



BEAUTY
and the
BALLER

Wall Street Journal Bestselling Author

ILSA MADDEN-MILLS

BEAUTY
and the
BALLER

OTHER TITLES BY ILSA MADDEN-MILLS

All books are stand-alone stories with brand-new couples and are currently FREE in Kindle Unlimited.

Not My Romeo
Not My Match

Very Bad Things
Very Wicked Beginnings
Very Wicked Things
Very Twisted Things

Dirty English
Filthy English
Spider

Fake Fiancée

I Dare You
I Bet You
I Hate You
I Promise You

Boyfriend Bargain

Dear Ava

The Revenge Pact

The Last Guy (w/Tia Louise)
The Right Stud (w/Tia Louise)

BEAUTY *and the* BALLER

ILSA MADDEN-MILLS



This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, organizations, places, events, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

Text copyright © 2022 by Ilsa Madden-Mills
All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced, or stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without express written permission of the publisher.

Published by Montlake, Seattle
www.apub.com

Amazon, the Amazon logo, and Montlake are trademarks of Amazon.com, Inc., or its affiliates.

ISBN-13: 9781542034784
ISBN-10: 1542034787

Cover design by Hang Le

CONTENTS

[Chapter 1 RONAN](#)
[Chapter 2 NOVA](#)
[Chapter 3 NOVA](#)
[Chapter 4 RONAN](#)
[Chapter 5 RONAN](#)
[Chapter 6 RONAN](#)
[Chapter 7 NOVA](#)
[Chapter 8 RONAN](#)
[Chapter 9 RONAN](#)
[Chapter 10 RONAN](#)
[Chapter 11 NOVA](#)
[Chapter 12 NOVA](#)
[Chapter 13 NOVA](#)
[Chapter 14 RONAN](#)
[Chapter 15 NOVA](#)
[Chapter 16 RONAN](#)
[Chapter 17 RONAN](#)
[Chapter 18 NOVA](#)
[Chapter 19 NOVA](#)
[Chapter 20 RONAN](#)
[Chapter 21 RONAN](#)
[Chapter 22 NOVA](#)
[Chapter 23 NOVA](#)
[Chapter 24 NOVA](#)
[Chapter 25 RONAN](#)
[Chapter 26 NOVA](#)
[Chapter 27 RONAN](#)
[Chapter 28 NOVA](#)
[Chapter 29 RONAN](#)

[Epilogue RONAN](#)

[Excerpt: *Not My Romeo*](#)

[Chapter 1 ELENA](#)

[ABOUT THE AUTHOR](#)

BEAUTY
and the
BALLER

Chapter 1

RONAN

“Hey, didn’t you once buy some poster of *Star Wars* for like . . . twenty grand?” Tuck asks as he plops down next to me where I’m alone at a table for eight. It’s after dinner, and most of the players have wandered off to dance with their partners.

“I have two, *The Phantom Menace* and *The Last Jedi*. Why do you ask?” I say, then drain my fourth or fifth whiskey, embracing the burn of the bourbon. The room isn’t spinning yet, which means I’ll need more. It takes a lot to forget that my NFL career is over, my fiancée gone.

“Dude . . . are you listening?”

I focus back on Tuck, faking normal. “Yeah, sure.”

He grins. “Good. Your perfect woman just walked into our party. Like a gift from heaven. We must make a plan.”

“Really.” I arch a brow.

“I hear your sarcasm, but come on, would I lie to my best friend?”

“Is water wet?”

He says something else, probably some wisecrack, but I miss it when a woman laughs in the ballroom, light and airy. I close my eyes, inhaling a sharp breath. For a second, she sounded like Whitney. See, the body can be numb, but little things trickle in and haunt me. And football? Not playing cuts like a razor blade, sharp and vicious. I can barely breathe when my team takes the field without me.

I signal the server for another drink.

The waiter gives me a nod, pours it, and then rushes over and hands it to me. I take a hearty sip under Tuck’s gaze.

“You never used to drink, Ronan. Don’t you think you’ve had enough?”

Ha. This is nothing compared to those mornings when I wake up and can't recall details from the night before. "The girl? What's it about her that makes her perfect for me?"

"Look for yourself," he says, nudging his head toward where she must be. "You won't believe what she's wearing. Behind you and to your left. Check it."

