- That he's confident but not truly arrogant
- The way he looks at me with those soft brown eyes
- His hoodie scent, which I can only define as home
- The rippling muscles covered in tattoos that give him a bad-boy look
- But he's a really good guy
- He followed his dreams and found success

Nope. Not a thing.

Etta Jo: If you and Giselle get a football player, you need to hook me up too. Okay?

Maggie: You don't want one. Trust me. They're trouble.

Etta Jo: Does that mean you have one?

Maggie: No! That's not what I meant.

But Etta Jo drops from the conversation.

Everything that isn't on my hate list, is on my...no. It isn't a love list. I don't love anything about Declan Printz except platonic love as a friend.

In Etta Jo's words, it's simply a *swoon list*. Nothing more. It could apply to anyone. The other guys on the team, probably. There was a cute guy at the airport, so maybe him too. Who knows, maybe coming to Concordia is a big blessing in disguise and I'll meet my future husband here.

As for Declan and me, there can never be anything between us, especially since he's a celebrity and even more so since I didn't tell him everything that was in that voicemail. I didn't want to be the one to deliver the message that has the potential to crush him.

Can't do that. Won't.

But the lie through omission eats at me all week and trust me, it does not taste anywhere close to chips and chocolate frosting, which I could go for to ease the 'ole nerves. And boy are they rattled.

Even though Declan can slip into what I've dubbed his *famous-face* when he pulls out the bravado and charm, he passes the remainder of his lessons this week with flying colors. He transformed into a great student, cleaned up, and is ready for the next phase of coaching.

But am I?

MAGGIE



*A*fter church on Sunday morning, Cateline calls all the etiquette coaches and football players into the parlor room with lace curtains, pink pastel wallpaper, and silk floral sofas with scalloped wooden frames.

The Boston Bruisers look like a bunch of grizzly bears at Grandma's house. It's quite a contrast and could be a good place for a photo shoot for an avant-garde magazine.

Big guys versus delicate, antique furniture. Let the games begin!

In the span of a week, I've been busy, but I've also gotten to know the other women on the Blancbourg team and the guys assigned to them.

Cateline has Wolf, who has a reputation as a player, off the field especially. However, if anyone can handle him, it would be her. The woman lords over this place with iron in her eyes...and fists.

A British woman named Pippa coaches Chase—the quarterback. They seem amiable enough, which is good matchmaking for coach and client on Cateline's part.

Everly, who is as sweet and sunny as can be is paired up with Grey, whose name is very fitting. It's like he stepped out of a black-and-white photograph. Everly has worn a look of concern on her face all week, but whether it's because Grey is difficult or for some other reason, I'm not entirely sure.

Not only do the guys take up a lot of physical space, but when they're together, they command attention. It's hard not to look at them, listen to them, and feel like something exciting is going on even if we're all just seated in a room.

They're boisterous and brazen, confident like titans, and always messing around like a bunch of school boys.

Cateline calls for their attention and when they don't quiet down, I half expect her to whistle like their coach.

"Gentlemen, I want to remind you why you're here." That shuts them up.

"Because we're a bunch of studs, on the field and off." Wolf chuckles at his joke.

Cateline's smile is slim and that's being generous. "I think you mean you pulled a *stunt* off the field that was not appreciated. You humiliated yourselves publicly, bringing shame to your commissioner and his family."

"On the upside, we made a lot of people laugh," Declan adds.

"More concerningly, some very important people did not think your stunt was amusing. That's where Blancbourg comes in. We want to teach you to think before you think, speak, and act. I expect progress has been made on that front this week."

I hear Chase whisper, "Did she say think before we think? I know cows have multiple stomachs, but I think we only have one brain."

Cateline makes a sharp *ahem* sound. "As you're aware by now, we started with coaching lessons here at the academy. Hopefully, you had plenty of practice. Now you will move onto the real-world application of being civilized human beings and not cavemen."

"I prefer to think of us as studs," Wolf says.

The way Cateline coils with tension, I expect her to tackle him at any moment. "You could think about it like a game. One you want to win."

"Wouldn't want to see what she'd do if we lose," Chase mutters.

"Our time together will culminate in the First Annual Boston Bruisers Charity Ball, which you could say is the big one."

"Like the Superbowl?" Chase asks.

Cateline ignores him and outlines the posh event.

"If you haven't noticed, we're not particularly fancy," Grey says.

"Speak for yourself." Declan brushes imaginary dust off his shoulders.

Cateline locks her hands primly in front of her chest, but I wouldn't be surprised if it's only so she doesn't slug one of them. "I have good news. To my surprise, all of you passed the first review. Now, you'll have lessons in the field—"

"The football field?" Chase asks.

Cateline glowers. “You will have an offsite opportunity to apply what you learned in the classroom to real-life scenarios.”

“Does that mean we’re done here?” Declan asks, casting a furtive glance around the room and landing on me.

Maybe he’s upset I didn’t mention it, but I didn’t have the details or the exact timeline until now. Before I can offer a look of apology, Declan’s phone rings with the crowd cheering ringtone. He clicks off his device. Cateline glares and I’m afraid she’s about to vaporize him with her laser beam eyes.

But instead of throwing me under the bus, Declan rushes to my rescue. “Sorry about that. I thought I’d silenced it before coming in here. During our lessons, Maggie made sure I knew to do that.”

I cast him a subtle look of gratitude.

“You said we’re going offsite, but I thought this was a month-long program,” Declan says.

“Sounds like you like it here, dude.” Wolf’s expression sharpens with distaste.

“Nah, I think he’s pumped that we finished early. Take that, Coach Hammer. We’re proper gentlemen,” Chase says with a laugh.

Cateline snorts. “You’re done with classroom instruction, yes, but not with your coaching. Your etiquette teacher will be your constant companion wherever you go and whatever you do for the next three weeks.”

Wolf matches Cateline with a snort. Grey stiffens and doesn’t take his eyes off Everly. As for Chase, I can’t quite gauge his response. Declan is on his phone, presumably checking his message. I can’t imagine he’s pumped to have me as his shadow for the next three weeks.

Neither am I, because the last thing I want to do is trace Declan’s footsteps into the limelight.

Cateline tells us that travel arrangements will be made with the players’ managers and our instructions are in a packet with our name by the door.

Leaving the bubble of Blancbourg should be interesting and a challenge, all things considered.

After ending the meeting, I find Declan standing by the window with his back to me and his phone to his ear. As I approach, he must sense someone behind him because he turns and lowers his device.

Our gazes meet. His expression falls to pieces then quickly reassembles into stony resolve.

The caller from Ireland must've finally gotten in touch with him.

He mutters a word that likely has never been heard in the esteemed and proper rooms of the finishing school.

Cateline's sharp eyes dart in his direction. "What have we said about language?" she asks.

"Sorry, ma'am. If you'll excuse me," he chokes out then rushes from the room.

Wearing high heels, I follow, but his football training works to his advantage. He's fast and no longer in the hall by the time I get there.

The other guys must have been preoccupied with the fact that their hopes were dashed and they still have to fulfill the full month-long program, and didn't notice Declan's sudden shift in mood. Nor do they join me as I search for him.

I check his room, but he doesn't answer when I knock. Then I head to the gym, but he isn't there either. Finally, I poke my head into the kitchen and find him seated on the stainless-steel table jabbing a spoon into a massive tub of ice cream.

He doesn't look up as I slide onto the table next to him.

After a beat, I say, "You know how I said I prefer cake to ice cream? I bake it whenever I'm celebrating something...or the opposite."

"What's the opposite?" His voice is low, grumbly.

"I also bake when I'm upset."

"That's right, you do," he says as if a specific memory from our shared past floats into his mind.

"Ice cream, on the other hand, is a hot summer day only item," I say matter of fact.

"Is that so? We used to get ice cream rain or shine."

My nod is swift and sure. "Things change."

"They sure do." He glances over at me, the corners of his lips tentative as if he battles with the news he received and something else. "According to these changes, does that mean that I can't tempt you with a bite?" he asks as if temporarily pressing pause on whatever upsets him.

"I cannot be tempted," I say with all the determination of someone who is very, very tempted.

He scoops up a bite. "I have to warn you, it's delicious."

"I said I didn't want any. It's all yours."

“Nope. You definitely want a bite. I’m pretty sure it’s homemade, super creamy, butter pecan.”

“I’m not interested.”

He waves the spoon in front of me. “Not even a little bit?”

At the same time, our gazes shift from the ice cream and meet.

His upper lip hitches like he’s Elvis Presley and knows there’s no way a woman can say no to him.

I bite my lower lip just so I don’t open my mouth and risk giving in.

“Come on. Just a taste. You won’t be sorry.”

I try to take a deep breath but it sticks. If this is just about the ice cream, he’s probably right. But if it’s about something else, I’m not so sure.

“This ice cream will change your life. It’s that good.”

“How much of it have you had?”

“Enough to make a decision.” His tone changes and whatever just floated between us dissolves, disappears, and his attention returns to whatever upset him and brought him here—the kitchen of all places.

“A decision about what?”

Declan sets the ice cream aside. He looks at his hands, clasped in his lap. “Some guys work out when they have something big on their minds. Others run and punch stuff. That usually does the trick, but this is different.” He lowers from the table, landing solidly on his feet. “The headmistress says we have to take our lessons into the real world. Well, I have to go to Ireland.” His expression pinches with dread rather than the excitement I’d expect if going home. Then again, I can relate because where is home?

“What’s wrong with that?” I ask.

“You can’t come.”

“Why not?” My head tucks back with surprise.

We’re friends first and I want to be there for him. I know the gist of the message. Likely, he does now too. I’m also concerned about telling Cateline that I can’t go and what this might mean for his career. Just how tough is Coach Hammer? If his name gives anything away, he’s as tough as nails.

Declan shakes his head. “I don’t want to let the guys down.”

“Like if you don’t complete the Blancbourg program, the guys are off the team?” I ask, paraphrasing what he told me. “Then complete it. We’ll figure something out. That’s what friends are for.”

“I can’t take you where I’m going.” He speaks with finality.

“I don’t understand. Ireland is a beautiful country. I’ve always wanted to visit.” I say earnestly.

He remains quiet.

I try a different tact. “Whatever you have to deal with, I’m your coach. We’ll work through it together.”

“I can’t take you into the past with me.” His voice is low, measured.

When we were texting, Declan said he wanted to make me laugh, and I’m overcome with the same desire—or at least see him smile, if only to lighten the load. I know how important the team is to him and won’t allow him to let down the others. I also don’t want to lose my job. Part of me feels responsible because I should’ve told him about the content of the voicemail right away, if that’s what this is about.

Swallowing thickly, I ask, “Declan, do you have a time machine?”

He exhales sharply through his nose, but his eyes crinkle at the corners.

Still seated on the table with Declan standing opposite me, we’re almost at eye level. My gaze doesn’t leave his.

“I’m going to Ireland as your coach in the present—not the past. I’m going to Ireland and will see the rolling green hills, the countryside, the cities rich with—” I was going to say *history*, but cut myself off if the past is burdening him. “I’m going to see what I’m going to see and if the past—your past—isn’t part of that, then so be it. But I won’t let you lose this game.”

His gaze catches mine and holds as if he’s measuring the distance between my promise and the truth.

The bluebirds inside wake up, look around, then turn pink-cheeked.

Declan lets out a long breath then closes the space between us, wrapping his arms around me as if relieved that someone else led the team in play for once.

Massive arms close around me and Declan’s chest presses against mine like a human shield to protect me from viral video viewers, meanie parents, and my inner troll. I wish I could do the same for him.

As he squeezes tighter, I wonder if holding onto me helps shield him from ghosts of his past.

I could curl up in Declan’s arms and stay here a while. The bluebirds let out contented little sighs.

“It’s going to be okay,” I whisper.

His shoulders drop a fraction as he melts into me with relief. Until now, I never really thought about Declan having a soft side hidden under his massive muscles, mischievous expression, and giant personality.

When we part, he says, “I don’t know if it’s going to be okay, but thank you, Magster.”

Declan extends his hand for me to take. When his fingers wrap around mine and our palms press together, I feel a singe that’s hardly left my skin since he’d led me to the kitchen in the middle of the night a week earlier.

In the hallway, I let go of his hand in case anyone passes.

“Go pack,” he says.

“Please, go pack,” I correct, keeping in character as his etiquette coach.

“Please, go pack,” he repeats.

“We’re leaving now?” I ask.

“Now,” he says in a low, commanding tone that’s laced with a gravity that I’m guessing I’ll understand when we get to Ireland.

Declan’s eyes drop to mine and remain there. It’s not an intense stare, more like they hold a question. I’m not sure what it is, but no matter what, my response is the same.

We’re best friends. Whatever he needs, I’m here.

“Now. Before I have second thoughts. There’s no one else, Maggerina.”

Before I get to my suite, I trip over what he said about there not being anyone else.

Now, a few paces away from me, he gives his head a little shake as if to snap out of it.

Our gazes meet and it’s almost as if he’s seeing me for the first time or with new eyes.

I wish my hair wasn’t quite so windswept. Likely my eye makeup flaked onto my cheekbones.

I tell my inner troll to pipe down. *I’m in charge*. Well, of my body. My heart is another matter entirely.

DECLAN



*U*rgency moves my body toward my room to pack, but my thoughts trail behind, lingering over questions about Maggie and what she means to me.

Everything.

I think back to our texting conversation when we'd accidentally swapped phones.

Why did she post the gagging face? Does she think I'm attractive or is she just being a good friend and doing her job? There's no denying the crackling inside me, did it also light a fire between us?

Bottom line, I can't imagine anyone I'd rather have with me for this particular visit to Dublin. It's hard to be on autopilot when I'm around Maggie. She turns on my senses. Makes cake and ice cream taste infinitely better. Draws my smile wider. Makes me laugh louder. Brings out the gentleman in me. The one who wants someone to care for, to share my life with.

But we're best friends. How can we possibly navigate the murky waters of friends to love? I'm not even sure she feels the same way. That piece of information floats in the deepest depths, and I don't think she's ready to let it come to the surface.

Silently reprimanding myself for not packing faster, I stuff all my things into my suitcase and hurry downstairs. Arthur, the butler, bellman, and I don't know what else, waits by the door. I've overheard him mention his wife's health, which reminds me of why I'm racing back to Ireland when I told myself I'd never return.

For weeks, it's like I've perpetually been in a doctor's office waiting room, expecting a call from my Aunt Maureen's care providers at any moment. I've known for a while that it was only a matter of time. Before I set foot on the field, I always offer up a prayer for her to make it to see me play again.

She's struggled with health issues for a few years and has taken a turn. The painful truth is, I don't want to accept the reality that the last living person in my immediate family will soon pass. She's the only person that would get me to return to Ireland. Not my street family—the people I grew up with when I was in and out of foster homes. They've long since forgotten about me. But that isn't all. I'm on edge, anticipating another call from Mrs. O'Mealley, someone who I wish lost my number. I'm glad I didn't listen to her message and I hope I don't see her or Keefe, if he's out of jail.

Aunt Maureen had been there for me during my roughest time. It's thanks to her that I went to the US and found my martial arts family, which led to my football family.

Before departing the Blancbourg school in Concordia, I put in a few calls to get things prepared for my arrival in Dublin. It's hard to believe I haven't been back for almost ten years. How has it been that long? My aunt returned to Ireland a few years after I'd made the Bruisers, saying it was time for her to go home. I guess she considered her work, reforming me, done. Ironical that here I am in a reform school-type setting again. Though admittedly, this is rather fancy and nothing like the places I'd been before my aunt bailed me out.

I also think Aunt Maureen knew she was sick back then and wanted to be somewhere more familiar than the States. Even so, she made the effort to travel to see at least two or three of my games each season.

When the worst of my juvenile delinquencies were behind me, I realized that my aunt had the patience of a saint. She'd brought out the best in me even though I had to punch through walls to get there—literally as part of my mixed martial arts training. But that was better than punching faces, which I'd been known to do.

Aunt Maureen saw some good in me. Not only had she and MMA saved my life, but it also prepared me for the rigors of football.

All packed, I meet Maggie in the grand foyer of the Blancbourg school manor house. With her blonde hair in loose waves and held back with a

clip, along with a blue button-up jacket, she is like a beam of sunshine breaking through clouds on an overcast day.

“Are you ready, Mr. Printz?”

I pick up her bag and sling it into the trunk of the town car. I wonder what the luggage tag would look like if it read Maggie Printz. *Margaret Pearl Printz* has a good ring to it.

“Thanks for doing this, Magoodles.” My voice strains, revealing my inner landscape.

She glances around as if making sure Cateline isn’t lurking. “My pleasure, Declando.” She wrinkles her nose. “I never tried giving you a nickname. Doesn’t quite have the same—” She shrugs. “I’ll stick with Declan.”

We both chuckle and get into the awaiting car.

On the way to the airport, we pass through the capital of Concordia, Intherness. It’s a combination of a modern city and a charming village with quaint lanes disappearing around corners. The late-day sun lights Maggie’s profile in pastels as she sits quietly beside me, gazing with wonder out the window. The royal castle sits high on the mountainside. The tires roll over the cobblestone streets and past shops with elaborately decorated windows and restaurants pumping out savory smells.

The driver passes through the gate at the landing strip and taxis toward the awaiting private jet. It’s a matte black that matches the matte black yacht and McClaren in Los Angeles, with the matching matte black Cadillac in Boston. I was able to get my plane to Concordia, but had to use a private limo service.

If only the neighborhood kids who’d teased me about being poor could see me now.

As we walk up the stairs and get on board, Maggie doesn’t seem the slightest bit impressed. Something like resignation or disappointment replaces the expression of awe widening her eyes when we drove through the Concordian villages. She’s stiff and almost seems prickly, irritated.

Luxury impresses most women I encounter. Getting on a private plane might be considered a Cinderella moment for some. Not Maggie. Her crimped brow suggests the opposite...or maybe it isn’t her first time flying private. Being best friends, I imagine I’d know about that—until recently, even though we hadn’t seen each other in ages, we text regularly and going on a luxury jet qualifies as textable material.

Then again, she said she changed. I suppose I have too. But I still can't be sure about what's changed between us.

DECLAN



I scuff my foot and almost stagger. Perhaps Maggie is upset because I've forgotten my manners—I guess I'm used to women fawning over me and my wealth.

Clearing my throat, I say, "Welcome aboard. Please, make yourself comfortable. The flight attendant can provide any beverages or food you may like. There is cake."

She tilts her head and narrows her eyes as though that was the wrong thing to say.

"Did you forget something? Did I?" I ask at a loss. "Is there something I can get for you?"

She lets out a sigh as she plunks into the leather seat.

The interior is cream and gold, everything shiny and polished.

"You wanted to come with me, right?"

"I didn't know we'd be using such ostentatious means of travel." She snorts.

