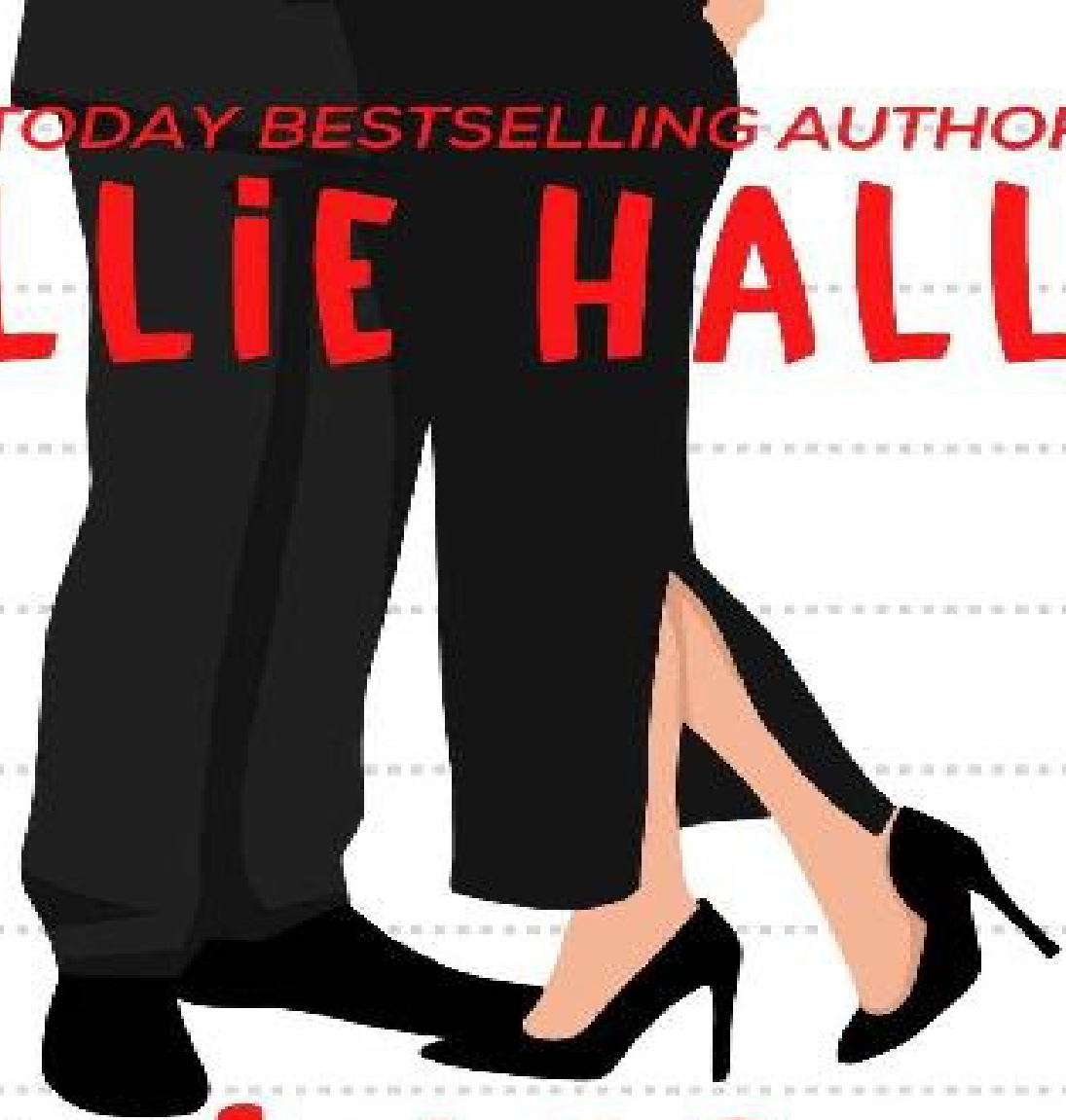
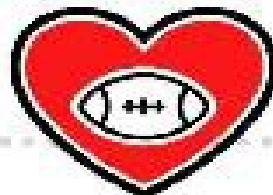


USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

ELLIE HALL



THE **KISS**  
LIST



A SWEET ROMANTIC COMEDY

**THE**  
*Kiss*  
**LIST**



**ELLIE HALL**

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## ABOUT THIS BOOK

**I'm not looking for a beast, a bad boy, or a football player, but it turns out this grump is playing for keeps.**

### *Everly*

I'm not ashamed to say that I'm a romantic at heart and expected my marriage to be everything I'd dreamed of. Turns out my ex was a toad, and not the kind that turns into a prince with a kiss.

After fleeing that ordeal, it wasn't only my heart that needed healing. A job with insurance wasn't enough and I did something to cover my treatment that makes me feel guilty every day. But I'm still alive and kicking, so that's a plus.

When I start work as an etiquette coach, my first client looks like a Viking—and acts like one too—then I uncover more than one secret that connects our pasts, but also threatens to ruin the present.

### *Grey*

I wasn't always the strong silent type, but it's easier to keep quiet, so I remain in control. That helps on the football field, but not when the commissioner's response to a poorly timed prank is worse than a tackle.

A sunshine-all-the-time life coach tries to tame and transform me, but no way am I letting her question the cage in my chest. That's out of bounds. But I catch feelings anyway, and there's no playbook for how to handle hearts.

When her ex threatens her with blackmail, let's just say I consult my cheat

sheet and show him who wears the championship ring. While things cool off, we retreat to my lakeside cabin, but whenever she and I are in the same room together, the space between us seems to heat up.

What started as a personal relations recovery program veers toward relationship territory, but can we each soften our hearts?

*USA Today bestselling author Ellie Hall presents a romantic comedy with sweet and swoony sizzle but without swearing or mature content. If you like Christian 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.*

# CONTENTS

## Reader Note Shenanigans

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

37. [Grey](#)
  38. [Everly](#)
- [Epilogue](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)  
[Also by Ellie Hall](#)  
[About the Author](#)  
[Let's Connect](#)

## READER NOTE



This book contains a sensitive topic for some people—breast cancer. Everyone’s experience is unique, including for the character in this novel, as you’ll see. Because of this, in my opinion, and the women close to me agree, there’s no right or wrong approach for how to manage the experience. However, it’s my intention to celebrate and honor the brave women and their loved ones who’ve dealt with this challenge. They are heroines in my eyes, including my late mother-in-law.

*I dedicate this story to her. (Miss you and love you.)*

Also, she gets full credit for inspiring me in the kitchen, because everything is better with butter. She was also the cookie queen. Grey’s spinach salad with strawberries, onions, and poppyseed dressing was also one of her summer classics. She brought the butter, but also made sure we got in some nutrition. Because it’s all about balance, right?

As for the lutefisk, I’ve never had it, so maybe it’s delicious and doesn’t smell as bad as people say, but I figured it wouldn’t be at the top of a three-year-old’s list of favorite foods, so it became the subject of a much-detested meal as you’ll see on the pages. Blueberries on the other hand? Those are summertime and anytime favorites, at least around here.

If you’re wondering about all the mentions of food? Our male lead fancies himself a farmer when he’s not on the (football) field. Nature’s bounty, bring it on! Plus, there’s a little push and pull when it comes to a certain Little Miss Sunshine “having the diet of a picky child.” That would be Everly, not the secret baby! Okay, I’ll stop now because I don’t want to give anything away. Except for chocolate cake. Look for that sometime in the future.



As for the football details, any errors are my own, though I did consult my Viking, even though his team doesn't often win. IYKYK ; -)

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

♥Ellie



she·nan·i·gans

*noun*

silly, spirited behavior  
mischief



# EVERLY



Dear Diary,

I could go for some celebratory cookie dough right now because I am in the clear, baby! Cancer free! Even writing this, I'm bouncing in my seat, doing a little happy dance while I wait for the bus.

If anyone else were here, I'd jump to my feet and hug them—yes, even the questionable fellow in the leather jacket and stringy hair who frequents this stop. One rainy afternoon, he told me that his name is Blade. Yes, I'd even hug a stranger because this kind of excitement, happiness, and relief needs to be spread like confetti!

All the exclamation points!!!

Ooh! I know, the bus driver will get a hug. She's a stern-faced woman who hauls around that giant blue Pez dispenser on twelve wheels and looks supremely inconvenienced when I ask how she's doing, but today she gets a hug from yours truly.

Gosh, I'm just so giddy.

It's been a long six months, but I made it to the finish line and I want to celebrate. It's hard to contain this level of I don't even know what to call it. I'm alive! Alive, I tell ya!

Oh, here comes Gladys leading her natural gas-fueled chariot. I only know that because the sign on the side says, *Now, fueled with natural gas*. I don't know much about what that means, but it doesn't matter because the driver is about to be fueled by an Everly Edith Adams hug.

*Wheeee!*

Okay, I'm back and the hug didn't go exactly how I intended. For one thing, I never noticed the metal partition bar installed to either make sure the

driver doesn't fall out the door or that people like me don't try to touch said driver. Also, I didn't calculate how high Gladys's seat is and when I lunged in for a hug, it was more like I was wrapping myself around her waist.

Two points for princess awkward. But Gladys was like a queen up there on her throne and looked down at me and said, "You okay, hon?"

There's a first time for everything. Usually when I ask her how she is her response is along the lines of a very unconvincing, *Another day in paradise*.

I told her that I've never been better. Literally. I also fist-pumped the air a few times. If I had pompoms, I'd have shaken them.

Because this route typically doesn't have many passengers, which meant no one was waiting to board, I was about to say, *I'm officially cancer free*, but the words got stuck.

It was kind of weird. Then again, the only person on the planet who knows about the diagnosis is Heidi and my support group. But it's easy to talk to them because either they get *me* or they get *it*. Well, the Wise Warrior Women collectively think I'm a bit wacky, but Heidi is my bestie for life, so she rolls with my sunshine-in-space personality.

*Watch out Heidi, I've got a hug waiting for you and it's coming in hot!*

Speaking of temperature extremes, no, I still haven't told my father. Haven't talked to him since...you know.

Since the wedding ceremony that wasn't. The wedding day ditch. The arranged marriage mishap.

Two more points to number twenty-nine with the brown, bob-length hair dodging that bullet. No, I'm not on any sort of team, but I am twenty-nine, so figured that would be my jersey number—though, I'm not sure how those numerical designations work for sports teams.

Yes, not even thirty and a cancer diagnosis. It was minimal—early and itty bitty—but I carry the same gene my mother did. For her, it was too late. For me, I took the necessary precautions, had major surgery, and now no cancer. So here we are.

And I'm thankful. So deeply thankful.

But am I still processing leaving my fiancé at the altar? Probably. Do I regret it? Nope. Especially not when the woman I heard him refer to as his "sidepiece" crashed my wedding.

From my hiding place in the closet, I watched her stride down the aisle, profess her love for my fiancé, and that he was making a mistake.

Yeah, that kind of affirmed saying, *I don't* was the right move.

Thankfully, they didn't get hitched right there, but their kiss at the altar suggested she wasn't a stranger and they'd done it before.

Turns out, with frequency.

However, I still haven't quite figured out the weirdness of the bedraggled man who looked like he just survived a shipwreck chasing after Sidepiece. He wore an open button-down Hawaiian-style shirt and flip-flops. It was November. But the hubbub that broke out among the guests provided a distraction for me to make my escape.

Thankfully, my father still hasn't caught up with me about how I "borrowed" his car. In tears, I drove that thing like I was making a getaway from a bank robbery and didn't see the new fence the McNally's put on the corner of their property.

Oops.

Don't worry. I sent them a money order to cover the damages—the start of my quick spiral into bankruptcy. The little fender bender also left me to walk the rest of the way home. If you saw a woman in a ruffly white wedding dress shuffling down Glen Carlin Road like she'd had a bad night, that was me. Only, it was a bad series of weeks, considering the health scare and finding out Todd was a toad.

However, this also means my father still hasn't reached out to see why his daughter, *moi*, didn't show up at the end of the aisle on her wedding day. You'd think something like that would pique the interest of the Ice King.

I'd say I stood Todd up at the altar, but when my suspicions were confirmed about the sidepiece, I couldn't go through with the marriage that was little more than a way for my former fiancé to climb the corporate ladder and for my father to continue to fortify his empire.

Yeah, it was quite a scene.

Am I bitter? Resentful? Hurt?

I'm healing and praying.

Could I use a hug? Probably.

Then again, I am now married to a veritable Viking. So the story has a happy ending. Sort of.

Well, after we said I do, the kiss was the icing on the cake, even though we didn't have one. It was the chocolate chips in the dough. The cherry on top of the sundae. The whipped cream on my waffles.

Okay, now I'm hungry.

And having a craving.

...and thinking about the kiss.

No, I'm not craving the kiss. Maybe a little bit. Slightly. Sometimes.

I know, I know, I promised myself not to recount it in my mind because I am happily single! Well, married, but it was a marriage of convenience, er, necessity. Otherwise, I might not be celebrating today. It's complicated and not something I'm proud of, but I was desperate and I'm not being hyperbolic when I say it was a life-or-death situation.

However, it is accurate to say that my life has been one long string of questionable decisions. But I don't regret that one and not because of the kiss that lives rent-free in my mind.

Hmm. I wonder if the Viking gives good hugs? All I know is he gives great kisses.

After the officiant at the courthouse said (and I'll never forget the words because of what happened next), *By the power vested in me by the State of Michigan, you are now pronounced husband and wife. You may kiss.*

We did as instructed and *savory squeaky cheese curds* was it a kiss!

As you know, it wasn't planned. The Viking and I met that day. The kiss was off-script.

So was the way his gaze jumped to mine in question.

Was he thinking, *Let's get this over with* or *We need to make this look real, so we don't end up back in this courthouse defending ourselves against a crime?*

Does getting married for insurance break the law? (I still can't bring myself to look it up and yes, that's what I was thinking.)

However, my head slowly emptied when those crystalline grey eyes landed on me. Then, when his mouth met mine, I stopped thinking altogether. My mind went blank. His gaze made my heart swell. The Viking crushed his lips to mine.

There was nothing gentle or tame about the kiss...and I liked it. So, I gave back. Gave my all to that kiss. Probably caused the poor officiant a case of heartburn because that kiss was on fire!

But it couldn't be helped. There was something primal between the Viking and me. It's like those words, *You are now pronounced husband and wife. You may kiss*, caused our cave people instincts to take over.

It wasn't a chaste little peck either. His hand twined into my hair while I'll admit I did some groping. The Viking was well built, with lean muscles—an athlete or Iron Man contestant, maybe. I didn't ask questions other than for

his insurance policy number.

But the kiss left me breathless. It still does.

However, let it be known that I am happily unattached and intend to remain that way for a long, long time. I'm about to embark on a new chapter: Single-verly. I can finally take the job that I was offered before this mess. I'll go be a girl boss and start a new life far away from everything. Including the Viking. Not that I ever expect to see him again. That was part of the arrangement. But I'll never forget his lips on mine.

Yeah, it was a real kissituation.

One I still haven't resolved, because I think about it nearly every day. Twice a day. Okay, multiple times. I can't lie to you, Diary, any better than I can lie to myself.

If things were different, I could almost imagine a future with the Viking. Then again, he didn't smile and we all know that I'm the smilingiest of smilers that ever smiled.

Love,  
Everly

P.S. Almost forgot! My thankful three:

1. I don't have cancer.
2. I'm healthy!
3. Relieved that I made the right decision. I could've married Todd and used his insurance, but then I would've been stuck with a lying cheat. Instead, I took a risk, got my life back, and am ready to move on. I am so deeply grateful, even if it meant marrying the Viking. Then again, it was worth the kiss.





## GREY



The only reason I know I'm still alive is because my pulse thunders in my ears. I don't feel the strain on my muscles as I pound up the stadium stairs. The sweat pouring off me doesn't sting my eyes. The ache in my joints I know should be there isn't even dull or distant as I take two at a time on the last stretch before I reach the top.

I feel nothing.

And I haven't for what seems like a hundred years. A hundred years without my best friend, my brother, my hero. And no, I'm not a vampire, zombie, or some other monster, though the guys on the team say I'm a beast.

In reality, it's been almost seven months since my world changed, but reality is a foggy thing these days.

I've lost count of how many times I've run the steps, but know that if I don't stop soon, one of my teammates is bound to come out here and tell me to take it easy. For anyone else, they'd demand one more set.

I don't want pity or to be treated with kid gloves, thank you very much.

But I'm the senior statesman on the team and after they heard about what happened to Bran, they started treating me differently, more gently.

No surprise when half the time I don't feel like myself. The problem is, I don't feel anything.

After another set on the stairs, I find the familiar row up in the nose bleed section. Years ago, Dad took Bran and me to a Bruisers game while we were visiting Mom's cousin here in Boston. The ladies went for lunch and shopping while my life changed forever.

The game started with a flyover by the quarterback's brother, a pilot in the Air Force. I'll never forget Bran's expression as he watched the plane

zoom overhead. We were riveted, shocked at something so powerful—we were used to small seaplanes and the family station wagon. Then the response of the crowd cheering was sheer awe.