With a heavy exhale, I loosen my tie and swivel in my seat and peer around various players. I focus in on the girl about twenty feet away and inhale as I get the full effect.

Whoa.

There's no way anyone could miss her. Not with that getup.

What the hell was she thinking?

"She's lost, yes?" he murmurs.

"Hmm," I say as my eyes brush over her.

Tall with pale-blond hair, she's wearing a costume, legit, like Princess Leia—slave-girl version, the one where she was captured by Jabba the Hutt. It's a gold bikini with a red filmy loincloth over her hips. She's even got the sleek plaited high ponytail and golden knotted necklace. From the metal snake cuff around her upper arm to the green lace-up boots, the costume isn't one of those cheap knockoffs from a Halloween store. It's damn perfect, and she wears it better than Carrie Fisher did in *Return of the Jedi*.

A low whistle comes from Tuck. "She waltzed in the fanciest hotel in the city and crashed a Pythons party. Right in the middle of all these suits and dresses. Everyone's staring at her. Wait a minute . . . looks like someone isn't happy . . ."

His voice trails off as a black-clad security guy approaches her, clipboard in hand, headset on his head. A scowl settles on his face as he snaps out words to her. Security is tight at our events. Fans, crazy ones, will do anything to get a glimpse of their favorite team.

She doesn't look like a weirdo fan. Those are usually wearing black-and-gold Python gear and shouting players' names.

She is lost.

Tuck lowers his voice. "She's about to get thrown out—or arrested. They've done it before. She needs a Han Solo to save her."

I turn back to him. "Subtle."

He shrugs. “She’s your type—into *Star Wars*, blonde, *and* a damsel in distress.”

“Not interested.”

“Liar,” he says. “Bet you can’t get her digits.”

I lean back in the chair and shake my head at him. Before I got serious with Whitney, we used to compete at bars to see who could get the most numbers. Jesus. That feels like a million years ago.

“You wanna play that, huh?” I ask. “Is this you trying to motivate me to move on?”

“It’s been almost a year since . . .”

“The wreck,” I finish, my voice thickening. “The anniversary of her passing is in four days.”

“I’m sorry.” He sighs and glances away, then comes back to me, leaning his arms in on the table, an earnest expression on his face. “Look. I miss you, okay? Dammit. I sound like a silly schoolgirl. It’s just . . . you’re avoiding *me*, your best friend. You’re drinking. A lot.” He rakes a hand through his messy sandy-brown hair and sighs. “I’m sorry, man. This isn’t about me, and I’ve got no clue what you’re going through, and Whitney, the way it went down—it sucks . . .”

I stare at the table as his words ping-pong around in my head. He’s not wrong. I’m in a dark place, a pit of hell, and I crave to crawl out. Some days it feels as if there’s nothing left inside of me. No spark. No hope. No joy.

I sat out the season on the injury list, and that was mostly out of respect for my history with the team. Everyone knew I’d never play. I didn’t even want to come to the end-of-the-year celebration, but I dragged myself here anyway. I just need something, *anything*, to numb this ache in my chest.

“Our team won’t be the same without you,” he says. “Maybe if you rehab another season, try different physical therapy—”

“I’ve done it all, Tuck.” I endured two surgeries and rehab from some of the best doctors in the world—and that was just for my knee. I had a whole other round for my face.

He exhales noisily. “But you know I can’t shut up, right?”

I tip my glass up at him. “Nine years together, and you never once stopped running your mouth.”

An eager expression crosses his face, his words coming in a rush: “Let’s play. ’Kay? Like old times? You rescue her from security, chat her

up, and get her number, and I'll wash your Porsche and let you take pics of me and brag about it, post it on Insta, whatever. Anything else that happens"—he flashes a grin—"I'm talking maybe kiss her, will be icing on the cake; feel me? You don't need a lesson on how to woo a woman, do you?"

My lids lower. "No." I've been a phenom quarterback since I was fourteen. Women have always gravitated to me.

Or they used to.

