HANNAH BROWN

Lessons in Love and Ballroom

The Woodridge Community Center dance studio hasn't changed in twenty years. The never-quite-clean mirrored wall, the paint-stained ballet barre, the scarred hardwood floor—it all looks exactly as it did when I walked in for the first time as a five-year-old with her first ballerina bun. Then, I was brimming with excitement.

Now, I'm overwhelmed with disappointment. Disappointment that I ended up back here in my hometown, that the only dance-tangential thing I can do is teach Intro to Ballroom for Active Seniors, that I failed so miserably and so publicly.

Just thinking about it all makes my newly repaired ACL ache and fresh tears gather, and I squeeze my eyes shut to keep them from falling. I refuse to greet the active seniors with salt-stained cheeks.

My eyes are still closed when I hear my cousin's voice: "You good?"

I blink open my eyes to find Olivia hovering in the doorframe, her dark hair pulled into a bouncy ponytail and her Director of Community Events badge hanging from a neon pink lanyard around her neck. (The lanyard, I note, matches the color of her nails, and I remind myself to locate that color in our now shared bathroom back at home.)

"Seriously, Iz, are you good?" she asks.

"Olivia, I told you, I want you to call me Isabel while we're at work." I'm trying to hang onto the last shred of my dignity, the last vestige of being Isabel Valentine, two-time champion of *Stars Come to Dance*.

Olivia rolls her eyes to let me know what she thinks of *that*, and says, "Fine, Isabel. But your class starts in ten minutes, and you look like you're about to faint. So I'm going to need you to tell me pretty quickly if you're okay."

"I'm good," I say with more confidence than I feel. "Come on, I once led a completely plastered soap opera actor through the foxtrot on live television and still placed second. I think I can handle a few senior citizens."

Olivia grins wryly. "You say that now, but you haven't met Rose."

"I'm a professional," I remind her. "I can handle anything."

#

Fifteen minutes later, and I'm ready to eat my words. I've taught all kinds of classes—mommy and me movement with screaming babies, intro to ballet with kindergarteners who have the attention span of gnats, barre classes with gossipy middle-aged women, private dance lessons for soon-to-married couples who bickered the whole time—and never have I taught a class as demanding as this one. There are eight senior citizens, all of whom have various ailments that they spend the first ten minutes describing to me in detail, despite the horrified expression I'm sure I'm displaying, and when I finally get them into position, they immediately rearrange themselves.

Despite this, most of them are pleasant. "Most," however, does not include the Rose that Olivia warned me about. In her early eighties with a puff of snow white hair and a baby pink matching set, Rose *looks* like a perfectly adorable old woman—and then she opens her mouth. Rose argues at every opportunity and challenges every instruction I give. Why *can't* she lead instead of Frank, who has two left feet and couldn't find his way out of a cardboard box? (Her words, not mine.) Why *shouldn't* she take off her sneakers and dance barefooted, just like her creator intended? (Again, her words.) Who am *I* to tell her what to do when she has seen me cry like a little baby on national television? (Do I even have to say it?) With as much patience as I can muster, I explain that the male partner leads in ballroom dancing, that I don't want her to be

injured if someone (like Frank and his two left feet) were to step on her bare foot, and that she would cry, too, if she'd come down out of a grand jeté and immediately felt a pain in her ACL like a million fire ants feasting on her flesh.

My voice raises on that last bit, startling even Rose, so when the studio door bangs open, I assume it's Olivia there to relieve me from my job.

Instead, there stands a little girl of maybe five with golden braided pigtails and a blue leotard. As she looks around the room in confusion, a flustered-looking man darts in after her.

"Hi, Grammy!" the girl exclaims, waving enthusiastically.

"Hi, sweetheart," Rose returns in a voice several degrees softer than the voice she uses with me.

"Sorry to interrupt," the guy says, offering an embarrassed wave as he leads the girl away. "Wrong room."

I only realize I'm still staring at the now-empty doorway when Rose snaps, "Well? Aren't you supposed to be teaching us something? Or did they give you a lobotomy in LA?"

#

When the hour concludes, I congratulate the seniors on their progress, tell them I'll see them next Wednesday, and then quickly make my escape to avoid being ensnared in conversation. I'm not sure I can take even another minute of things they should really be talking to their doctor about, and I certainly don't want them to ask me about that tattered remains of my career.