He told us he wanted to be an Air Force pilot. When Dad explained what that would require and the danger it could pose, he was undeterred.

An hour into the game, I watched *my* future play before my eyes. I decided I wanted to become a football player. Seeing the guys rush up and down the field, playing real life chess moves to bring the ball from one spot to another. It's strategy, geometry, and a healthy expression of ferocity.

Those two goals were achieved, but I never expected what the risks Bran took would cost *me*.

My elbows rest on my knees as I hold my head in my hands. Early on in our respective careers, Bran would cruise overhead during the season opener—carrying on the tradition of that game Dad took us to all those years ago. Later, Bran shifted into special operations. Suffice it to say, he won't put on an aerial show this year.

I'm not even sure why I'm still playing, other than the fact that I don't know what else to do. I was planning on retiring last season, but if I give up football, I'll have nothing. No one.

My phone buzzes in my pocket. As usual, I consider ignoring it. I've never been much for pointless talking, especially not lately.

However, I check in case it's my mother. Instantly wishing I hadn't, my lawyer's name scrolls across the screen. I let it go to voicemail, but instead of the telltale ping of a message, it rings again.

"Yeah?" I answer.

"Hi, Greyson. It's Nancy, Mr. Brown's assistant, from Michaelson and Brown," she says formally with my full name as if we still use wall-mounted phones without caller ID.

"Hey, Nancy." My voice is scratchy from disuse.

"I have some news regarding the matter that was brought to your attention several months ago. The one you requested Mr. Brown look into. We are still waiting for a final sign-off from the judge, but it looks like it's a solid claim and is going forward."

Her words come at me slowly, as if through a fog. People describe clouds as soft. Sure, they look like cotton fluff. But there's no substance. It's just vapor. I'm in the clouds. Surrounded by them and not in a good way.

"Okay. Well, whatever needs to be done. I'm in the offseason and plan to

go back to Michigan, so my mother will be there to help.”

“How nice. I’m sure she’s excited about this development.”

She would be if she had any idea how much our lives are about to change. I manage a grunt in response.

“Listen, there’s just one little matter. Because your residence is in Michigan and we’re working with Massachusetts courts as well as the custodian’s home State of New Jersey—”

I lose track of what she says next, distracted by how something like this could’ve happened. How I let it. I’ve spent hours and long nights trying to understand, beating myself up, and struggling with guilt. The only saving grace is I’m trying to make it right.

“We’re looking at about another ten days, two weeks, max. I hope you understand.”

“Yes, of course,” I reply, not having any idea what I’m supposed to understand because the day Ted Brown called me personally to explain the complicated situation is still catching up to me.

“We’re working hard to obtain an exception to the clause that you have to be married and will be in touch in the next couple of days. I hope you enjoy the rest of the afternoon, Grey. Thank you for your time.” Nancy hangs up.

The line goes dead. And that’s mostly how I feel except for one major detail that I can’t connect to the rest of the situation that prompted the call.

I belatedly whisper, “I am married.”

A faint ringing sounds in my ears and follows me down the stadium steps, through the tunnel, and into the Bruisers’ locker room where I shower. I cannot fathom life if this doesn’t work out favorably. But my hands are tied at the moment, and I know my lawyer and his team are doing all they can to make it right.

In a haze, I wander through the hall and find Chase saying goodbye to three Bruiser Babes. I have a vague conversation with him about bachelorhood and a reality show while he talks to his sister on the phone.

Between Bran being declared MIA and my ex royally messing up and then taking off, I’ve detached, rendering me empty, checked out.

And that’s how I find myself in the team lounge, trying to figure out how I got here. Not literally, because I’m not that far gone, but preoccupied with the fact that I’m about to take full custody of my son if all goes favorably with the court.

“We could glue his hands together while he’s sleeping,” Declan’s

mischievous voice breaks into my thoughts and I snap to attention.

With these guys, you can never be too careful or let your guard down. I taught them well, even though I can no longer muster my inner rascal.

Chase, our quarterback, sits down near me and I eye the rest of the guys carefully, well aware they're conspiring.

Declan is the wide receiver and the mastermind of whatever misdeed they're hatching.

Connor "Wolf" Wolfe earned that name on and off the field where he plays safety—fathers look after your daughters because they are not safe around him.

Rylen, the running back, is on his honeymoon. As far as they know, he's the first among us to get hitched.

Then there's me, the linebacker ghost with secrets, brooding over here in the corner—at least I hear Declan mutter some version of that about me.

All the same, I pick up on what they're putting down about pranking the newbie on our team.

"Dude, he's our new center. We kind of need him to have use of his hands," I say in a flat tone, but mean it to be practical.

"Yeah. Coach Hammer says his hands are gold." Wolf grumbles because he's a show-don't-tell guy like me.

"The commish says he's like the rising sun and any team would be lucky to have him." Chase shrugs like he wants to make it clear he isn't taking sides.

"Luck has little to do with it. I say he's in it for the paycheck." Wolf flashes Chase a look that should get him punched, but the QB is a nice guy and lets it go.

I sniff, because had Wolf said that to me when I was Chase's age, furniture and a nose would be broken.

I didn't join the Boston Bruisers by accident. It's not that I'm violent, but I don't suffer fools or snide remarks unless they come out of Declan's mouth because he's a jokester and can take it as well as he can give it.

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

"You proved yourself." Elbows on knees, I clap my hands together, eager to move on from this conversation.

"So will Brandon," Chase says.

“Brandon Nash will have to do more than prove himself. He’ll have to endure our killer practices and show that he’s a team player, not a showboating—” Wolf finishes with what Coach Hammer refers to as *locker room words*.

We all know what’s coming. Yes, Brandon Nash, the newest player for the Boston Bruisers, will have to prove himself, but he’ll also have to survive team initiation.

“How about we replace his toothpaste with mayonnaise?” Declan wrinkles his nose as though having instant second thoughts.

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

Wolf slashes the air with his hand in a downward motion. “No. We’re not covering the toilet seats with plastic wrap. Coach Hammer made me clean it up last time. Never again, man.”

“Doughnuts filled with mayo? Mayo in Oreos?” Declan suggests. His slight Irish accent reminds me of his roots, which bring to mind family and my own.

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

Wolf’s eyes darken and his lip curls. “I know what we’re going to do.”

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

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

Wolf gestures for us to gather around. I reluctantly get to my feet and join the guys. Little do they know, this might be the last time. I didn’t announce my retirement, but given the changes coming to my life, I might have to. However, I’m not ready to let this go.

After Wolf relays the plan, I frown. “Brandon Nash 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—”

I hold up my hand for him to stop right there. “We do not need to hear about your latest conquests.”

Chase shifts uncomfortably.

“I think Rylen would approve,” Declan says.

Only Wolf laughs because, given the delicate details of the prank and Rylen’s newlywed status, I find it hard to believe. Or at least, I imagine he’d

have second thoughts.

Do I? Not especially. I'm not even wearing a ring.

We hash out the finer details of the plan to prank the newest member of the team, stack our hands into the center of the tightknit circle, and holler, "Cruisin' for a Bruisin'"—the team slogan.

Wolf convinces Chase, the most amiable of the crew, to send Brandon a text, inviting him to hang out in the team lounge where we'll lie in wait.

Chase's phone pings with a reply a moment later. "Brandon said that he's on his way."

Wolf grins, showing his teeth. "Perfect."

I roll my eyes. "I don't know why I let you guys talk me into this."

Wolf stops short and shoots me a glare. To an outsider, they'd think we're about to throw punches—I won't lie, it crosses my mind. We've all brawled, then made up like brothers.

As the oldest on the team, at times, they'd underestimate me. Now, they call my fists Lightning and Thunder. I'm fast and hit hard—on the field and off. Little do they know when my brother and I were kids, that's what people in our neighborhood and kids at school would call the pair of us. He was Lightning. I was Thunder. But all I am now is stormy.

Sometimes, Wolf needs a mouthful of humble pie, though I'd try not to break any teeth. But in this instance, he's being a football brother because he recognizes the clouds that drifted into my life several months ago, stuck around, and then turned downright dark last month when I hadn't heard from my ex for weeks and discovered she dumped our kid with her mother.

"Who started the newbie initiation, Grey?" he asks.

Nearing forty, I'm the oldest member of the team and it's the only one in the league I've ever played for—I'm well aware that it's rare not to be traded at some point. Even Coach Hammer jokes that I run the show and seeks my input for plays and team business.

"Who was the original mastermind behind all the pranks?" Wolf asks.

My lips form a thin line because I know what he's getting at.

"Don't forget who you are. Don't let *it* get you. He wouldn't want that." Wolf turns back to the room.

My nostrils flare on my exhale, but I get his meaning. No more needs to be said, except the news that balances on the tip of my tongue. In addition to Bran being MIA, presumed KIA, I should tell them what's coming my way, but footsteps echo from down the hall.

Wolf signals that we get into position for the prank on Brandon.

In Rylen's absence, Declan leads us in what would be the classic start of a game and says, to the tune of *Hut, hut, hike*, "On the count of three..."

I have second thoughts. I'm getting too old for this, but the door swings open.

Wolf says, "Now."

At that moment, whoever stands there gets an eyeful of the Boston Bruisers' star players' backsides.

"It's a full moon in Boston," Declan shouts.

Wolf howls.

Someone gasps.

A camera flashes.

I groan because as we turn around, it's clear Brandon isn't alone in the doorway. Pro league Commissioner Starkowsky and his daughter Elyse, along with several other team officials, wear various expressions of surprise and disgust.

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

We make fast apologies. Well, except Wolf. He's never one to say sorry.

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 looks like an overripe grape. "You are excused," he blusters.

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

All that does is remind me of Thunder and Lightning. But where there should be a swell of emotion, there's nothing but emptiness.





# EVERLY



This is my big beginning, my chance to start over and forget Todd, the wedding fail, the fear when I got the diagnosis, and the kissituation. Okay, being real here. I'll never forget that. In fact, I should probably do the Viking a favor and send divorce papers so he can move on with his life.

But will I?

With no plans or interest in dating anytime soon, the ring stays on my finger to ward off vampires and turds like Todd.

I glance from my ticket with my assigned seat number to the labels under the overhead bins until I finally find my spot by the window at the rear of the plane. As I squeeze past the other passengers, apologizing because my hands are full, I get a few—how shall I put it?—friendly but wary looks.

It's like they're not sure whether to be cautious in case I'm a problem wrapped up in a happy daisy sundress with a leopard print denim jacket on top, or a nervous tween traveling by herself for the first time.

To be clear, it's neither. Well, I won't lie. I am a little nervous.

I checked my luggage and carry my yellow metal water bottle covered in stickers, my handbag with the Cookie Dough Diary, my phone with its fuzzy case, and the cowgirl hat that no one would buy and I couldn't part with. All of that is mine, but I borrowed the daisy sundress and leopard print denim jacket.

Yes, I look like a middle schooler who just left the mall with her loot. No, I didn't rob a twelve-year-old. However, with my finances being relatively tight, I "shopped" in Heidi's basement storage boxes to replace some of my belongings. Okay, pretty much my entire wardrobe.

Once upon a time, I had a credit card that I didn't think twice to swipe at will. I bought whatever clothing, coffee, and tchotchkes I wanted. Spiteful, Todd cleaned me out and Heidi helped me sell online everything that remained, leaving me with her castoffs, some of which she's had since middle school.

Which means I'm the same size Heidi was when she was still a preteen. Five-two and a shave over a hundred pounds.

Nothing wrong with that, but I don't exactly feel like I'm winning at adulthood. Mostly, because until recently, I didn't realize I could make my life my own. It had been subject to the whims of my father and then my fiancé.

*Watch out world, here I come.*

All I need are a pair of headphones with a unicorn horn or cat ears and I'd be golden.

An older woman with tufty white hair sits in the aisle seat and stares at her cellphone's blank screen. I squeeze past her before carefully lowering into my spot. My chest is still sore if I move abruptly or twist, but so is my heart. I'm not sure it'll ever heal. It wasn't broken by a lousy boyfriend or lost love, more like a loser, but from time to time it hurts nonetheless because, as independent as I am, what I really long for is family.

Of course, Heidi's embraces me with open arms, but I mean my own family—a mom and dad, maybe siblings I can call and whose kids I can spoil.

I gaze through the airplane window at the workers bustling around, loading luggage, and beyond to the trees with new, bright leaves. It's been a long spring. Heidi argued against my leaving so soon, especially because summer is the best time of year in northern Michigan. However, as soon as I received clearance to fly, I booked my ticket to Concordia, where I have a job waiting at the Blancbourg Academy d'Etiquette.

The promise of the bright horizon waiting for me, along with mountain views, seaside vistas, and a new beginning, helped me through the long winter.

As the rest of the passengers board the plane, I feel like a marathon runner who's almost reached the proverbial finish line, only I'm not wearing a terry cloth headband or neon sneakers. My wavy brown hair is just a tad too short to tie in a ponytail and I sold my gently used two-hundred-fifty-dollar sneakers on one of the online consignment shops that Heidi found.

I anticipate a win because I'm leaving behind the ever-present twist of anxiety that has kept me on edge for months as soon as the plane reaches cruising altitude. I never meant to do anything shady, but ultimately, it was a life-or-death situation and I'm eager to put as much distance between myself and the past as possible.

I buckle up, wrap my mother's pashmina scarf that I never leave home without around my neck and shoulders, and say a quick prayer for a safe journey.

A shadow darkens the light streaming in from the windows across the aisle. My stomach twists. I risk glancing up, bracing for the worst—The Spider, aka Todd, demanding me back, which he's done several times since, and I quote, "You humiliated me on my wedding day in front of my friends and family."

Reality check, buddy. I think the sidepiece had something to do with that. All the same, he won't let it, er, me, go.

Instead, a man with a sizeable paunch, weasel-like eyes, and greasy hair points at me or the vacant seat, I can't be sure. "I was hoping for the window."

His teeth are kind of pointy.

A flight attendant stands by his side as if anticipating she might have to wrangle him into his seat like an unruly toddler. "Sorry, sir. Your ticket is for this seat. Please make yourself comfortable. We're getting ready to taxi to the runway."

With a shrug, I proffer an apologetic smile. "I guess it's too late to switch."

Like a grubby creature that dragged itself out of a gutter after feasting all night on discarded pizza crusts and chicken bones, the man-animal grunts and pushes his way past the older woman who angles her phone from side to side like a hologram sticker.

"Mind yourself, young man," she says when he drops into the seat, bumping into her.

Manimal doesn't bother to apologize and crowds me with a grubby plastic grocery bag tied tightly at the top and a dirty backpack that he drops on my foot as he shoves it under the seat. I'd rather it was Blade from the bus stop. At least he didn't smell like cat pee.

The creature next to me kicks off his faux leather loafers and then elbows me as he reclines in his seat. "Betcha wish you traded with me now, huh?"

My friendly smile dips when a dirty, cheesy odor filters from below.

“I wish I could afford a first-class ticket,” I mutter.

“Don’t we all?” he replies.

His coarse inconsideration and traveling first-class remind me of Todd, someone I’m desperate to forget. Though, Todd wasn’t an offense to my olfactory senses and presented himself with impeccable business attire.

I shift closer to the window, trying to put as much room between this barefoot grease weasel and myself as possible.

Another flight attendant appears, checking safety belts, seatbacks, and tray tables. “Excuse me, sir,” he says.

Manimal’s eyes are closed and he doesn’t respond.

“Sir,” he repeats and then shakes his head. Turning to me, he says, “Ma’am, we’re preparing for take-off. Could you please ask your dad to put his seat in a full and upright position?”

“My dad?” I stammer.

He takes a second look at me and winces. “Your husband?”

Easy enough mistake to make since Manimal spills over to my seat like he wants to snuggle. “I’m not married—” But my left hand with the slim band circling my finger tells a different story. It tells the truth. “I’m not married to him,” I correct.

The flight attendant huffs and moves to jostle Manimal awake. But the older woman in the aisle seat merely swats him on the arm and says, “Put your seat back up, buddy bucko.”

He blinks a few times and then obeys before closing his eyes and resuming his snore.

“Sometimes you have to be direct.” The older woman extends her hand for me to shake. “I’m Gudrun Sprunk, but my friends call me Goodie.” She winks at me. “I have a feeling we’re going to bond during this transatlantic adventure, so you can call me Goodie.”

I can’t help but smile. “I’m Everly. Nice to meet you. Any tips for how to get Manimal here to put his shoes back on?”

She laughs. “When the flight attendant brings beverages, I’ll get some ice in an extra large cup. That oughta do the trick.”

Despite the slimy, porky, and rank rodent disguised as a human between us, snoring like a grizzly that swallowed a goose whole, maybe this will be a good flight after all.

“So, what are you in here for?” she asks.

I lean forward, not quite picking up Goodie's meaning.

"Why are you confined to this metal missile that's about to hurtle through the heavens?"

"Not a fan of flying?"