I can count on one hand the times Maggie and I have fought. Usually, it was over something stupid and resolved in less than five minutes. But this is different. She seems genuinely upset or disappointed in me.

"You know that I like to make an entrance. Not going to lie, I like the luxuries my life affords me. I've worked for it and didn't grow up some privileged, entitled goldie." I snort. *Goldie* had been Keefe's expression, meaning those who lived a charmed life. Will he catch word that I'm back? Likely. The two of us could sniff each other out in the dark. But we haven't spoken since I left Dublin and Keefe went to jail.

“A goldie? Ironie.” Maggie likely remembers me using the term when we’d privately tease the entitled students senior year who’d been born with gold spoons in their mouths, never mind silver ones.

Maggie gazes out the window, locking me out and leaving me to walk back in time. Memories flood my mind as the plane hurtles past a golden sunset that stands in contrast to our darkening moods.

When I lived in Dublin, my reputation was right up there with the roughest of the street toughs. No one would mess with me. But inside, I was soft. Weak. Vulnerable. But I kept it hidden.

Right now, I feel like I’m balancing on the knife’s edge of being tough and tender as memories slice through my mind like the clouds whispering by outside the oval window of the jet.

I left Dublin years ago. A pause button had been pressed, preserving all of my emotions like baggage left behind. They’re frozen in time, cryogenically stored in well-worn luggage. Now, with the prospect of returning, I’m afraid they’ll all come rushing back and spill out.

More than anything, I don’t want Maggie to see the other side of me—the guy that isn’t the fun-loving goofball jokester. The side that I’d left on the streets. Any dangerous behavior that managed to tag along with me abroad to the US, I’d beaten out of myself during my training as a mixed martial artist. And let’s be honest, there were countless times when I had to check my ego at the door and take a big bite of humility.

When the lights of Dublin city come into view, stretching in every direction and then ending abruptly where it meets the sea, I sense a pair of hazel eyes flit to me and remain fixed there.

My stomach lurches and it’s not because of turbulence. Before we touch down, I have to make this right. “Mag-ookie, I’m sorry if this is too flashy. I figured you’d like it rather than having a kid kicking the back of your seat the entire commercial flight or the attendant forgetting to bring you water or a broken vent blasting lavatory air at you the whole time.”

“It’s just so posh.”

“What’s wrong with living large? Wouldn’t you if you had the chance?”

“I did, Declan,” she says, almost in a whisper.

It takes me a moment to follow. “Oh. I didn’t know.” Maggie’s expression is closed as I try to peel back the layers of understanding.

“Growing up, I was wealthy. I had everything except—it doesn’t matter. I’ve since made my own way and don’t take handouts. Unless it’s a

cupcake. Won't say no to one of those."

I nod slowly. "Sort of makes sense now. You're a minimalist, renouncing all your worldly belongings, including Bagwick Wiggletop."

Her stony expression cracks. "I did once consider becoming a religious sister."

We both laugh, not because there is anything funny about nuns. No, I respect them deeply. Rather, this whole situation, and how Maggie and I can go from serious and somber to silly in two seconds.

There's no one else like her. But now is not the time to probe her about the past. Mostly because I don't want to discuss mine. After all, we have an unspoken agreement.

"Ordinarily, the school arranges for our accommodations, but because we left so abruptly, we'll have to find a place to stay, unless you're heading home," she says.

"I haven't been home in years." Where would I even call home? A park bench? The encampment under one of the bridges that run over the River Liffey?

She looks at me expectantly as though waiting for the address.

"Don't be silly. I've already made arrangements," I say.

"You didn't have to go through the trouble."

"It wasn't any trouble."

Outside the cocoon of the airplane, the air is damp, the memories stark, and my energy as viscous as blood. I move slowly, as though stepping through time. Forward or backward, I'm not sure.

Another luxury sedan waits for us. Its headlights glow in the light fog. In the short walk from the plane across the tarmac, Maggie shivers. I long to drape my arm over her shoulder, drawing her closer. I want to assure her it's okay. No, I want her to do that for me. But is it? Right now, I need an anchor, something to tether me to the life I made for myself beyond these shores. With my hand planted on her low back, I open the car door and she gets inside.

Maggie gazes out the window as if trying to connect our surroundings to me. We never officially declared our pasts private, but there's a gap in our knowledge of each other and it only starts when we met in high school.

The thing is, I don't particularly want to fill in the blanks, or be reminded of the guy I was. Maggie is better off not knowing, but I'm afraid

that my worlds will soon collide. If I'm not careful, everything I've worked hard for, including this friendship, could get sucked into a black hole.

Since leaving Blancbourg, a heavy curtain seems to have dropped between us. It's as though we both have something to say, but stick to our unspoken pact not to discuss our pasts. I know what I'm keeping from her, and for good reason, but why is she acting distant and cold?

I'm tempted to slide across the hood of the car, action movie star style, but I'm afraid if I turn my back, she'll bolt and I'll lose her to this city forever.

It's happened before.

But I can't let the past tackle me. As if dodging a linebacker blitz, I waver slightly on my feet.

Maggie ducks her head out the window as if sensing my hesitation. She says, "Remember who holds the lantern lighting your path, Declan. Trust Him. It's going to be okay."

A memory of a Bible study my aunt made me join tumbles toward me. There, I met Christ and my life changed after that. One Psalm, in particular, illuminates my mind.

But being back here reminds me so much of Siobhan. Never mind a cold headache from ice cream, my chest hurts. But instead of her, Maggie is here comforting me, saying and doing the right things.

DECLAN



The driver stops in front of the Meridian Hotel, a five-star location. Maggie slowly gets out of the car and then spins in a small circle, taking in our surroundings. Drawing a breath, a small smile forms on her perfect lips. The lights from the hotel practically make her sparkle. The crackling inside builds. I want nothing more than for this trip to happen under a different set of circumstances, ones in which I can take all the wrongs I've done out of the equation.

She's too good, sweet, and pure. She doesn't belong here. At least not with me.

It's like the past sacks me on fourth down. The ball switches play and now I'm on defense, deep in familiar territory. Exactly where I don't want to be.

Shoulders bowed, I mutter, "I'll see you in the morning."

She wedges herself between me and the vehicle's door before I can close it and tell the driver to speed away, possibly back to Boston. Though I'd make sure Maggie made it home safely.

"Where are you going?" she asks.

"Not here."

"Declan, I don't think you understand. I'm your coach. Where you go, I go."

"Bathroom too?" I ask, humor filtering through the density of my return.

"No, gross. But the deal with your coach, your actual football coach and the commissioner, is that I basically babysit you. I'm to report your every move. And don't ask if I mean the ones in the bathroom too. Absolutely

not. Your career and, according to what you told me, the careers of three other guys, are riding on this. So, if you've made secret arrangements to meet with Brandi or whoever, it's off."

I scrub my hand down the back of my neck. "It's not like that."

"Then where are you going?"

"The hospice." My voice is almost a whisper.

If she's surprised, she doesn't show it, but she does get back into the car. Gaze softer now, she says, "Like I said, where you go, I go."

The driver moves into traffic. The sheen on the asphalt suggests it rained recently. I recognize the names of the streets, the turns the driver takes, and many of the stores and pubs, but a lot has changed too.

Have I? I feel like I'm ten, twelve, sixteen all over again—when Aunt Maureen got me out—when my life hung by a frayed thread.

"I haven't been home in years either." Maggie's voice floats to me from the other side of the car.

"I take it home is not in Florida. So where is it? You never told me," I answer.

"I don't know anymore."

"What about your parents?"

Her answer is silence as if to remind me that the topic is off-limits.

When I had her phone, I saw a photo of a little girl with her same eyes, hazel with amber flecks, tucked between two adults who looked vaguely familiar. Perhaps she suffered a tragedy of her own and is as alone as me.

"How about your home?" she asks, breaking the long pause.

She seems alone, lonely at times. I recognize the empty void of that feeling and how deep its claws sink in to keep me there. I don't want to shut her out, but can't let her get close to the past—to who I was.

But Maggie is a beam of sunlight. What would happen if I let a little of that into the shadowy spots? Before allowing myself to think too hard, I blurt, "I never knew my father. My mother passed away when I was a lad. Grew up...moving around. When I was sixteen, my great aunt found me. We'd never met before that, but I went to live with her in the United States. She was a flight attendant. The private plane was a gift for her, but..." I trail off.

Maggie is quiet for a long moment. "I get the sense that you're avoiding something." She faces me, gaze soft with understanding, despite the private airplane reentering the conversation.

As we pass under the street lights and illuminated signs, her features move in and out of shadow. I sense the same could be said about her avoiding something.

"Listen, I'm here to help you manage your life. The good and bad. The tricky and easy. I'm your coach. It's my job."

"You're also my friend."

"Remember, we didn't know each other until now."

"But we're no longer at Blancbourg." I lift both my eyebrows.

"We have to follow the rules."

"We're in my territory now. I make the rules," I say with a laugh, but I'm not joking. For a long time, that was true...until things went too far.

We pull up in front of a nondescript brick building. Maggie's gaze floats to the sign *Hope House Hospice*.

I sense the gears shift between us as the car comes to a stop.

In a low voice, I say, "What I need right now is a friend."

Without hesitating, Maggie takes my hand.

If I didn't know better, I'd claim my shoes are made of granite. I don't really want to go inside and see my aunt, once energetic and inspiring, in bed. Technically, she's my great aunt. Maureen Printz worked well into her sixties, flying all over the world. She'd tell me about all her travels, making the planet seem like a magical place, rather than the rough, thankless life I'd experienced on the streets before she came along. She was my very own knight in shining armor, rescuing me from myself.

Above all, Aunt Maureen had believed in me.

I pause on the sidewalk, considering turning back as the shadows try to fog me over.

Maggie gives me a gentle look. "She probably isn't awake. It's late. She's ill..." I don't want to say goodbye.

Maggie loops her arm through mine, snuggling me closer and pulling me forward. We stand outside the entryway. The mossy smell of the river combines with the aroma of roasting coffee, the yeasty waft of Guinness, and the faint yet ever-present burning of tobacco. Or perhaps I'm just remembering those distinct smells of the city rather than letting myself get too close to Maggie's sweet rosewater scent.

"I'm not good at goodbyes," I say.

"You're not good at hellos either."

We both laugh lightly.

“But I thought I got a positive review from you.”

“Water guns,” she reminds me, pointing her fingers like a pair of pistols. “But I’m here to help you work on that. Anyway, how do you know it’s goodbye?”

“Because she’s in hospice care. You know what that means.”

We cross into the foyer. A few chairs are against one wall, a table with some outdated magazines, and a desk with a single light glowing dimly. It’s quiet yet peaceful.

“What do you believe?” Maggie asks. “Do you really think this is all there is? That goodbye means the end?” She eyes the cross on the wall.

“Well, no,” I hedge.

“Then have faith,” Maggie whispers.

Without another word, her hands are around mine and she bows her head. We remain that way, each of us sending silent prayers up to God while we wait for the attendant to return.

A few minutes later someone clears their throat. “Apologies for the delay. Short-staffed this evening. Nurse Milly has a stomach bug and we can’t have her around our residents. May I help you?” The older man’s voice rises and falls like my own lilting Irish accent, bringing me unexpected comfort.

“We’re here to see Maureen Printz,” I say in a clearer voice than I expect.

“Oh, you must be her nephew. She talks about you every day. Thank you for the generous donation.”

“Happy to help. You do incredible work here.”

The man nods and then comes around from the desk to lead us to the room. “Don’t tell anyone, because I’m not supposed to have favorites, but she’s mine. Maureen has the best stories.”

My eyes tickle, but a smile rises to my lips. “That sounds about right.” When I went to live with her in Boston, she’d tell me wild stories of adventure.

Before we enter, I whisper into Maggie’s ear and can’t help but get a breath of her sweet rosewater scent. “Prepare yourself, Aunt Maureen is a hoot. She’s as elegant as she is—”

“A jokester?” Maggie asks, filling in for me.

I chuckle because she’s not far from the mark.

“Must run in the family.”

All the same, I take a deep breath as the attendant opens the door.

"There's my lad," Maureen says in a raspy voice when we enter.

Maggie follows me.

Aunt Maureen reclines in bed and the light in the room forms a dim golden halo, but her eyes are as bright as ever. "Who's this lovely lass?"

"Aunt Maureen, this is Maggie. Maggie Byrne," I say.

She pads closer and clasps the older woman's hand. "I'm very fond of your nephew. Thank you for raising a rascal." She winks.

A smile races across my lips.

"It's nice to finally meet you, Maggie. Declan always mentions you when we talk. Surprised we never crossed paths back in Boston when you kids were in high school. It's almost as if he was hiding you from me."

The room is silent for a moment, reminding me that I'm holding my breath.

Maggie says, "It's a pleasure to meet you."

"Likewise. I thought you were going to thank me for raising a gentleman and I was going to call malarkey on you."

"You mean caveman?" Maggie jokes.

They both laugh.

"Declan, I like this lass. She's a straight talker."

"That she is. Also, she's the one who's teaching me to be a gentleman."

"Will Wick Hightower be at the Superbowl this year?" Aunt Maureen winks at Maggie.

"You know the offensive coordinator?" I ask.

My aunt smiles demurely. "Dinner and conversation have been had. Memories made. But I don't think I'll be there this year."

"I'm not entirely sure we'll make it either. Half the defensive line is injured or still recovering," I reply, meaning to make my aunt feel better, but realizing a moment too late that I probably drew more attention to her ailments.

"Don't be thick. Sure you will. The Bruisers quarterback has an arm like a canon and can scramble like Tarkenton."

"Fran Tarkenton?" I ask, shocked that my elderly aunt knows that legendary football reference.

"We met when I was on the London-Chicago route, years ago." Her cheeks take on a healthy glow.

“And let’s not forget they have a great wide receiver.” Maggie leans into me with a smile.

Her gaze meets my aunt’s and floods me with warmth. What was I expecting coming back here? A stiff beating? Retribution for all the ones I’d given? I don’t know, but it wasn’t this.

Maggie sits down in a folding chair next to my aunt’s bed while I remain by the door.

“Oh good, she’s going to stay. Why don’t you make yourself comfortable too, Declan? I’d like Maggie to know what kind of tangle she’s getting herself into.”

“I have some idea,” Maggie says.

“Is that so?” Aunt Maureen asks with an arched eyebrow and a playful smile.

“But I wouldn’t object to getting the full picture,” Maggie adds.

“A captive audience. I like it.” Aunt Maureen coughs.

“Can I get you some water?” I ask.

“Nope. I’m fine. You get used to the interruptions. Now, where was I? Oh yes, a story about our wee Declan.”

I know what’s coming and wave my hands as though trying to avoid an oncoming vehicle. “You don’t have to do that, Aunt Maureen.”

“Oh, but I do.” Mischief scrolls across her features.

Maggie leans in.

It’s then I realize that Aunt Maureen must think we’re a couple. My insides crackle.

“If you can believe it, Declan used to be a pipsqueak. A scrawny boy. I only know this from a few photos and his own accounts, but after his mother passed, he learned to get along on the streets. Do you understand? A real punk,” she says to Maggie.

“Aunt Maureen, are you getting tired?” I ask, trying to thwart her account of my childhood.

“Tired? Not anymore. You’ve made my, well, your visit made my day.” She coughs. “Back then, all Declan’s flash and fame were more like grit and grime. He toughened up, dare I say a bit too much. Fights, trouble with the Garda. My, oh my, he was naughty.”

I pump my hands. “Okay, okay. Let’s hear a more uplifting story. Tell Maggie about the time you visited the Royalty in Concordia.”

“Oh, what a grand place. The castle, the ball, the glamour,” she says. Her eyes dip as if in reverie. “Before I get to that, Declan, did you hear about Keefe? His mother paid me a visit about a week ago. Says she tried to get ahold of you.” She turns to Maggie and her expression darkens. “Has he told you about Keefe? Talk about naughty. No, that word is too kind. Keefe was a—” Her tone thins. “I suppose it was inevitable. Tragic though.”

My throat tightens. Then my gaze shoots to Maggie and it’s like I have a vision of two closed doors. Behind one is a pit of loss and loneliness that’ll swallow me up. Behind the other is a future with this woman who is my best friend, with the potential for more. So much more.

It’s as if my whole life has been driving me toward making this choice, minus the detour of the last few years.

I know the destination I desire and she has hazel eyes, a sweet smile, and the kind of warmth that could thaw the coldest, darkest of hearts.

But I don’t deserve her. After everything that’s happened in the past, my fate lies behind the first door.

MAGGIE



I shift nervously. I knew that not revealing to Declan the full voicemail would come back around, but it isn't my business.

At the time, I didn't expect we'd be in Ireland. As soon as we touched down here, he'd iced over. At the mention of Keefe, he positively freezes even though the room is toasty warm.

I don't know how, but I have to fix it.

After several of Aunt Maureen's stories, including one about a case of mistaken identity which brought her to the castle in Concordia, it's time to say goodnight. Noting the cross above the bed, I hold Declan and his aunt's hands and say a prayer.

The older woman smiles with gratitude as she asks about future plans—engagement, wedding, honeymoon.

I open and close my mouth, but the correction that Declan and I are not a couple doesn't come out. I feel caught in another lie, but how can I take this small happiness away from the woman?

Declan stands in the corner, his face partway in shadow. Certainly, he heard the comment but must feel the same way. No sense in dashing his aunt's happiness.

I give the two a few moments alone and wait for Declan by the front desk. His eyes are glassy and we remain quiet on the short walk to the waiting car. I consider suggesting that he explain to his aunt that we're not together the next time he sees her.

A secret part of me doesn't object to the mistake, even though being with Declan is a silly and impossible thing to desire. There is no way a

regular girl like me would interest a famous football player like him. End of story.

End zone, friend zone.

But the correction that truly needs to be made is by me. I should confess I heard the full content of the voicemail and didn't convey the entirety of the message. But I'm afraid that'll only complicate matters and make things awkward.

As the car idles at a traffic light, I break the silence. "It was really nice to meet your aunt. She's proud of you and it's obvious how much she cares about you."

Declan remains quiet until the traffic signal changes and the car accelerates. "She's a special woman. All those years ago, she took me in and loved me even though I was a street thug—I'd gotten in so much trouble. She forgave me. She also introduced me to Jesus, and it's in Him that I seek forgiveness."

"I hope you'll forgive me for not correcting her about us. I didn't want to disappoint or upset her, all things considered."

My heart thuds, filling in the gap between what I say and what it wants. "Right. We're just best friends."

"We get along really well."

"When you're not blasting me with water." My laugh is a pitch too high to be believable as I try to skirt this conversation.

"It's easy to talk to each other," he says.

"That's because you have to. I'm your etiquette coach."

"What about all our texts? And the years before that?" His eyes are tender, but his brows lift in surprise at how hard I'm trying to deflect the changes between us.

"Right now, I'm in a certain role and I can't—" I can't risk losing my job, my best friend, or my heart.