I beeline for the admin offices so that I can check in with Olivia, and as I round a corner at top speed (which, admittedly, is not very fast these days), I nearly collide with the blond guy who made a brief appearance in my class.

"Sorry!" I exclaim, grimacing in pain as my knee throbs from stopping short.

"You okay?" he asks, soft gray eyes looking at me with concern.

"Yeah, thanks. It's just, you know." I gesture to my knee in explanation.

He takes in the clunky knee brace I've been wearing since my surgery two months ago. "Oh, are you injured?"

I narrow my eyes at him. "Are you making fun of me?"

"No." He tilts his head in confusion. "Why would you think that? I don't even know you."

"You don't know who I am," I say in disbelief. After all, I'm *Isabel Valentine*. Nine million people watched me tear my ACL on live television during the *Stars Come to Dance* finale.

He gives me a tilted smile that makes my heart do a silly little leap. "Well, I know you're the dance instructor whose class my daughter crashed. Sorry about that, by the way. We were looking for gymnastics, and she opened the wrong door."

"You're forgiven," I say, gaze traveling to his hand and noting his lack of a wedding ring. Quickly, I remind myself that it doesn't matter. I didn't come back to my hometown to start dating; I came here so I could get back on my feet, both figuratively and literally. Once I'm healed enough to resume my role as a dancer on *Stars Come to Dance*, I'll be on the next plane to LA.

"I get why she wanted to join," I continue. "Our class was more fun."

"Rose will be the judge of that," he says, laughing.

“Speaking of, did I hear your daughter call Rose ‘Grammy’? Is Rose … your mother?” I can’t imagine that bad-tempered, bossy Rose could birth this handsome, gentle man, but stranger things have happened. I’m teaching at the community center after all; maybe pigs are flying.

“How old do you think I am?” he asks, mock-offended. “Don’t answer that. But no, Rose is my daughter’s great-grandmother.”

Before I can ask any follow-up questions, a door bangs open and a gaggle of small girls, all bright leotards and glitter and high-pitched laughter, bursts out. His daughter rushes over and exclaims, “Daddy, I did a backbend!”

“On the first day? Wow, Emmy, that’s incredible.”

“It is,” she agrees. Then she seems to notice me and asks, “Who are you?”

“I’m Isabel. I teach Introduction to Ballroom Dancing for Active Seniors. The class you accidentally walked into.”

“Grammy looked mad at you.”

“Oh, I’m sure she wasn’t—”

“You look like a ballerina,” she says, pointing at the high bun I’ve twisted my long, dark hair into. “Can you teach me to do that?”

“Maybe, if it’s all right with your dad,” I say, glancing at him. “Sorry, I don’t think I caught your name.”

“His name is Daddy,” Emmy informs me.

“That’s true,” he says, laughing, “but I also answer to Alex.”

He grins at me, and for a moment, I feel like I’m stuck in the tractor beam of his sparkling eyes and bright smile. I feel like I should say something witty, but all humor escapes me.

Before I can regain my senses, Rose's voice booms down the hall. "Emmy! Come over here and give Grammy a hug!"

Emmy squeals and scampers off, and Alex turns back to me. "I should go with her. Rose is always sneaking her candy and ruining her dinner. But it was nice to meet you, Isabel. See you next week?"

"I'll be here," I say, and I can't figure out why my stomach is fluttering with excitement.

#

Two and a half months ago, I returned to my hometown a broken shell of a person. I was in constant pain, unsure whether I would ever dance again, and humiliated to be moving back into my childhood bedroom at the age of twenty-five. I swallowed my pride and slept in my old twin bed with its pink canopy for six weeks, until I'd recovered enough from ACL surgery that I could move into the guest bedroom of Olivia's house. Living with my cousin at least lets me pretend that I'm a fully functioning adult.

Plus, it's fun. Olivia is one of the sunniest people I've ever met, and she's a much-needed bright spot in this otherwise dreary season of life.

That night, as I serve up the vegetable stir-fry I cooked in lieu of paying rent, I ask Olivia as casually as I can, "So, what's the deal with Alex?"

"Alex?" Olivia frowns. "Hon, there's no 'Alex' in your class. Are you thinking of Rex? Because he's—"

"No, I met some guy named Alex at the community center this afternoon. His daughter is in gymnastics. His grandmother is Rose?"

"Oh, *that* Alex! Rose isn't his grandmother; she was his late wife's grandmother." Olivia shakes her head sadly. "His wife died in a car accident when their daughter was just a baby. It was so tragic."