I catch my reflection in the mirror behind him and see the scars on the left side of my face. Jagged and pink, the longest one starts at my temple, traces past my ear to my jawline, and ends midneck. Sixteen inches long, that cut was a quarter inch from an artery. Other scars, like jagged spiderwebs, slice into my cheek on the same side, then disappear into my dark hair. Last year, my hair was shaved around my ears and longer on top in a classic pompadour, but it has grown out, the longer length brushing my chin. Still, they're visible. Last week, one of the trainers dropped off some personal equipment I'd kept at the field. When I opened the door, he saw my face . . . and flinched. Might as well get used to it. They aren't going away. I rub the long one, my thumb brushing over it.

"They give you a dangerous vibe," Tuck says.

"Frankenstein—yeah, that's a good look." I drain my glass and set it on the table.

"All right, buddy, let's get you moving," he says as he tugs me up.

I weave on my feet—whoa—then straighten and frown. "What's the rush?"

He waves that off. "Listen to me. Go talk to that girl. For your best friend in the whole wide world. *Please.*" He bats his lashes at me.

"You're an idiot," I say as I glance back over at her.

While we were talking, the security guy called another one over. They moved her to a corner near the entrance, and she's got her chin tilted, a defiant look on her face as they question her. In a flurry of her loincloth, she nudges past them and gazes around the room, her eyes landing on me and sticking. Her face transforms, a radiant smile curving her lips.

Tuck lets out a surprised sound. "Huh, will you look at that? She knows you! This is perfect! You've got this!" He slaps me on the back. "Go get her, tiger. Go, go!"

"No," I mutter.

Then the security guard puts his meaty hand on her arm and half drags her to the door.

“Dammit,” I breathe as a twinge of protectiveness rises. I heave out an exhale, shake off Tuck, and jostle my way through the crowd, leaning slightly on my right side to compensate for the prickle of pain on my left.

“That’s what I’m talking about!” Tuck calls out. “Save the princess!”

Whatever. I flip him off over my shoulder.

I’ll see what she’s about, and that’s it.

Maybe get her out of here without causing her any embarrassment. I grew up with two younger sisters, and there’s a long list of escapades I’ve saved them from. Hell, I half raised them. What’s the harm in helping the princess? It’ll be a good story *and* get Tuck off my back.

As I approach, she’s having words with the guy holding her arm. She fights free of his grasp—again—then rushes toward me, the slits of her skirt showcasing her long, toned legs. Security is hot on her heels, but she never looks back, her posture straight, her steps sure, as she keeps that “I know you” smile directed straight at me.

We meet in the middle of the ballroom underneath one of the chandeliers among the dancers, and I send a head nudge to the duo behind her.

“Ease up, guys. She’s with me.”

They shrug and leave. I’m sure crazier shit has happened at an NFL party.

My breath hitches as I take her in. I didn’t appreciate her before at the table, but this close, it’s as if someone created everything I love in a woman: tall, blonde, heart-shaped face, sapphire eyes, luscious tits. Toss in the costume . . .

My teenage fantasy in the flesh.

She takes both of my hands in hers, and the touch sends a buzz of awareness racing over my skin. I didn’t expect that.

“Ronan,” she murmurs.

Okay, she knows my name—not surprising.

“Hey, um . . . ?” What are you doing here?

“Help me,” she implores dramatically. “You’re my only, um, salvation . . . and stuff like that . . . to save the universe.”

I huff out a rusty laugh. “Well, that’s almost Leia’s first line in *Star Wars*.”

She leans in, and her fingers dance up my jacket and land on the lapels, stroking the black fabric. “I love this suit. You like my outfit?”

My gaze tangles in the soft curves of her body, lingering on her bikini-clad breasts. Gradually, I move up to the smooth line of her throat, to the dark winged eyebrows that contrast with her hair and frame her face. Even without the kick-ass costume, she’s the kind of girl you see on the street and do a double take. Hourglass shape, classic features, and a perfect pouty bottom lip.

“Yes,” I murmur.

“I could get used to this skirt.” She moves her hips, swishing the fabric.

“Loincloth.”

“You don’t say? I’ll make a note of that.” With a sly yet sweet smile, she does a little twirl, then stops in front of me and places a hand over her heart.

“What?” I ask.

“It’s sinking in. You really came to help me.”

My lips twitch. “To save the universe. And stuff like that.” I glance around the room. “Can I escort you somewhere?”