"I know that your favorite kind of cake is carrot, you have an affinity for official days—official doughnut day, official sweet romance day, official bumble bee day, official French language day...I could go on."

"I've always wanted to go back to Paris," I blurt.

There's no way I want to update or change our friendship status, but when he finds out I omitted what Mrs. O'Meally said, it'll mess up everything. It's probably better not to allow our feelings to develop. Yet,

Declan is hard to resist. I tell myself that maybe instead of ruining our friendship, maybe it'll enhance and nurture it like a flower on a vine.

A vine with thorns, my inner troll pipes up.

Declan's lips twitch with a smile like he senses my thoughts. "And now I can add Paris to the long list of places we should visit. Let's not forget you were a field hockey star and you're a wiz when it comes to grammar and punctuation. Oh, and you can solve a Rubik's cube in about sixty seconds."

"And what do I know about you?"

"Almost everything. I'm an open book." He gestures with his hands, opening and closing them.

I spin my finger around us. "This is new to me." The items on my swoon list loom large in my mind. "Let's see. Things I know about Declan Printz. You're a bad-boy. You get a tattoo every time the team wins. You smell like..." My breath takes on that swoony sigh Etta Jo pointed out.

"You know that I'm also an amazing football player, ruggedly handsome, big muscles—" He flexes, then raises and lowers his eyebrows.

My exhale comes out shaky. "But everyone knows that."

"Fair enough. But you know more about me than any other single person."

"Even Brandi?"

"Who's Brandi?" he asks before leaning forward and giving instructions to the driver then doesn't say anything else for the next few minutes as the car motors several miles north.

After a long pause of pregnant silence, we pull into the driveway of a luxury townhome.

Declan finally speaks, "Welcome to Howth Harbor and the house I've never set foot in. I have plenty of room for you to stay, including a guest space that Aunt Maureen was supposed to occupy, but she preferred her flat in the city proper. In the meantime, I'm going to prove that you know more about me than anyone else." He starts to get out of the car.

I grab his arm. "Wait—I have something to tell you." I struggle to keep my voice even.

He lowers back in and tilts his head in my direction.

"I have a confession."

"That you're actually a vampire? That you love pickles and peanut butter? That you swapped out your college roommate's designer water for tap water? Two truths and one lie for me, baby. I am not a vampire."

The corners of my lips tug upward. Declan can consider his mission to make me smile a success. Nonetheless, I take a deep breath and hold his gaze.

His smile falls when he realizes that I'm not joking.

"The first night when you asked me to listen to the voicemail, I didn't tell you the whole story. I think it was about your friend Keefe—the person your Aunt Maureen mentioned."

"What did the message say?" His voice is tight.

The content of the voicemail has played in my mind every day since I heard it. "It was a woman. She sounded upset. What I'd told you about her saying that you should call, no matter what time of day or night, and that it was important, were both true. But she also said that *he* might not make it. That even though it's been years, you should come. Her voice cracked and she was crying, so I couldn't quite make out the name or who *he* was, but now I realize that it was probably Keefe."

"Why didn't you tell me before?"

"It seemed too personal. From the past. Something we don't talk about, even though we do know a lot about each other. It was for you to hear. Not me. I tried to get you to listen to it yourself. I should've told you the truth. I'm sorry. I realize now that was selfish of me. I wasn't thinking about you and how it would've been important for you to go to his bedside. Mostly, I didn't want to open the door to my past," I blather with apology in my voice.

Declan's eyes are icy and he gets out of the car.

A moment later he comes around to the passenger side and opens my door.

I figure I'll go back to the hotel after I dropped that truth bomb, but he holds out his hand to help me out of the vehicle.

"Come on, Maggles. We have to talk."

MAGGIE



I follow Declan up a hedge-lined, lantern-lit path to the house. Salt and seaweed scent the breeze. The lights are already on inside. A fire crackles in a brick hearth, taking the dampness out of the air even though it's late spring.

Declan stands in the foyer and looks around. "Believe it or not, I've never been here before." He takes off his coat and then sits on the sofa.

Bracing for a scolding, I follow him.

He sighs and then pats the couch next to him. "Come on, Magglesworth. I may have been a tough teenager and am now a Boston Bruiser, but those days are behind me. I'm not mad."

Hesitating, it's not like I expect him to punch me. More like blast me with a water gun.

"I'm sorry I insisted you listen to the message. I apologize for putting you in that position."

I try to refute his apology, but he holds up his hands for me to stop, but his fingers wiggle slightly.

Declan looks around shiftily and wears a mischievous smile. Oh, I know that look.

Anticipating what's coming, I perch on the edge of the sofa, ready to flee in the event of a prank.

In one swift motion, Declan tackle hugs me. I shriek and he laughs, but his weight is warm and welcome until his fingers start to wiggle. I try to shoo his hand away, but that only makes him more determined as he starts to tickle me.

With a feather-light touch, his big, strong hands work their way up my side along my ribs, toward the soft part under my arm before reaching my neck. I laugh in the maniacal way that only happens when something feels so good, yet is absolute torture.

Trying to hold still is futile, it just makes him go harder as if it's his greatest joy to hear me laugh.

I am a writhing, uncontrollable heap of playful delight as I try to tickle Declan back. I get him a few times and his expression turns serenely joyful like whatever thoughts hang heavy in his mind float away as if on a cloud.

I guess this is what swoony, blissy love is like.

When we both catch our breath, we exchange a long look.

"Lady Maggie, this is all really heavy for me, but it's in the past. This is the present, but here's the story. Keefe was my best friend when I was growing up—if you could call ours a friendship. More like survive-ship. Even though I'd moved numerous times, we always found our way back to each other. He taught me everything I knew about lying, stealing, and cheating. Aunt Maureen used a choice word when I told her about him for the first time and said she'll thank God until the end of time that she got me out of there."

"It was that bad?" I ask.

Declan nods gravely. "When we were kids, we did pranks, harmless stuff mostly. Then when we were barely teenagers, twelve or thirteen, he started running with a different crowd. They were harder. Got into drugs. That was the end. He changed after that. I lost him but didn't give up on him." Declan scrubs his hand down his face. "I tried to get him back on track. Stuff happened. He never forgave me." The words are clipped like he's reaching back into memory and seeing the whole picture but only sharing snapshots.

"I'm sorry, Declan. That sounds hard." I know my words hardly suffice in this situation.

"The worst part was when he told me that as long as he was alive or dead, he never wanted to see me again. That just about broke me. It got dark in my life, but then Aunt Maureen led me to the light. Jesus taught, 'If you forgive others their transgressions, your heavenly Father will forgive you' (Matthew 6:14)." Declan's jaw twitches.

I'm glad he's a man of faith, but sense there is something more, something he's hung up on and not telling me.

“Again, I apologize for keeping the voicemail from you, but thank you for sharing about your past.” I dig my teeth into my lip, still feeling awful.

“I accept your apology, but even if I had gotten the message in time, I couldn’t have gone. I respected Keefe’s wishes.”

He presses his much larger palm against my hand, lacing and locking his fingers around mine. His gaze tugs at me as if we both realize things could’ve been different, but they aren’t and more importantly, we have each other.

“When I first got the call, I vaguely recognized the number and knew it wasn’t about my aunt. I have her doctors on speed dial and the hospice saved in my contacts. I talk to Aunt Maureen every day.” He smiles slightly. “She knew things were beyond salvaging with Keefe. She says the only one to save him is the Savior. Sadly, I agree. Hopefully, he’s at peace now.”

“Will you go to the funeral?”

Declan’s eyes dim. “He says, he never wanted to see me again, dead or alive.”

“Maybe it would help you, though. You know, to put the past to rest.”

His thumb brushes the soft part of my hand between my pointer finger and thumb. “That part of the past? I already have.”

“What about his mother?”

“I’ll get in touch with her tomorrow and pay my respects.” Declan’s nod is short, giving me the sense that there truly is more to the story. Then again, I’ve successfully omitted most of mine.

He abruptly gets to his feet as if eager to move on. “So weird that I’ve never been here. Let’s go exploring. The Keefe I knew would’ve liked that.”

We tour the house with its two floors, the adjacent flat—or as they called it in the US, the mother-in-law apartment—and end up in the spacious kitchen. The back wall consists entirely of windows. Sailboats bob in the water of Howth Harbor. Moonlight glints off the rigging.

Declan gazes there for a long moment as though sending his thoughts out to sea. “I called ahead to prepare for our arrival. Make yourself at home. I need to go freshen up. You’re welcome to do the same in the adjacent flat. After, we can have something to eat.” His heavy footsteps echo down the hall.

Since landing in Ireland, his Irish accent has become stronger. It has a low, soothing quality when he isn’t joking around and being boisterous. I

have a strange desire to hear him read poetry and tell me stories. I try to dismiss the silly notion. I'm not an actual princess or aristocratic royalty, inclined to a life of romance. For the next few weeks, I'm Declan's coach.

And I just told him that I'd lied.

The thing is, he forgave me. It's a relatively small gesture in the grand scheme of things, but if he can forgive me, who can I forgive in my life?

MAGGIE



I find my way to the small apartment adjacent to the main house. My bags are on a table by the door. I didn't bring much, since I wasn't sure how long we'd be in Ireland, which may have been a mistake.

Doesn't Declan have football-related off-season events back in the States? Or did the coach clear the calendar during the guys' etiquette rehab?

The strange thing is, the Declan I'd first met and the man I'm presently with at a townhome in Ireland are two entirely different people. One is thoughtful and sincere. The other is carefree and cocky. All things considered, he gets an A+ for today manners-wise, but I'm not always sure which guy I'm going to get.

Distress creeps toward me as I try to distract myself with the décor in the house. It's modern meets minimalist with tech gadgets and top-of-the-line appliances. Some people might be impressed by his jet, yacht, and this multi-million-dollar home, but I see the end of the friend I knew and someone who has the potential to lose sight of what's important.

How far has he traveled down the road of selfish, self-serving lavishness without thought or care about relationships and connections in a never-ending quest for more?

If I've learned anything, it's that a million isn't enough. Five million doesn't do the trick. Boats, planes, none of it satisfies. Instead, it's the ruin of all that's good and true.

After the long day of travel, my battery is low and I have to admit, the bed looks pretty cloud-like. Being a frugal bugle these days, I convince myself it'll save Declan money to stay here instead of at the hotel—even though he doesn't seem bothered by blowing cash on a gold-plated Lego

set. On my way up here, I passed a game room where it gleamed on a shelf along with an antique billiards table and an old-school pinball machine.

I change into leggings and my favorite oversized Bruisers' sweatshirt. Declan gave it to me when he made the team. My stomach grumbles with hunger, signaling I'd better head to the kitchen.

There, he stands in front of a pantry cabinet and watches me approach. I try to make sense of the pinch between his eyebrows and the softness in his eyes.

"You're in the kitchen. Cooking. Wonders never cease and all that," I say, surprised to find him donning an apron that says *Kiss the Cook*.

The little bluebirds inside warble.

Declan shifts from foot to foot. "It's a risk I'm willing to take. I didn't want you to go hungry."

"Nice place." My voice is flatter than I mean it to be.

"You don't like it," he says more as a statement rather than a question and spins his finger in our general vicinity.

I clear my throat. "It's tasteful, but it's peculiar that you've never been here."

"You're wearing the same expression you did on the jet."

He knows me so well.

"It's not Boston," I say.

"No, we're a long way from there. I'm not sure if that's a good thing or a bad thing. Is it the Legos that have your lips twisted like you ate a lemon?"

I tip my hands, weighing the possibility that he's warm.

"I always wanted a set growing up."

"Gold Legos?"

"Well, no. But why get plastic when you can have precious metals?" Without waiting for my response, he moves to the stove with his back to me and stirs something.

"If I didn't know better, I'd think that's a cauldron and you're mixing up some strange brew, but it smells amazing."

His muscular shoulders shake with a laugh. "I hope you like traditional Irish stew. Actually, I can't say that since I'm cutting a few corners and making the quick version. Don't tell Aunt Maureen."

Previously, he'd worn suits at the Blancbourg school. Now he's in a black T-shirt and blue jeans. A full sleeve of tattoos covers one arm with

several dotting the other.

I approach him tentatively, not feeling confident the air between us is clear, despite his words of forgiveness. Could I forgive him if he'd done the same? The answer floats into my mind. *Yes, of course. We're best friends.*

He turns, holding a wooden spoon aloft with his other hovering to catch drips. "Taste this, it's delicious, if I do say so."

I step closer, and he feeds me a bit of the broth.

"I've eaten at many of the finest restaurants in the world and nothing compares to a homecooked meal. When I was a kid, they were few and far between so I've come to appreciate the simplicity—" He breaks off. "You don't like it? Did I add too much thyme?"

"I thought there were sanctions against you entering kitchens."

"There were. They've been lifted." The tremulousness in his voice suggests that's not true and there's a story there. A dark one.

Declan set places for the two of us at a farmhouse-style table with him at the end and me to his right. He serves the soup and some freshly baked artisanal bread.

After smoothing his napkin on his lap like a proper Blancbourg student, he says, "Okay, two truths and one lie."

I flinch. "Can we skip the lying part?"

"I suppose. Then it's just telling each other truths."

"I think we should only tell each other truths. And the truth is this stew is blowing my mind." I grin around a bite.

"Thank you. Who goes first?" Declan asks.

"Let's do rock paper scissors."

This time, I win the best of three rounds.

"Where do I start?" I ask.

"How about at the beginning? We kept the past out of the present when we met. Mine broke out of its cage. Your turn. Do you have siblings?"

"Only child." And a mistake, a burden at that, according to my parents.

"Me too. Well, I never met my father so there could be other Declans out there." He chuckles.

"I think one of you in the world is enough." My lips quirk. At least, one is enough for me. More than enough.

He laughs. "What's your first memory?"

I puff my cheeks on an exhale as I think. "Looking into the cold dark lens of a camera after somersaulting. I wanted to show my parents, but they

—” They caught it on film like everything else. Granted, we were on the set of *Friends of the Family*.

Declan’s face falls as if he senses my loneliness. “First job?”

“Honey Holiday,” I blurt because there’s no holding back now.

“Is that like a sweets shop or a doughnut place?”

I grunt. “Not quite. How about you?”

“Football.”

“Football as a profession, but back up. What was your first job before that?” I ask, relieved to shift the focus off myself.

“When I was a hooligan on the streets of Dublin, no one would hire me. When I got to Boston, Aunt Maureen scheduled me to have an interview for locker cleaning duty at the Bruiser’s stadium.” He leans in. “No joke, I’d never even seen an American football game. I was loyal to the true and rightful national sport of my home country. You would call it soccer. I call it football. Some people call me a traitor.” He laughs again. “How many matches did I sneak into? All of them. Served me right to be cleaning toilets in the locker room of the best football team in the world—even if it was the other kind of football.”

“God certainly has a sense of humor.” I go on to tell him about some of my recent jobs, which were only slightly more glamorous than cleaning locker rooms. I leave off the part about my riches to just short of rags story because my childhood was the opposite of his in many ways.

“I want to hear what being Cinderella was like.” Declan’s voice is soft, providing me with an opening to spill the “Spill.”

“I really could’ve used a fairy godmother.”

“That bad?”

“After all was said and done, I’d much rather visit the park than work there. My dip in the fountain kind of took the magic out of things.”

Our bowls are soon empty, but we remain at the table, heads almost together, talking for a long time before moving to the living room where Declan stokes the fire and then drops onto the sofa where he angles to face me. He picks up each of my hands, inspecting them. “I see that you’re not wearing a ring. Is there anyone special in your life?”

I squawk a laugh.

“Why is that funny?”

“First of all, if that were the case, you’d know. But who’d want to date me?”

Declan's eyebrows shoot up and his mouth falls open. "Who wouldn't? You're beautiful, smart, confident—apparently, except when it comes to your date-ability."

My cheeks heat. "Declan, who'd want to date a woman who can barely keep a job and who—" I want to say more but hold back. I can't tell him about my family—it's a stretch to even call them that—and the infamy I've tried to live down. "I dated a little, but mostly I've been single. I do better with friendships."

"Lucky for me," he says. "So, no one notable?"

I squish up my face. "Let's say there have been some disasters. Have you ever heard of Sly the Single Guy?" I wince because I'm still a resident of embarrassment-burg. Not enough time has passed for me to laugh off the epic mistake.

"Yeah, he had a popular YouTube channel about being a bachelor." The pinch of confusion around Declan's eyes smooths with recognition. "You dated him? Seriously? How would that work if he was a single guy?"

I draw a deep breath and then exhale. With it escapes the entirety of the story I've barely shared with anyone—not even Etta Jo. "You know that I don't pay much attention to social media and pop culture so I didn't know who he was besides Sylvester. Things got more serious and we collaborated on a mobile cupcake shop. I bought the van and everything. It was my entire savings. I even considered living in it if I had to, but with the oven and everything, I wasn't sure I'd fit." I smile at the bittersweet memory. I'd been so eager to make my endeavor work.

"I vaguely remember you telling me about opening a cupcake shop on wheels."

"This was during the playoffs, so you were preoccupied."

"What happened? Why aren't you a mobile cupcake shop queen?" Declan asks.

"Sylvester said he believed in my success and wanted to partner. He was supposedly investing his half of the funds to get it outfitted to work like a food truck, but with cupcakes." I smile because I'd been so excited. "I had big plans to cater to people in the parking lots at various theme parks, waiting in lines for the busses, and so on. Maybe even at football games."

"That's a cool idea."

"Sylvester took the van one day and disappeared."

"Disappeared like he got lost on the way home or—?"

“I thought I could trust him. The purchase was in his name because I hadn’t established my credit. He was exposed as not being a single guy and his channel was demonetized. And he lost all his money in a bad bitcoin deal. He took my funds and the van to pay back his debtors. It was such a stupid mistake.”

“What are you saying, My Magic Maggie?”

I hang my head. “He sold the van. Ran off to Mexico with some girl. Talk about pathetic.”

“I hope you mean he’s pathetic and not you.”

My shoulder lifts because it sure feels that way. My inner troll gets loud, giving supporting evidence as to why I don’t deserve cupcake success or love. “I was so gullible. Should’ve taken precautions. Been business savvy.” There is a little more to the story that I decide to keep to myself—it turns out Sylvester was using me for my connection to my rich and famous parents, but when it became clear that I no longer had much of a relationship with them, he cut ties.

“You were trusting. Nothing wrong with that.”

“In reality, I invested myself in a guy instead of my future.”

“But when you find the right one...” The corner of Declan’s lip lifts and he absentmindedly links his pinky with mine.

At those words, the bluebirds in my belly devour a vat of cupcake frosting and then take flight. I try to get them to calm down, but the way Declan is looking at me with intensity and tenderness sends those birds on a sugar high.

“Did you press charges?”