"No. I'm old-fashioned. Prefer my feet on the ground, my hands in the dirt, and the sun over my head. Oh, and I love homemade bread." She pats a paper bag. "My sister lives in Concordia and has faced some health challenges. Had to have surgery, so I'm visiting to help while she recovers." She winks. "It's a surprise."

"I wish I had a sister." I'm thankful for everything Heidi did, but Goodie's gesture gives me all the feels at how thoughtful and selfless it is, considering she's not a fan of flying.

"No siblings?"

I shake my head. "But the answer to your question about why I'm traveling has two parts."

"Oh, like a movie with a sequel?" But the maternal look she gives me suggests she understands the circumstances aren't entirely sunny and if Manimal weren't between us, she'd hug me, no questions asked.

Carrying all this baggage around is starting to wear me out and Goodie seems like the exact type of mom or grandma that you'd spill your life story to and won't make it weird. I kind of need that kind of closure right now as I say goodbye to the past.

"For the first act, I'm kind of on the run from my ex-fiancé who I stood up at the altar. He was cheating, so it was for the best. For the second, I'm also recovering from surgery. Cancer. The bad gene. Double mastectomy."

She nods slowly like she can fill in the blanks.

"Actually, there's a third. I'm starting a new job."

Goodie's eyebrows lift into her tufty hair. "Sounds like you have a story to tell. Some grievances you could stand to get off your chest. Pun intended."

My cheeks puff on an exhale. "You have no idea."

"We have a lot of hours ahead of us. If you're not the type to want to tune out the world, I'm all ears and this one is out cold," she points to Manimal, "so whatever you have to say is between you, me, and the seatbacks."

"Thanks. I don't even know where to begin." I glance at Manimal to make sure he's asleep. "Well, for starters, his behavior reminds me of Todd, my fiancé before I got married."

"You don't look old enough to have a first husband, never mind a second

one. Are you traveling incognito?"

I can't help but laugh and explain raiding the boxes in Heidi's basement, where we also came across photos and memorabilia from all thirteen years of being in school together.

"She sounds like a good friend. That Todd, not so much."

"For the few months we were engaged, it was good. Then I overheard him refer to his 'Sidepiece.'"

"I take it you're not talking about a jigsaw puzzle. Do you mean sidepiece like a mistress?"

"You got it. I caught them once. Then the blonde thought it would be fun to crash our wedding. Psychotically, he objected to us separating and not following through with the marriage. Mistake number one was intertwining our finances during the engagement process. Number two was I put almost everything from invitations to hotel accommodations on my credit card. My dad was going to reimburse me, but we haven't spoken since the big day that wasn't. I could go on with mistakes three through three hundred, but we don't have that much time. Suffice it to say, the only solution was to walk away and let him have everything."

"Even your clothing?"

"No, I had to sell it to cover living expenses."

The plane starts to accelerate and Goodie grabs my hand. "Away we go."

When it lifts into the air, I exhale like I just busted through the ribbon at the finish line. I ran away from Todd and with good reason. Now, I'm flying away from all the doubt, fear, and pain that's been chasing me for months. I can finally put the past behind me with a fresh start, in a new country, and with a new job.

Once the plane levels out, Goodie releases my hand. "Now where were we? Oh yes, where does the actual husband come into it? You avoided the fiancé but said that you're married."

I shift uncomfortably because I can't reveal the truth without coming off like Manimal. My husband and I met for all of five minutes before tying the knot. Once I'm a year cancer-free, I'll divorce the Viking stranger that Heidi hooked me up with. But I don't tell Goodie about his excellent health insurance. It wasn't the best choice, but jobless, homeless, and essentially on the run, I had no way to pay for treatment. After many late-night tear-filled talks, Heidi came up with a solution. Instead, I weave a tale about a rebound.

"He was Heidi's brother's best friend's brother. How is that for

convoluted?” I laugh it off like it’s just another nutty nugget from my madcap life. The whole thing is probably illegal, but without a residence, job, or insurance, I was out of choices. After escaping Todd, I was lucky not to be on the street.

I didn’t get my hopes up, not expecting the Viking to go for it, but Heidi said he had a soft spot for helping people—especially if it had anything to do with his brother.

I continue my gently massaged story. “A week later, we met at the courthouse, and by the looks of him—massive frame, muscles the size of watermelons, long blond hair, and a big beard—it appeared as if he’d rowed ashore from Lake Superior to raid and pillage a village.”

Goodie’s complexion turns the faintest rose as if she likes the picture I painted. “I once had a Norseman of my own. Our love story could fill a book.” She sighs.

“I’m all ears,” I say, repeating her comment from earlier.

“I may write it one day, but it’s bound to bring me to tears and I don’t cry in public.”

Can’t say the same for myself. I cry easily, supposedly like my mother did.

“So where is this Viking now? Does the end of your story have a happily ever after, a happy for now, or a not happy yet?”

Thankfully, she gave me an easy way out because I’m not sure how to answer the question without revealing a major hole in the plot.

I met my husband for all of five minutes before tying the knot. Without a word, we signed the paperwork and I was able to use his insurance. Someday, I’ll figure out a way to repay his generosity, but at the moment, I have to focus on my new job and getting back on my feet.

“That last one. I have this job that I couldn’t pass up. But good friends and great listeners help fill in the gaps.” I give Goodie a warm smile.

“Heidi sounds like a keeper. It’s important to have good friends, especially when you get to be my age and can’t figure out how to turn this dreaded thing on.” Still clutching her cell phone, Goodie angles it at me.

“I can help.” With a click and a swipe, it lights up and jingles.

“You’re an angel.”

I’m definitely not but am starting to think Goodie is. For a minute, when Manimal plunked himself between us, I was having my doubts about this flight.



“I was supposed to text my brother-in-law when the plane took off but couldn’t manage to operate this thing. Did you mention Blancbourg? He’s the butler there. Arthur Fitzwilliam. My sister is Britta. Do you know them?”

I explain that I haven’t yet been there. “I secured the job at Blancbourg late last summer, but when everything exploded with Todd, I contacted the headmistress and explained that I had to postpone my employment if possible.” My qualifications impressed Cateline, and she was very understanding of the situation.

“And during that time, you had surgery?” Goodie asks, not having forgotten that detail.

I tell her about the cancer scare and the precautionary treatment that prompted the mastectomy.

“Heidi was extremely helpful through it all, but I didn’t want to impose any longer than necessary. As bad as my luck had been, after I’d recovered from the surgery, I reached out and sure enough, there was still an opening at Blancbourg.” Excitement about my new position builds as the plane coasts over the Atlantic Ocean.

Goodie’s expression turns soft as if she senses I’m not telling a perfect stranger the whole story, but appreciates that I trusted her with some details. “I’m glad to hear that the challenges you’ve experienced may have slowed you down and taken you to unexpected places, but they haven’t stopped you. I hope I’ll be able to say the same for Britta.”

“If she’s anything like you, I bet there are still many more adventures to be had.”

“I’ll say. If I’ve learned anything in life, even through trials and tough times, it’s to never lose your sense of humor. In the same conversation when Britta told me she was sick, we were laughing so loud, her husband had to ask her to keep it down or we risked waking the neighbors.”

This brings a smile to my face because I see the same thing in myself, especially with Heidi. “There’s a lot to be said for laughter, sisterhood, and best friends.”

“Yes, and a lot of delicious ground to cover. I want to do a Concordia cake crawl. I’ve heard they have the best chocolate cake in the world. And because I can’t let myself get too fluffy, after we crawl, we’ll hike. I hear there are wolves in those mountains and I’d like to see one.” The corner of her lip trembles. “Bjorn loved wolves.”

I sense she has a lot more to her story, including losing someone she

loved. We chat for a few more minutes before she tunes into an episode of Miss Marple on the mini-screen attached to the seat in front of her.

Midway through the flight, Manimal creeps closer. Presumably, he's still asleep as he smooshes me against the window of the plane. I gaze at the clouds, imagining, as I so often did when I was a child, riding a Pegasus and going on adventures to magical lands where I'd find my mom waiting for me.

I'm not sure if Goodie has kids, but I bet she'd tell great bedtime stories. I hope that the bad parts of mine are behind me and I'm getting closer to my happily ever after, even if it won't be with the Viking.



## GREY



*I*'d bet good money that not one of the other Boston Bruiser players loses sleep over the mooning incident as the actual full moon hangs high in the sky over the city.

Can't say the same for myself. While the press rolls out headlines about moon-gate and social media chatters about #BruiserButt, my mind churns, trying to figure out what my ex was thinking. If it's true or if someone is trying to extort me.

Most of all, I want to make sure that my kid is safe and the best place for that to happen would be with me. The whole situation gnaws on what's left of my hide, chewing me up.

My ex is deplorable, but instead of making her pay for abandoning our son and not having the decency to leave him with me, I just want to make sure he's okay.

The faint ringing in my ears from earlier continues. Unable to sleep, I pace in the condo where I stay when in Boston. The leather sofa, entertainment unit, wet bar, and houseplants take on a surreal quality as the original conversation with Ted Brown comes back. I'd asked if he was sure my ex went AWOL and that she renounced custody. That I had the chance to do the right thing after thinking my son was better off with his mother when we couldn't find a way to get along and I got lost after everything with my brother. It didn't help that she cheated on me either.

Ted knows everything, but said the case isn't iron clad. That there were holes. But he gave me hope that we'll be the ones to fill them by exposing a great deception.

I just want my kid back. He's too young to be going through this, to be

without parents who love him.

And according to Nancy, by law, I have to be married unless Ted can find a way for me to wiggle out of that. However, what he doesn't know is that I am married. But I'd prefer to keep that to myself because, in a fit of grief, I said yes to my brother's best friend's sister's best friend who needed health insurance.

The web is as tangled as it sounds.

I scrub my hand through my shoulder-length hair, which is also tangled. My mother would be appalled if she saw the current state of my grooming habits.

So would the woman I married. Probably. Actually, I don't know a thing about her other than she grew up with Heidi and Jimmy in northern Michigan like me. It's not surprising that our paths didn't cross since she's quite a bit younger than me. Let's see. Jimmy was Bran's age and his little sister must be about seven or eight years younger than he is because there are at least two other Weaver siblings between them.

I'll admit it's weird being married but only knowing that my wife has brown wavy hair, a summer tan, and is on the shorter side, at least compared to my six-plus feet.

Then again, I'll never, not even if I got concussed, forget our kiss. It was the closest I felt to being alive since I learned about Bran's status. Since I lost hope that he was still alive.

They found the wreckage. No body. No way he survived it.

Her lips on mine were the stuff of shock and awe. Like seeing fighter pilots overhead for the first time. A football game where giants battled it out on the field. Only, everything about her was soft and sunny, nothing aggressive or fierce about her. Human sunshine. Pure beauty. The exact opposite of me, but a complement in every way.

The kiss reminded me that I'm still alive. But all too soon, it was over.

I'm guessing whenever she no longer needs the insurance, I'll receive divorce papers. That means I'll have to tell my lawyer, which could complicate this custody issue, unless he finds a loophole in the interstate laws Nancy mentioned.

Whereas most people would feel dread, guilt, or something, I've got nothing other than a dull sense that I should have an emotional response to all of this rather than detached emptiness. Well, except for how I treated fatherhood. I'm well aware I failed there.

It's only a matter of time before Coach pulls me aside and suggests I talk to someone, but that won't happen unless I screw up on the field. Mercifully, that's the one part of my life that's still intact, where I haven't faced failure or loss.

With a deep breath, I drop onto the couch and it's only when my phone buzzes repeatedly that I realize I must've fallen asleep. Morning light paints patches on the wall opposite my bed.

Coach's name scrolls across the screen and my last thoughts before I dozed off filter back. I grunt and answer.

An hour later, Declan, Wolf, Chase, and I shuffle into Hammer's office. He's on a phone call and flashes the one-minute signal with his pointer finger along with the hairy eyeball.

I grumble, but we deserve it.

"Don't you dare say, 'I told you so,'" Wolf warns.

"Come on, we've done worse." Declan shrugs.

"Guys, Elyse was there." Chase refers to Starkowsky's daughter, a grown woman who has certainly seen her share of football players in various stages of dress, having been around the team her entire life. She's a reporter and spent a lot of time in the locker rooms pre and post-game.

Declan and Wolf wear matching sneers because this early call interrupted their beauty sleep, or should I say their recovery sleep? No strangers to late nights, they like to party. Chase is fairly tame. I was once the wildest of the bunch, but those days are long behind me—the little lapse in judgment with my ex notwithstanding.

Chase adds, "It's the principle. Would you want your daughter to see our backsides?"

"He has a point," I say.

"We don't have daughters," Wolf says.

"You know what I mean," Chase hisses.

Declan laughs as if any of us are anywhere close to settling down and having kids. Little do they know about my surprise news. I haven't quite figured out the logistics of parenting and game season, but when I tell my mother, I can't imagine a world in which she won't help. The woman lives for babies, kids, and small and large animals. And I'll hire a nanny. Problem solved. Not that the kid is a problem. More like, I'm not going to say no to being a better father because of logistics.

Coach Hammer ends the call with an abrupt slam of the phone that I

sense is directed at us rather than the person on the other line.

I prepare to apologize, but Hammer holds up his massive hand, indicating I save it.

I've seen this clip before. I know the drill, meaning I've learned to keep my mouth shut. Can't say the same for the rest of my teammates, but we'll see how this goes.

Hammer gets to his feet and paces along the bank of windows overlooking the practice field. "I understand the pranks are part of the game, the comradery, and the glue that holds the team together in some ways. But you went too far. I've had a lot of heat coming down from up high lately about your—" He spins his hand in a circle as if hoping to pull the right word out of the air. "About your antics."

Wolf gives his patent lazy shrug. "Oh, come on, we were having fun. We thought it was just going to be Brandon, not the commish."

"Elyse was mortified."

"More like it mortified the commish," Wolf says.

Hammer tilts his head at a *shut up* angle. "Connor." All he needs to do is use Wolf's given name to quiet him down. Wish I could say that worked for me. The guy is all lip.

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.

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

"Hilarious," Wolf says only loud enough so we hear.

"Boys, there are consequences."

"A fine?" Wolf asks. "I'll pay for it. Whatever."

"Penalty?" Declan says.

"Community service?" Chase suggests.

I remain quiet because I've been in this office on numerous occasions when Coach has to give a token scolding for misbehavior. We're the Bruisers, we're known for our "antics," but his tone and the drop to his

shoulders are different from in the past. Whatever is coming is going to be bad.

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

I tuck my head, not sure I heard correctly while the other guys ask a flurry of confused questions. But I’ve known Richard Hammer for almost twenty years. I’ve seen his many moods and this is not a joke... not even a prank.





## GREY



*A*t Coach Hammer's proclamation that we're getting shipped off to finishing school, Wolf barks a laugh.

"I think Coach is saying that he has to make an example of us," I say.

"Not me. This is coming directly from the commissioner." Hammer drops into his seat as if he wishes it weren't so. He tosses a newspaper down on the desk between us so we can see the headline. He stabs it a few times.

*Full moon over Boston.*

Declan and Wolf chuckle. Chase cracks a smile. I remain as stony as ever, because, yes, it's a big deal and I'm not one to rock the boat, but at this point, I'm not even sure I'd know if I were drowning. Maybe I already am.

Hammer groans and scrubs his hands down his face. "You guys are terrible with the press."

Declan smirks. "They say any kind of press is good press."

"The problem is you're lacking in actual good press. You're all cocky. Not at all humble."

"Come on, it's all hype," Chase says.

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

"We're the Bruisers. We have a reputation to uphold," Wolf says, elbowing me, likely because I've been on the team the longest. "Tell him."

The coach's perfunctory smile suggests any appeal I make is a lost cause. He goes on, "Starky wants you to clean up, learn some manners, and prove that you're well-behaved gentlemen."

I snort, because although we're all men, it'll take an army to turn this group of jocks into anything approaching the definition of the word *gentle*.

"Think of it like reform camp. You'll be there a month."

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.”

The silence erupts with protests and I’m not sure who asks what as the call from the lawyer collides with my career. I can’t lose my spot on the team. It’s all I have. But what about my son? Nancy said we had about ten days, but the coach said my sentence is a month. What will I do?

“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 go to training in August.” Hammer, ever the picture of calm, grits his teeth.

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

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

All at once, we each come up with objections and try to talk him out of it, except I don’t tell him about the call, the kid, or what’s coming my way. I can’t tell the guys any of that yet because I don’t know what it’ll mean for next season.

Hammer’s eyes bulge as if he only heard one word among the chatter. “Unfair? Poor Elyse cannot wipe the sight of four pasty rear ends from her mind—neither can the rest of the country.” Hammer points at the newspaper, which features the photo, blurred in select areas.

Several people stood in the doorway, but it must’ve been Brandon who snapped the shot with his phone. Starky’s fingers are too fat to operate a keypad, Elyse is a reporter and would’ve owned the story, and the officials do not want this kind of press. Later, I’ll remind Brandon about the no phones in the lounge rule and make sure he doesn’t do something this stupid again.