My heart twists with grief for him, and right on the heels of that, I feel a wave of embarrassment. I've spent the last few months feeling extremely sorry for myself, mourning the loss of my dream job, but Alex lost his *wife*. The mother of his child.

"Alex is a good guy, though," Olivia continues, oblivious. "He took over his dad's furniture repair shop. You know, the one on Main with the sign that looks like a chair? And he knows literally everyone, and is always so helpful. Like, I'm sure every single one of the dancers in your class has some nice story about him—oh!" She cuts herself off suddenly, fumbling for her phone. "Speaking of your dancers and their stories, your class is a huge hit! Gregory posted about it on Instagram—"

"Gregory?" I interrupt. "The guy with the bowtie who looks to be one hundred?"

"He's a very young ninety-nine." Olivia turns her phone to me, and I see a blurry mirror selfie of Gregory, captioned *getting my ballroom on with superstar @isabeldances.*

I burst out laughing, and I laugh until I cry. As I'm wiping away the tears, I realize this is the most I've laughed since I tore my ACL months ago.

Maybe this isn't the disaster I worried it would be.

#

I pass the time until the next ballroom class the way I usually do: gritting my teeth through physical therapy, giggling over dinners and coffees with Olivia, filing documents in my mom's law office while her paralegal is out on maternity leave. *You know, there's always law*

school, my mom says yet again, as though I didn't once dance on television with the top-grossing action film star.

When Wednesday evening finally comes, I take special care with my appearance. I put gloss in my hair before I twist it up, glide on a new raspberry-colored lip gloss, and wear my sleekest black leotard with my flutteriest, sheerest skirt. The knee brace kind of ruins the effect, but there's only so much I can do.

I arrive at the community center fifteen minutes early, hoping to run into Alex again. But the only person there is Rose, who traps me in a conversation about a grocery store teller who didn't bag her groceries to her specifications, and then class is starting.

#

After class, I take a moment to smooth my hair and reapply my lip gloss before stepping into the hallway. It's been a week, and I haven't been able to stop thinking about the way Alex's eyes crinkle when he laughs or the slight tilt to his smile, and I'm near desperate to see him again. Luckily, I find him exactly where he stood last Wednesday, reading something on his phone as he leans against the wall outside the gymnastics room.

At that moment, he looks up and recognition sparkles in his eyes. Butterflies explode in my stomach.

"Isabel, hey," he says. "I finally figured out where I know you from."

I laugh. "I was wondering when—"

"You were two years behind me at Woodbridge High." He grins, looking pleased with himself.

"Oh." I blink, surprised. "That's not … I didn't know that."

"That only hurts my feelings a little," he says, laughing.

“It’s not about you. It’s not like I paid much attention to anyone in high school. I was completely focused on dance. And how it could get me out of this town,” I add.

He looks at me thoughtfully. “And yet here you are.”

“It’s a long story.”

“I’d like to hear it. If you want to tell it, that is.” He bites his lip, looking suddenly bashful. “Rose is having Emmy over for dinner tonight. Think you might want to get a drink?”

“I would love that.”

#

Alex suggested we meet at “the bar,” and it tells you something about our town that I know exactly which one he means. On the corner of Main and Broad, there’s a squat brick building covered in flaking black paint, its only signage a neon sign reading “BAR.” Olivia and I snuck in with fake IDs when we were seventeen, only to turn around and sneak back out when we saw a group of our teachers playing darts.

Now, as I step onto the sticky floor, I’m overcome with self-consciousness. I feel eyes on me wonder what they see: local girl made good, snob, failure. It’s so much I almost back out the door. But then my gaze lands on Alex, and all that discomfort melts away. I cross to where he’s waiting in a booth and slide in across from him.

“Isabel, hey. You look nice.”

“Thanks. So do you.”

He grins and looks down at the navy t-shirt that strains across his broad shoulders in all the right ways. “Is this a safe space to admit that I tried on five different shirts?”

“I tried on six.”

His grin widens. “Are you always so competitive?”

“Pretty much,” I say with a laugh. “It’s my weakness.”

“And here I thought your weakness was your bum knee.”

I blink in surprise. No one, not even Olivia, talks about my injury. Everyone tiptoes around the subject, afraid of setting me off.

“First,” I say, “it was, technically, my ACL. And second, wow, way to come in hot on a first date.”