“I tried but didn’t have a case. His credit was slightly better so the loan was in his name, but it was my money we spent for the down payment.”

And I didn’t want to bring attention to myself or see a headline that read something like *Former Child Star Honey Holiday Gets a Sour Deal*. I’ve managed to mostly erase my image from the record of popular culture and want to keep it that way.

“You shouldn’t give up on your dreams,” he says.

“It’s not worth it.”

“It’s always worth it. You’re worth it, Maggie,” he says and then kisses the top of my head before padding up the stairs. “Let me know if you need anything. Goodnight.”

Stunned, I remain on the couch in front of the fire. Only, it's like Cinderella's bluebirds lift me into clouds of fluffy buttercream. I'm buzzing from head—where Declan had kissed me—to toe.

DECLAN



Downstairs, I wanted to smother Maggie with kisses, show her how special she is, and bring her dreams to life. But she's resistant, clouded by something that I can't put my finger on. Like one of the onions in the stew I made, there are layers of her past that she's keeping to herself that I fear might make her cry, so I don't want to press. But she's more like a flower I want to see bloom than an onion.

My mind churns all night, starting with the visit to see Aunt Maureen. She taught me to celebrate the passing from life to death—so long as the person had lived long and well.

My thoughts jump to dinner with Maggie. I already burned one person I loved and was subsequently kicked out of all kitchens, leaving Siobhan disgraced and me depressed. I hardly trust myself in the kitchen and definitely not with love.

The very fact that I broke the ban on me in kitchens is nothing short of a miracle. Aunt Maureen tried to ease me in front of the stove and made sure I left her care knowing how to make stew, even if only verbally. I never tied on an apron and tried it on my own. Truth is, I'd do anything for Maggie, even face my deepest inner fears.

Aunt Maureen and Jesus put me back together. But I still carry shame, guilt, and can't imagine forgiving myself. It's no surprise that Keefe hadn't been able to do so either.

That leads me to think about my oldest friend—if I could call him that. Maggie is a true friend. Despite not telling me the entirety of the voicemail, she's proved that many times over.

As for Keefe, I suppose his troubled soul is finally at peace.

Can I ever find peace and forgiveness? I doubt it, and Maggie can never know what happened. I don't want her to glimpse that part of my past.

This brings me back to Maggie—I'm always returning to her, whether anticipating a text after a game, a photo on a random Tuesday afternoon, or reminiscing.

It's wild that we're back in each other's lives. I feel strongly for her in a way that I didn't when we were in high school and that I haven't since Siobhan. It's been years since the beating thing in my chest felt alive other than during a football game—and that is only because I'm running so hard.

Siobhan was my first love, at least that's what I thought at the time. But we were young, foolish, and I didn't fully understand what it means to want what's best for someone else. Back then it was all about me.

What would it mean to let Maggie into my heart? Is there room for her amidst all the baggage from the past?

I toss and turn all night. At dawn, despite the hearty stew, my growling stomach keeps me awake. When I was a lad in Dublin, so many nights, I went to bed hungry. Starving. For food, warmth, and love. Is my hunger just a reflex at being back in Ireland? A vestige of the kid I was the last time I was in the country? Certainly, I was plenty warm in the luxury townhome. As for love...?

Maggie's image with her summer blonde hair, hazel eyes, and lovely curves springs to mind. My lips heated when I brought them to her forehead with a gentle kiss last night. I want to kiss her again, but I have a problem.

A big one.

I think I'm in love with my best friend. Her smile is the kind that can light up a room, a city, and the world, but most importantly, she's illuminated the darkest parts of my heart.

But the problem is the best friend part.

Also, I don't think Maggie realizes how amazing she is. She's Mag-mazing. I want to show her what she means to me. A plan forms in my mind. Thankfully, the pantry is fully stocked.

I search for the best carrot cake recipe on the internet. Even though it's early morning, I mix and stir the ingredients, trying to be quiet so I don't wake Maggie up.

At last, the cake comes out of the oven, filling the air with the scent of butter, cinnamon, and spices. Next, I put together the cream cheese icing. Nothing about carrot cake makes sense. I'd put carrots in the stew, after all.

Then again, nothing about Maggie and me makes sense either. Yet somehow, I feel like maybe we're meant to be together.

When she appears, still wearing the Bruisers sweatshirt, it's like the sun rises all over again. "Morning. It smells like..." Her eyes widen and her mouth drops open like she might just drool. Still fuzzy from sleep, she looks adorably disheveled.

"It smells like carrot cake," I announce, gesturing to it on the table. I just managed to get it frosted and topped with a sprinkling of toasted walnuts before she appeared.

"What's the occasion?" she asks. "It's not the official carrot cake day. That's in February."

I chuckle inwardly. Of course she'd know that. "I figured we could have it for breakfast."

"We can't eat cake for breakfast."

"My house. My rules." I wink. "Plus, it's the Official Maggie Day."

"What?" A crease forms between her eyes like she's confused.

"Yep. It's on the Irish Register of official days."

"Really?"

I smirk. "Is now."

The concern on her face blooms into a smile.

It's funny how seeing her smile recharges me like sunshine after days of rain. "Since it's the official Maggie day, I give you the day off."

"I don't think Cateline would allow that."

My thoughts jump to Wolf mentioning that Cateline, the headmistress and his coach, is hot but bossy. Then again, he probably likes that about her.

Maggie continues, "I have a month-long contract with you. We're barely two weeks in. Afterward, I'll get some time off and we can celebrate Maggie Day or something," she says the last part like it's silly, but I'm taking this seriously. Very seriously.

"My house. My rules," I repeat, arms crossed and unyielding.

She eyes the cake. "How about an hour? I can take an hour off."

I waggle my eyebrows. "We can start there, but we'll see about any further negotiations."

"By the way, I gave you a stellar report yesterday and not because I was feeling guilty about lying. At least you didn't fire me for not telling you everything from the voicemail. You were the picture of kindness and compassion—especially with your aunt."

“I figured it wouldn’t go over well if I walked in and squirted her with water guns.”

Maggie laughs.

“Ah, so am I forgiven for my grand entrance?” I ask, smirking.

“I suppose so.”

“How about for ignoring you at my birthday party?”

“That was years ago.”

“So it’s forgiven?”

“You did send me tickets, gifts, all kinds of stuff.”

“I wasn’t trying to buy your love, but I was caught up in the moment. I’m sorry.”

“True, you can’t buy my love, but you can make up for it by baking.” She smirks.

“Is the way to your heart with carrot cake?”

“And laughter.”

I jump up from the chair and search the kitchen cabinets and drawers, searching for a birthday candle until I find one. “I owe you an Official Maggie Day wish,” I say before breaking into the happy birthday song, but replacing the happy birthday part with Maggie Day and serenading her.

After she makes a wish, I dig into the cake and offer her a bite.

She giggles and smiles, her cheeks growing rosy. I’m not sure what came over me, but I can’t sit still. Nor can I let her go.

Drawing Maggie to her feet, I lift our arms in a formal dancing position and we sashay across the tile floor. Her palm pressed against mine provides me with an anchor I never before had when in Ireland.

Her smile brings me joy along with her laughter. Her eyes sparkle as we spin around the room. I’m like a man in a musical, only this is real life and I can’t imagine wanting to give Maggie anything other than the happiest Maggie Day.

I pull her in so we’re standing face to face. The crackling charge rushing through me turns into a rumble. It’s as though an electrical force draws us closer until the space separating us is narrow enough for little more than a whisper to pass through.

“You have a bit of frosting on your lip,” I say.

Her mouth parts.

I lick my lip.

Maggie’s eyes meet mine.

It's like being in the tunnel at a stadium before a game when all I can hear is the thunder of the crowd and feel the crush of energy and anticipation.

"Can I do something about that?" I ask.

She gives a little nod. I close the space between us, our mouths meeting.

She's sweet and tentative but gives back as the kiss stretches longer and longer. It's like neither one of us plans to stop, to let go.

My heart races as though it's expanding, growing, and making more room for Maggie, when before it had been a small, closed thing, protecting what precious love I'd once had.

I walk her backward until she's perched on the edge of the farm table.

She circles her arms around me, but we don't break contact as the kiss continues.

My palms skim her silky hair before gripping her jaw in both hands as I deepen the kiss.

She curls into me, cementing the intensity between us.

My pulse goes mad as it throbs with a simple truth.

I love Maggie Byrne.

At last, we part, and she whispers, "I don't need a Maggie Day wish. I got what I wanted."

I smile a real smile for the first time since arriving in Ireland, maybe for the first time here ever.

We share a slice of cake.

"This has to be the happiest Maggie Day I've ever had. Much better than any birthday."

"But there's more. It's only just begun," I say.

"I took an hour off work. I don't think I should take any more time."

"That's okay. I have to go on a shopping spree because my coach packed light. You'll have to help me. I'm looking for clothes that are—" My gaze trails the length of Minnie Maggie, sizing her up. "Well, your size."

"Are you saying what I think you're saying?"

My shrug is pure innocence.

She cocks an eyebrow, "So you're saying that you have a pet llama who wears my size clothing?"

I bend over with a laugh. "I like this playful side of you."

With a giggle, she says, “It’s Official Maggie Day. I’m trying to let my hair down. But you can’t take me on a shopping spree.”

“I can,” I say with a wink. “Go on, get ready. I’ll have the car pick us up in thirty minutes.”

Her sigh in reply suggests she thinks that’s as appealing as falling in a fountain while dressed as Cinderella and having it captured on film. But she disappears to the adjacent flat nonetheless.

A half-hour later, I sweep Maggie into a day in Dublin. But first, we stroll through Howth along the harbor. Like the moon the night before, the sun sparkles on the water in the harbor.

When we reach the car, I say, “I’ve always liked it here. I’ll have to show you around later. It doesn’t seem like a whole lot has changed.”

“Why don’t we do that now instead of shopping?”

“But it’s Maggie Day.”

“I don’t need anything,” she counters.

“I came from the humblest beginnings and I want to spoil you.”

Her expression flickers like a candle guttering in an ill wind.

“You okay?” I ask.

“Yeah.” She gazes out the car window.

“Let me treat you. It makes me happy.”

She still doesn’t turn back to face me.

I lace my fingers around hers, drawing her away from whatever dimmed her light, and toward me.

At last, Maggie says, “It’s just that receiving this kind of attention isn’t easy for me. Birthdays are especially hard. In fact, I stopped telling people when mine was a long time ago.”

“But I knew,” I say, recollecting our phone passwords. “Does that mean you trust me?”

She bites her lip and nods.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

Her shoulder lifts and lowers. “I just enjoy spending time together.”

Time together? That’s all I want.

I lean in and give her a quick kiss with all the love in my heart. I just hope it’s enough.

DECLAN



First, Maggie and I visit St. Patrick's Cathedral, stroll through the Trinity College grounds, and stop to see the Book of Kells. Then we have fish and chips for lunch. After that, we hit the high street shops. While growing up, I couldn't even afford to walk down the street, no less buy something on sale.

Like the boss I am, I stroll into a luxe fashion brand boutique, ready to drop a few bills on some clothes for Maggie and me.

A spidery woman dressed all in black struts over. "Can I help you find anything special?"

I already did.

Turning to Maggie, I say, "Anything you want. It's yours." I follow up with a wink.

She wears a similar expression to when we were on the jet and then when we got to my house. It's part prickly and part uncomfortable. Eyeing the door, she leans in and whispers, "Declan, I don't want a things-ship."

"A what-ship?" I ask, then gesture to Spider-woman to excuse us for a moment.

"You heard me correctly. I don't want a things-ship or buy me fancy jewelry because you feel guilty-ship."

"Do you have someone in your life like that?"

She nods slowly. "My parents. They were shallow, all about outward appearances and inward bank account balances."

This is news to me, and I'm sorry to learn about the things-ship. "Then what do you want?" I ask, genuinely wanting to know Maggie's answer.

"I want a relationship...and maybe a pastry or a cookie. A scone?"

I chuckle. "I know just where to go."

When we get outside, Maggie takes a deep breath. Like a contagious yawn, I draw one too. It feels good to be outside rather than shopping. We stroll down the street, take a couple of turns, and then arrive outside a bakery cafe. The scent of loaves of bread and cakes filters from inside.

Maggie gazes wistfully through the window. Balloons reach the ceiling and the strains of the happy birthday song come from a little kid's party.

After hearing My Maggie-o's story about the lousy ex-boyfriend, Sylvester, who dashed her mobile cupcake shop dreams, she's probably lamenting what happened rather than particularly hungry or in need of more cake.

She wears a sad smile when she turns to me. "Want to go visit your aunt?"

"But it's Official Maggie Day."

"She's family. Plus, you said that you talk to her every day. While you're here and while she's still here, you should visit her every day." The gravity in her tone keeps me from asking if she's sure she wants to do that. "I'd also like to hear a few more stories." She pats the buttons on my shirt and starts down the sidewalk, decision made.

It means everything to me that Maggie wants to visit my aunt. The hospice is only a short walk away and it starts to drizzle, so we hurry along the street.

Aunt Maureen is delighted and regales us with stories—including one about my seventeenth birthday—just a couple of weeks before Maggie and I met.

"We flew standby to Bermuda—" Aunt Maureen starts.

"Mind you, I'd only been on a plane once before when I flew with a one-way ticket from Dublin to Boston, so that trip was a big deal," I interject.

"I wanted to show Declan that there was more to the world than the mean streets where he grew up. Nothing against these streets. They're home, but he'd found his way to the worst of them." Aunt Maureen slowly shakes her head.

"You helped me find my way out."

"And," she points a crooked finger at the cross over her head.

"And Big J," I say.

Aunt Maureen smiles through a cough. “I intended to show him that by focusing on faith, working hard, and being the best version of himself, all things were possible. He could be a pilot, live in a place like Bermuda, or ___”

I finish for my aunt, knowing exactly where she’s going with the story. “On our flight back, we were rerouted because of a storm.”

“Oh, the strings I had to pull for that one.” Aunt Maureen smirks.

I cross my arms in front of my chest and rock back on my heels, using air quotes, I repeat, “A storm.”

“So, there wasn’t a storm?” Maggie asks.

“Tickets to the Carolina Storm and the Boston Bruisers at the Super Bowl.” I smile.

“Pulled some strings for those tickets too. And since Declan had moved to Boston, he’d become quite the American football fan. Good at it too. A natural talent if I ever saw one. Who knew?”

“So, you had a birthday extravaganza?” Maggie’s eyes light, likely thinking of our day so far.

“I wanted to make up for lost time. We had sixteen years’ worth of birthday celebrations to pack into four days. That’s how long I had off from work.”

“She’s a saint,” I say, smiling fondly at my aunt.

“Well, I’m not so sure about that yet.”

My heart hiccups.

“It’s Maggie Day. Let’s hear about her best birthday memory,” Aunt Maureen says.

“Today. Today has been the best day.” But her sad smile is back.

“She’s the sweetest,” Aunt Maureen says to me. Then she turns to Maggie. “No, I mean from when you were a lass. What did your parents do for you? They’re big on birthday parties over there in the States.”

Maggie shakes her head slowly.

Aunt Maureen enters a coughing fit and the nurse checks on her. Once she’s settled, I say goodnight so she can rest.

Concern for my aunt pierces my chest and worry about Maggie fills my mind.

MAGGIE



During the next week, Declan has to increase his workouts since he intends to stay on the team and has to start training for the upcoming season. He also attends a few press events.

More than once, it's obvious he restrains himself from the usual hijinks the Boston Bruiser's wide receiver is known for. However, he handles his public appearances without any commentary or instruction from me. It's almost like I'm not on the job. More like I'm traveling around Ireland with my boyfriend.

I mean my best friend.

I mean Declan.

I don't know what we are, but the highlights of the week involve the frequent kisses he steals when we're alone. I never knew something as simple as a pair of lips pecking my cheek, the space behind my ear, my temple, forehead, the top of my head, and my lips could ignite me in such a way. I've hardly stopped smiling because it's like I'm living in a fairy tale.

I didn't mean to tell him about Sly the Single Guy who'd smashed my cupcake dreams. It was shortly after I'd left school. Too bad my business degree didn't cover how to protect my heart and not get duped. I hardly ever thought about my lousy ex, but my dream to open a bakery someday or have some other cake-related business is ever-present. It's a someday kind of thing though, but being away from my normal routine and with Declan makes anything seem possible.

We visit Aunt Maureen every day, see sites in the city, which amounts to a lot of walking, and go on a boating excursion. Even though it's summer,

it's too cold to swim in the sea, but we take a dip in the infinity pool behind the townhome in Howth.

One afternoon, Declan finally goes to pay his respects to Keefe's mother. I take the rare moment alone to Facetime Etta Jo in Florida.

Before I'm able to ask her about her new studio, with a startle, Etta Jo says, "Maggie, that smile. What is that smile? You look like the cat who got the cream."

"Well, the food here is phenomenal. Whoever made up the rumor that food across the pond leaves something to be desired hasn't dined in Dublin lately."

"No, I mean, you look tickled pink. Like you're floating on blissy, swoony clouds."

I tilt my head, looking at myself in the little square on my phone's screen. "We went boating the other day. Maybe I got a bit more sun than I thought."

"You goofball. I mean, you're smiling like a girl who has her first crush, or should I say, kiss?"

My cheeks blaze.

"Does that smile and that rosy glow have anything to do with player number forty-four, wide receiver for the Bruisers?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"I think you do," Etta Jo singsongs.

I'm not ready to confess that we kissed and that I might have feelings for Declan. Scratch that, I do have feelings for him. Big ones. Yards and yards of a football field, a ball sailing through the uprights, and into a fathomless night sky sized feelings.

I change the subject, directing the conversation away from guys, but my rosy glow doesn't fade. That may be because I can't stop thinking about Declan. Sure, he's been spoiling me, but his attention is enough. More than enough. It means everything to me. But I'm afraid to tell him why.

Etta Jo manages to shift the conversation back to Declan and me. Before we get off FaceTime, I tell her about how he's been so thoughtful. Not even realizing it was my birthday, he made up Official Maggie Day and got up early to bake me a cake. My favorite kind of cake. Shenanigans aside, he's also fun to be around. It's like we built upon our friendship, getting closer, going deeper.

He has a hidden, secret sweet spot hidden under his tough, tattooed exterior—one I only caught glimmers of before. On top of that, he's a man of faith, something deeply important to me.

The truth is—and it's something I can hardly admit to myself, never mind confess to him—I love Declan Printz. That, I keep to myself.

Just then, a door slams, footsteps stomp up the stairs, and then another door slams. He's back from his visit to Keefe's mother. Perhaps it didn't go so well.

My stomach jitters and not from Cinderella's bluebirds.

The sun is setting over the harbor when I get to the kitchen. Most nights, we've eaten dinner out after visiting Aunt Maureen, but recalling what he said about a homecooked meal, I rifle through the pantry until I locate all the ingredients for my favorite comfort food.