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

“For an Irishman,” I mutter.

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

But I’m not. “This team is my life,” I say softly.

“All of our lives,” Declan echoes.

Hammer tosses his hands in the air. “Consider this probation.”

“Walk as in leave the team?” Chase asks, catching up with Coach’s previous comment. “Considering the only thing I know how to do is play football, I’ll do it. I’ll go to the finishing school or whatever.”

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

“You know the answer to that.” I sigh because the animosity between Rhett Collins and football—yes, the game as a whole—is legendary.

“Which is—?” Wolf asks.

“If he did, whatever the deal, would be worse, much worse.” With a shake of my head, I grunt. It’s a non-starter.

Declan gazes toward the ceiling as though asking for help.

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

We experience a group case of whiplash.

“All of you,” Hammer says as though dropping a gavel.

“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 are known for being players—off the field as well as on. I don’t have that title anymore—hung up my hat when I thought I had a family. That didn’t work out as expected.

“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.” Putting on his eyeglasses, once again signaling he’s done with us, Coach reviews a document on the desk.

“The grocery aisle?” Wolf chuckles.

Coach looks up over the wire rims like a parent who’s been worn down by idiotic questions and comments.

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

“Boys, the Boston Bruisers used to be more family-oriented.”

I stiffen, thinking about my increasingly complicated situation.

“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 was taught 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 as if he too has a secret he's never revealed.

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 us. "During this monthlong period, there aren't going to be any pranks, bad press, and 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."

Begrudgingly, we acquiesce and exit the office.

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

"A what?" I ask.

"A football—?"

Hammer chuckles. "Something like that." He takes a phone call, dismissing us at last.

In the hallway, we convene and complain.

Rocking back on my heels, I cross my arms in front of my chest. "Listen, you know what this team means to me. We're going to follow orders."

"Good luck keeping Wolf away from women," Declan says.

Quickly coming up with a plan, I say, "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."

While Declan and Chase move closer, Wolf shifts away, never a fan of rules.

Chase tugs him back to our 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."

Wearing a half smile, Chase shrugs like it's no big deal. It may not be a common lifestyle choice among the players on the team, but he honors his faith. I've made mistakes in my past but received the grace of God's forgiveness and am, or was, a changed man. These last few months broke me.

Declan tugs at the chain on his neck that holds a cross. "It's just a month."

Splaying my fingers, I count off, "The playbook rules: No kissing, eyes up, hands off, no dating..."

"Unless you fall in love," Declan adds.

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

Wolf groans.

"Got it?" I eye him.

Slowly, one by one, we stack our hands in the center of the circle. Ironic, because the last time we did this was just before we got in trouble.

All at once, we chorus, “Cruisin’ for a Bruisin’.”

My phone pings with a message. It’s from my lawyer Ted, asking me to call him right away. I had it in *Do Not Disturb* mode while in Hammer’s office. This can’t be good.

As we start to walk down the hall, Wolf says, “You have to admit I have a good butt.”

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

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

“The mooning prank was all your idea.”

“No, if I remember...” They start bickering.

“Guys, it doesn’t matter now. What does matter is that we’re going to camp and have to—” Chase starts.

My attention is halfway between here and wondering about what Ted has to say, so I interrupt. “Hammer said reform school.”

“Classes.”

“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.” Declan’s phone pings.

“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 beeps 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.

I elbow him, wanting this to be taken seriously.

“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,” I say.

“It says here that we’ll still be training. They’re sending some specialist or something.” Chase skims the email.

“Yeah, I feel special,” Wolf says darkly.

Chase claps Wolf 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?”

Declan nods, but the others remain silent.

As for me, I couldn’t find the country on a map, but the follow-up message from Ted suggests that I’m going to need to find a compass, and my wife, fast.





# EVERLY



When the beverage and food cart comes around, Manimal returns squarely to his seat but doesn't spare an apology for encroaching on my personal space. Goodie and I chat some more about Concordia and their world-famous chocolate cake.

"I'm more of a cookie gal." I go on to tell her about the Cookie Dough Diary. "When I was in college, I had a demanding professor and a very full second semester." When I think about my more recent problems, I almost laugh at myself, but creating the Cookie Dough Diary was the best thing I could've done because it still serves me now.

"What did you study?" Goodie asks.

"I majored in business with a focus on hospitality services and minored in Victorian history. One practical, the other—"

"A delight?"

"Exactly. One day, I needed comfort and I always found that in cookies and milk." I stage whisper, "Cookies and milk from a store. Don't tell anyone, but up until that point I'd never turned on an oven."

"How'd you make it to college without doing that?"

"Don't ask," I mutter across Manimal's sawmill snore. I don't like to talk about the cold and modern house I grew up in, the cook, the nanny, or the general lack of cookies in my young life. "So I got all the ingredients, made the dough, and—"

"Don't tell me you couldn't turn on the oven," Goodie says.

"No, it was in my dorm's common room and wouldn't work. It was plugged in, but I guess there had been shenanigans the weekend before when some genius tried to defrost frozen bottled beer in the oven and blew the

thing up.”

Goodie laughs. “Did you eat the cookie dough?”

“Sure did.”

“Raw eggs too?”

I bite my lip. “I didn’t say I followed the recipe exactly. I forgot the eggs. Somehow. Anyway, from that day on, I’d make a batch of cookie dough to nibble on while I studied. I started keeping tracking and rating my attempts which morphed into me actually making cookies. Let’s just say, I know how to operate an oven now. The stovetop, not so much.”

“My mother used to make delicious gingersnaps.”

“Do you have the recipe?”

“I sure do. Now that I know how to turn this thing on, let’s exchange email addresses and I’ll send it to you.” Goodie jiggles her phone.

“I’d love that. Thank you. The thing about the Cookie Dough Diary is it doesn’t just contain edible cookie dough recipes, though I do record my favorites so I have plenty to draw from when I someday become a mom. So far, I’ve perfected chocolate chip, peanut butter, oatmeal raisin, sugar cookies, and my favorite deluxe double-chip cookies—the secret ingredients? Chocolate chips and potato chips.”

Goodie arches an eyebrow.

“Don’t knock it until you try it. Pro tip: you have to use the wavy potato chips.”

“Chocolate and chips are two of my favorite things. Never thought to put them together.”

“You’ll thank me later. Also, grateful for the happy accident with the original batch of cookie dough and the diary it prompted me to start, every day I write down three things I’m thankful for.” I draw in my diary too, but don’t show anyone my sketches.

“And today’s entry?” Goodie asks.

My shoulders bunch up. “Well, I’d have to say, meeting you. Despite,” I discretely point to Manimal who would be catching flies if there were any on the plane, “this flight has turned out pretty great so far.”

Manimal rouses, glowers at Goodie then me, and says, “What does a guy need to do to get some rest around here?”

She and I both suppress laughter.

“Well, I’d better try to get some more shut-eye because when I get to my sister’s I have a feeling we’ll be gabbing all night.” Goodie smiles warmly

and then closes her eyes.

I inhale a deep breath and then take out the Cookie Dough Diary. It's the ninth one with that title—one for every year since starting it in college.

I gaze out the window at nothing but clouds stretching in every direction. For an instant, my mind feels spacious, open, and free from the recent burdens—the Todd tragedy, the cancer scare and surgery, and losing everything in my life as I knew it.

From my right, a *thrppp* sound rips into my moment of serenity, followed by a foul stench.

*He didn't!?*

*Yep, he did.*

I fight the urge to smash the panel above my head to deploy the oxygen mask. I will not be writing about Manimal passing gas in my diary. Instead, when the air clears, my pencil scratches the paper as I sketch a well-built warrior with a leather uniform and armor—back in college, I was part of the LARP Club. Like the popular book and movie *Fight Club*—one of the reading requirements to join—the first rule of LARP Club was you didn't talk about LARP Club. We also had to go deep into the J.R.R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis catalogs along with numerous contemporary novels.

Afterward, I'd always draw a scene we acted out as I envisioned it. In this one, I imagine my valiant hero defeating the Manimal of the Underworld.

As I fill in the details, the hero's features resemble the Viking's, my fake husband? Non-husband? Husband of convenience? I'm not sure what to call him as I fiddle with the ring on my finger.

To my drawing, I add a sword, imagining severing the ties between us. It's not because I'm ungrateful, rather Todd ruined me for marriage. No way will I cozy up and couple down with a guy, at least not anytime soon.

My eyes flutter closed and I dream of the Viking riding into battle atop a powerful steed. A Manimal tries to attack, but he scares it off and then whisks me off my feet and onto his horse. We ride across rocky terrain. A man atop a black stallion appears in the distance. Only, it's a spider. The Viking challenges him, vowing to fight for my honor. After engaging in battle, the Viking remains standing and Todd, begging for mercy, lay at his feet.

I startle awake, my heart pounding as I remember where I am. I pat myself down, making sure that I wasn't in Manimal's space or worse, cuddled up with him. Thankfully, there are several inches between us.

However, my cheek is tender from being pressed up against the window.

I try to shake off the dream as Goodie wakes up and our chatter resumes, much to Manimal's annoyance. We even try to include him, but not even a snooze and a snore refreshed the guy.

Soon, the plane lands with a warm welcome to Concordia from the captain. He describes perfect weather and wishes us a pleasant stay.

I've been here once before, during my figure skating years. I recall it being a beautiful and wealthy country, complete with old-world charm and abundant nature, including mountains, beaches, hot springs, and more along with friendly residents. There are loads of restaurants and my mouth practically waters, anticipating a slice of chocolate cake. I try to remember the name of the bakery or restaurant where I originally got it, but that was about fifteen years ago and the memory faded. I'll have plenty of time to explore when not working and promise myself a piece of that chocolate cake once I find it.

After getting off the plane, I follow the signs to the luggage carousel. Manimal bumps past me, grabs his suitcase, and carelessly swings it into my legs.

"Ow," I say, hopping on one foot.

"Watch where you're going," he says and hurries away.

Where is my Viking when I need him? Granted, this doesn't qualify as a sword-slaying incident, but I'm guessing Manimal would think twice about being so rude and watch where *he's* going if I had the Viking by my side.

I give my head a little shake for being so silly. My doctor assured me I'm in perfect health, but there is more to my recovery than just the physical aspects. I'm still healing from the change to my appearance, my relationship with Todd, the difficulty that followed, and having to sell everything I owned. I'm firm in my decisions, but they weren't easy, so I give myself a little grace for wanting a strong Norseman with a steed and a sword to defend my honor.

Although he isn't *my* Viking, and typically, I don't need rescuing. Ours was a marriage of convenience and nothing more. I'll probably never see him again.

As the other passengers collect their bags, two little kids scamper around, probably restless after the long flight. Longing tugs at my heart. However, their mother, also traveling alone, looks like she's going to have a meltdown of her own as she repeatedly instructs them not to climb on the conveyor belt,

ride the luggage cart, or pinch each other.

Eventually, only the mother, her kids, and I remain, waiting for our belongings.

The mom and I exchange a knowing glance, both realizing the same thing at the same time. The airline lost our stuff.

It's been a long day, a long week, and an even longer series of months, but I refuse to let the inconvenience get me down. I tell myself my suitcases aren't at an airport in New Guinea or Cape Horn.

The little girl tugs on her mom's shirt. "Mommy, I'm hungry."

"Yeah, me too," the little boy says.

"Our car is waiting and we'll be at home soon," the mother says. "I guess we have to go report our luggage missing."

"No!" the little girl yells, throwing herself on the floor.

From the exchange that follows, I gather that her favorite doll was inside their suitcase.

"Sweetie, we'll get LuLu back," the mom says. The poor woman struggles with her tired and hungry children as they whine.

Wearing a friendly smile, I give them a wave. "Excuse me, can I help? My suitcases didn't make it either, and I'm hungry too." I glance at the little girl, on her belly and kicking the floor. "I kind of feel like doing that myself, but I was going to grab something from that kiosk over there. I can get them something too. Or I can help you report your missing belongings."

The woman relaxes with relief. "Thank you. Thank you so much. We're just coming from a funeral and—" Tears prick her eyes. "It's been a hard week."

I give her arm a gentle squeeze. "I'm sorry for your loss." In my own way, I understand. I've lost so much and am hoping my new life in Concordia will lead to a brighter future. "I'm on snack patrol. Any food allergies I should be aware of?"

"Mercifully, no." The woman exhales like she'd been holding her breath since boarding the plane.

"In that case, I'll meet you at the baggage office with some goodies."

Fifteen minutes later, I have two new best friends who perch in the plastic chairs on either side of me contentedly munching on popcorn and drawing pictures using blank pages from the Cookie Dough Diary. I'm like Mary Poppins with this thing.

Sam and Zoe draw me pictures of their pet frog and fish, respectively.

Patty, their mom, returns from the help counter, looking somewhat relieved. "I cannot thank you enough."

"Don't mention it. We were all at our wit's end. Trust me, if I thought laying on the floor and crying was going to help, I would've been right down there too."

I tell her about sitting next to Manimal. We chat for a few minutes and exchange numbers when the woman asks if I'd ever be available to babysit.

I tilt my head from side to side. "I'm just starting a new job at Blancbourg, but once I'm settled in, I'd be happy to."

"Good luck recovering your bags," the woman says before leaving with her kids.

And that's where my charm and resourcefulness end because the worker can't locate my luggage but assures me it'll be delivered to Blancbourg Academy as soon as possible.

"Soon as in tomorrow or soon as in—?"

"It can take anywhere between twenty-four hours and we've had some luggage not turn up for twenty-four months."

"Great. Looks like I'll be wearing a daisy dress and leopard print denim jacket to my first day as an etiquette coach."

While waiting for a taxi outside the arrivals gate, I breathe in the fresh air, feeling thankful to be far away from Todd despite losing Heidi's hand-me-downs.

An empty cab pulls up and as I gesture for it, a businesswoman with coordinating luggage brushes past me with purpose and gets in. I check the incoming lane for another taxi. Concordia is generally a friendly place. I guess the airport is the exception. I bet Goodie would've shared her ride with me.

In the distance, a man built like a linebacker and with long hair gets in a sleek black car. Last time I was here with the Ice King, we traveled in style. Gone are those days. Now it's just me, the last of my savings, and my luggage. Or not. I clutch my carry-on bag in case Manimal is a purse snatcher and tries to make off with it.

But the sun is coming out. Things will get better from here. I hope.

A taxi approaches. Wouldn't you know it? Manimal scuttles by me and gets in.

"Can I share a ride with you?" I call.

He's about to slam the door.

I thrust my metal water bottle forward—a sacrifice I'm willing to make if he tells the driver to step on it.

When he glowers, I add, "Please?"

He scowls and then squishes over.

I just barely resist calling, *Par three!* If this were a golf game, I'd have won.





# EVERLY



*A* little musty after traveling and resembling a wayward preteen in need of charm school, I roll through the quaint village outside the capital city of Intherness with stone buildings and thatched roofs, flowers spilling out of containers, tiny dogs sniffing tree trunks and toward Blancbourg Academy d’Etiquette in Concordia.

*I’m on my way!*

I’ve seen pictures of the manor online, but the old-world architecture makes me think I’ve walked into a fairytale.

*Take that Manimal.*

He got out on the corner of two streets ten minutes into the ride, leaving me to cover the fare. He probably lives in a hovel or is here on a shady business deal to smuggle oysters or something equally slimy.

The Blancbourg property is sprawling and the main house is grand with a sweeping lawn in the front and stone paths everywhere. The cobblestone driveway leads to an entryway complete with ivy and topiary along with a jolly doorman who wears a welcoming smile.

“Welcome,” the man says, ushering me inside. “No luggage?”

“I travel light, but unfortunately it was lost,” I explain.

A pair of high heels click toward us in a rhythmic march. I recognize Cateline, the headmistress, from our video interview. She wears her hair in a bun, but a few pieces fall loose as if she too has had an eventful morning. She launches into introductions, knowing exactly who I am, though thankfully not about my past. I made a promise never to talk about it as I step into my new life.

It’s done. Over. Ancient history.

“Everly, this is Arthur. He’s the glue that keeps Blancbourg together.” The words themselves have warmth, but Cateline has a chilly personality.

The older man with a few wispy pieces of white hair remaining on his head nods genially.

“You and Mrs. Fitzwilliam are the glue that holds me together.” Cateline leans toward the older man as though she doesn’t want anyone nearby to hear her dole out niceties.

A little hum of excitement builds inside as I make the connection between Arthur and Goodie.

“She’ll be delighted that you said that, Miss,” Arthur says. “Oh, and she made you a loaf of that banana bread you enjoyed last time you visited. She’s been stocking up before surgery.”

Cateline proffers a bittersweet smile. “I appreciate her more than I could ever express.”

Unable to contain myself, I bounce a little and say, “I met Goodie on the airplane.”

Arthur’s eyes twinkle. “No surprise there. She’ll be the mayor of the village before she leaves. Meets people wherever she goes. But Britta will be surprised. In fact, I’m guessing she’s just arrived.”