My cheeks heat as soon as I say “date.” He never used that word. Maybe I’m getting ahead of myself; maybe I just exposed how inexperienced I am, how I always chose dancing over dating.

But Alex is chuckling and holding up his hands in surrender. “Sorry. I spend too much time with Rose. That woman has a tongue so sharp it could cut you. Can I try again?

I smile. “Please do.”

“Well,” he says, giving me a lopsided grin, “I wanted to hear that long story you promised me, but then Rose told me you’re some kind of celebrity.”

“’Celebrity’ is going a bit far.” I smile modestly. “But I did win *Stars Come to Dance* twice in a row.”

“Cool,” he says, but I can tell that he has no idea what I’m talking about.

“You know the show, right?”

He winces. “I don’t watch much tv.”

“That’s … refreshing, actually,” I say, laughing. “Well, the concept is that celebrities perform specific dances with professional partners. I’m one of the professional partners. Or I *was* until I hurt myself.”

I close my eyes and suddenly I'm in that terrible moment again: the hot lights beating down on me, the high-tempo music still playing, the searing pain racing through my leg, the awful stillness of the crowd as they watched me writhe on stage. And worst of all, the crushing humiliation.

"I'm sorry that happened. Does the brace help?"

I nod. "Yeah, but it's a long road. I had surgery two months ago, and I have many more months of physical therapy before I can even dream about being in condition to dance like that again. If ever."

"You must miss it."

I nod, not trusting myself to speak as tears begin to crowd my eyes. Dancing was my everything; not being able to dance feels like a part of me has been ripped away.

Alex's eyes soften into something that looks suspiciously like pity, and I'm about to lift my chin and tell him that no one feels sorry for Isabel Valentine—I cannot bear one more indignity—but then he steps out of the booth and extends a hand.

"May I have this dance?"

I look around the bar, self-conscious. "Dream a Little Dream of Me" is playing on the jukebox, and quite technically, we could slow dance to it right beside our booth. But what would everyone think?

"You want me to dance *here*? In the bar?"

His expression droops. "Shoot, was that a dumb idea? I figured if you could teach that class, a little swaying wouldn't hurt, but if it would hurt your knee, let's not."

"It's not …" I start, but trail off. I'm not worried the dance would re-injure me, but I also don't know how to explain to Alex that I'm too afraid to dance *here*? How could he understand

that I, a person who has danced on one of the most highly viewed television programs, now feel self-conscious dancing in front of some bar patrons? Some of them might have known me as a child or know my parents; others might have seen my fall. All of them might look at me and wonder who I think I am, might see the aura of failure.

"I don't think I should," I murmur, looking down at the table.

"No worries," Alex says, sliding back into the booth. "So tell me what it's like leading that class. I want to hear everything."

#

Those drinks at the bar lead to a coffee date, which in turn leads to a dinner date, and eventually to mini-golf with Emmy. Over the next six weeks, Alex and I get into the habit of seeing each other almost every day and texting through all waking hours. He's funny and kind and inquisitive, and if I didn't know better, I might think I was falling in love with him.

It's ridiculous, I know. Alex has based his entire life in this town—he has a daughter, a business—and I'm only cooling my heels here until I can resume my life in LA.

But when he kisses me, it feels like my entire body and soul are being pulled into orbit around him, and I forget all the reasons it will never work and imagine all the ways that it could.

#

Meanwhile, the seniors in my ballroom dancing class have made incredible strides. Poor Frank may never find the count, but he's at least smiling while shuffling across the floor. Even Rose seems to have grudgingly come to accept me, although I'm not sure if that's because she respects my dancing experience or because I'm dating Alex. The class has gone so well, in fact, that we're going to close it out with a showcase—a chance for the community to see my seniors, or the Silver Stars, as they've taken to calling themselves, shine.

Gregory and I are taking a mirror selfie after the final class before the showcase when my phone buzzes. As Gregory posts the photo to his grid, I check my email to find a message from my agent that's so surprising even my good knee buckles underneath me.

Isabel — Just got a very exciting call about a new amateur dancing competition show being put together. It's called GOLDEN DANCE, and the competitors are all senior citizens. The producers tell me they've seen Instagram posts about a senior dance class you're leading, and they want you to be one of the judges! Taping starts in LA in two months. Let me know what you think!

Just a few short months ago, this email would have made me cartwheel with happiness, knee be darned. But now …

Now I'm not so sure what I want.