As the water boils and the sauce comes together for mashed potatoes with melty cheese, my phone jingles with an incoming call. I must've left it in the hallway. Declan appears, expression knotted with emotion and hands it to me.

I stare at the name on the screen. *Mom*.

It rings again.

"Going to answer that?" Declan asks.

"Yeah," I say. Turning to face the windows and hoping to be anchored by the boats in the harbor, I say a tentative, "Hello." My voice sounds small, weak.

In contrast, my mother blares through the earpiece. "Happy birthday, Lefty." My father's voice echoes the sentiment in the background.

"Uh, thanks? Do you mean official Maggie Day?" I almost feel silly asking, but how could they know about that?

Before my mother can reply, Declan is behind me. He squeezes my shoulders and then laces his arms around me in a reverse hug. My back presses against his chest and his heartbeat steadies me.

However, I don't want him to hear any part of the conversation. Yet, his presence does what the boats cannot. He holds me here, giving me the support and grounding I need to get through what amounts to a stormy phone call with my parents. Declan anchors me so I'm not carried away by a tide of tears.

"Mom, my name is Maggie, not Lefty."

"Come on, you were always Lefty to us."

Yeah, left alone.

“Wait? It’s not your birthday? Gosh, I’ll have to correct my assistant. She thought it was today. Do you know that I’m on my sixth personal assistant in as many months? Some people have the competence of a trout,” Dad says.

“Trout are fairly intelligent and resilient, as far as fish go,” I mutter.

“Is that so? Speaking of swimming. We saw your little stunt in the fountain. Who was that kid? We’ve tried to track him down for an interview.” My father guffaws.

“Glad to see you traded him in for a football star,” my mother adds.

My mind wipes blank like a computer screen that lost power. I don’t comprehend the words she spoke. Awareness filters back as I realize Declan can hear it too.

“That kid practically *pushed* me into the fountain. He was—”

“I know a ploy for the press when I see it. You learned from the best, Lefty,” my father says into the phone. “Great idea using it to make a move on a star football player.”

“I didn’t. I don’t know what you mean. How do you know about Declan?” I crane my head to look at him, but his expression remains impassive. He doesn’t let me go.

“We have our sources. Remember the cameras are everywhere and we just hope this blows up as big as your tenth birthday party.” This time my mother chortles.

“Mom, it’s not like that.”

“The kisses you shared at the Kitten Whisker’s pub in Dublin and on the boat suggest otherwise.”

My breath disappears. The oxygen leaves the room. I’m limp, little more than a sodden rag doll. Of course, they have cameras and sources everywhere. They’re probably following Declan after the #BruiserButt scandal, then realized it was their daughter with him.

“I’m Declan’s coach.”

“Sure you are. You wouldn’t know a football from a soccer ball if it hit you in the head. Oh, wait, Barry, do you remember when we got that footage of her getting beaned off the head at the game? Who was playing? Gosh, I can’t remember. She has two left hands and two left feet. Classic Lefty.”

My stomach churns and my knees turn limp. “Mom, I have to go.”

My father hollers, “Sheila, the limo is waiting. The Bertrams are expecting us at the club.”

“We have a big event this afternoon with the well-heeled in Hollywood. Ta ta.”

The phone goes silent. Declan’s arms around me try to dam the tears, but not even he can hold them back. I try to get loose from his arms, but he holds me in place, slowly turning me around until he embraces me in a comforting hug that’s even better than cheesy mashed potatoes.

I half expect Declan to toss me like yesterday’s trash, knowing now that my mother and father implicated me in trying to use him for publicity. For what purpose? Well, that’s the million-dollar question, literally, to my mother’s single-mindedness. Money. Fame. Influence.

When I finally slow to snifle, Declan cradles my jaw and smooths away the remainder of my tears with his thumbs. Then he sits me down at the table before dishing us each a heaping scoop of cheesy mashed potatoes.

“Do you want to talk about it?” he asks.

“Not really.”

“Well, I have something to say.”

I glance up sharply, awaiting another blow. He believed them. He hates me. He wants me out of his house.

But Declan cups his hand over mine. “I’d noticed that they’ve never really been part of your life. Granted, I didn’t grow up with parents the way most kids did, but it’s safe to assume moms and dads usually call if they can. Right?”

“I didn’t grow up with parents the way most kids did either.” I draw a breath that lifts my shoulders to my ears. Here goes. “Declan, whereas you grew up poor, I was rich, which just goes to show you that money doesn’t equal love.”

His lips press together, forming a thin line. “For all my flash and flair. I know that.”

“I never went hungry or anything, but they were gone most of the time. They didn’t pay me any attention, didn’t remember my birthdays. Left me with nannies. Then that private school in Boston for high school when I wasn’t exactly the teen star they wanted. I was always on the outside looking in. They lived a high-profile lifestyle, but I became a hidden secret, a burden. When I was little, I sometimes wondered if they even wanted me.”

Declan levels me with his gaze. “Maggie, you are definitely wanted.”

My heart swells with hope then crashes when my phone rings yet again. This time it’s from Cateline, my boss. If my parents, owners of the biggest print and online gossip empire in the world—B&S Media—had seen us together, chances are the headmistress at Blancbourg did too.

“I should take this.” I get up from the table and hurry to the other room.

Cateline bypasses pleasantries. “I see your reviews of your pupil are coming in positively. I’m happy to hear it. Because we’ve been short-staffed, I’m out of the country with a pupil of my own, but some visuals have come to my attention. It appears you and Declan Printz are very, um, comfortable with each other.”

“What do you mean?” We’ve kissed enough in the last week, but it’s been in private, not something to be splashed in the tabloids.

“There is a photograph of him holding your hand. Like he was leading you toward a boat.”

“Oh, that. Um, I’m not a big fan of maritime pursuits and considering, um, I have to chaperone him...” I hate the lie but don’t want him to get in trouble.

Cateline clicks her tongue. “I see. Please remember that you are his teacher. He is your student. The relationship begins and ends there.” She hesitates. “We have a reputation to uphold at Blancbourg.”

“Of course. My apologies if that looked like anything more than it was ___,”

“Glad you understand,” Cateline says, finishing.

Without returning to the kitchen, I say goodbye and go to my room. I can’t risk Declan and me being seen together in the media because of what it could do to him and his team. He said his coach told them women were off-limits during their etiquette training, meaning no dating. They’re attending Blancbourg to reform their lives. Not only that, but I don’t want to lose my job. Now that my parents know, we’ll have people tailing us, trying to get a prime shot.

But the biggest reason we can only be friends is that eventually, everyone leaves me.

Left-y indeed.

Declan will find someone more dazzling, just like Sly the Single Guy did.

Before a pair of tears break loose from the corners of my eyes, a light rapping sounds on my door.

“Maggie-roo, can we talk?”

I squish up my eyes and turn the doorknob.

Declan leans on the doorframe, arms crossed, brown eyes soft. “You okay?”

“Are we just into this because it’s against the rules?”

“What’s this?” he asks like he wants me to spell it out.

I gesture between us.

“When have you ever broken the rules?” he asks.

“I can think of a few times. Your ice cream distribution scheme? The pumpkin picking spree? And let’s not forget when we snuck into Gillette Stadium.”

“Tickets were sold out. I had an in.” He winks.

Declan Printz’s winks would decimate a weaker woman. Then again, they’ve never been directed at me in this way.

“You were my accomplice. See, you’ve broken every rule ever made.”

“Am I just a rule to break?” I regret asking the question as soon as it’s out of my mouth, but we shouldn’t blur the line between friendship and whatever this -ship is.

Like a boat leaving port, I have to put distance between us.

MAGGIE



The next morning is cloudy and the sky threatens to crack open any moment with rain. Overnight, I came up with a plan and send out some emails right away.

When I get downstairs, Declan is on the phone and quickly hangs up. “Good morning, Maggie McNugget,” he says.

Smoothing my skirt, I say, “Morning, you have one more experiential lesson in the program. I checked your agenda this afternoon and it’s clear. I have to observe you in a public setting, performing a business transaction or something similar in a professional manner. I arranged an interview, figured you could show the world there’s more to you than the mastermind behind #BruiserButt.”

I can’t quite read Declan’s expression, but his shoulders aren’t pressed back in his usual upright posture. “Wolf can take credit for that.”

“Coach Hammer wants you to reform your reputation so I did some research and found Blair Covell who can help spread the word. She’s well connected and has written a few pieces on other big names.” My inner troll adds that she’s also beautiful, has zero flaws, and is perfect for Declan. The Official Blancbourg Guide for employees doesn’t say anything forbidding client and journalist dalliances.

Declan’s expression is somewhat slack. “I’ve heard of her. This is a purely professional meeting?”

“Yep. Coach’s rules stand and so do Cateline’s.”

He crosses his arms in front of his chest. “You want to revert to the rules? Are you suggesting we pretend we didn’t kiss? That we don’t—?” He waves his finger between us.

“You made a pact with the guys. I have to keep my job. That means we can only be friends.”

“You can’t square a circle, Maggie.” With his forefinger aiming upward, he spins it between us.

“You can’t get kicked off the team.”

Declan’s shoulders drop as if he knows I have a point. “Of course. I overstepped. That wasn’t appropriate. So, we’ll pretend it didn’t happen.” He casts his gaze past me like if we make eye contact, his lips will be on mine faster than he’d run the football down the field.

“So, we’re just friends,” I say to clarify.

“Still friends.” His tone is clipped.

“Friends do things like hang out, watch football games, grab pizza.” I try to sound normal, but I’m a few octaves too high.

“Sure. We won’t do anything friends wouldn’t do.”

“We might want to define what *friend* means.” His lips float toward amusement.

“Ha ha. You know what friend means.” I try to be dry and non-flirty.

“I figure we should clarify. Do friends do things like this?” Declan leans in and our lips crash together.

I can’t resist the gravitational pull as if there’s an *us* at the center of the universe. His scent, his rough touch, his soft brown eyes. Declan’s hands grip the sides of my arms, his chest rises and falls, and with his lips on mine, instead of feeling like a washed-up fairytale princess, I feel like a queen.

My fingers explore his jawline and then wrap around the back of his neck. My heart hammers against my ribs and my thoughts float away.

“I like this version of friendship,” Declan practically growls.

And cut scene!

“Best friends don’t swoon or crush or kiss or...”

“I say best friends should kiss. Often.”

Declan kisses me again. For the record, his lips should be illegal. I’ll put out an all-points bulletin later to make sure the world knows to stay away from his lips—mostly because I want to be the only one allowed access. I’ve known Declan for almost a decade and never thought about what it would be like to kiss him until recently. Okay, maybe once or twice, but I didn’t think it would be like this.

The kiss intensifies and deepens. I'm upside down and inside out. The world brightens and darkens at the same time. I don't think we're breathing.

Faints

Okay, I don't actually lose consciousness, but I can't let this go further. I lean back slowly and we pull apart. Although Declan's lips are no longer on mine, he doesn't move away. Rather, he wraps his arms low around my waist like he doesn't plan to let go.

"You and I were inseparable senior year and then went our separate ways. We were insta-friends and now is this insta-love?" I ask.

"No, this built over time. We've been the only solid thing in each other's lives."

I try to understand, to rationalize what's happening. Attraction developed between when we last saw each other and now. But something is different.

What's different? Setting? Context? That whole absence makes the heart grow fonder cliché?

"Declan, what's going to happen when you go back to football? If I stay in Concordia?" Though it sounds more like *Dughadnsnanoofball istacordia?* because my face is mashed against his chest with me wrapped tightly in his arms. I don't want to let go either.

But the awkward silence expanding between us confirms what must be done.

After a while, he says, "Maggie, is this about your parents? No offense, but it's clear what kind of people they are. Social climbing, money-grubbing—"

I hold up my hand even though he's right. "What is it about? One word. Playbook."

"Right. So, shouldn't I stay away from women who have the same agenda as your mother and father?" His tone has a sharp edge to it.

"Do you mean Blair Covell? This is the last phase of our time together and the best possible way forward. She's going to interview you and you're going to put your skills to work. Show her and the world that you're a team player, possibly a family man in the future, reformed."

"I don't want to. I was thinking we could watch that new superhero movie. I make great popcorn," he says more lightly.

"How about we do rock paper scissors?"

He playfully rolls his eyes.

We throw our fingers, symbolizing the three objects. I win two out of three rounds.

Declan pinches the space between his eyes and then brushes his hand up to his forehead.

“I want you to demonstrate that you’ve learned social graces.”

“Haven’t I already shown *you*? How many meals have we shared?” he asks.

I force a deep breath. Every word spoken is agonizing as I push him away—mentally and emotionally. The man himself is a superhero, a football player. No way I could physically push him away. “You’re meeting with Blair.” My voice is robotic.

Declan’s face wrinkles. “I don’t feel good about that. If I’m late or don’t show up, will you fail me?”

“Yes.”

He grips the back of his neck. “Okay, fine. I’ll do it. Just this once. But Magums, what about us?”

“I’m your teacher. You’re my student.” Now, I’m a shaky robot, malfunctioning, running out of battery, but the silence that follows makes it final.

The motherboard is powering down in three, two, one. It’s the final countdown before it goes kaput.

Loneliness is one of my earliest memories, and with Declan, it’s the opposite. He’s thoughtful, kind, warm, and his presence fills me in a way no one ever has before.

Too bad I’ll soon have to say goodbye and we’ll go back to being text-only friends.

DECLAN



I don't understand what's happening. Maggie goes from hot to cold to downright chilly in the drafty harborside restaurant. She'd arranged for me to meet with Blair Covell—a renowned reporter and rumor monger—and all I want is for Maggie to be seated in the chair opposite me.

All these years, with every dollar I've spent on lavish, stupid, look-at-me things, I've been trying to fill a space that is the exact shape and size of Margaret Pearl Byrne.

Joking back and forth on text and seeing, smelling, and touching her in person is a different ball game altogether.

However, football is a game I won't jeopardize—my teammates mean too much to me. I've learned more than just how to throw a ball and win the Superbowl throughout my career. I have some celebrity standing and am regularly called a football star—or moon, depending on who is asked—but I also know the score. People like the notorious Barry and Sheila Prucell of B&S Media are only in it for the money. They'd staked their claim by airing videos of people humiliating themselves and went well beyond good-natured bloopers, including—from what it sounds like—at their own daughter's expense.

How are those creeps Maggie-the-Magnificent's parents? She is one of the sweetest, kindest people ever, even on par with Aunt Maureen. From what I've gathered, Barry and Sheila are downright diabolical. Almost more alarmingly, what made her keep that from me? Why the secret? What is she afraid of?

Or is she worried about losing her job if B&S Media publishes photos of us? Maybe her boss gave her a warning.

I trust Maggie and forgive her for failing to relay the full content of the voicemail from Keefe's mother, but maybe there is something else she's not telling me. After all, I still have a secret too. I didn't go see Mrs. O'Mealley nor does she know about Siobhan.

Before I can think further, a woman wearing high heels towers over the table. I quickly get to my feet to welcome her formally and pull out her chair. Maggie is watching me, assessing for the review. This is more like torture, but I'll go along with it only to get to the end of this thirty-day grace period before my life can go back to normal.

And the normal I want is a life with Maggie in it. Not just texts and occasional calls. Face time on the daily—and I don't mean the video chat app.

Right now is a balancing act of demonstrating I'm a gentleman so I can be done with the finishing school sentence and get started in a relationship with My Maggie.

At the same time, I don't want to give Blair the wrong idea. I have zero interest in this interview and if what I've been told about the likes of her, is that she'll toy with me and play coy to get me to spill my secrets.

Blair introduces herself and then gets right down to business—asking about my personal life, my love life.

I give vague answers, keep things light, simple.

Then something warm and smooth taps my ankle. The pointy toe of a high heel tugs at the hem of my pant leg. I shift my foot away, closer to my chair. Blair repeats the action, all the while wearing a smile on her face as she asks about numerous women I've dated—half of which I hardly remember. Clearly, she's done her homework as well as practiced her footwork. Again, I move my leg away.

A chilling thought zips through me—sports drink with ice dumped over my head chilling. Playing in Minnesota in January frozen.

"I shouldn't do this," I sputter.

Maggie mentioned the playbook and to anyone watching, this might appear as if I'm breaking the rules.

"Declan?" Blair's smoky voice threads into my thoughts. "Hi. You still with me?"

"Oh, right. Yeah." Maggie sits nearby quietly evaluating and completely distracting me. I'm disoriented. I want her. I can't have her.

"I have rules," I say.

“Tell me all about them.” Blair purrs, reaching her hand toward mine.

I tuck it in my lap. “Coach’s rules, um...” Usually, I’m a smooth talker when around attractive women, but my tongue—and stomach—are in knots.

“I should go.” But I don’t want to fail my evaluation or give anyone the wrong idea.

“What’s the matter?” Blair’s tone sharpens like the toe on her high heel which repeatedly pokes my leg no matter how many times I shift positions.

My eyes flit from Maggie to Blair and back again. There’s no contest, my heart belongs to the woman across the room, but I don’t want to jeopardize the rest of the team.

Blair huffs. “Why is that woman staring at us? Is she some crazed fan? She can’t take her eyes off you. But you keep looking at her too.”

Maggie writes something down in a notebook.

“She’s my, um, coach.”

“Your football coach?”

“More like a life coach.” A love coach. She’s the one who brought my heart back to life.

“But you’re not looking at her the way you would a professional. No, there’s something else. Would you rather she be in my seat?” Blair asks pointedly.

The honest answer is out of my mouth before I can stop it. “Yes.”

Her face hardens. “I thought so. Good thing I came prepared. Come here, Declan. I have to tell you something.” She gestures I move closer.

I lean in and Blair grips the sides of my face. Before I’m able to jerk away, she plants a kiss on my lips.

The snap of cameras flashing clashes with the clink of silverware and the single word, the plea, that flies out of my mouth. “No.”

I know what’s going to happen. They caught the moment on film.

I know what it looked like—not a tame interview like Maggie had intended.

I know what Coach Hammer will think, the commissioner, and the world when all I want to do is shout from the rooftops how much I love a princess named Maggie.

Everything is ruined.

Blair sits back in her chair wearing an impish grin. “The player got played.”

I don't have anything to say to her that doesn't involve words forbidden by my etiquette training.

Shuffling backward, I scan the room for Maggie. She's not here. I hurry outside. The sidewalk is empty.

I try texting and calling. No answer.

I go home. She's not there.

Staring out the window into the harbor, I'm lost at sea. I regret going along with the dumb interview. Should've trusted my gut. I should have told Maggie that I have feelings for her when I had the chance. But she put on the brakes because Coach Hammer gave me an ultimatum. I don't want to ruin the guys' careers and now it's going to look like I did.

I have to talk to Maggie. Where could she be?

After searching on my phone, I learn that it's official fluffernutter day. Marshmallow fluff and peanut butter make me think of desserts...which makes me think of cupcakes.