Disappointment flickers over her face before she quickly hides it. “No. I’m fine. Really. It was nice of you to come over. I’ll go. I just wanted to pop in and see . . .” She stops, seeming to think about her words, then smiles ruefully. “Never mind. Thank you. Goodbye, Ronan.”

When she turns, I grab her hand. “Wait.”

I don’t know why I stop her, but . . .

My eyes lock with hers, several breathless moments passing as our hands cling. Acting on instinct, my thumb caresses her palm.

Her lips part, heat flashing in her irises.

A long breath comes from me. I miss *this*. Desire, not pity, in a woman’s eyes.

I swallow thickly. There’s been no one since Whitney. I’ve had opportunities, mostly Tuck dragging me out to dinners and get-togethers, and girls have offered, but my body—and my heart—wasn’t ready.

It’s been forever since I flirted with a girl, but . . .

Lowering my lids, I tug her closer to me until our chests brush. “Who are you, gorgeous?”

Silence, thick and sweet, stretches between us. “Yours.”

A shot of lust, fueled by her whispered words, hits me. The lizard part of my brain, the primitive side that reacts on instinct to fighting and fucking, rears up. *This one*, it demands. *Take it*.

She's not the right girl, the other side of my head shouts, even as my index finger strokes her cheek. She turns her head into the touch, sighing softly, and my chest seizes at her automatic response.

You wanted something to push that grief back.

"Dance with me," she murmurs and doesn't wait for my reply but leans her forehead on my shoulder, her body starting to sway to the slow song the DJ plays.

I dip my head and sway with her, slow and easy. My hands slide around her waist, almost tentatively. Moments tick by, heavy with expectation, as if waiting to see what happens next. My thumb finds the small of her back and circles the soft skin there. It's my favorite part of a woman, and I can't resist. My breath snags as her fingers trace designs on my shoulders, then press harder, her nails dragging down my back, then up. I bite back a groan. Touch. It's one of the things I've missed, the smooth glide of hands over skin, the feeling of connection.

We go from one song to another, the music bleeding together as the DJ spins slow tracks. I keep my eyes shut, my body relaxing against hers. Even my knee feels better. A long exhale comes from my chest as the tension from the last few hours vanishes. It was hard to walk in here. To sit at a table with couples, recognize their sorrow-filled glances, and realize that once again, I'm alone.

The truth is it's the nights that eat at me the most. I'm sick of spending them by myself.

Vaguely, as if from a distance, I'm aware that "Say You Won't Let Go," by James Arthur, is on the speakers, a song about two people connecting . . . maybe it's a message.

Her lips brush against my neck, almost hesitantly; then, braver, she moves back and kisses my throat. Electricity flares, and I toy with the top of her loincloth, rubbing the fabric. I ease my hand underneath it, my fingers grazing the curve of her ass. My heart hammers as she responds by swishing her leg in between mine, brushing against the bulge in my pants.

Powerful and greedy, desire slams into me.

I stop our dancing and slide my hands up her arms to her neck, tilting her face up. Need soaks her features, eyes dilated, cheeks flushed.

She isn't one of Tuck's party girls who flirts with me to be nice.
And I'm not misreading her signals.

I didn't see this (her) coming, but . . .

"You wanna get out of here?" I ask in a gravelly voice. "Maybe do some role-playing, hmm?"

She knows what I mean. Her. Me. One night.

Her pink tongue dips out and dabs at her plump lower lip. "All right."

"Good," I purr as my thumb brushes her mouth.

I crook her arm through mine and lace our hands together. We move through the dancers as we leave the ballroom. Outside, the foyer is crowded with people, and we dodge past them with heads bent. I'm doing it to not be recognized; she seems to understand.

With each step, the air thins, my chest tightening. I'm not sure if it's because this is an impulsive decision I'll probably regret tomorrow or if it's her. We get inside the elevator, and I slap the button for the top floor, then ease her against the wall. Words don't feel necessary as I run my nose up her throat. She smells fresh and tart, like apples, and I'm rushing, totally—I don't know this girl, even her name, but I don't care. Nothing has stemmed the darkness, even alcohol, but I'll sink myself into a beautiful woman to bring on oblivion.

She looks up at me. "I—I don't normally, um—"

I stop her with a finger to her lips. "I'm going to kiss you. Is that okay?"

She nods.