#

I tell no one about the email. Not Olivia, and certainly not Alex. It feels like almost a betrayal to both of them that I'm even considering it, which is confusing. Because, intellectually, I know I have to accept. Opportunities like this don't just fall out of the sky, and this could be my only chance to get back in the game after my injury. I *have* to take it. I have to get back to my life.

Right?

But the more I think about it, the more I find myself wondering: What if that's *not* my life anymore?

#

I'm no closer to a decision the next morning as Olivia and I swing by our favorite coffee shop. As we step through the door, we nearly collide with Rachel, one of our high school

classmates. In fairness, it's hard to *avoid* colliding with Rachel as she appears to be about seventeen months pregnant.

"Oh, wow, Izzy, hi!" she squeals. "I'm so glad I ran into you. My Great-Aunt Amelia is in your ballroom dancing class, and she won't shut up about it! She's making us all come to the show tomorrow night."

I tell her that I love Amelia (which is true—the woman has a delightfully sharp sense of humor) and we spend a few minutes catching up before Rachel tells us she has to run. As we watch her and her baby bump make their way down the sidewalk, Olivia shakes her head.

"Can you imagine *Rachel* being someone's mother?"

"You don't think streaking during the Homecoming game is particularly maternal?"

"Not entirely, no." Olivia laughs, then shakes her head ruefully. "But help me remember to take my birth control pill when we get home. Because seeing her reminded me that I forgot this morning."

"You may want to look into what I have. I used to forget my pill, too, so I talked to my doctor about what birth control would be best for me. She recommended a long-acting, reversible option. It protects me against pregnancy for several years, and I don't have to worry about taking it every day."

"Really? Wow. But what happens if you change your mind? Like, you and Alex have been getting so close, and you know he's a great dad."

"Olivia!" I squeal. "Alex and I have been dating for six weeks. But even if we'd been dating for six *years*, I'm not ready to have kids right now."

"But what if—"

I laugh and cut her off. “It’s reversible. So if I were to change my mind, I can just have it removed by my doctor.”

“That’s it! I’m making an appointment with my doctor to talk about switching from the pill to a long-acting option,” Olivia says, lifting her phone. Suddenly, she gasps, and the expression on her face is enough to tell me that something’s wrong.

“What is it?”

“It’s the community center,” she says, eyes scanning her phone screen. “Seems like a pipe burst overnight. The whole building is flooded.”

“Oh no! That’s terrible.” An idea comes to me. “Hey, what if we charged admission to the showcase tomorrow night? It could be donation-based, and you could use the proceeds to cover whatever insurance doesn’t.”

“That’s a good idea, but, Iz … we can’t host the show tomorrow.”

“What? But the seniors have all worked so hard …”

“I know, but, Izzy, the building is *flooded*. There’s nowhere to put on the show.” She shakes her head glumly. “We’ll have to cancel.”

#

I’m crying by the time I reach Alex’s store. Sobbing, really. Dimly, I’m aware that I should have more dignity, but I can’t stop the tears from coming. It’s been a long six weeks with the seniors, and they’ve come so far. They deserve to show off their skills.

That’s why I’m crying. Not because I somehow believe this is *my* redemption arc. Not because I’m afraid this is all about to come to an unceremonious end.

Alex listens thoughtfully as I tell him through tears about the flood and Olivia canceling the show. And then he lifts a shoulder and says, “We can solve that.”

“How?” I demand. “They can’t dance in standing water.”

“So put on the show somewhere else.”

“But where will we find room to showcase ballroom dancing for eight people? Especially when one of them is Frank, whom I have become very fond of, but who truly does have two left feet and needs all the extra space he can get.”

Alex chuckles. “Leave that to me, okay? One of the benefits of spending your whole life in one town is that you end up with a lot of people to call, and some of those people owe you favors.”

“Thank you,” I tell him, catching his hands and bringing them to my lips. “Thank you so much.”

“Anything for you, Iz,” he says, kissing me lightly.

My agent’s email burns a hole in my heart, and I have to turn away. I know I need to tell Alex about it, but I can’t bring myself to do it right now. I promise myself I’ll do it after the showcase.

#

When Alex tells me that the bar has agreed to host the senior showcase, I assume he’s joking. But after he explains that he’s fixed the barstools there for free for years—and that some of the dancers, particularly Amelia, have been long-standing frequenters of the bar—it starts to make sense.