The driver brings me to the neighborhood where we'd seen the bakery cafe hosting a little kid's birthday party when we'd first toured the city on Maggie Day.

Traffic moves slowly so I hop out of the car at a traffic light and hurry the rest of the way on foot.

The strumming of a guitar and singing filters from down the street. Low light sparkles from inside. The bakery is hosting an open mic night and people are perched everywhere, watching and nodding their heads to the beat of the music.

I spot Maggie in the corner. Cutting through the crowd, I don't take my eyes off her. When I get close, her eyes are damp.

"I was worried that I wouldn't be able to find you," I say.

She looks up at me and blinks a few times. She must not have heard me over the music. I want to talk but don't want to be rude to the performers and patrons. I lean in, catching her sugar-sweet scent. "Can we go outside?"

Maggie gives a slight nod and we head outside and sit on a low wall.

I reach for her hand, not sure whether to start with an apology or an explanation.

She speaks first. "There's something I want to tell you. Growing up, my favorite thing was holding hands. It made me feel connected, less alone." She takes mine. "You heard my parents call me Lefty. Partially because I'm left-handed, but I started to think it was because I was always to the left of

what they thought was cool—I liked nature, reading, and baking. While they were all about money and their reputations. I just wasn't built with the factory settings they wanted."

"I think you're perfect just the way you are."

"I didn't fully explain that I was a child TV star. Honey Holiday on Friends of the Family." I slowly deflate like a balloon with a hole in it.

"Regrettably, I can't say I've heard of it. Didn't grow up with much access to television."

"That's not a bad thing. It was sometimes fun, but there was a lot of pressure."

"I can't imagine."

"It was my whole life until I was eleven. My parents were chasing fame. I felt like an alien. Like I didn't belong. They never included me. They'd travel, vacation, go to dinners, and they left me behind. I was raised by nannies. Most of them were nice, but it wasn't the same. For a while, I was hoping I was adopted. No such luck, but I was always so afraid I'd turn out like them. They're self-obsessed, selfish, social climbers who wanted nothing to do with me and who take pleasure in humiliating people. I never told you about them because I was ashamed, yet wanted nothing more than their attention."

"You're not your parents, Maggie," I say.

"I used to try to make them like me. When that didn't work, I just faded into the background." Her eyes pinch as she holds back tears.

I want to show the world how amazing she is, but know My Mag-wonderful well enough to understand that isn't what she wants. Instead, I listen to her story.

"On my twelfth birthday, they hosted a surprise party. I was shocked, delighted. But it turned out they'd hired a team of clowns, knowing that I was deathly afraid. I know it's irrational—" She shakes her head.

"I love to laugh but don't think clowns are funny. You're not alone." I give her hand a reassuring squeeze.

"Of course, I freaked out. They caught the ordeal on film and used it as one of their big media blitzes. It has been one of the most-watched videos on their site, ever. Despite that, I was always waiting for them. Waiting for them to acknowledge me. Waiting for them to love me. Instead, they used me as a pawn to advance their business. They've been straight-up mean to

me, insulting my appearance, my life choices..." She gazes at her shoe, scuffing the ground. "They don't even know me."

I tuck a piece of hair behind her ear. "You're right, but you are someone worth knowing. You're beautiful, fun, smart...I could go on. You're the kind of person I want to be friends with. More than friends with."

She glances up at me and then dips her head. In that split second, I glimpse joy on her face, but she quickly hides it.

"Maggie, I want you to trust me. What you saw back at the restaurant with Blair was no different than what your parents did."

"What? Like ignore me?" she snaps. "It was clear the two of you enjoyed being together. She was tall, beautiful, and well-connected. You kissed."

"What? You're the one who set the thing up. I said it was a bad idea. For the record, she kissed me because she saw me glancing over my shoulder at you every two seconds. I told Blair I'd rather you be sitting in her chair. She didn't like that and had planted a photographer—probably to get a shot of us together and she got what she wanted. But that wasn't what I wanted."

"What do you want?"

"You. Us. The truth. I know it's hard to open up. It's not easy for me either. But I don't want to lose you. I don't want to mess things up." My phone beeps in my pocket, but I ignore it, giving Maggie my full attention. The phone rings and I sigh, glancing at the caller's name on the screen.

"Oh, no. It's the hospice." I've been visiting my aunt every day since my return to Dublin and was told they'd only call if she'd taken a turn.

I answer and the night closes around me, suffocating me. I turn to Maggie. "I have to go."

Without thinking, I rush to the waiting car. I know this looks like I'm turning my back on Maggie. She trails after me. In the car, she silently takes my hand and doesn't let go.

The next hours are a fog of tears and heartache, and signing papers.

Maggie remains by me, praying, and being the exact steadying presence that I need. However, like a trigger, memories of losing Siobhan dredge up old emotions and threaten to swallow me whole.

Over the next days, life gradually comes back into focus as I arrange Aunt Maureen's funeral service. Maggie is a quiet partner, supporting me, but she's also doing her job as an etiquette teacher. The experiential

finishing school portion likely doesn't have a grading system for memorials, but I try to carry it off with grace even though I'm breaking inside.

All I want to do is pull on a pair of sweats and sit in a dark room with a cold drink and Sportscenter.

I want to escape it all, especially the photograph of Blair kissing me that's been splashed all over society pages, gossip magazines, and the internet.

Maggie's parents, of B&S Media, used the footage they had of Maggie and me, positioned it against the image of Blair and me, and generated a stir among people who follow that kind of trash. It's only a matter of time before I hear from Coach Hammer.

For the first time in my professional football career, I ignore it all and silence my phone. I don't want anything to do with the media chatter.

Sitting at the kitchen table, I gaze out at the water. Even though no one will leave me alone, I feel that way, likely how Maggie felt when she was growing up. But I've already been abandoned, orphaned, and now the single member of my family that I knew is gone.

Soon, my career will be over. Maggie will leave. Ironical that I'm right back where I started, lost and alone in Dublin.

MAGGIE



Everything has fallen apart.

My parents remind me of that fact when they call to ask about Declan and me.

When I see the photos and articles they manufactured with headlines like *Pro ballplayer on probation but still playing the field* and *Leading ball player leading women on*. Beneath it are images of Declan and me together as well as him and Blair. It's made to look like there's a love triangle and he's passed me over. As always, I'm the loser. In the article, they portray him as a womanizing jerk. Blair steals the spotlight. It'll ruin Declan's career and likely affect his teammates.

Guilt forms in the pit of my stomach, but I'm not sure how to fix any of it.

It's too late for Declan and me because as soon as his time in the Blancbourg program is over, never mind returning to friends who text, he'll probably want to forget about me. More than anything, I don't want to be the cause of him losing his job and his passion, football—the thing he's worked so hard to achieve.

On top of that, Aunt Maureen passed away and Declan is understandably distraught, coming apart at the seams.

I stay a few nights at the townhouse but figure it's time to book a room at a hotel and then head back to Florida. No doubt I lost my job.

Every time my phone beeps, I expect Cateline to announce that I'm fired.

The questions I'd asked myself when leaving the States circle my thoughts once more. Who am I? What do I want? I'm not a princess in title,

but I want to rescue myself and figure out a way to stop living paycheck to paycheck.

I've failed and am going to end up right where I started.

I'm so far from my mobile cupcake shop dreams, it's laughable. More than anything, I want to make people happy because that makes me happy. My parents always threw high-end events but excluded me. Long ago, I decided if they were going to miss my birthdays and other special occasions, I'd start celebrating official days because every day should be joyful. I helped myself once, I could do it again. Right?

While I pack my belongings, shouting comes from the other room.

"I did not break the playbook rules. That image was not what you think. I did no such thing. I wouldn't. You know what I value." This is followed by stomping. Then a door slams. A few moments later, Declan's voice rumbles from the kitchen, "Coach, please listen..."

My stomach sinks, swims with guilt. Not only will I lose my best friend, but he's also about to lose his career and everything he's worked for.

It's time to make some phone calls of my own. First, I dial my father who is only slightly more responsive than my mother. No answer. I leave a message and then try Sheila—yes, she prefers I call her by her first name. I reach voicemail. It could be weeks or months before they respond, given they've missed my birthday of all things. But I have to stand up to them. Tell them how I feel, how they've hurt me, and demand that they remove anything from the internet that they posted about Declan.

I have to do this now, so I open up an email and pour out my heart, telling them how they'd hurt me. I copy them and their assistants on it.

Afterward, I plunk down on the bed, struggling to figure out a way to make things right. An idea pops into my mind.

Silence replaces the rise and fall of Declan's voice from the kitchen. I find him seated at the table, chin in his hands, and gazing at the harbor. His phone is by his elbow and the screen dark.

With a flat chuckle, he says, "I have a yacht. Would it be so bad to prepare it for departure, leave all of this, and just sail into the sunset?"

"You might get lonely," I say.

"I wouldn't if you were there." He grasps for me, but I'm just out of reach. No sense in making things worse and giving in to the yearning only to have it taken away.

Instead, I sit down beside him. “Declan, you know that we can only be friends. Our lives are too different. And the truth is now that you know about my past, you understand why I don’t want any part of the limelight. Can you imagine what my parents would do if we were together? They’d have a field day.”

He levels me with a gaze. “You can’t exist in the limbo of wanting their attention and fearing it.”

My face falls slack and I lean back. He’s right, but I don’t like it and don’t know how to change it.

“And if we were together, things would be different,” he says softly. He tries to meet my eyes.

If I do, I’ll give in, captivated, magnetized, charmed by him. “Would things be different, though? Last I checked, Declan Printz, wide receiver for the Bruisers, is very much in the spotlight, and from what I’ve seen, he likes it.”

Hands on hips, he turns and paces in front of the window, now looking anywhere but at me. I discretely make my move, exchanging his phone for mine, but this time, on purpose.

My voice small and tentative, I say, “Declan, I think it’s best we just go back to being friends.” At that, I hurry from the kitchen.

Back in my room, I close the door and immediately find the number I’m looking for at the top of Declan’s favorite contacts. *My Oh Mags* is there too.

I press *call* and hope I have plenty of time to say what I need to before Declan realizes I have his phone.

A gruff voice answers on the third ring.

“Hi, Coach Hammer?”

“This isn’t Declan. Who is this?” the coach demands.

“I’m Maggie. His other coach from Blancbourg. I stole his phone.”

The coach blusters, quick to admonish me, but I explain the situation. “No, he didn’t put me up to this. In the past month, he’s gone from being a rascal, as his aunt would’ve said, to a fine gentleman and a man I’d be proud to have on my team.”

Hammer asks about the photographs and I tell him who my parents are, what they did, and how it’s true that his wide receiver and I are close. “It’s one of those best friends turned to the potential for something more scenarios.”

“Yeah, my wife watches Hallmark movies and reads books like that. Not my favorite trope, but it makes her happy.”

“Declan has been my best friend since high school. I didn’t know much about his past before that, but I know that he’s a good person even though he shows the world his bad-boy side. I arranged the meeting with Blair because I wanted him to have the opportunity to share the truth, possibly clear his name after the moon-gate scandal. Apparently, Blair had other ideas, resulting in what looked like Declan breaking the rule you set about dating while at reform school. I should’ve vetted her better. For that, I apologize. The truth is, Declan and I do have feelings for each other and that may have broken your rules.”

The line is quiet for a moment. “Well, Miss Byrne, I appreciate your honesty.”

Guilt bites into me because I wasn’t always honest with Declan—that I’d switched our phones is a point of fact. I also haven’t been entirely honest with myself. I really, truly have feelings for my best friend, but once out from under the thumb of probation from his coach, I don’t know if we can take it to the next level. Can I live with his life in the limelight?

“Also, you’ll note that all of my reviews were entirely positive. There was no bias, just observation.”

“That kid can be a charmer,” Coach Hammer says.

“I’m well aware.” I add that he maintained a positive character while facing difficulties from his past and his aunt’s sickness and death. “It’s been a challenging month.”

“Printz has a habit of getting in his own way, but thank you again for clearing things up. You should probably give him his phone back now.”

Relieved that the conversation seemed to placate the coach, I let out a long breath when we get off the phone.

I return to the kitchen to switch the phones back, but Declan isn’t here. I glance out to the harbor and I hope he didn’t sail away.

MAGGIE



*T*he shower runs upstairs. Declan is probably getting ready for the funeral service. I change and pack my things to stay at a hotel tonight. While waiting for him, I book a flight back to Florida.

When I hear Declan's dress shoes tapping along the hardwood floor, I meet him by the door. Outside, it's not raining, but the air fills with fine mist. We're both quiet on the ride to the funeral. The turnout is relatively small as everyone pays their respects.

Afterward, rain patters down. Declan remains by the coffin, motionless and with his head bowed. I thread my fingers in his and say a final prayer before gently moving him toward the street and awaiting car.

A woman stands on the sidewalk, partially concealed by an umbrella. She swipes at Declan and hisses, "Mr. Famous Football Player, you think that you're too good to return my calls? To pay your respects to my family? You take a lift up in the world and then forget about the little people down below? Well, I didn't forget about you."

Declan goes still and the blood empties from his face.

"Too busy with your fame and line of women clamoring for you to remember my Siobhan and my son? Your girlfriend and best friend? Remember them, Declan?"

"Mrs. O'Mealley?" he sputters.

She shakes her head while glaring at me. "He'll never love you the way he loved her." Then she bears down on him. "Or did you? What is it Declan? Honor the past or drown your sorrows with this nobody?" She laughs. "Oh, wait. Deep down you're a nobody too. Don't forget where you came from, lad." She glowers as the rain pours down.

Declan doesn't move.

"Nothing to say?" Mrs. O'Mealley wears a thin smile. "Well, I sure did. Big media came sniffing around and paid me a handsome sum to tell my story. Your story. Strange it hadn't come out before now. Well, the world will know who you really are. A murderer. I'll never forget, Declan. Now, you won't either." She storms away.

Feeling like I had whiplash, questions race toward me. What did the woman mean about Declan being a murderer? I knew he had a rough past on the streets of the city, but I can't imagine him doing something so despicable.

Declan hangs his head and wordlessly gets in the car. He rests his elbows on his knees and holds his forehead in his hands the entire way. When we pull up in front of the townhome on the harbor, he passes me my phone. "We accidentally switched again."

Before I can correct him and explain I took his phone and why, or ask him what just happened, he gets out of the car and then like a gentleman, he holds open my door.

I step into the rain. I have to know whether I fell in love with the man I think he is or someone else.

A foghorn blows mournfully in the distance.

"What happened?" I ask. "What was that woman talking about?"

"That was Keefe's mother."

"Mrs. O'Mealley? I thought you'd already seen her."

"I was going to, but I couldn't do it. Chickened out. I'm sorry I let you think otherwise, but visiting her and being back here was what I meant about stepping back into the past when I'd originally tried to convince you not to come."

Teeth chattering, I say, "She said you were a murderer."

Declan nods as the rain catches in his hair and turns his black suit darker.

I gasp and take a step back.

"That was why I couldn't bear to listen to her message."

"You owe me an explanation. Please give me an explanation." I tremble as my voice turns pleading.

Declan's eyes lift to meet mine. His are dim. "When I was fifteen, I fell in love with Keefe's twin sister, Siobhan. We were mad for each other. Keefe had already turned to drugs by then. Looking back, I think we were

there to support each other. We both knew him when he was still relatively normal.”

I quietly listen as a friend because that’s what we are. That’s what he needs right now. And I need the truth, one I hope I can handle.

He shifts his gaze toward the harbor. “Have you ever heard the quote, ‘A ship in harbor is safe, but that is not what ships are built for?’ I understand that I can’t rightfully keep the truth from you. If what Mrs. O’Mealley said is true, you’ll find out anyway. If I was a boat, I’d have to go bravely into choppy and uncharted waters.” He watches the rain pouring down. “I’ve only ever told Aunt Maureen this story. It broke me. It pains me still, but I know I have to take the risk and tell you what happened all those years ago, even if that means you’ll sail out of my life.”

Bracing myself, my mind empties and I just listen.

Declan draws a deep breath. “One day, Keefe was bad. As high as a kite. He was out of his mind, acting belligerent, dangerous. Siobhan was making lunch and he kept messing with her. She called me to help calm him down. Their mother was at work. Siobhan snuck me into the house. First, I found his drugs and disposed of them. But Keefe caught me and lunged at me with a kitchen knife. Siobhan must’ve been watching from the hall because before I could stop her, she launched herself between us. It happened so fast. The knife flew out of Keefe’s hand. Trying to block it, I shoved Siobhan out of the way. She fell against the hot stove and was burned badly. It was all my fault.” Rain or tears track down Declan’s face.

I swallow the lump in my throat.

“I called the Garda, an ambulance came. She had severe burns, particularly on her hands and face. She was a fiddle player. Couldn’t play anymore. I was distraught. Keefe was crazed. She was wounded. I figured she’d tell the police what happened, but she covered for her brother because I later learned she’d started using drugs too. Turns out Keefe was involved with some shady people and had been a bad influence on his sister. Ended up going to jail. He blamed me—had I not thrown out the drugs and had I not been there, it wouldn’t have happened. He soured his mother on me too. Once, she’d been like a mother to me. The worst of it though, Siobhan left town and we never heard from her again.”

I gasp. “I’m so sorry.” I cannot imagine the agony and burden he’s endured.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you. It’s just—I was burned by love. I couldn’t go to the funeral.”

“Declan, that’s awful. Painful. But it’s in the past. You were young. Keefe had problems and—”

He shakes his head. “I can’t—this, us. I can’t risk it.” He turns down the path toward the townhome.

I can hardly process what Declan told me but can see the weight of it pressing down on his shoulders as he disappears into the house, letting the wind slam the door behind him.

I don’t want to let him go, but know that if I go after him, he’ll turn me away. He’s too hurt. Reaching for the door handle to the car, I whisper, “Goodbye, Declan.”

After I check into a hotel in the city proper, I see that my parents called but didn’t leave a message.

I collapse on the bed and quickly file my final report as Declan’s coach. Likely, I lost my job, but want him to get the credit he deserves. He did well practicing etiquette. In fact, after leaving Blancbourg, I hardly had to teach him a thing.

His childhood sounded so challenging, and now I better understand why he tended to rebel, back in the confines of high school and the pranks while on the Bruisers. However, he’d flourished with me. The thought makes me wonder about the vengeful woman, Keefe’s mother, who’d confronted him at the cemetery. What was she talking about, selling his story to the media?

Realization dawns. My parents. My terrible, horrible, evil parents. I’m about to punch *call* on my phone when it beeps with a message. Likely, they called me earlier to gloat and are texting now to really rub it in. They probably resent that I reject their lifestyle and by default, them.

However, the message is from Etta Jo. It’s simply an emoji with a surprised face. Then a link to the B&S Media website. Squishing up my eyes, I don’t want to click it, but can’t bring myself to see what more damage my parents have done.