I slant my mouth across hers, our breaths mingling as I part her lips. She melts against me. A shudder ripples over me as lust, long banked and hungry, strains to be unleashed, to crush her beneath me. I hold it back, for now, and learn her mouth, the shape of it, the dips and valleys. Her breath hitches as I tug on her bottom lip with my teeth, then kiss it softly. I move from her cheek to her ear, my teeth biting on the lobe.

"I don't normally either," I breathe.

Later, she takes the card from me and opens my door. We walk inside the suite and pause in the foyer as she takes in the penthouse I booked. The decor is mostly white with a low-profile, black gas fireplace burning in the den. The views of Manhattan are glorious from the windows, which is where she drifts, but my gaze goes to the kitchen . . . and the whiskey bottle.

I offer her a drink, and she says no. I pour a glass for me; then we wander into the master bedroom, where an empty bottle already sits on the nightstand. Tuck was right about me not being a drinker. For years, I set high goals, studying how to be a great leader and quarterback for my team, pushing my body to its limits with training, eating right, rarely consuming alcohol. For me, it was the game I lived for.

I won three Super Bowls in a row.

Look at me now.

There's a moment of clarity, my mind debating if bringing the girl here was a good idea. I'm supposed to see Whitney's parents tomorrow—

I kick that thought away.

She gives me a heart-stopping smile and does a pirouette in front of the window, her loincloth billowing around her. She repeats her quote, correctly this time, then laughingly admits she doesn't know any more. I tell her I'll teach her all my favorites. I finish my drink, then another. Time passes fast, yet slow, as she flits around the room. She talks, telling me things, maybe her name, and I soak her in, the graceful way she walks, the way her overgenerous lips curl when she smiles.

Propping myself against the wall to keep steady, I find music on my phone, some slow pop song.

"You're incredible," I murmur in her ear when she glides over to me.

How did I get here with you? How did you find me?

With our arms draped around each other, we sway as she sings along with Savage Garden's "I Knew I Loved You." Her voice is rich, each note perfect and clear. She's good. Or maybe I'm just trashed and anything sounds good.

When the song ends, there's a silence as we face each other.

The air thickens.

I brought her here, but she can walk out that door.

With that thought, I twine our fingers together and dip my face into her neck and inhale deeply, deciding this spot is my second-favorite part of a woman. I rest my hands on her clavicle with ownership, my thumb brushing against the goose bumps on her skin.

"It's game time. Are you staying, Princess?"

"Yes." Her gaze is steady and sure.

It's all I need as I try to remove her costume, but my fingers don't know where all the snaps and buttons are, and she does it for me, quickly,

tossing her top to the floor, then her bikini bottoms, revealing a white lace thong. Sitting on the bed, she loosens her green boots, tugging at the laces. She undoes her hair, the curls from the braid spilling around her shoulders. My mouth dries as she stands unabashedly in front of me. There's no shyness. No pretention. She's lush and decadent, her tits heavy, her nipples a rosy red. The curve of her waist gives way to full hips and long legs. Her toes are painted a shimmery gold—

My thoughts halt as she jerks the duvet and blankets to the floor, leaving the sheet and pillows on the bed.

My adrenaline spikes. We're doing this. *I'm* doing this.

"Come to me," I demand softly.

She walks over and strips me of my jacket, then tosses it on a chair. She unknots my tie while I tear at the buttons on my shirt. They fly across the room. My pants are next, both of us fighting for the zipper as our breaths mingle. I shove down my underwear, and she takes my length in her hands. A long guttural sound comes from my chest as our bodies fall to the bed.

I shove down the pain in my knee and cage her in underneath me. She looks fragile and vulnerable, and my blood heats, the alpha in me rearing up to protect her. I capture her sapphire eyes, and something there is eerily familiar. Shadows of pain.

I nudge my nose against hers softly, then give her tender kisses as our scents mingle, my whiskey with her sweetness. I tell her she's perfect, that she's safe with me, that she's mine. "And I'm going to eat you up," I purr.

"Ronan . . ." She runs her hands through my hair, pulling on the ends and dragging me down for a wet, openmouthed kiss that turns frantic. My hand cups one breast as I suck the other nipple into my mouth. I move between the two, my five-o'clock shadow brushing over her soft skin. She tastes like . . . I don't know . . . joy.