Alex, with Emmy in tow, meets Olivia and me at the bar an hour before the show, and the three of us, along with a bartender who seems somewhat disgruntled at being drafted to help us, rig up makeshift curtains, set up speakers, and arrange chairs, while Emmy hangs her own handmade construction paper decorations.

My nerves start to kick in as the dancers arrive, and they're fully aflame by the time patrons start filling the seats. It's a new sensation for me: I'm used to being nervous before a performance, but I'm not used to being nervous before *someone else's* performance. I just want this show to go well. I peer out at the audience of smiling faces: my parents, Olivia's parents, Emmy and her friends, my dancers' families—including Rachel—and all the people I've gotten to know since I've been back home.

Home.

Before I can analyze why my heart hitches on that word, Amelia is at my side, her arms crossed firmly over her chest.

"I'm not going out there," she announces.

"Oh, Amelia, you don't need to be scared. You're going to do amazing!"

"I'm not scared; I'm just not in the mood. And I'm too old to make myself do things I don't feel like doing."

"But Gregory needs—"

"Don't worry about me," Gregory says, swooping to my side as much as a ninety-nine-year-old man can swoop. "I'll dance with Isabel."

"Then it's settled." Amelia flashes Gregory a devious grin. "I'll be having a drink at the bar."

Amelia ambles away, and I turn to Gregory with suspicion. "Why did that feel like a set-up?"

"Because it was, my dear." He pulls his phone out of his pocket and aims it at us. "Say cheese."

I shake my head and smile for Gregory's selfie—it's the least I can do, after all, considering those selfies may have helped me get the Golden Dance judging offer.

"Almost showtime," Alex says, checking his watch as he approaches. "Olivia's ready to make the introduction whenever you are."

"Great." I clap my hands and call out, "Places, everyone!"

"Coming, partner?" Gregory says, offering me his arm.

"You go ahead. I'll be there in a moment." I turn to Alex and explain, "Seems Amelia and Gregory made a sneaky plan to get me dancing."

"Can your knee take that?" Alex asks hesitantly. "You've worked so hard in physical therapy. I'd hate to see you set yourself back."

I hesitate. Claiming I can't physically do the dance is an easy out; no one would blame me. I don't have to tell anyone that my physical therapist cleared me for moderate activity, or that the slow box-step I would be doing with Gregory would certainly fall into that category.

But I can't lie to Alex.

Slowly, I nod.

"I'm physically capable of doing it. But …"

"But you're afraid," he says gently after I trail off.

Again, I nod.

"There's nothing to be afraid of," he says softly, taking my hands. "We're all friends here."

"But what if …" I swallow, the words sticky in my throat. "What if I fail? Again?"

"You won't," he assures me. "But even if you do, I'll love you anyway."

Love. My heart soars, and I blink at him. "What?"

"You heard me." He gives me that crooked smile. "I love you."

"I love you, too," I say. "Alex, there's something I need to tell—"

"Last call for places!" Olivia shouts.

Alex leans over and kisses me softly. "Tell me after the show."

Then the music starts, Gregory is at my side, and Alex is slowly pulling back the makeshift curtain to a collective gasp from the audience. My anxiety all but disappears the moment I take the first step. My body remembers what to do, and each step through the paces brings a fresh wave of excitement. Dancing—even though I'm more awkward than usual, hampered by the knee brace—lights me up in a way that nothing else ever has. I chance a glance into the audience and see Alex watching me, rapt.

When the curtain finally tugs closed, I'm exhausted. It was only three dances, but after months of physical therapy and wondering whether I'd ever perform again, I can barely stay on my feet.

And I'm not sure I've ever felt more triumphant. Not even when I won those *Stars Come to Dance* trophies.

As the audience applauds, Gregory pulls me into a butterscotch-scented hug and Rose nearly knocks me over with a high-five. Amelia is back from her seat at the bar, wine glass waving as she congratulates everyone on a job well done.

I turn and find Alex watching the proud dancers with a funny look on his face.

"What?" I ask, suddenly self-conscious.

"That was incredible," he says, closing the distance between us and wrapping his arms around my waist. "Truly, Iz. I can't believe you took this group—and I say that with love, but

I've seen most of these folks dance at weddings or here on a Friday night—and put on a showcase of *that* caliber."

I beam. "They worked really hard. I'm so proud of all of them."

"I'm proud of *you*," Alex says, leaning in so close that our foreheads touch. "You were amazing out there. Just like I knew you would be."