DECLAN



Maggie already had her reasons for not wanting to be with me, but I knew that once she heard the full story of Siobhan and Keefe, she'd leave. No one ever stays in my life. Not if I pull back all the glitz and charm and am really myself.

I'm little more than the lowly lad Mrs. O'Mealley described.

Forget getting tackled, this is like getting kicked in the chest, the heart.

I should've known better than to fall for someone as true as Maggie.

She deserves better than me anyway. I was born a loser and will always be one, so I've tried to make up for that on the football field. People like me are destined to be alone. Maggie isn't a nobody. She is amazing, beautiful, and so kind. She'd held me steady during the return to Dublin, our stay, and my aunt's passing. She knew just when to squeeze my hand, when to pray, and when to listen.

As the days pass, wallowing in misery, I've gone through exactly five bags of Taytos cheese and onion crisps. I would like ice cream and cake too, but don't have the energy to go to the market after using whatever was left on a Hail Mary.

When I discovered we'd switched phones again, I got her parents' contact info to make sure they listen for once. I had my manager contact them under the guise that I wanted an exclusive interview. They jumped at the bait and called back immediately, hungry for a scoop. I gave them one and an earful about being better to their daughter. I also told them the entire story about Keefe and Siobhan. They'd already known, thanks to Mrs. O'Mealley, but I added details and clarified things. Having learned from the best coach in the NFL, I gave them an ultimatum.

They either air my side of the story and keep their daughter out of it or I'll take them to court for slander. After digging through their website, it wouldn't only be my lawyers going after them, but I'd convince the other guys on the team to do the same.

Additionally, if B&S Media does the right thing, I'll pledge a large sum to a charity of their choice. I hope that will pave the way for them to report on positive celebrity news rather than scandals. Unlikely, but I'll use whatever influence I can.

I hadn't broken the rules of the playbook per se. I'd fallen for Maggie. I only had eyes for her and counted myself lucky that I have a chance at love at all. She's a forever kind of woman. The kind for a ring and 'til death do we part.

When I had her phone, she'd received a call from Sylvester. The name was familiar, and I realized that's Sly the Single Guy who'd betrayed her and took off with the mobile cupcake van she'd invested her savings in, dashing her dreams. I considered giving the dude a piece of my mind, but it isn't my business and don't want to overstep any other bounds. Maybe they'd been in touch and are rekindling things. Above all, Maggie deserves to be happy and I doubt I could ever do that for her—not with the damage from the past that I still carry.

After learning about what happened with Keefe and Siobhan, I'm certain that Maggie won't be able to forgive me...or trust me anyway.

Keefe never forgave me for what had happened with his sister. However, the worst part is I can't forgive myself. Keefe was right. I should've done something, anything differently during that dreadful summer day, but especially not causing Siobhan to fall against the hot stove and ruin her life.

For the last several days, a faint pain has grown in my chest, but right now it's like a stab wound. I grip my heart and close my eyes. When I open them, my gaze lands on a photo of Aunt Maureen that I had on display at the wake. She stands in front of a cathedral in Rome during one of her many travels. My breath catches. It's like she's reminding me of what she'd been saying for years about forgiveness.

I take it as a sign.

I call the car service and have the driver bring me directly to the local church. It's quiet since I'm here outside of service times. I kneel in a pew. First, I pray for another chance with Maggie, but when my mind quiets and

I listen to God, I know that to move ahead with my life, I have to forgive myself. I'm not sure if the directive, "If you forgive others their transgressions, your heavenly Father will forgive you" (Matthew 6:14), includes forgiving myself, but I'll sure try. I have to reconcile.

My aunt had been telling me to be brave and forgive myself, but if I do, will that mean I'll stop regretting what happened? Forget Siobhan? If I forgive myself, does that mean I think what happened is okay?

The answer comes to me in a heartbeat. No. Forgiveness doesn't mean that I'll ever forget. It means I'll remember Siobhan always, but without the cloud of hurt. I'll let God be the judge. I have room for love from the past, present, and future. And the future I long for is with Maggie and a family of our own. Is that crazy?

I somehow escaped the streets and created a life for myself. I'm not proud of all of the things I did along the way, but I want to make Maggie proud of me. I say another prayer, asking for forgiveness for #BruiserButt too. Just in case.

As I sit back in the pew, all the loneliness that I've ever felt dissipates and is replaced with the loving presence of my Savior. The pain in my chest subsides and I take a deep breath of the wax-scented air.

Before leaving, I light a candle for Siobhan, Keefe, and Aunt Maureen. I'm not sure what's next, but the past is finally at rest.

Back home, I try to call Maggie and when she doesn't answer, I text her. First, I apologize for not telling her everything. Then I explain why, confessing my fears, hurts, and deepest wounds—that I'm not good enough for her.

Days pass. No reply.

The ache in my chest returns.

I hardly leave the townhome in Howth, not even to go to the gym.

One afternoon, Coach Hammer's name appears on the screen of my phone with an incoming call. "We have you on the schedule for next week. Have you been keeping up with your workouts? Wolf has been doing ballet. What do you have to say for yourself?" Hammer snickers.

I glance at the empty packets of crisps. "No, I haven't." My voice is rusty from lack of use.

"What do you mean?" Hammer tears into me, hollering and scolding me from one end to the other.

"Why would I bother?" I ask.

“Because you’re the wide receiver for the Bruisers. The greatest team in history.”

“I’m pretty sure you meant to dial Fatechi.”

“Am I talking to Declan Printz right now? Because if so, let me set things straight. Maggie Byrne called me and explained the situation. She confessed that she had a thing for you—don’t get big-headed about that—and tried to put distance between you two so you didn’t get kicked off the team and lose your spot to Fatechi.”

“Maggie called you?” I ask at the same time I realize she must have switched our phones on purpose. The day before, I’d received a call from an airline, asking if I’d review my recent flight to Florida. She must’ve used my phone when getting a ticket too.

“I had zero sense you put her up to that. I think there’s a haters club consisting of women who’d prefer to burn you, son. That Blair woman, for instance.”

And Tess, Kate, Candi, Brandi...all of the women I’d wooed and then ditched.

“Also, I read the reviews from Blancbourg. I looked into the timestamps of the various photos. They’re legit. To anyone with half a brain, B&S Media spun the whole thing for the lead on the infamous football player. You haven’t done yourself too many favors with the media lately, but that exposé on your past—I’ve had literary agents calling the training center asking if you want a book deal. That’s a story of perseverance. Why didn’t you ever tell me where you came from and what you’d been through?”

I’m nearly out of breath, keeping up with everything the coach says. I went from entertaining giving up and boarding my yacht for parts unknown, to coming back to life.

“You there?” Hammer asks.

“Yeah. I’m, just, stunned. I thought it was over.”

“You know what we say on this team. It ain’t over ‘til we’ve won. We’re resilient, fighters. The name Bruisers isn’t for nothin’, son. We might get beaten down, covered in bruises, but we always get back up.”

“You’re right, Coach,” I say, my voice stronger now.

“Ah, those words are music to my ears. Never thought I’d hear them from you, though.” He chuckles. “Now, unstun yourself and get back on track. I want two-a-days. You got that? One workout in the morning. One in the afternoon or evening. These are going to be hardcore workouts, lifting,

and stamina. No, make it three. Need you in fighting condition for the season.”

“You got it,” I answer, rising to my feet.

“When is the soonest you can get to LA? I reckon pretty quickly, given that jet of yours.”

“I’ll be there in under forty-eight hours. First, I have to make a pitstop in Florida.”

Omitting the extent of my life story from Maggie and not going after her was as bad as fumbling the ball in the last seconds of the fourth quarter. No, worse. I’m about to run upstairs and pack when I stop in front of the photo of my aunt.

It’s like her voice is in my head. *Tell Maggie the truth.*

“I did,” I whisper.

The other one.

I’ve been an idiot, that’s for sure, and have to fix things if it isn’t too late. As Coach said, I’m a Boston Bruiser, but before that, I’m a survivor. I’ve been knocked down, but always get back up. Time to man up and fight for love.

MAGGIE



*N*ever mind hot mess. My life has become a humid disaster.

Returning to Florida is like a step backward. There, I reunite with my inner troll while I fully embrace the Goblin mode life. Haven't showered in three days. I'm pretty sure the hair tie fell out while I was lying on the couch, yet the messy bun on top of my head remains in place. Let's not discuss the state of my fingernails, toenails, or other parts of me that routinely get groomed.

Cateline would fail me out of the Blancbourg program if I were a client. I haven't heard from her and most certainly lost my job at Blancbourg. I'd liked to have explored Concordia, eaten some of that chocolate cake. I could look for an opportunity to work at a bakery or open one of my own.

No one there seemed to connect me to the Cinderella Spill viral video...or my parents. I could be anonymous. Drift into the sunset like Declan sailing off in his yacht.

My inner troll has an opinion on everything, including him.

Troll: You need to ditch him like yesterday's news.

Me: No, I should ditch these hole-filled sweatpants and empty food containers.

Troll: Pfft. Don't be ridiculous. Goblin mode is totally trending right now.

Me: I find that hard to believe.

Troll: That's just it. You're so out of touch. You prefer living your life instead of gossiping about others. Didn't your parents teach you anything?

Me: Yes, but without meaning to. They taught me that I value real friendships over undermining other people's relationships, publicly.

Troll: *Well, are you all that different? *Cough, Declan, Cough**

Me: *Yes, that was different.*

Troll: *Well, it didn't work out anyway, so who cares. Come on, go get some more chips and some of that cake frosting. We can dip them and turn the television back on.*

While I try to ignore my inner troll's demands, it lists all the reasons Declan and I can never be a couple and shouldn't even bother being friends. Most of the reasons involve how I'm an ugly liar pants and how he's the swooniest, which reminds me of my swoon list.

Despite my troll's protests, I think about how Declan has always been a refuge, a source of laughter and comfort. A home I never truly had. Because it's not four walls, gilded mirrors, silk sheets, and expensive items. Although home is a noun, it isn't a place or a thing.

It's a person.

When I'm with Declan, I'm not lonely.

The troll cackles at this like I'm the ignorant one who didn't go to school.

Me: *Who made you an authority?*

Troll: *You did.*

Oh.

Before I can pick myself up and brush myself off, Sylvester calls for the third time. He's also texted, asking if we can talk and try again. That ship, er, van sped out of the parking lot leaving my life in a cloud of dust, heartache, and financial woe. But aside from my payment from my now-defunct coaching job, I need cash. Maybe he had a guilty moment and wants to pay me back.

Reluctantly, I agree to meet him at what had been my favorite bakery in Orlando, hoping by some stroke of good fortune he found a decent bone in his body and decided to do the right thing.

Etta Jo drops me off before heading to her new studio.

"I hope you get your set of wheels back," Etta Jo says.

"Unlikely. I'll just take the bus back to your place. Thanks again for everything."

"You can call Giselle to pick you up. I think she's covering the dinner shift later, so she's probably free. Still dating the football player and still working at the restaurant." Etta Jo snorts. "Call me old fashioned, but I'd have him set me up for life."

In my deepest, most secret daydreams, I'd thought about a future with Declan and marriage. Of course, I'll never be Mrs. Printz but had the opportunity arisen, I'd keep a job—I need to have my own thing.

But what could it be?

Cupcakes and baking. That's my thing. I love them, but even more so the smile people wear right before (and after) they take a bite.

But there are bakeries everywhere. That was why I had the clever idea to have a mobile unit. I glance up and down the street, wondering if Sylvester had finally decided to return what is rightfully mine. Just a few work trucks, a sedan, and an economy car fill the parking spaces.

Stepping inside the bakery, the sweet scent loosens my frown. Row after row of cupcakes, pies, cookies, cakes, tarts, and more line the display case.

"What can I get for you?" the salesgirl asks.

I point to a pink velvet cupcake with buttercream icing and rose gold sprinkles. "I'd like one of those."

She rings me up. "That will be—"

Someone slides beside me. "I'll take one too, along with your number."

The salesgirl wrinkles her nose.

I turn sharply to find Sly standing beside me. From under his hat, his hair is longer than it was the last I saw him and he's either going for the ape-man look or is in dire need of a shave. He could stand to attend Blancbourg for a month.

He startles when he sees me. "Maggie. Whoops. Already have your digits." He swoops in to kiss me, but I back away.

"Hi." A deep furrow forms across my brow. I go to an empty table and sit down. What had I ever seen in this guy?

He grabs a chair and spins it around, sitting backward on it. Without needing to see the logo on the other side of his hat, I can tell it's Boston Bruiser's football merchandise given the black and blue design.

"So, Maggie, Maggie, Maggie. It's been so long. Where have you been? What have you been up to?"

I take a bite of the cupcake, thinking about how to explain. If I even want to. It has a slight strawberry flavor that complements the vanilla buttercream, reminding me of strawberry shortcake—a fitting summer treat.

I should've seen the writing on the wall when early on in our relationship, he was all about himself. Then when I told him about my business idea for the mobile cupcakery he was fully on board—probably

seeing dollar signs. Otherwise, our conversations usually centered around him. Not much has changed. He seems unable to wait for me to finish chewing and launches into an account of what has been going on in his life—true to form.

I roll my eyes and continue to enjoy my cupcake as he rattles on about his various schemes for making money. The latest is a football tailgate service to bring sports fans some kind of spice condiment I've never heard of. He calls himself "Sly the Spice Guy" now.

Nearly choking on a cupcake crumb, I realize Sylvester must've seen me online with Declan and wants me to make an introduction to the football player. I haven't gone online in days, fearing what I'll see because we're all over the internet. I have no doubt my parents are having a field day, splashing my photos and foibles all over the place for everyone to see. I can imagine the headlines.

Cinderella over the moon for football Printz who left her before half-time or Looks like football prince ends things with Cinderella before midnight.

I brush my hands together. "Good luck with your business, Sly. When you start rolling in the dough, or spice, as it were, remember you owe me—" I'll never forget the amount of the van because it had been all my savings, but I should add interest. "You owe me thirty-four thousand dollars and fifty cents. When that's been paid, maybe then we can discuss your spice."

His brows pinch together. "What?"

"For taking off with the van I'd invested my life savings in to create a mobile cupcake shop."

"I wouldn't think you'd need that now that you're—"

"Now that I'm back here, without a place to live, and with my heart—" I stop myself from saying more. I don't owe Sylvester an explanation, and he's the last person I want to talk to, but the whole situation weighs heavily on me because he interfered with my dream.

"So, you're not with Declan?" He scratches his temple.

I shake my head and wipe my eyes.

"But the internet says—"

"The internet needs to get a life," I practically growl. "My parents can spew whatever lies they want about him, but I know the truth. Declan is a

good man. He's had tough times and came through them, stronger and better than most people would've."

Sylvester leans on the back of the chair. "Maggie, I hate to say this, but your parents agree."

"What?" I ask, echoing his previous question.

I tear my phone from my pocket and open up the search engine. Sure enough, there are numerous articles and posts about Declan, where and how he grew up, the trouble he'd gotten into, and the incident with the O'Mealleys, but it paints him as a hero—because he is. He also made a huge donation to an organization to help at-risk youths.

My mouth hangs open as I skim the article. At the bottom, next to a photo of my parents, is a text box that reads *We hope you like our new segment about Hunks, Honeys, and Heroes. Real-life stories of celebrities who've defied the odds and do good in the world. Dedicated to our daughter, Maggie, who you may also know as Honey Holiday from the hit show Friends of the Family.*

The sounds in the bakery fade as I sit, stunned by what I read. "Wow," I whisper.

Sylvester's voice comes back to me. "So, do you think you could introduce us? I'm guessing number forty-four will love our spiced pickled egg relish mayo combo."

I squish up my nose and give my head a little shake. Then again, Declan does secretly like pickles and peanut butter. Mayo, not so much.

The density of the burden I've carried lifts and the light of forgiveness toward my parents enters my heart. But that doesn't mean I'll forget the debt Sylvester owes me. I still have to find a place to live, a new job, and have bills to pay.

"Sylvester, number forty-four aka Declan Printz thinks that you're a real —" I whisper the unpleasant words in his ear so I don't disturb the other customers. But saying the football player's name twists my stomach in knots. I miss him and considering what Sylvester is up to, I don't regret using the Boston Bruiser's clout against my ex.

"I, uh—Declan Printz? You told him about me, us?"

"I told him how you disappeared with the van," I clarify. "You dashed my dreams. Left me high and dry." I cross my arms in front of my chest. It feels good to face him finally and tell him how he hurt me.

“So, you’re not going to see if the team would endorse my condiment truck?”

I sigh in exasperation because I shouldn’t expect a guy like him to apologize. “Absolutely not.”

If I were truly vindictive, I’d have my parents claim his products had caused food poisoning or something disastrous and splash the breaking news online. Instead, I get up and say, “Good luck, Sylvester. I hope you, uh, sell some spice, and I expect that check soon.”

I stride from the bakery, feeling like I have a little taste of justice—it’s faintly like a strawberry velvet cupcake. I doubt I’ll ever see that money, but perhaps Sylvester will find success in his spice company.

MAGGIE



While riding the bus back to the apartment, I review the B&S Media story. My parents are like sharks. Blood lures them—stories of death, loss, and destruction. What made them change course, publish something that painted Declan in a positive light instead of Mrs. O’Mealley’s account, and then dedicate the story to me?

As the bus stops and heaves a sigh, I realize that I hold the answer in my hand. When I switched my phone and Declan’s, there was a call from my parents. Had they called and he answered or had Declan called them and they’d gotten back to him? Whatever happened, it came out positively in the end and that is all I could hope for.

Declan’s story, as dark as it had been, is one of hope. He’d overcome the odds that he would’ve turned out exactly like Keefe. Declan had been afraid to tell anyone the truth about his past, but it was powerful and showed the resiliency of the human spirit, the community that consisted of his aunt, trainers, coaches and team, and his faith. My parents, of all people, had been the ones to share it.

Tears fill my eyes. I may not get my happy ending with Declan, but maybe because of him, other people—teens like he’d been, those who thought there might not be a way out of difficult circumstances—will find the strength in his story to move forward.

Buoyed until I return to the apartment, I promptly fall onto the couch because the reality is, I’m homeless, jobless, and loveless.

My inner troll pipes up, attempting to quash my ambition and motivation.

Etta Jo had offered me a place to stay until I got back on my feet, but as I lay here, wishing to be part of the second half of Declan's story, I can't imagine getting up. At least not for a while.

I probably ought to go to Concordia or someplace else where I can be anonymous. Declan's idea to sail around the world on his yacht sounds tempting. But there is no way we could ever be together.

I groan, feeling like I crash-landed. In the last days, Etta Jo has sat with me for hours, listening, sharing her insight, and supporting me, but I can't imagine moving—my body or into a new place. I don't know how I'll get on with my life or where to go. I'm utterly alone.