It makes me happy to know the sisters will be together during Britta’s surgery. Heidi was extremely helpful in practical ways, but also cried with me and made me laugh (gently) when we reminisced about high school and watched romcoms while eating my cookie dough creations.

Cateline gives me a brisk tour of the manor and then we go to her office to file some paperwork.

The headmistress sits behind her desk and jiggles her computer mouse to bring it to life. “Unfortunately, our enrollment rate has been shrinking, but as luck would have it, several American football players got into some hot water. Their commissioner decided learning etiquette might set them straight.”

She delivers the information efficiently even though if it were my business, I’d be fretting about dwindling enrollment. The old me wore my heart on my sleeve. The new me keeps everything closer to the vest and is guarded—at least that’s what Heidi lovingly brought to my attention when she tried to get me to open up and push past the shame Todd caused.

“Everything around here has been sheer chaos as one of my teachers got another job and one retired. I’m grateful you were still available,” Cateline

continues.

“Thank you for holding the spot open.”

We review my information to make sure it’s up to date.

Cateline clicks the mouse several times. “It says on the application that you’re married, but over the phone, you mentioned you were single.” She glances at my left hand and her eyebrows bunch together.

An immense sense of guilt keeps the symbol on my finger—not the engagement ring from Todd. I returned that one to his mother. Instead, I wear the wedding band I’d exchanged with the Viking. Even so, guilt nips at me like piranhas in the Amazon. Fearing insurance fraud authorities will catch me, I uphold the charade. Not only that, but marriage is a sacred vow. I’d never have gone through with the fake wedding had my life literally not been in jeopardy.

I’d exhausted all other options. I couldn’t remain in Virginia where Todd and I lived unless I moved into a homeless shelter and applied for financial assistance to help cover the treatment. That also meant possibly putting my sanity—maybe even my life—at risk, depending on how long the process took with Todd nearby.

After the wedding that wasn’t, I maxed out what was left of my credit cards just to survive. Heidi offered for me to stay in the spare bedroom at her house and I hurried there without thinking about what to do next.

I hadn’t thought about a cover story for why I was engaged, not married, and then married. There is no easy way to explain it. I opt to keep it simple. Cateline seems like a no-nonsense kind of person. By her brusque manner, she doesn’t have the time or interest to hear my sob story.

“I prefer to keep work and my personal life separate, but I am married.” That’s the truth even if I spare the details.

“I understand and appreciate that. Working with clients as intimately as we do, it’s best to handle things that way and not let our personal and professional lives overlap.”

She shows me to my suite and gives a quick review of what to expect the following day when the new pupils will arrive.

“I don’t have the biography for your student prepared, but it will be ready in the morning. In the meantime, you can review this guide and our recommended attire.” Cateline wears a pointed expression as she passes me a book outlining the Blancbourg program. At that, she sweeps from the room.

In my teeny bopper outfit, I stand in stark contrast to the Victorian-style

furnishings and antiques that fill the suite. After I shower and wipe off Manimal's residue, I call the airline, hoping for a luggage update. Forget a phone tree, I get lost in a labyrinth as I try to reach customer service.

While a Muzak version of a yacht rock song plays through what sounds like a 1980s-era boombox that got run over by a semi-truck blares in the background, I gaze through the window at the quaint village.

I recall my years traveling the world as a figure skater, bringing me to Concordia over a decade before. In a way, I wish I was still that version of myself—young, innocent, eyes wide to the world. Todd had all but stolen my sense of wonder.

As I stare at the reflection of the majestic mountains shining in the lake along with the glow of the moon, I promise myself to get it back. Starting with that amazing slice of chocolate cake I'd eaten so many years ago.

Also, I'd like my suitcases returned, even if all it contains are Heidi's castoffs. Like some kind of warped lullaby, the on-hold waiting music, the combination of nerves, jet lag, and the unfamiliar place sends me face down on the feather mattress and I sleep like, well, like a weasel—or I should say Manimal—with weird fairytale dreams.

The next morning, still without my luggage, I shower and change back into the daisy sundress. I may not have mentioned that my ballet flats are metallic pink. All that's missing from the ensemble are bangle bracelets, a scrunchie for the perfect high ponytail, and a pair of gaudy clip-on earrings. I most closely resemble a character from one of the eighties movies Heidi and I would watch at my house because my father didn't enforce preteen PG movies like her mother.

Like a champion at life, I brush my teeth with my finger and smooth the fluff and frizz out of my hair with the last squirt of hand lotion I had in my purse.

After charging my phone, which had died thanks to being on hold while I was passed out, it beeps with a few messages.

My heart hammers in my chest at several calls and texts from Todd. Switching my phone back to airplane mode, I tell myself not to get flustered.

I practice the breathing exercises my support group taught me. I scream into my pillow. I pull out the Cookie Dough Diary and tell it how much I want Todd to leave me alone.

He and Manimal would probably make great friends. Then again, I don't want my ex, known in the business world as "The Spider" to step foot in this

country.

I fashion my mother's voluminous pashmina scarf stylishly around my neck. I haven't gotten used to the flat plane of my chest yet and opt not to wear the padded bra Heidi bought to give the illusion of two round bumps in place of breasts. For me, it's easier to accept things if I don't pretend.

After that first doctor's appointment when I received the diagnosis, I sat in the stairwell of the medical building, crying until I was pretty sure I'd tapped dry all the rivers in the greater Arlington area. A woman wearing a similar scarf but tied smartly at the nape of her neck approached me. She told me that she finds someone like me sitting right here about once a week. We chatted for a few minutes and she connected me to her support group. I attended, tentatively at first, but it soon became my lifeline—and Heidi.

The women in the group all had different experiences and approaches to care and recovery, but they were all supportive and without judgment. We cheered each other on through all stages and they were there for me when I opted not to have reconstructive surgery. They're my Wise Warrior Women and I wouldn't have survived with a sense of humor without them.

With the group's help, I could breathe again. Live beyond the surgery. I owed them so much—and the cold, Viking man who'd afforded me the procedure and top-level care.

Looking in the mirror, I wipe away a tear and smooth a few wild pieces of my brown hair. I square my shoulders, lift my chin, and with my guidebook to Blancbourg in hand, I step into the hall, ready for my new job.

The manor is quiet except for the chiming of a grandfather clock that leads me toward the entryway with a double staircase—the kind women in gowns would carefully step down before going to a ball. I also imagine girls balancing books on their heads as they descend to practice perfect posture. According to the guide, we won't be covering that lesson, but I wouldn't mind living one of those movie makeover scenes with the main character having a big reveal, complete with a fancy hairstyle and gown.

With a welcoming morning greeting, Arthur gestures me over. He passes me a little paper bag. "Gingersnaps. Goodie said you'd need them today."

I smile and thank him and then go to Cateline's office. Shortly after, a peppy woman named Pippa enters with a flurry of energy.

She opens a pastry box. "Anyone care for something scrummy to start off Monday?" Then she apologizes for being late and we get down to business.

I walk away from this meeting having learned three things:

1. The pastries in Concordia are delicious and lucky me, I have cookies for later
2. The new students are rasc-letes (part rascals, part athletes) who're likely to be handfuls
3. And never call Cateline, Cat, unless you want your face scratched off, theoretically. But Cate is okay.

With the new student file in hand, I find our meeting room. I want enough time to review the info and understand as best I can who I'll be working with.

However, if I were on hold, there wouldn't even be enough time for bad Muzak to blare through the phone speaker when a giant beast of a man lumbers into the room.

His blond hair is long and wild, his beard full, and he has the qualities of a Norseman from mythic sagas. He's a veritable Viking.

I meet his crystal-clear gray eyes. Despite his appearance, they're gentle, honest, and trustworthy. Eyes I've seen once before.

My new student is the man I married in Michigan.



## GREY



Well, this is a kick in the pants. I did my level best to forget about the little marriage arrangement back in Michigan, but the beautiful woman with sunny spring-green eyes, who is technically my wife, stares blankly at me.

“Lately, I’ll admit that my sense of humor has been severely lacking, but if this is a sick payback prank, I’ll crush the guys,” I mutter.

Tense all over, I hulk in the doorway to the meeting room where I’m supposed to learn how to be a gentleman. No chance. Not like this.

“Is this some kind of joke?” I ask.

Everly LeFevre, the woman I married as a favor to my brother’s best friend’s sister—yeah, I can hardly keep it straight either—stands in front of me.

The last time I saw her, she was wearing a white winter jacket. Today, she has on a colorful ensemble as if she got dressed in the dark. Not to be impolite, but I’m feeling kind of rude right now.

“We’re both in Concordia,” she says.

I’m not sure if it’s a question or an affirmation that this is indeed a reality and not an alternate daydream realm.

“At reform school.” But I’m not sure if she’s a student here, having committed some misdeed like me, my coach, or if she got lost on her way to a nineties tribute band concert.

Wearing a perfunctory smile, she corrects, “Actually, it’s Blancbourg Academy d’Etiquette in Concordia.”

“And you’re here because—?” I ask, hoping she can help me make sense of this strange reunion flashback nightmare. We’re a world away from where



I'd last seen her in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan where we exchanged vows.

"I'm your—" As if uncertain or nervous, her fingers travel to the ring on her finger.

I never signed divorce papers, so this only confirms that we're still married. But I took off the ring the second I got back to my truck on that windy winter day. The thing is probably still in my wallet.

Silence grows as if neither one of us are sure how to answer that question. Everly shifts with discomfort and my gaze snags on her green eyes. They're brighter than they'd been on our wedding day. Instead of the hollow, haunted look she'd worn in the moments before she'd said, *I do*, her brow crimps with confusion.

I've thought about her numerous times, random times. There've been moments when she'd pop into my head, wondering why she needed my insurance and what made her look so desperate, but I chalked it up to another case of *Not knowing the details*. The first one was the disappearance and presumed death of my brother. The third, more recent, is the situation with my son.

After everything that went down with his mother, I never planned to get married or have a family, so I figure it couldn't hurt to help the girl out.

I'm not particularly curious by nature, but the impromptu fake wedding had been the second significant event in my life that I knew next to nothing about. In the first instance, I'd been robbed of information. If there is a universal limit on what I can know, I'll save it so I can find out what happened to Bran.

In the case of marrying Everly, keeping the details sparse was intentional. I figured the less info I had the safer it was for both of us.

She blinks a few times and shrinks back.

I've been staring, and even Declan has said I'm not someone he'd want to tangle with in a dark alley. I catch my reflection in a gilded mirror over a table by the entry, looking rather beastly, if I do say so. I tower over Everly, who is petite yet shapely, though that daisy dress and the leopard print jacket don't do her any favors. Just keeping it real.

"This isn't a joke," she stammers, belatedly answering my question.

"Then I take it as punishment," I mutter.

Opening a folder she holds in trembling hands, she says, "You're my new client."

“Well, isn’t that convenient? The school must have a rule forbidding teachers from instructing a spouse. Let’s fix this.”

She gives her head a sharp shake and her eyes turn to liquid. “It’s complicated, but please don’t—”

I pump my hands so she doesn’t release the waterworks. Call me callous, but I can’t handle it when women cry. Then again, I haven’t felt anything in a long time so maybe I should watch a nature video on baby pandas. They’re cute.

Then I recall the delicate nature of the wedding. Jimmy mentioned something about Everly’s health and my insurance was part of the package. I promised no one would know about it. So far, I’ve kept my word.

As though reading my mind she says, “The first rule of Marriage of Convenience Club is we don’t talk about Marriage of Convenience Club, understand?” she says, transforming from confused and fearful to in command of her class of one.

Having watched the Fight Club movie she borrows the concept of rules from numerous times with my brother, I get the reference. I nod once and lower into the chair opposite her at a long wooden table.

“Welcome to Blancbourg Academy d’Etiquette.” Her tone turns polite and professional, if not a little wooden like she’s delivering lines in a live-action role-play of her life.

Lately, it’s like I’m slowly turning into a robot, trading in whatever makes me a sentient human with feelings—both physical and emotional—into a human cyborg made of metal and computer chips. I know when I’m supposed to smile and experience emotion, but it doesn’t come. I probably need a system update.

Everly skims the contents of a folder—likely outlining my most recent crime. “Please explain what brings you here, Mr. Adams.”

I wonder almost the same thing, but about her. I didn’t think I’d ever see Mrs. Adams again. What are the chances that we’d travel halfway around the world only to end up in the same room? But remembering the first rule of Marriage of Convenience Club, I know that’s not what she’s asking.

“Error in judgment,” I answer simply.

“Is that something you do often?” With her thumb, she spins the thin gold ring on her fourth finger almost like a nervous habit.

My eyes drift over hers. I would’ve been struck dumb had they not already been imprinted in my mind. It was hard enough watching her full lips

to say, *I do*. She's gorgeous. In another life, I would've been interested and asked her on a date. That's how normal people start things like marriage, right? But nothing about me has been normal since I lost Bran.

At last, I answer her question. "Do I often have lapses in judgment? Nope." Not lately. A few years ago, my answer would've been different, the whole thing with my ex, for instance. Not getting married, not being a better father.

"But you and three other men on your football team decided it would be entertaining to moon a fellow player along with several others, including the commissioner?"

I press my lips together, the whiskers on my beard digging into the scar hidden there. "That wasn't the intention."

How could I explain the pranks? The team comradery? The other guys that are almost, but not quite, like brothers? Or the fact that I essentially go through life in a permanent state of sleepwalking, except when on the field?

The cyborg inside counters, "If you're asking as my coach, my actual coach already reprimanded me. If you're nagging me as my wife, save it."

Her nostrils flare. "Second rule of Marriage of Convenience Club is we don't talk about Marriage of Convenience Club."

With an exhale, I say, "Right."

"You understand that your actions have consequences?" she asks.

"Moon-gate, #BruiserButt, or whatever they're calling it was a split second of idiocy that backfired—"

Her lips curve as she holds back a laugh.

"Pun not intended."

"Of course. This isn't a joke and there's nothing funny about four grown men exposing their backsides to the world." She straightens the papers from the file and then fusses with the scarf around her neck as though suppressing laughter.

"It had the unfortunate result of bringing more press to the Boston Bruisers, an already legendary team, but what happens in the team lounge is supposed to stay in the team lounge. Believe me, I don't want to be here." I clear my throat, realizing how harsh I must sound. "But I am and I guess there's no getting out of it."

With a slim smile, she says, "Are you ready to get started? Ready to change your life?"

Her lips should be the furthest thing from my mind, but I cannot deny that

with each word she speaks, it's hard not to think about the kiss on our wedding day.



## GREY



*M*ooning the new player for the Bruisers wasn't my idea, but it had been my choice, which landed me in this opulent manor which may as well be a classed-up detention hall. I hate being confined and told what to do. I'd rather be on the field or in a field on the little corner of Isle Royale that's been in my family for almost a century. But I have to go along with the commissioner and coach's punishment.

Marrying the woman across the table from me hadn't been my idea either, but I'd agreed, and here I am.

My brother would just tell me to follow orders. I sense the cold presence of Bran's dog tags against my chest. During football games and practices, I've taken plenty of hits to the head, back, legs, and parts of my body I didn't even realize could feel pain, but nothing is as bad as not feeling anything.

Everly sits across from me, waiting for me to reply again.

*Am I ready?*

Her brow is smooth, placid. Her green eyes are focused, but hidden behind them, what I glimpsed on our wedding day, is something else, something deeper, something I recognize by name only.

Pain and loss.

When I slid the ring on her finger, I had the silly thought that two hearts seek each other out to become one, not whole which is something else, but to become something new together. I dismissed the idea then and again right now because there's little more than a hard stone beating in my chest.

I've let my lack of being fully human ruin me appearance-wise. Stopped shaving, cutting my hair, and doing anything to take care of myself other than working out. Football is all I have. On the other hand, despite whatever

Everly had gone through, she preserved her beauty with her feminine features, full lips, and shiny hair.

“You ready?” she repeats.

She’d also asked, *Ready to change your life?* Do I have a choice?

Bran would say, *Buck up. Follow orders. Soldier on.*

He was always the good son, brother, friend, and warrior. So was I, once upon a time. But I cannot fathom how I’ll ever wake up from this cold reality I inhabit.

At last, I grunt in response to Everly’s question.

It’s the best I can muster as I have a mini-battle inside between the dying version of myself and the fragments of the former me that continue to fight for self-preservation and connection.

“Wonderful,” she says brightly. “I’m going to teach you to offer everyone you come across the best version of yourself, teach you to rise to whatever occasions you encounter, and to be gracious even when you’re inclined to offer the opposite.”

“I’m pretty sure you memorized that from the contents of the file.”

“Face it ‘til you ace it,” she singsongs.

“Do you mean fake it ‘til you make it?”

“I meant to swap the letter *K* for *C*. No one likes fake, Mr. Adams.”

I’ve been faking my way through life for the last several months and am doing just fine. Faking that I’m okay. Faking that I’ve moved on. Faking that I dropped the ball when it came to my son’s care and well-being. Faking that I’m not married. Granted, I haven’t so much as spoken to another woman who’s not my mother since marrying Everly, but I don’t think there’s much real about me left.