The weight of my secret compresses my chest, making it hard for me to breathe. When Alex leans in to kiss me, I can't take it any longer.

"Wait," I say, putting a hand on his chest.

The smile slips from his face. "What is it?"

"I got an email from my agent yesterday." I can hear my voice wavering, and I have to stop and inhale to steady it. "I've been invited to judge a new reality dance show."

He says nothing, just stares at me like he's not quite sure what to do with that information. Then his face cracks open into a wide grin. "Iz, that's amazing."

My stomach twists. "Yeah, but … it shoots in LA."

His grin falters but doesn't disappear completely. "I mean, I kind of assumed it wasn't filmed here. So … how long would filming take?"

"They didn't say, but I'd assume ten to twelve weeks." I bite my lip. "I haven't responded yet."

He frowns and looks down. "Because of me?"

"I mean …" I trail off and nod. "Yeah. Just weeks ago, you know, I would have killed for an opportunity like this. I couldn't *wait* to get out of here. Again. And now … now I can't imagine leaving you."

Alex lifts his charcoal gray eyes, and they're shiny with tears. "Listen, I'd miss you. So much. But dancing is your dream. I can't have you give that up for me."

Tears sting behind my eyes. "So what are you saying?"

"I'm saying that you don't have to choose between being a dancer and being loved."

The ease with which he says this flips a switch inside me: This was never a binary choice. This was never just success versus failure, career versus love, leaving versus staying. This is about me slowing down and finding a way to let the things I love—*all* the things I love—into my life.

"So if I do it …"

"I'll support you one hundred percent. Heck, maybe I'll even bring Emmy out to LA for a visit." His expression softens. "I'm head over heels for you, Iz, and I want to see you happy. More than that, I want to see you shine. Like you just did out there."

"I love you, too," I say, the tears spilling over.

Alex's smile goes soft, and he leans toward me. Just as our lips meet, there's a tap on my shoulder.

"So," Rose says, scowling at me. "When does our next session start?"

"I'll talk to Olivia," I promise her. "My schedule might be complicated, but there's nothing I'd like more than to keep teaching you all." I sneak at look at Alex. "Well, maybe not *nothing*."

He laughs and squeezes my hand, and for the first time in a long time, I'm feeling hopeful about the future.

Author's Note

I hope you enjoyed reading Isabel's story as much as I enjoyed writing it! For those of you who have been following me since the beginning, you know how important it is to me to have open and honest conversations about love, careers, family planning, and finding the path that's right for you.

Through Isabel's story, I wanted to explore what it means to rebuild after setbacks and to pursue your dreams on your own terms. As Isabel navigates disappointment around her injury, a new role at the Woodridge Community Center dance studio, and an unexpected love story, she also starts to consider what she wants for her future, ultimately deciding that she's not quite ready for children of her own. And that's okay! I believe stories can be a powerful way to open the door to conversations we may not know how to start. My hope is that Isabel's story resonates with you and reminds you that deciding what's right for you is always worth talking about.

Isabel, with the help from her doctor, chooses a long-acting reversible contraceptive (LARC) that's right for her. I'm excited to partner with Organon, the makers of NEXPLANON® (etonogestrel implant) 68 mg Radiopaque, on this piece. NEXPLANON is one example of a LARC. NEXPLANON goes in the arm, not the uterus. It provides up to five years of pregnancy prevention in women. It can be removed by a trained healthcare professional at any time and must be removed by the end of the fifth year.

You should not use NEXPLANON if you are pregnant or think you may be pregnant; have or have had blood clots; have liver disease or a liver tumor; have unexplained vaginal bleeding; have breast cancer or any other cancer that is sensitive to progestin (a female hormone), now or in the past; or are allergic to anything in NEXPLANON.

Please read the indication and Important Safety Information for NEXPLANON below.

Visit nexplanon.com for more information.

Indication

NEXPLANON is a prescription birth control for the prevention of pregnancy for up to 5 years.

Important Safety Information

You should not use NEXPLANON if you are pregnant or think you may be pregnant; have or have had blood clots; have liver disease or a liver tumor; have unexplained vaginal bleeding; have breast cancer or any other cancer that is sensitive to progestin (a female hormone), now or in the past; or are allergic to anything in NEXPLANON.