Dozing, the door flies open and Giselle breezes in. She shuffles bags, boxes, and other items around. She's in a frenzy, shoving things into Etta Jo's room, tossing clothing and shoes in the closet. She stuffed stacks of magazines under the coffee table. Her long, lacquered nails flash.

I blink and sit up. "Everything okay? What are you doing?"

Giselle startles. "I didn't see you there. You're heaped under that ratty blanket."

"Goblin mode."

"That is not a vibe."

"Do you need help cleaning up?" I ask.

"Oh, no, honey. You just keep laying there wallowing. Don't mind me. I just have a player for the Miami Riptide coming over."

"Are you still dating Garrison?"

Giselle nods. "I think things are getting serious. He wanted to come to see my lair." She cackles.

I almost crack a smile. "Have you heard from Cateline?"

"No, she's dealing with a football player of her own." Giselle smirks.

I gasp. "The headmistress and Wolf, her pupil?" I thought they despised each other.

Giselle smooths her hair. "How do I look?"

"Gorgeous. As ever. Giselle, you could go through a hurricane and you'd look as fresh as spring rain."

"It's these Berghier genes. You might want to freshen up too. Okay, lights, camera, action." She struts to the door just as a knock sounds.

Without warning, several burly guys stride in. The one in the front is wearing the turquoise and yellow colors of the Riptide, but the others are in

Boston Bruiser's black and blue. They surround me on all sides and pick up the couch, then heft it with me still on top.

I squeak and then squeal as they march out of the apartment. "What is going on? Where are we going? Put me down!"

They don't answer.

I try to sit up, being careful not to fall over the edge.

Carrying me like some misfit goblin princess, the football players parade down the hall and outside. They set the couch down in the courtyard at the same time a black dot fills the sky.

Just then, Etta Jo and Giselle sit down beside me with the football players at our backs. Everyone looks up.

The dot gets closer. My hands tent over my mouth. "Is that?"

"A bird? A plane?" Etta Jo asks.

"Nope. I'd say it's a man."

A man descending in a parachute. We watch in stunned silence until at last, Declan lands in the courtyard. One of the guys whistles and everyone hoots and claps.

I scramble up from the couch, trying to make myself look less like a goblin, which is a foregone battle, and rush over to him. "What are you doing—?"

"There was a problem with the airstrip and I couldn't get clearance to land." He unclips the harness and envelopes me in a hug.

I sink into him, never wanting to let go.

"I couldn't let another day pass not seeing you. My only choice was to take the leap, the risk, and hope you welcomed me back into your life. I had the guys here, and with Giselle and Etta Jo's help, get you outside on the fly." Declan gestures.

"And you have to get to LA," one of the other Boston Bruisers hollers.

"And that. Will you come with me?" Declan asks, windswept and out of breath.

"Go to Los Angeles?"

The air is still, but everything is happening so fast it's like high-speed winds blew into town and turned my world upside down.

"Please. I won't ever give up on myself or us again." He tells me how he'd forgiven himself for the past and tried to make it right by talking to my parents so we'd have a shot at a future together.

A smile crests from my heart and reaches my eyes. "I won't give up on us again either. Ride or die, but I refuse to jump out of a plane."

Declan laughs then angles my chin to face him and leans in. His gaze dips to my lips. The flurry of the last minutes slows, my surroundings blur. The past dissolves. All that matters is right now.

Declan's hand cups the back of my neck as he draws us together. Our lips meet.

I've never jumped out of an airplane, but imagine the swooping and diving from the bluebirds in my belly are a lot like the thrill of flying through the sky. I drop through fluffy, swoony, blissy clouds.

My heart rushes as his pounds against mine.

I melt inside as he deepens the kiss.

Our elbows bend and our fingers lace together. I squeeze tight.

I no longer feel alone, but connected. To Declan, to our future.

Another round of cheering comes from the guys and my friends, reminding me we have an audience. Not my favorite.

The next minutes are a matter of Etta Jo and Giselle getting me cleaned up, packed up, and ferried off to the airport where the private plane waits.

During the flight, Declan catches me up on everything that has happened since we parted in Ireland.

"Thank you for talking to my coach. He can be an intimidating guy."

"Thank you for talking to my parents."

"So you're not mad?" he asks.

"I was hurt that you didn't tell me about Keefe and Siobhan, but I also understand you were trying to protect yourself. Just like I've been doing since I distanced myself from my parents, never letting anyone get too close. It was almost like it was easier to be alone. But not really."

He nods in understanding then tells me about his ultimatum and the donation.

"I guess some things don't change. I thought maybe they'd done that out of a sense of goodness."

"I didn't put them up to the dedication. That was all of them. But I understand how the past may have hurt you and I won't keep anything else from you, Maggie."

"No more secrets?" I ask.

"None. No more omissions?"

I shake my head. “We have a long flight ahead of us. Let’s tell each other everything.”

“We might need longer than that.”

“Who goes first?” I make a fist and shake my hand up and down, signifying we do rock paper scissors. “Best two out of three.”

Not to brag, but I win. “What’s the strangest thing you’ve ever eaten?”

“Oh, this is easy. Aunt Maureen came back from a flight to...I forget where. She had this thing called a hundred-year-old egg.” He makes a gagging face. “It was as disgusting as you’d imagine.”

“Then you definitely wouldn’t be interested in Sylvester’s spiced pickled egg relish mayo combo.”

“That would be a solid no. But I am interested in us.” Declan squeezes my hand. “Maggie, you and the guys on the team are my found family. I want to be yours. I want a future together and don’t want the past to come between us.”

“I want the same things. But I don’t want your fame to come between us either, so I’ve decided to let the past go—and accept my childhood for what it was and forgive my parents so that I can be present for us and our future.”

We move in for a kiss and then chat for the rest of the transcontinental flight, talking about life, our hopes, plans, and more.

“So, when we get to LA, I have a lot of training to do, but I will spend every other second with you. I don’t want you to get bored, though, so on the flight from Dublin to Florida, I set up a cupcake crawl for you.”

“A cupcake what?”

He pulls out a piece of paper and a sketch. “In Ireland and cities like Boston, there’s a thing called a pub crawl where people go from pub to pub. So, I thought you could do the same, but with cupcakes. I mapped out every café, bakery, and restaurant in the city that sells cupcakes. I figure you can visit each one, try out their offerings, write up a review, create a blog, or just do research for fun.”

“Really? This is the coolest thing ever.”

Declan smiles. “Even though I have a demanding job and like it or not, I will be in the limelight a little, I want to be with you the most. I’ll do anything to make that happen. But I also think it’s important for you to follow your dreams wherever they lead.”

I nuzzle close to him, surveying the list of cupcakeries and the map. “I know where my heart leads, Declan. To you.” I kiss him on the cheek and

he turns to me, kissing me fully on the lips.

The plane cruises toward Los Angeles. I haven't been to my hometown in years. My parents' office is nearby, but I don't think about that right now. The sun has set and instead of the stars glittering above, the city shines below. Our kiss deepens, but all the lights on the ground or all the stars in the sky can't make me feel more electric, more plugged in and connected than I do right now.

"I love you, Maggie," Declan says.

"I love you too," I answer.

MAGGIE



A few days pass. Declan has numerous meetings and training while I happily tour the city, the beach, and the sites while sampling a couple of cupcakes each day.

I also receive my check from Blancbourg and an offer to keep my job if I still want it. Because the other etiquette coaches and I had worked for a month straight, we also have a couple of weeks off. I take the time to figure out my next steps.

Could Declan and I have a long-distance relationship? Could I come up with a job where I can work in Boston and Los Angeles, or manage my own hours making me available to travel with him when possible? I have a lot to think about, and the city's energy and the cupcakes are helping to inspire me.

However, my parents haven't replied to my email. I avoid visiting their office. Likely, they aren't there anyway, but I feel at peace after reading the article and dedication. They've had another Hunks, Honeys, and Heroes story come out about a male model working to help clean up the trash in the ocean.

While checking out bakeries, I worry that the cupcake market is saturated and opening a bakery of my own isn't a good idea. Plus, it would tie me down to a location. And if I were trying to spend time with Declan given his busy schedule, especially during the football season, how could I manage a bakery? Maybe I like eating cupcakes more than baking them.

As I sit at an outdoor table on a sunny day, I hear a familiar cheering sound, like a stadium clapping and hooting for their favorite football player. I look around and a man in a pink and yellow van with a cupcake on top

waves at me. I blink a few times, afraid it's Sylvester. But no, The Declan Printz sits in the driver's seat of Maggie Cake's Mobile Cupcake Shop.

I jump to my feet and my cheering matches his ringtone as I rush over.

In a flurry, he tells me I now have the option to sell cupcakes at games or wherever. My hand is over my mouth. Eyes wide.

"Do you like it?"

I'm stunned speechless.

"Maggie Cakes, is it okay?" Sweat pierces his brow.

I reach through the window and clobber him with a hug and a billionty kisses. "I love it. I love you. This is...I don't have words, other than this goes on the swoon list. Er, the love list. Thank you, Declan. Thank you."

"Glad you approve."

I hop in the passenger side and admire the custom cupcake bakery on wheels. The radio dials are little cupcakes. The seats are pink pleather. It is a dream.

"I have another surprise. Buckle up," Declan says, wearing a mischievous grin.

About five minutes later, Declan pulls into the back lot of a big non-descript building.

"Where are we? I feel like I've been here before."

"It's a busy day, so I opted to take us through the rear entrance. Word has spread that I'm in town training." Declan is all muscle, but in the last weeks, he appears as if carved of stone, pure power.

"Yeah, let's avoid the cameras."

It's like he's forcing himself not to smile. Wherever we are must have really good cupcakes.

We follow a lightly wooded path toward the back of a building. A man dressed in a dark suit and wearing a coms unit in his ear nods at Declan and lets us through a nondescript door.

As it closes behind us, I could've sworn he said, "Cinderella and Prince Charming have arrived."

I blink a few times, and it only takes a second for me to realize we're at Disneyland. Still holding Declan's hand, I spin in a circle before landing in his arms.

"What are we doing here?"

"I wanted to get you some cake. To celebrate."

"Celebrate what?" I ask.

He draws me into the center square by the castle and holds my hands in his. His thumb runs smoothly over the heart charm around my wrist.

I repeat what he said all those years ago. “No matter where we go, no matter what we do, I promise that I’ll always be there for you and you have been. I wasn’t expecting my heart to lead me here. To me. To us.”

He beams. “If I could, I’d give you the keys to the kingdom. All I have is the key to my heart, and it is yours.”

My heart stutters, leaps, and grows in my chest.

“I want to be the Prince Charming to your Cinderella. You are my princess. If I had a glass slipper, I’d give it to you. Instead, I have this.” He drops to one knee and holds up the shiniest diamond ring I’ve ever seen and it’s cut in the shape of a heart. “And you’re my star. I vow to keep my focus on you as my light, day and night, always. We were in the friend zone, but I love you to the endzone and beyond. Will you marry me, Maggie?” he asks.

I smile and toss my head back, laughing. “Yes, yes I will.”

“I couldn’t wait a minute longer to hear you say that.” He gets back to his feet.

Declan slides the ring on my finger. Cupping my jaw in his hands, he kisses me.

When we part, people all around cheer and clap. Unlike the last time I was at a theme park, I don’t mind the excitement or the flashing of cameras and video.

I lean toward Declan and say, “Now, about that cake.”

He winks at me. Arm in arm, we make our way through the crowd for some dessert to celebrate our engagement.

“What do you think of getting married here, Cinderella?” Declan asks.

“I’d like that, Printz Charming,” I reply.

Lifting onto my toes, I plant a kiss on his cheek.

EPILOGUE



There used to be television commercials post-championship football game win, when a reporter would ask the MVP, “What’s next?” Then they’d enthusiastically shout, “I’m going to Disney World!”

I was in one as a child star and got to pop the question once.

Speaking of popping questions, after Declan proposed, we remained at Disneyland, getting VIP treatment on all the rides. And guess what? I didn’t fall into a single fountain.

However, we didn’t go to Disney World for our honeymoon. I’ve had enough theme park excitement for a lifetime.

Not wanting to wait a second longer to say I do, Declan and I got hitched the next weekend. We had an intimate wedding ceremony with Etta Jo and Giselle as my bridal party. Coach Hammer gave me away and passed off the rings. No, my parents didn’t show up, but that’s okay. I didn’t want to have to confiscate their phones or kick out their ever-present cameraman.

We decided not to host a formal reception because The First Annual Boston Bruisers Charity Ball is coming up fast. However, we did a mini reception at a fancy steak house, rented out a movie theater, and then went bowling. It was a blast and reminded me of the kinds of things Declan and I used to do when we were in high school.

Were there pranks? Not on our big day, but I did hear two Bruisers giggling as they ran out of the bathroom at the bowling alley. When Brandon came out a few minutes later, there was some strongarming.

In the meantime, our honeymoon took us to sea on Declan’s yacht where it was just the two of us for two swoony and blissy weeks.

When we got back, we attended the ball, and then I eagerly started my mobile cupcake business while Declan jumped into the season. So far, things are pretty sweet.

So that's my status update and if you ever want to try a corn chip-inspired cake with chocolate frosting, look for a pink van with a cupcake on top outside football stadiums nationwide.

In fact, I'm parked outside one right now. Usually, on game days, I feature chocolate cupcakes with blue frosting—Bruiser themed.

But today I added a little something inside and I made enough for the entire stadium...with a little help. Okay, it was a herculean effort, but it's a big game and I cannot wait to see my husband and best friend's face on the jumbotron when everyone bites into their cupcake at the same time.

Declan can go big, dropping into the courtyard at Etta Jo's apartment by parachute, whisk me off to Los Angeles in his private jet, then propose to me at Disneyland.

But I have a surprise of my own up my sleeve, er, in the oven. Wink, wink.

Etta Jo bustles around, nervous for me. Giselle is as cool as a cucumber as she sets the cupcakes for the team on a platter.

"This was genius," she says.

"Are you sure you want to do this at halftime? What if it throws Declan off his game?" Etta Jo asks.

"He's laser-focused no matter what. I think this news will only be fuel to fight harder."

"You mean play harder?" Etta Jo asks.

"It's always a fight on the field for the ball," Giselle says with a laugh because her boyfriend's team is the rival today.

"But not for your heart," Etta Jo teases.

"Well, I make Garrison work for it a little bit. For instance, I don't go to all his games. Don't want him to get a bigger head than he already has."

"Do you mean he has a special helmet?" Etta Jo asks, extremely concerned about player safety lately.

"No, I mean his ego. Any man that owns a yacht needs a good woman to keep him in check," Giselle says.

"This is true," I add.

"Keep him on his toes," Giselle says.

“Prank him every once in a while.” I wink, thinking about the harmless and sweet April Fool’s style jokes Declan and I play on each other.

“Isn’t that dangerous?” Etta Jo asks.

“No, we have rules. No pranks on Sundays or game days. Nothing that could maim, burn, or render the other incapacitated in any way for any amount of time.”

“Wow, you guys put a lot of thought into this,” Giselle says.

“A couple that laughs together, stays together.” I smile. “But there’s more.”

“We’d love to hear about it, but we ought to bring these cupcakes up. It’s almost go time and I don’t want to fumble this tray, have a team member slip in the frosting, and fall.”

“Etta Jo, they’re wearing cleats. They play in mud, snow, and ice. They’re tough, rugged guys,” Giselle says.

“All the same.”

Giselle and I exchange a look, wondering what’s gotten into our friend and her preoccupation with the guys’ safety.

Then I gasp but quickly stifle it with a swoony, blissy sound because now is not the time to reveal what I just figured out about Etta Jo and Brandon Campos. We are on a mission and it’s to share with Declan and the country, as it turns out, that he’s soon to be a father.

Cupcake trays in hand, the girls and I march toward the stadium. The crowd cheers when the halftime act wraps up. The announcer’s deep voice booms and everyone becomes relatively quiet. But my heart is loud in my ears as I step up to his booth and he introduces me.

Etta Jo and Giselle remain by my side. Both prepared with cupcakes and one for me.

“We have a special announcement that we need your help with. I’d like to introduce Maggie, the wife of number forty-four, Declan Printz.”

My hands shake slightly as I step in front of the microphone. Meanwhile, the vendors distribute the cupcakes to fans on both teams.

“Hello.” I sound like a squeaky mouse.

Then remembering that my parents and the entire world will likely see this, I clear my throat and summon my skills as a child performer, only I’m a woman now and this moment is going to change my life and Declan’s.

“Thank you everyone for being here today. You may have seen Maggie Cakes, my mobile cupcake company at games and even tried some of my

baked goods. Well, today, everyone gets a cupcake. I have some exciting news to share and I need your help so don't bite into it just yet. We're all going to do it together on the count of three."

I scan the sidelines on the field for my husband. He stands, helmet in hand, staring up at me, lips parted, eyes bright.

Waving, my smile grows and I continue, "Declan, we're expecting."

"A baby?" he shouts.

I nod. "But the question is..."

Etta Jo grips my hand and into the microphone, she says, "Pretty in pink or..."

Giselle leans in and adds, "Or baby in blue?"

I finish with, "Take a bite and you'll have a clue. Now, on the count of three, bite into your cupcake and then everyone shout out the reveal."

The stadium is silent for five seconds before the word, "Blue" erupts from all corners. Everyone cheers, black and blue confetti blasts, showering the crowd, and on the jumbotron, my husband is smiling so big you'd think he already won the game.

I rush down to the field. He runs toward me and before I set foot on the turf, he picks me up, swings me around, and says, "We're having a baby?"

"A boy," I add, in case that wasn't clear what with the cupcakes and confetti.

Declan picks me up again and the crowd is wild, cheering for us and offering congratulations. For once in my life, I don't mind the spotlight shining because this time, it's on us.

♥Not ready to leave Bruisers behind? Read the bonus epilogue, featuring Etta Jo and Brandon when you sign up for my weekly newsletter. You'll also get a FREE book along with access to my reader library of bonus content, including extra chapters, scenes, recipes, coloring pages, and much more!

[Check it out here.](http://www.subscribe.com/swoonbonus) Or visit <http://www.subscribe.com/swoonbonus>

♥Be sure to come right back to read a snippet Cateline and Wolf's story, *The NOT Love List*.

Chapter 1: Cateline

Concordia is best known for its chocolate cake—three layers of moist deliciousness cushioned by fluffy buttercream and topped with 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 are the sweeping views of the ocean to the south and the lush mountainsides that give way to impressive peaks to the north.

The third are 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 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 noticed 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 the closed door.

About a decade ago, m 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 room 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 things, 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 too many times to count when I was growing up.

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 fulltime.

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.

Chapter 2: 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 Lizabeth'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, yes of the legendary football family and our quarterback, frowns.

"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 bruisin.' We could give him the ole Boston Bruiser wedding gift."

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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.



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