“Face the failure, the misfortune, the financial ruin. Face the pain.” Surprising strength backs Everly’s otherwise soft and sunny presence.

But I’m a storm cloud and reply, “How’s that working out for you?”

“Like a charm, sir.” As if she knows the exact game of obstinance I’m playing, she wears her sunny smile but twists the ring on her finger.

Face it ‘til you ace it is a trite cliché and couldn’t possibly penetrate the hurricane I’m in. Not that I’ve bothered trying, but none of that will change the outcome. Bran will still be gone.

I can think of plenty of instances when I gave people my worst, turned my back on opportunities, and received grace instead of offering it. I’m not proud of that, but Everly is talking about thriving when I’m barely surviving.

I don't think changing letters around in words will turn rock into muscle tissue and resume the ticking of my heart.

"Here at Blancbourg, we offer full-spectrum image improvement along with personal and professional relations makeovers. We'll pinpoint the specific areas that you need to work on and go from there. Sound good?"

No, it sounds terrible, but I won't rain on her positivity parade.

I grunt.

She takes out a pen and notebook from her purse. "Please tell me a bit about yourself."

Ironic that my wife knows nothing about me. Does she want a bio? Vitals? Height, weight? Football stats? I have no idea where to start or what to say.

At my silence, she makes a note on a page in her notebook.

I lean in, curious about what she wrote.

Like a seesaw, she leans back, taking her notebook with her. "It's important for me to take stock of where you're at so I know where to go. We'll custom-tailor all of your lessons to highlight your strengths and transform your weaknesses, but I can't help you if I don't know anything about you."

I grunt. It's my usual response even though she isn't the usual speaker. Something about Everly, or this peculiar situation, transfixes me. The way her lips move. The way she touches the ends of her hair over her shoulder. The way she holds the pen. A real husband would know all these fine details and what they mean. My brow furrows.

"You do realize that in order for me to give the headmistress here at Blancbourg, along with your commissioner and coach, a favorable review, indicating that you passed the program, you have to speak and interact. This isn't a case where you can pull on your helmet and zone out."

I'd rather be on the field. Anywhere but in this pressure cooker collision of my past and present. I grunt again because I'm afraid of what nastiness will spill out if I open my mouth—how unfair and stupid and unreasonable this is.

She sighs, steaming ahead. "It's my understanding that we'll begin our time here at the school, then I'll shadow you for several weeks in your regular environment. After our time together, you'll be tested and attend The First Annual Boston Bruisers Charity Ball."

"The first thing you should know about me is I don't say much and prefer



to be an observer. The second thing is I don't suffer fools or take any nonsense." My voice is like tires on gravel.

"But you'll dish it out?" she challenges me and points at a moon-gate article clipping in her folder. The backsides of my teammates Declan, Wolf, Chase, and me blur but are still there for all the world to see.

I grunt.

"Is there a third thing?" she asks.

Probably, but I don't answer.

"We'll start simple. Full name, please."

"It's on the marriage license," I blurt.

"Third rule of Marriage of Convenience Club—"

"I'm not going to fight you, Everly."

She pauses at the sound of her name as if surprised I remembered it.

"Aren't you already?"

I scrub my hand over my face. "Greyson Harris Adams."

She writes it down. "Date of birth?"

"June seventeenth," I add the year as an afterthought.

"That means you'll be turning forty soon," she says cheerfully.

I don't want to think about celebrating without Bran—birthdays were our thing. The only thing that keeps me from going into the shadows is the upturn of Everly's lips as if cheered by the idea of a birthday.

"What about you?"

"What about me what?" she asks as though confused.

"Name, date of birth, all that."

"This doesn't work both ways, Mr. Adams," she says, reminding me of her position as coach and me as the client.

"Is that a rule?"

Wearing a slim smile, instead of answering, she grunts as if mimicking me then continues down the line of questions.

After the interview, Everly slides a sheet of paper across the table outlining an itinerary for the week. "My phone number is on there if you have any questions or need me for any reason. We'll be together most of the time, but if you're in a situation that you're not sure how to navigate, have to reply to an email and don't know what to say, or need anything else, please don't hesitate to reach out."

Need her? Not likely.

Want her? No comment.

But I can't have her. Never. Not even if we're married.

However, I can't help but worry that our secret is tempted to sneak out of its hiding place.



# EVERLY



Day one is done and the Cookie Dough Diary sees a lot of ink as I rant about Greyson Harris Adams. When I set my pen down, the pages flutter and I spot the Viking I drew on the airplane. It's hard to deny he shares an uncanny likeness with the man I drew earlier while asking Grey about himself.

At one point, our hands brushed and I still tingle all over. Inside and out. Top to bottom. Yes, even my lips, bringing the kissituation vibrantly, vividly to mind.

Strange getting to know your husband by interviewing him, asking about his statistics and hobbies.

Don't even get me started about how grumpy, gruff, and grouchy he is. He could be holding a baby, surrounded by puppies, and eating ice cream and he'd still have a scowl on his face. I'm not sure who or what bit him on the butt, but I'm not his biggest fan, cheerleading his grumpiness.

Then again, he's probably just mad that he got in trouble for #BruiserButt and is stuck here with me instead of doing whatever Viking raiders do during their time off.

Eat those grisly-looking turkey legs? Drink flagons of mead? Sharpen their axes?

To be clear, even though Grey is a beast of a man, he doesn't scare me. While there's nothing gentle about him, he's not like Todd who has vampire-like qualities, and I don't mean the Edward Cullen kind. Then again, I was more of a Team Jacob gal myself.

My stomach remains in knots at the steady stream of Todd's harassing texts, demanding we get married. Complaining about how we let everyone

down. Questions about what to do with the gifts.

I'm tempted to reply that he should've thought about that when he shackled up with the sidepiece, but restrain myself. Contacting him would be like inviting said vampire into my life and I recently used up the last of my stash of garlic and wooden stakes.

Journaling about my unusual day and reunion with my husband, now a client, doesn't do anything to quiet the repetitive thought that these circumstances are beyond bizarre.

Despite my background in life coaching, which I studied to increase myself as an asset at my old job, I can't reconcile today's encounter. It doesn't make sense. The tools for how to handle it don't exist because I can't think of any case studies where a man and woman secretly get married for reasons of convenience, don't ever expect to see each other again, and then are forced to work together, she as a coach and he as the client.

The resources don't exist. I'm flying solo on this one, just when I thought I finally landed—a new life, a new job, and I could use some new clothes because my suitcase still isn't here.

I could also go for some cookie dough comfort right about now.

The manor is vast with labyrinthine halls lined with oil paintings in heavy frames, sconces glowing on the walls, and plush carpet upstairs that gives way to marble on the lower level. I got lost a few times today, which is fitting, considering my situation.

There's a kitchen where an in-house chef prepares meals, as well as an employee lounge with sofas, tables, and a kitchenette. I consider borrowing ingredients so I can make myself some happiness in a bowl.

Through the window, the moon rises over the mountain view in the distance. It's just after nine pm. The shops in the village close early, but it's probably not too late for me to see what I can scrounge up downstairs.

This place is way too fancy for my dress with the daisies, but it's all I have for now. I slip on the silly magenta ballet flats and pad down the hall. During the day, the manor is inviting in its opulent way, but after sunset, I'm not going to lie, I get goosebumps.

The faux candles in the sconces flicker on the walls. The building's creaks and groans make my skin pebble with goosebumps. I could use a Ghostbuster or Grey as a backup. But cookies call and after a few wrong turns, I find my way to the massive kitchen and flick on a light.

Phew! Nothing but a vast space with stainless steel work tables and state-

of-the-art appliances that contrast with the otherwise antique and classic style of the manor.

I don't know what Cateline will say if she finds me down here, but I'll replace whatever ingredients I use and ply her with a bowl of cookie dough. No one has ever been able to resist my recipe. Then again, she seems more of a chocolate kind of gal, the darker the better.

"Come to me, cookie dough ingredients," I say, wiggling my fingers.

It takes me about ten minutes to find what I'm looking for, which isn't exactly the typical roster of flour, baking soda, and sugar. There's a secret ingredient. Wink. Wink.

After mixing up the batch, I decide to head to the teacher's lounge, hoping maybe some of the other coaches are there and we can swap stories and strategize, because if the rest of the guys are anything like Grey, they too have their hands full.

It's spooky in here at night, so with the bowl in hand, I hurry through the halls like the floor is lava and I don't want to catch Slimer's attention.

The teacher's lounge is dark and empty, reminding me this isn't the college dorm where I'll find people hanging out at all hours. Technically, it's not even late. My grandmother, in her elder years, lived in a community residence and they'd play canasta until midnight. I bet Goodie is up. I could text her, but have been avoiding my phone because Todd won't leave me alone.

The house we bought together is still for sale, and in case he finds a heart beating in his chest and wants to slip me a twenty, I refrain from blocking him. But don't be fooled, my finger hovers over those aggressive red letters B-L-O-C-K every time his name scrolls across my screen.

And yes, a twenty-dollar bill would be great, and I wouldn't say no to twenty thousand or my portion of the down payment either.

Once upon a time, I was a successful business consultant. Respected in my field. I also had in my possession a beautiful wardrobe, a five-step skin care system routine, and discretionary spending money for things like coffee and cookie dough supplies. Then along came the Spider. That's what he's called in the business world. My father is the Ice King. Yeah, I sure know how to pick them. Although, I guess I didn't pick Draven Lefevre, a former top hockey player in the NHL turned metal magnate, to be my father.

In a word, the man is cold. Yeah, as ice. I said it.

He was the king of distant and dismissive. Meanwhile, I did everything I

could to get his attention.

Colored on the walls with crayons? Check

Pretended I was a puppy at the princess party? Check

Ran away with the circus? Check

Dressed up as Darth Vader and serenaded the lunch room? Check

Backflips on ice skates? Check

Rainbow Bright hair? Check

Questionable boyfriends? Check

When none of that worked and a vat of homebrewed kombucha exploded in the kitchen, I decided to switch tactics and be the good girl. I improved my grades. Attended Dad's alma mater, not that the star hockey player had much affinity for class when he was a student, but they sure like the alumni support. I yes sir'ed myself into nearly making the biggest mistake of my life when he proposed I marry Todd. Yes, the Ice King all but sent me out the door with a dowry in the name of a smart business partnership.

I poke around in the teacher's lounge, hoping to find a "Grab and Garb" box like we had in the college dorm. Students could donate clothes they no longer wanted and others could take something they did, but had to leave something in return.

Though, college is well behind me as I approach thirty. This setting reminds me of living on campus with the student and teacher element, though I guess the roles are reversed.

A *thump* and a *bump* sound from what I think is the other side of the wall and I jump. If this place is haunted, am I safer here out in the open where someone will find me, or am I better off in my room?

Being frozen with indecision is nothing new. I've been told that I overthink, overlove, overcare, overanalyze, and overstress. And when I do make a decision, I often question its sensibility in hindsight. I also tend to oversleep and overeat, hence the Cookie Dough Diary where I can digest my thoughts, feelings, fears, and confusion.

This prompts my decision and I opt to head back to my room where I can sketch until I process this strange feeling of unreality of having met my husband here at Blancbourg.

I grew up in a cold, modern home of my father's design. Unlike the classic style of the manor with corniced ceilings, wood and wallpaper, oil paintings and antiques along with low lighting, it was metal and glass.

If ghosts were real, a wraith would haunt my father's home. This place

has more headless horseman vibes.

Dipping my finger into the bowl for a bite of dough for fortification, as I turn the corner, a shadow, low on the wall, flickers. I go still because *ghosts!* It's small at first but grows until it looms like a giant raccoon stalking through the forest on its way to rummage through the campground trash cans.

Then a large man with broad shoulders, a beard, and wild hair comes into focus.

From what I've seen, ordinarily, Grey walks like a man who knows where he's going and who he is. He can handle himself and me, as it turns out. But right now, he looks lost. Haggard. Like he's sleepwalking or pacing around because he can't sleep.

"What are you doing up?" he asks.

"I'd rather have it be a raccoon," I mutter.

"What?"

"Never mind. What are you doing up?" I counter.

Today, being around these football players is like visiting a city where everything is taller than you, crowding the sky. All I can do is look up.

On my way to Grey's eyes, I lock on his lips, waiting for him to answer. Obviously. I'm not thinking about the kiss situation. Probably.

He doesn't answer, but his gaze dims in the low light, telling a story. I see an ache trying to burn its way through a wall he built as a buffer to keep emotion out and emptiness in.

Why would someone do that? Because in the short term, it's easier to deal with than pain.

He glances down at me, glancing up at him. His eyes float to my lips. His were the last I kissed.

A list builds in my mind—yes, I need some clothing and bath products, but it has to do with the kiss. Perhaps, if I write a pros and cons list of the kiss, I'll be able to stop thinking about it and get through the next thirty days.

"I'll trade you some kissy dough for a T-shirt."

Grey's head snaps to the side. "What?"

As my cheeks heat to three hundred and fifty degrees as if preparing to cook the cookie dough, I hold up the bowl. "I said *cookie* dough. Sheesh. What did you think I said?"

He scrubs his hand down his face. "Never mind and no thank you."

"But I will take a shirt."

"Like a Bruisers shirt? Want me to sign it too?" His tone suggests he'll do



no such thing.

“No, Sir Grumps-a-lot. I don’t want your signature, I already got the ring.” I hold up my hand and twinkle my fingers.

His expression turns prehistoric. Pure stone from the center of the earth.

“Apparently, you do not find that funny. Fair enough. I need a shirt to sleep in.” I explain about my luggage being lost.

His broad shoulders, always held at attention like he was once in the military, drop on a sigh. He turns back the way he came and calls softly over his shoulder. “Come on.”

I follow Grey down one of the many hallways in this manor—the place is a maze. We reach a wooden door almost identical to mine.

“Be right back.” He goes inside.

“I’ll wait right here then,” I say to the door as it closes inches from my nose.

Note to self: instruct Grumpy-pants, er, Grumpy-shirt, about accessway customs.

When Grey returns, a moment later, he passes me a T-shirt. “This okay?”

Like a little weirdo, I bring it to my nose and inhale.

“What are you—?”

Inhaling his fresh split wood scent was a mistake because my voice gets all raspy when I say, “Just making sure it’s clean.”

“I wouldn’t give you a dirty shirt. I’m not some kind of caveman.”

“Could have fooled me,” I say with a smile.

The comment prompts the vision of Grey doing domestic, normal, and everyday things, which is at odds with his Viking appearance. And, not going to lie, it’s hot, like this oven is on the fritz hot. The heat from the pair of ovens occupying my cheeks travels through the rest of my body.

“You good?” he asks.

“Oh yeah, great. Just...baking, thinking.” A sigh spills out of me as I look dreamily into the distance.

“I should be sleeping.”

“Mmhm. Me too.” But gazing up at Grey, backlit by the soft light in his room, I have a feeling I’ll be dreaming of a domestic Viking, who after splitting wood, comes in and sorts his mixed colors warrior-wear for the washing tub.

Leaning in the doorway with his arms folded, he says, “Night.”

But gazes locked, neither one of us move. I’m recalling the light

streaming through the windows in the courthouse. The smudge on the wedding officiant's eyeglasses. Grey's heavy hands in mine and the exact moment when I met his eyes.

Much like now, our gazes hold as if we're both asking whether we are actually going through with the marriage of convenience. And much like now, neither one of us backs away.

When the words, *You may kiss*, met my ears, there was no question.

Grey and I are physically in a similar position now, facing each other. All I'd have to do is lift onto my tip toes. He'd close the space between us. Our lips would press together in less than a breath.

It's like we both dance with desire, temptation, and the lingering memory of the kissituation.

But neither of us makes a move in any direction. The building creaks, snapping me out of my trance. The corner of my lip lifts when I see just how heavy Grey's eyes are, focused on me, no doubt mirroring my thoughts.

Or it could be jet lag.

At last, when I turn to leave, I expect to hear the door close, but he remains there, watching me walk away.

Over my shoulder, I say, "Sweet dreams, Viking."



# EVERLY



Despite the settling sounds the manor makes, which are decidedly unsettling—I'm pretty sure a house can't crack its knuckles, which that's exactly what I hear as I try to fall asleep. I toss and turn in bed.

The scene in the hallway fills my mind. Grey's woodsy scent on the shirt that I wear fills my nose. And I'm all out of cookie dough, otherwise, it would fill my mouth instead of memories of our wedding day kiss.