Talk to your healthcare professional about using NEXPLANON if you have diabetes, high cholesterol or triglycerides, headaches, gallbladder or kidney problems, history of depressed mood, high blood pressure, or allergy to numbing medicines (anesthetics) or medicines used to clean your skin (antiseptics). These medicines will be used when the implant is placed into or removed from your arm.

Immediately after the NEXPLANON implant has been placed, you and your healthcare professional should check that the implant is in your arm by feeling for it. If at any time you cannot feel the NEXPLANON implant, contact your healthcare professional immediately and use a non-hormonal birth control method (such as condoms) until your healthcare professional confirms that the implant is in place. You may need special tests to check that the implant is in place or to help find the implant when it is time to take it out.

The implant may not be actually in your arm due to failed insertion. If this happens, you may become pregnant. Removal of the implant may be very difficult or impossible if the implant is not where it should be. Special procedures, including surgery in the hospital, may be needed to remove the implant. If the implant is not removed, then the effects of NEXPLANON will continue for a longer period of time. Other problems related to insertion and removal may also occur, including vasovagal reactions (such as a drop in blood pressure, dizziness, or fainting), pain, irritation, swelling, bruising, numbness and tingling, scarring, infection, injury to the nerves or blood vessels, and breaking of the implant. Additionally, the implant may come out by itself. You may become pregnant if the implant comes out by itself. Use a back-up birth control method and call your healthcare professional right away if the implant comes out.

The most common side effect of NEXPLANON is a change in your normal menstrual bleeding pattern. In studies, 1 out of 10 women stopped using the implant because of an unfavorable change in their bleeding pattern. You may experience longer or shorter bleeding during your periods or have no bleeding at all. The time between periods may vary, and you may also have spotting in between periods.

If you become pregnant while using NEXPLANON, you have a slightly higher chance that the pregnancy will be ectopic (occurring outside the womb) than do women who do not use birth control. Ectopic pregnancies can cause serious internal bleeding, infertility, and even death. Call your healthcare professional right away if you think you are pregnant or have unexplained lower stomach (abdominal) pain.

The use of NEXPLANON may also increase your chance of serious blood clots, especially if you have other risk factors, such as smoking. If you smoke and want to use NEXPLANON, you should quit. Serious blood clots can occur within blood vessels of different parts of the body, including legs (deep vein thrombosis), lungs (pulmonary embolism), brain (stroke), heart (heart attack), and eyes (total or partial blindness). It is possible to die from a problem caused by a blood clot, such as a heart attack or stroke. Tell your healthcare professional at least 4 weeks before if you are going to have surgery or will need to be on bed rest, because you have an increased chance of getting blood clots during surgery or bed rest.

Cysts may develop on the ovaries and usually go away without treatment, but sometimes surgery is needed to remove them.

Besides changes in menstrual bleeding patterns, other common side effects reported in women using NEXPLANON include headaches; vaginitis (inflammation of the vagina); weight gain; acne; breast pain; viral infection such as sore throats or flu-like symptoms; stomach pain; painful periods; mood swings, nervousness, or depressed mood; back pain; nausea; dizziness; pain; and

pain at the site of insertion. Implants have been reported to be found in a blood vessel, including a blood vessel in the lung.

Call your healthcare professional right away if you have pain in your lower leg that does not go away; severe chest pain or heaviness in the chest; sudden shortness of breath, sharp chest pain, or coughing blood; symptoms of a severe allergic reaction, such as swollen face, tongue, or throat and trouble breathing or swallowing; sudden severe headaches unlike your usual headaches; weakness or numbness in your arm or leg or trouble speaking; sudden partial or complete blindness; yellowing of your skin or whites of your eyes, especially with fever, tiredness, loss of appetite, dark-colored urine, or light-colored bowel movements; severe pain, swelling, or tenderness in the lower stomach (abdomen); lump in your breast; problems sleeping, lack of energy, tiredness, or feeling very sad; or heavy menstrual bleeding or if you feel that the implant may have broken or bent while in your arm.

NEXPLANON does not protect against HIV or other STDs.

You are encouraged to report negative side effects of prescription drugs to the FDA. Visit http://www.fda.gov/medwatch or call 1-800-FDA-1088.

Please read the Patient Information for NEXPLANON and discuss it with your healthcare professional. The physician Prescribing Information, including the Boxed Warning, also is available.

To learn more about NEXPLANON, talk to your healthcare provider, visit nexplanon.com or call 1-844-674-3200.

Thank you for spending time with Isabel's story and for letting me share a small part of her journey with you.

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