I kiss down her body, my hands following. I touch the curve of her waist, her inner thigh—then I'm at her center. I lick the nirvana there, my hands clenching on top of her thighs as I feast.

Moaning, she tugs on my hair, and I rise up.

An unexpected flicker of disconnect hits, almost choking the desire, as the chain around my neck, the one with Whitney's engagement ring on it, swings between us, glittering. I shove the ring to my back as guilt washes over me.

A dark road flashes in my head, the scratching swipe of windshield wipers, hail pinging, wind battering the car. I should have paid more attention to the storm and slowed down, taken a different road, insisted she put her seat belt on—fuck, how did I miss that? She hated wearing it, the one rule she refused to follow, and I wasn't paying attention; then a bolt of lightning hit the bridge—my breath shudders. No.

I don't want to think about that.

Not here. Not now.

I kick back the ache of those memories; I try, even as the condom gets rolled on. I slide inside her, all the way home, a primal roar coming deep from my chest. I stare down at the beauty in my bed, and finally, she's the only thing I see in my head.

We become a whirlwind of carnal need, straining to crawl into each other. We're wild, grasping, finding new positions, new places to touch. I'm voracious; she's ravenous. I grunt with every thrust, my eyes eating her up as the headboard clatters against the wall.

"Ronan . . ." Her head thrashes back and forth on the pillow.

"I'm there, Princess . . ."

My fingers circle her nub, and she explodes brilliantly, magnificently, her body undulating in sinuous waves.

My cock thickens, eager to follow, ecstasy a heartbeat away.

"Whitney," I call out as I come.

My body trembles as I rest on top of her before rolling off and falling to my back. I shove my damp hair off my face and suck in gulps of air. That was incredible. My hand reaches over the space between us and toys with her long blonde hair, carding it through my fingers. She's already flipped over, facing the other direction, the sheet around her shoulders.

Some of the blood returns to my brain.

Wait . . .

A sinking feeling trickles in.

Did I . . . did I call her . . . *Whitney*?

No way. Impossible.

My heart drops to my stomach as realization kicks in.

Jesus, I totally did, but . . . it wasn't like that.

It just wasn't.

I don't know what to say. She heard me, of course. Grimacing, I stare at the back of her head and wrestle with how to explain about Whitney's

death, how she died in my arms, how it was my fault . . . but those memories are full of thorns.

I search for words, but my tongue feels thick, my brain sluggish, fighting through the haze of bourbon. I should say I'm sorry, I should ask what her name is, I should tell her that she's the best thing that's happened to me in a year . . .

Exhaustion wins and drags me under.



When I wake up, my head is stuffed with cotton balls. Sunlight glints in through the blinds, and I rub at the grit in my eyes. Tensing, I turn to look at the pillow next to me. There's no one there, not even an indentation. The room is dead quiet except for the blaring horns from the traffic outside. A heavy feeling settles in my chest, and I can't decide if I'm relieved or disappointed she left. I rake my hands through my hair, frowning, as I try to piece the night together. It might take a while.

I hiss when I see that it's two in the afternoon, and I've missed lunch with Whitney's parents in Connecticut. Cursing under my breath, I yank my pants off the floor, fish out my phone, and then fire off a text apologizing.

I collapse back on the bed. One thing is clear. *I had sex.*

Guilt chews me with sharp teeth, then spits me out in disgust. Couldn't I have waited until after Whitney's one-year anniversary? Doesn't she deserve that? I loved her with my whole heart, with everything inside me, yet it feels as if I betrayed her.

Swallowing thickly, I get up and grab my clothes, when a golden arm cuff rolls out of my shirt. I rub my fingers over the thick metal, my head flashing to last night. I recall us dancing, the sex, yet . . . I frown, squinting. She was blonde, yes. She had blue eyes, yes, but the rest is vague and blurry.

Sure, I've been blackout drunk, but how can I remember the awe in her eyes when we met, her bubblyness, the smell of her neck . . . yet *not* her features?

Maybe I don't want to? Guilt over Whitney? I exhale. I don't know.

Another memory trickles in, ugly and harsh, and a curse escapes my lips. I called her Whitney. A fresh wave of remorse settles over me. Jesus. No wonder she left without a word.