Taking out my diary, across the top, I write *The Kiss List: The pros and cons of kissing my husband*. As we stood there, it felt like we might kiss again...or at least we were both thinking of the original one. I'm a save-the-best-for-last kind of gal, so I start with the cons column. In it goes:

- We married for convenience
- I don't want to risk my job
- Shouldn't rush into anything since I'm fresh off the runaway bride train
- We established some rules, but not for this
- I'm notoriously terrible at keeping secrets
- The risk of things not working out between us (my heart is a bit fragile at the *mo*)

As for the pros column, I write:

- Kissing Grey on our wedding day was the kiss that ruined all other kisses for me

- I light up when he touches me and could power a small city if we were to kiss again—I consider this a public service
- He smells so good and all I want is to get closer to the scent like a hound dog
- It would be cruel not to satisfy the giddy butterflies inside my tummy
- The increase in my heart rate is probably good for my cardiovascular health
- Despite all the ways we're opposites, when we kissed, we connected and it felt like we were made for each other

Thoughts down on paper, I finally fall asleep and my dreams are Viking cookie dough delicious.



The next morning, I wake to a sunny day, ready to take on Grey and what's sure to be his cloudy weather.

We meet for a formal breakfast so he can practice his table manners. Unfortunately, I'm still wearing the daisy sundress and pink metallic flats so it doesn't take me long to get ready, but I expect him to be late.

However, I find the man seated at the table with the white linen cloth reading the newspaper. It's the sports section, but still, it's surprisingly civilized.

"Good morning," I say brightly.

He grunts. Instead of putting down the newspaper, he turns the page.

I frown, considering last night I thought maybe we'd connected.

I'm all too familiar with this kind of greeting, but I can't exactly stomp my feet and have a temper tantrum because I want his attention. Been there. Done that. Doesn't work. At least not with men like my father or, at least it seems, Greyson Adams.

"I can't hire an interpreter, so starting today, I'm going to create a book of translations to decode your responses. A grunt is an acknowledgment. Whether it's a yes or a no, it's not clear."

Grey doesn't so much as chuckle.

“Next, a snort is laughter or derision. A groan might mean disappointment. Let’s see, then there’s the growl, which, let’s be honest, is intense. Are there any other sounds I should be aware of? Do you speak another language besides Cro magnum man?”

This elicits a grunt, which he follows with, “I speak some Norwegian.”

“I’m fluent in French, thanks to my father’s French Canadian heritage, but I am not versed in your animal sounds.”

He snorts.

I can’t say this is progress.

“So, what’s on the menu this morning?” I’m asking Grey, but Arthur steps forward, offering a variety of menu options. I ask about Britta’s recovery, Goodie’s visit, and thank him again for the cookies.

“Hmm. By any chance, do you have waffle cones?”

“We serve waffles on Wednesdays, miss.”

“I’m in the mood for a waffle cone with coffee ice cream.” I end up resorting to my age-old attention-grabbing tactics that failed on my father, but have to give it the old college try, right?

Arthur’s expression pinches with distress at my breakfast choice. Still shielded by the newspaper wall, I do a little wink-head nudge to indicate Arthur go along with my charade.

He nods as if catching on to my approach with the reform school student.

“Or I could go for some chocolate cake.”

“For breakfast?” a gruff voice says from behind a headline about American football players mooning their superiors.

I make a thoughtful little *hmm* sound, considering it.

“That’s not a balanced breakfast,” Grey says, appalled.

“If you think about it, a fried pancake slathered in butter and liquid sugar maple syrup isn’t either.”

“Pancakes are garbage food.”

I blink a few times, unsure I heard him correctly. “You don’t like pancakes?”

“I didn’t say I dislike them. I don’t approve of them.”

“Are you some kind of monster?”

He grunts.

“What are you having for breakfast?” I ask.

Before he answers, Arthur brings out a plate topped with stacked layers of what looks like sourdough toast, sliced turkey, baby spinach, mashed

avocado, and poached eggs. I wrinkle my nose.

Arthur asks, "Anything else, sir?"

"Do you have hot sauce?"

"May I please have some hot sauce?" I correct.

Grey's lips remain fastened in a thin and defiant line.

Arthur scuttles away, probably in search of hot sauce and a poking stick in case Grey gets ornery. My mémé, who lived outside Quebec City, used to walk five miles a day, weather permitting. She'd always carry a stick in case a *mouffette* (that's the stinky, black-and-white critter) got any wild ideas.

"Also, you were supposed to wait for me to order your breakfast." I put on a little pout.

"I was hungry." To my shock and surprise, Grey says a quiet blessing over his food.

"You spend too much time alone and have forgotten, or never learned, how to behave."

"My mother would take offense."

"I'm sure she's a lovely woman and would appreciate that I'm reminding her son not to eat like a savage bandit who just stole a whole chicken and is eating it raw."

"You paint a grisly picture."

"Lose your appetite?" I chuckle.

He wipes his fingers and straightens. "I'm not alone too much. I'm with the guys on the team all the time."

"Might I remind you that you're all *here*?"

I take his grunt to mean touché. Ha! Score for Team Everly.

Arthur drops off the hot sauce and hurries back to the safety of the sideboard table in the corner.

Despite my gentle coaching, Grey proceeds to inhale his breakfast like it might be his last meal. Never mind about the win. I didn't realize that part comes with the caveman package—patent-pending, batteries not included.

I pump my hands. "Mr. Adams, slow down. I don't want you to choke."

Fork lifted halfway to his mouth, he asks, "No?"

"No. I'm not sure I can wrap my arms around you if I need to give you the Heimlich."

He cuts his pace by a third and is done by the time my waffle with a scoop of vanilla ice cream arrives. It's not my favorite, but it's close enough and I thank Arthur profusely.

I drizzle it with syrup, but only because I sense it'll annoy Grey. I did say I don't want him to choke but never mentioned anything about not wanting to be a little itch that he can't scratch, at least until he starts cooperating.

Done with breakfast and the newspaper, he sets it and his plate aside. "So, what's next?"

"After I'm done eating my delicious meal, we're going on a field trip."

"Where?"

"It's a surprise."

"Why?"

"Because sometimes life throws us a party, only instead of candy in the pinata, we realize we've been whacking a wasps' nest," I mutter that last part. He grunts.

"Does that mean you understand or did I just throw you a curveball?"

"Football."

"Football what?" I ask, growing increasingly irritated by his single-word side of the conversation.

"I play football. A curveball is a baseball term."

"Ah, so he does have command of the English language." If Cateline were a fly on the wall, she'd buzz past and scold me for not teaching through example and demonstrating my manners. But Grey is a particularly tough customer, so I need to pour on the tough love.

Of course, he grunts.

"I don't care what sports ball we're talking about, did you catch my meaning?"

Grunt.

"Grunt, grunt, grunt. Okay, Grunt Guy, we're going to try again. Let's attempt a civilized and polite conversation. One you'd have in mixed company. For example, say you were seated at the table with Commissioner Starkowsky, his daughter Elyse, and the officials."

"I see you did your homework."

"Read the newspaper article while you used it as a shield."

"A shield?" he snorts.

Which I take as progress, because it's not a grunt.

"I was tracking the stocks," he says.

"In the International News section? Anyway, back to our scenario. You're at the table with the people you mooned."

"You forgot Brandon."



“Okay, he’s here too in this scenario.”

“And you?” he asks.

“Am I here? For our purposes today, let’s say yes. I’m seated at the head of the table, atop a throne,” I say the last part with a theatrical flourish if only to see whether he’ll break his fast on frowning.

Grey rests his forearms on the table and clasps his hands. “First, I’d tell the commish that he made the wrong decision to send us here.”

My eyebrows lift. “I was thinking more along the lines of starting with a neutral topic like the weather.”

“Then I’d remind the officials that they’re paying for this.” He points his finger in the air and gives it a little spin to indicate Blancbourg.

“Asking about their families is a more appropriate topic of conversation,” I suggest.

“I’d apologize to Elyse, but I’m well aware of what she did in the locker room three seasons ago.”

“I was going to say now we’re getting somewhere, but we all make mistakes and that sounds more like something to bring up privately.”

“Brandon would get an earful because he should not have snapped the photo. If he’s the one who leaked it to the press, I’d consider snapping one of his fingers.”

I wince.

“I’m kidding. I want him to be at his best for the season, but putting a little fear into him will keep him on his toes.”

“Does that really work?”

“It really does. But I also plan to take time with him during preseason so he’s game ready. I do that with all our new players, especially the younger ones.”

“Well, aren’t you the dangerous gentleman.”

Leaning back in his chair, Grey wears the faintest smirk, almost undetectable, beneath his beard. He laces his hands behind his head.

“And what about me? What would you say to me?” I ask.

Grey watches me eat for a long moment, then he says, “I’d tell you that you have the diet of an unsupervised child.”

I sputter and am at risk of needing an abdominal thrust, but thankfully, the ice cream washes the bite of waffle down. I contemplate what to say while I take careful and slow bites, chewing each one at least twenty times.

Unfortunately, an edge piece of waffle I had balanced on my fork because

it had the perfect amount of ice cream drops onto my dress. Right on the part I don't want anyone to notice. I should've worn my mother's scarf, but then it would've gotten syrup on it.

"Oops. Are you going to drink the rest of your water? I should probably spot-treat this."

Grey looks at his glass like he's been walking across a parched desert for a week then slides it my way.

"Thank you." I dab at what I hope doesn't become a stain.

"Didn't you wear that yesterday?" Grey asks.

"How nice of you to notice. Why yes, I did." I plaster on a fake, fake, fake smile.

"You have the wardrobe of a teenager."

I'm not obsessed with clothing or appearances but have, throughout my life, looked relatively put together and stylish. Heidi's hand-me-downs were a necessity and it's hard not to feel the sting of Grey's comment. But I remind myself I am here to correct his beastly ways. "Hmm. True and you have a mouth your mother should wash out with soap." I never said I was perfect and above slapping him back with some banter.

"Leave my mother out of this," he grinds out.

"Stop insulting my food and clothing choices, meanie." Admittedly, he's not wrong about my breakfast selection, but the outfit situation was based on necessity and the stupid airline lost my stuff.

"Grow up," he says.

I audibly gasp. "Okay, old man. I'll do that just as soon as you do, he who showed the world his backside."

"I'm not old. I'm in my late thirties."

"I'm in my late twenties and am enjoying life, including this waffle with delicious melty ice cream." I zig and zag my fork like an out-of-control airplane.

"And you still eat cookie dough."

"I love cookie dough and brownies and all the foods you probably don't let yourself eat."

"If you haven't noticed, I'm a professional athlete and what I put in my body matters."

"If you haven't noticed I'm actually happy. Where I live, it's sunny. The birds are chirping. I smile and laugh and occasionally eat ice cream for breakfast. I'm alive." Yes, I'm happy in general. Or I would be if my

husband and I hadn't just had our first argument, but I don't say that because of our Marriage of Convenience Club rules.

His eyes flash and go dark. "You don't know anything about me, Everly. Anyway, why should you care?"

My heart pinches because it's obvious he's masking pain of some sort. A wound, a hole. Emptiness. Yes, that's what it is. Something is missing in his life.

Maybe it's a coincidence that Grey and I were brought back together, or perhaps because I got a second chance after my health trouble, I can show him what it's like to heal and really live.

Taking a deep breath, I say, "Greyson, I didn't pay for a subscription to the Grump on Demand Network, yet that's what I got. Lucky for you, there was a company merger and I'm bringing the sunshine. Cue the lights, the music, and the sparkle hands."

I wave and wiggle my fingers but don't so much as get a grunt, a snort, or a ghost of a grin from behind his beard. And yet, I cannot tear my eyes from his lips, reminding me, once more, of the kissituation.



## GREY



*B*efore leaving Boston, I played phone tag with Ted Brown and his assistant Nancy. As soon as I get to my suite, I get a call back.

“Grey, it’s Ted. Good news or bad news first?”

“Is any of it good news?” I mutter.

“Bad news first to soften the blow. You do indeed need to be married in order to obtain custody.”

“And what’s the good news?”

“That you get to be married.”

How is that good news? But I don’t ask because likely he’ll have the same answer as Hammer when he gushed over Marsha. I can’t imagine being married to someone like the coach, Ted... or me. Gross. Even if you’re as slick as Declan or a charmer like Chase, peel back the outer layer and it’s all hair, sweat, and bone. Nothing soft or sweet. My mother used to sing a rhyme to Bran and me about snakes, snails, and puppy dog tails. That’s what little boys are made out of. Men too.

Why a woman would want to be with a beast like me is unfathomable.

“Ted, I have some news for you too.” I clear my throat. “I am married.”

“Ha ha. Married to football. I know. And I have my money on you this season. But married to a woman, legally, in this country.”

“The problem right now is that I’m out of the country.”

“Well, you have one week to get your #BruiserButt back here, say I do, and claim custody.”

I swipe my fingers through my hair and they tangle. “You heard about that too?”

“I was ready to run interference if necessary.”

“Thanks. But I am married. True story.”

“Crazy weekend in Vegas? What happens there, stays there. Amiright?”

“You’re not wrong, but, um, I’m actually married to, um, a woman.”

“Well, that’s lucky. Any chance she wants to be a mother?”

“Status pending.”

“Well, *unpend* all statuses and get me a legal copy of your marriage license.”

“How soon do you need it?”

“Yesterday.”

A shaky breath escapes. “I’ll figure it out.”

“I know you will, Grey. That’s why you’re the best player in the NFL. Now, go get ‘em, tiger.”

If only it were going to be that easy. Nonetheless, a plan forms in my mind, involving getting my son back with my cousin taking care of him temporarily until I return to Michigan. As my wife repeatedly said, The first rule of the Marriage of Convenience Club is you do not talk about Marriage of Convenience Club.

Hands hammocked behind my head, I flop back onto the bed. I could use a snooze, but my mind whirs with this strange turn of events. I repeatedly land on our wedding day. It was surreal as the officiant said our names, pronouncing us husband and wife.

But the kiss was very real and I cannot stop thinking about it whenever I’m in the same room as Everly. It doesn’t help that her lips are soft, pink, and plump.

Suddenly, I’m craving cookie dough and wondering what she looks like in my T-shirt. She wished me sweet dreams the other night when I couldn’t sleep because the void threatened to swallow me up.

However, right now, if I close my eyes, I think I’ll get those sweet dream wishes after all.



Two days into my time at Blancbourg, I’ve obeyed the first and second rules of the Marriage of Convenience Club by simply not speaking much. It’s not hard for me to do, but that also means that I haven’t had a good opening to

ask Everly if she happens to have a copy of the marriage license on hand. Mine is on Isle Royale, probably. I didn't take great pains to keep track of it because I figured it would be in the paper shredder before the year was out.

After consulting the daily etiquette school itinerary, the next item of business is a makeover. When it comes to my appearance, my routine involves running my fingers through my hair, making sure there aren't crumbs in my beard, and calling it good.

It wasn't always this way, but when it seems like almost everyone you love is ripped from your life, looking put together becomes less of a priority, and keeping it together moves to the front.

Everly mentioned a lifestyle makeover, but the location indicates I have to go to *The Salon* on the lower level. Checking my watch, I only have five minutes until the appointment.

I smooth my hand down my giant beard, well aware of the scar it hides. Is the Blancbourg Academy preparing me for a live appearance on a talk show? An interview? A dating competition? Bran would always tease me, saying I was the next eligible candidate for one of those bachelor contests because of my good looks, but they've been swallowed up by what my mother would call a hobo beard on my face and a mop of hair on my head.

Walking past a floor-to-ceiling mirror, I glimpse my long stride and ignore my stringy hair and face hidden behind the beard. Bran would say I look like a feral dog with mange. He wouldn't be wrong.

While he was the good brother, I had been the good-*looking* brother. At least, that's what he would say. Maybe he was trying to gas me up. I'll never know. However, we looked so much alike, we'd sometimes be mistaken for twins—handsome, strong, over six feet with broad shoulders, and big hands. Dad made good use of splitting and stacking logs. We had the chiseled features of our Scandinavian ancestors—well, I do under my beard.

Everly, as bright as ever, waits outside the door. Today, she's dressed in a pair of leggings with a cosmic background and cats riding on slices of pizza and a tiny vintage T-shirt with a boy band emblazoned across the front. I imagine her cornering a teenager at the mall and demanding they give up the goods.

It's quite the ensemble, but I'm starting to expect nothing less from the woman who happens to be my wife. I also can't help but think about her sleeping in my T-shirt. It's so big, she probably swims in the thing.

“Good morning, Mr. Adams.”

I grunt as usual.

“Not a morning person?”

Grunt.

“Grey the Grump.” She holds out a paper cup of coffee. “I’m guessing you need some caffeine to get the gears going. I noticed you take a splash of milk, no sugar.”

I take it and offer a grunty thanks. Our hands brush. I expect a sensation, but there’s still only cold stone inside. Nothing lights under my skin. Well, maybe a little bit of warmth kindles, but that brings the risk of feeling more, which I want to avoid, because what happens if I leave the void? I fear a rush of emotion will crush me like a full-team tackle.

“Cranky?”

I take a sip of the coffee and grunt.

“I was today too before I had my morning waffle cone with ice cream. Coffee flavor striped with dark chocolate, if you’re wondering.”

I grunt, unsure if she’s serious or making a joke.

Everly sucks her cheeks in then starts whistling softly before saying, “I bet you were one of those old-man-yellers as a child, like you’d yell at the neighborhood kids to get off the lawn.”

My mouth pinches toward a grunt, but she’s wrong. My eyes soften and crinkle on the edges at a memory of Bran and me causing havoc in our lakeside neighborhood.

A woman with dark hair greets us. Her nose wrinkles as she looks me up and down. “Well, we have a situation, don’t we?”

Yeah, I may resemble a guy who just came ashore after weeks on a long boat, traveling from island to island, raiding and pillaging, but I bathe and don’t smell bad. At least I don’t think so.

Everly introduces me to Shonda, the resident stylist at Blancbourg.

She clutches a football...and her stomach?

I grunt in greeting.

“I was wondering if you could sign this.” She thrusts the football into my hands and then turns away.

I tense, unsure if there’s a problem.

The woman pales, looking ill.

“Are you okay? Can I do anything—?” I ask, alarmed.

She waves her hand in front of her face. “I’m fine.”

“You sure, Shonda?” Everly asks. “Water? Fresh air? Ice cream?”



Shonda approaches and then halts, swallowing thickly. “We have a real Beauty and the Beast scenario here.” Her smile makes me worry she accidentally consumed one of Declan’s mayonnaise concoctions.

I glance at Everly for a clue as to what’s going on. She barely reaches my shoulder and whereas she’s petite, I feel like an overgrown oaf. There’s no mistaking that I’m a beast and *belle* means pretty in French. Haven’t seen the movie, but Beauty and the Beast is accurate.

Shonda coughs lightly and presses her hand to her belly again. “Karma’s going to get me for that comment. No offense meant.” She rushes toward the door.

“Are you okay? Is there anything I can do?” Everly asks, echoing my questions from moments before.

“I’m expecting. First trimester. This never happened with my previous pregnancies. Please, just do it. Don’t tell Cateline.” Shonda makes a scissoring motion with her two fingers and then hurries off.

“What was that all about?” I ask.

“Maggie, who I just met and who also works here, used to be a Disney princess. She was joking that I look like Belle from the movie *Beauty and the Beast*.”

“Never seen it.”

“No surprise there,” she says.

Still holding the football, I grunt. “I meant I was wondering why Shonda ran out. Is she ill?”

“She’s pregnant. Probably morning sickness.”

“But it’s afternoon.”

“That’s just what it’s called. It can strike any time, day or night.”

“What did Shonda want you to do?” I ask.

“Get you in a salon and you open right up, huh? Mr. Chatty all of a sudden,” Everly says, circling me. “She wants me to give you a makeover.”

“Are you qualified?”

“My best friend Heidi is a hairstylist. I think I can manage. Let’s just say anything would be an improvement,” she mumbles the last part.

I grunt and reluctantly get in the chair, but only because my brother wouldn’t recognize me. I worry my rough appearance caused Shonda to become ill.

Everly peruses the stylist’s tools and picks up a hank of my hair and another. She studies the ends. “You have nice hair. Good genes.”

“What does this have to do with my pants?” I ask, belatedly realizing I just opened myself up for a #BruiserButt joke.

“I meant genetics. Like your children will be lucky if they have hair like yours. Mine is thin, boring, and refuses to grow past my shoulders without turning into straw. Though, it used to be long.” She shrugs.

I glance at her hair, imagining it would be soft between my fingers despite what she said.

“Okay, Beast. You, your genes, and your #BruiserButt, over to the sink.”

“I walked into that one, huh?” I ask.

A playful smile appears on Everly’s lips. “Walk? No, I need you to sit.” She gestures that I park myself on the chair, lean back, and rest my neck on the cushion.

“I take it you haven’t been to the barber in a while.”

I grunt as she adjusts the water temperature and then dampens my hair. She suds the shampoo and then hesitates, as if considering asking if it’s okay to pet a stranger’s dog. Then her hands plunge into my scalp where she rubs circles with just the right length nails and the soft pads of her fingers. In gentle strokes, Everly massages my head and my eyes drift closed.

My skin tingles all over. As seconds pass, something vibrates inside. Warmth spreads through me. I can’t let myself get comfortable and pop my eyes open.

Viewing Everly upside down, I glimpse details: the little dimple in her chin, the brush of her long eyelashes on her cheeks, and the delicate set of her lips.

*Belle.* She’s even pretty from this angle.

I slam my eyes shut, but that forces me to tune into my other senses. Beyond the scent of shampoo, I smell sweet sunshine. I hear the gentle intake of her breath. And her touch is like angel’s wings, puppy fur, like falling through clouds.

Her fingers rub the nape of my neck, the area near my temples, and cradle my head. For half a second, I feel relieved of a burden. I exhale, sinking deeper into the chair, into her capable hands, and into the notion that something about Everly both calms and excites me.

What if our marriage had been real?

As soon as the idea creeps into my mind, Everly’s voice breaks the silence and I slam the door on that idea. “I’m not sure what Shonda’s spiel is, but considering this is the makeover portion of the program, I’ll assume she

reviews hygiene.”

She talks to me about the topic for the next few minutes before toweling off my head. We return to the chair in front of the mirror and she runs a comb through my hair. It’s longer than hers, reaching past my shoulders.

“It’s a shame,” she mutters.

Before I can ask what she means, the rhythmic snip of the scissors slices through the silence. Long blond pieces drop to the floor in a crescent shape. I track Everly’s scent again and think about how easily sweet sunshine can break through clouds. Warmth radiates from her skin and her smile is like standing in a patch of sunlight on a cold day.

She adjusts the chair with a lever at the base so my head is level with hers—not difficult since I’m tall and she’s relatively small. As she circles me for the front portion of the haircut, we’re almost eye to eye. She stands to the side of my long legs, arching at an awkward angle before shuffling to the other side.

She squishes up her face, trying to find a good position before standing squarely in front of me, tucking between my knees as she snips a few more times.

My mouth goes dry, but the coffee is out of reach and probably cold by now. Something stirs in me. Maybe she was right. I’m not a morning person. At least not anymore. I’m an Everly person.

No, no, no. I did not think that. No way.

Both of Everly’s hands grip my jawline and then brush through my beard. The pad of her thumb grazes the scar on my lip.

“My old hair stylist would keep up a running commentary, asking me about my life, job, boyfriends.”

“Plural?” I interrupt.

She pushes up one shoulder and holds back a smirk. “My father was unflappable. Kind of like you. I did everything in my power to flap him. Brought home guys with motorcycles, tattoos, and one who told me he loved me on our first date. I had a feeling he was going to propose and he did, right in front of the Ice King.”

“You call your father the Ice King?”

“Former hockey Hall of Famer turned brutal businessman.”

“Should I be worried?” I ask, considering I did technically marry this man’s daughter.

“You? Worried? No. As I said, you’re unflappable. Put the two of you

together in a room, you'd have a stare-off showdown for eternity. Neither one of you would crack. It would be televised and everything. People would place bets. I'd probably walk away a zillionaire."

"You've really thought about this, huh?"

The corner of her lip flirts with a smile. "Not until right now."

And now I'm thinking about her mouth. On mine. The wedding kiss. Haven't kissed or been kissed since. Coach's rules and the playbook didn't apply to me so much as the rest of the guys. Perhaps until now. My stomach flickers and then clenches as though arguing over Marriage of Convenience Club rules and personal space.

"Let's not talk about my sordid past of questionable decisions." Wearing a teasing smirk, Everly tugs on my beard. "Are you inviting birds to nest or are you frugal and save food scraps?"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, I've heard it all before. Flavor saver, Rip Van Winkle, whatever." Bran had a beard and without realizing it, I started growing mine after he died.

As she runs her hands through it, I grip her wrist firmly, not because I don't want her touching me, but because I need to stabilize myself at the unfamiliar flare inside.

She jerks back. "Don't bite."

"I'm not going to—" I cut myself off when I see the fear in her eyes. "Everly, I'd never hurt you." My throat goes from dry to scratchy.

She steps back slightly, as if not entirely sure.

My eyes meet hers, trying to convey what I can't with words.

"Can you just trim it? Clean it up?" I'm not ready for another big change.

She nods but still doesn't move closer.

I take her hand more gently this time, causing my skin, my muscles, and my bones to crackle with energy. "Be careful."

Her long, dark lashes brush the skin under her eyes as she blinks a few times, as though she's waiting for me to fully confirm that it's okay.

I give her a slight nod.

Everly rolls her shoulders back, and she puts on a brave face as she moves in close, planting herself between my legs as she trims my beard.

I keep my gaze glued to her, praying that she doesn't waver...praying that she won't leave when she sees me. I don't recognize myself anymore and I'm not sure the makeover will do me any favors.

The thing is, I'm a shell of who I used to be. Can't remember the last time

I smiled or laughed. That changes a person, inside and out.

Plus, there's the scar.

Even though I hardly recognize myself, I do recognize Everly. She's the woman whose eyes I held as we stood hand in hand, in the courthouse. Whose plump lips had spoken two fateful words, *I do*. Who I didn't forget but never expected to see again.

She pauses briefly as she carefully clips the hair around my lips, presumably seeing the scar.

Her eyes flash to mine in question, but I don't offer an explanation. With the beard, it's easier to hide: my appearance, my past, and the emptiness.

But when her breath moves softly against my skin, her fingers touch my hair, and her thigh presses against mine, the stirring that turned into a flare drives down deep into an uncharted place inside me. It travels among the stone and cold, the wasteland of my inner terrain as if looking for a rest stop, an ice cream parlor, somewhere to park and stretch.

"Whew. We are done. We made it," Everly says as if she too experienced the soul journey of the last hour.

She spins me around in the chair so I can see the results of the makeover. "Ta da!" She wiggles her fingers while waving her hands excitedly.

At the sight of myself in the mirror, resembling my brother so completely, the guilt inside builds like pressure beneath the earth. My muscles and tendons tighten, blood rushes through my veins, and the grunts that ordinarily come from my throat turn into a growl.



# EVERLY



Since the moment I started washing Grey's hair and then trimmed his beard, I've been hyper-aware of his proximity. I wasn't entirely joking when I asked whether he'd bite, but with him, I feel safe. Like he trusts me and I can trust him.

Though, when I was working so close to him, I didn't entirely trust myself not to see what would happen if I pressed my lips to his skin.

My work complete, I step back to admire the finished product. A breathy little whoosh leaves my chest. The Viking cleans up good. His gaze jumps to mine.

"Not too shabby, if I do say so, and no longer shaggy at all." Pleased with the way his newly trimmed hair looks and the shape I gave to the beard, I beam a smile.

Grey's eyebrow crests as if concerned that I'm about to launch into singing a show tune. He looks steadily into the mirror. His eyes go from sparkling, crystalline gems in his face to dark, hard stones.

He pushes up from the chair with a roar. The muscles of his neck cord and his nostrils flare as he throws Shonda's football at the mirror. Thankfully, it doesn't break, but I'm afraid something broke inside of him or he's going to break something in the salon as he storms across the room.

I catch our reflections. Even though the glass is still intact, all I see are fragments, slivers of him and countless questions in my eyes.

He Hulks out, whipping off the hair-cutting cape. The momentum causes the styling products on the shelf to topple like a house of cards.

My gasp of shock turns into a tremble in my voice. "Grey, I'm sorry. What did I do? I'm sorry," I repeat.

He avoids looking at the wreckage, but his eyes land on me, lighting up for a moment before going black. Grey's body vibrates with rage as he barrels out of the room. I don't let a tear fall until his footsteps go silent in the hall.

I quickly wipe my eyes, still not sure what went wrong, and set to work cleaning up the mess as I analyze the last few minutes.

Deep in thought, I don't hear anyone enter until they speak. "What happened?" Cateline's hand is on her hip.

Another one of the bearded football players appears at her back and surveys the damage. "Grey." He disappears down the hall, presumably after his teammate.

However, I'd rather Cateline see this than Shonda. Seeing her workspace in ruins would crush her.

"What happened here?" Cateline repeats and her eyes flicker with alarm and accusation. "Did Grey do this? We were warned he has a bit of an anger management problem."

My ring glints on my finger. "No, it was me. I didn't tell you that I'm a bit of a klutz."

"That makes you and Pippa," Cateline mutters. "Where's Shonda?"

"She wasn't feeling well. I, um, did Grey's makeover."

Cateline's right eyebrow rises so steeply it could pierce the sky.

I didn't want to lie, but I have to protect my secret and if Grey gets in trouble, my job could be at risk. "I was putting everything away, tripped over the hairdryer cord, and bumped into the vase. Everything went flying or spilled. I'm so sorry. I'll clean up and you can deduct any damages or replacement costs from my salary," I say in one long breath.

Cateline strides toward the football, picks it up, and studies it like a private investigator. "Where did Mr. Adams go? Why isn't he helping you?"

"Oh, he sliced his finger on the scissors. His, um, football throwing finger." *Lies! All lies!*

Cateline narrows her eyes. "Do you know what position Greyson Adams plays?"

I should know this vital piece of information, being married to him and all, especially if there is an insurance fraud investigation. Which I wouldn't doubt because Cateline all but flashes her detective's badge.

I regret lying about the whole Hulk smash thing, but what other choice do I have? My father won't speak to me, no less help me. Heidi did what she



could, but I wasn't even managing to live paycheck to paycheck. I don't have a backup plan. I can't lose this job.

After Todd and I got engaged and I relocated to Virginia, I lost most of my other friends—not on purpose, but by default. He slowly and slyly closed my circle until it was just the two of us. By the time I realized what had happened at the hands of my narcissistic ex-fiancé, it was too late.

“Linebacker?” I guess Grey's position. Ask me about hockey and I can give the entire history and rules for play. Football is completely foreign.

Cateline huffs, but all I hear is *Ding, ding, ding. Correct answer. Phew!*

She says, “I'm going to let this slide, but I advise you to get to know your player and get to know him well so that you're able to optimize your time together and prevent situations like this.”

She trains her gaze on me. “You were assigned to be Greyson's personal coach. Your job is to guide him and help overhaul his life. You're in charge of him and yourself. I expect you to keep him reined in. The school is already on shaky ground financially since fewer and fewer people seek our services, but if we can prove we've reformed these men, we're sure to get a surge of business, keeping us both with jobs. I'll inform the maintenance staff about the mess.”

“Yes, ma'am.”

“Also, please consult the dress code section of the Blancbourg manual.”

After the headmistress leaves the room, I hang my head. I'm already screwing things up—just like my ex always said I did. As usual, I have no idea what I did wrong.

But Cateline is right. I took the fall because I want to give Grey a chance, but also because I need to keep my job. Nonetheless, I feel terrible and will add this to the list of things that have gone wrong.

After cleaning up as best I can, I step into the hall, heading toward the garden. The fresh air is welcome as it fills my lungs, pushing out the tension. Ever since Grey Hulked out, my heart hasn't stopped thudding against my chest.

As I stroll past roses and other flowers in bloom, my phone rings with an unfamiliar number. Perhaps it's Grey, ready with an explanation and an apology.

I answer at the same time as I take another deep inhalation of fresh air.

“Everly,” a caustic and unwelcome voice hisses.

Dread creeps across my skin and my stomach instantly knots with

anxiety. Blood drains from my limbs, and if I didn't have a special grippy doodad on the back of my phone, I'd drop it.

"I see you've got your hands full."

Frozen, I don't answer. A voice in my head tells me to hang up and run, but to be careful because I've walked into more than one spider web without seeing it.

"I see you're dressing like a child instead of like a real woman." I take this as a reference to my chest. Todd, the Spider, is a vile man. Also, I borrowed one item from Maggie and one from Pippa to complete today's outrageous look.

My face heats and the blood in my veins goes from icy with fear to boiling. Words fight their way out of my throat. "Then why are you calling me?"

"To let you know that I know all about your little ploy."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Sure, you do, *Mrs. Adams*."

Again, my stomach knots and sweat marbles my skin. "Leave me alone and don't call me again."

I hang up and as I race back into the building, a worrisome thought halts me in my tracks. How would Todd know what I'm wearing? Is he following me? Once more, my pace hastens.

Upstairs, I lock the door to my suite. My heart sinks as I slouch onto an antique sofa. I thought I'd be safe in Concordia.

Holding my head in my hands, salty tears drop from my eyes. I've lost so much and don't know what else to do except to hang on and pray for a miracle, for something to happen that'll take away the pain and stress, make Todd leave me alone once and for all, and bring that wholesome feeling of sunshine back into my life.

Heavy knocking on the door startles me from my prayer. I cross the room and peer through the peephole. If it's Todd, I'll have him escorted off the grounds for trespassing. He holds no claim in my life, except the guy doesn't have boundaries and I wouldn't put it beyond him to try to physically bring me back to the US and force me into marriage by gunpoint.

After I discovered him having an affair, and when I didn't follow through on our wedding day, he fired back with the support of his family name—just as I expected him to do. With the promise that he'd leave me alone, I let him have everything. Yet, he still tried to drag me to court for the house and

through the mud leaving me with debt I can never hope to repay. I thought that was my punishment for leaving him at the altar. Apparently, he wants more.

A blurry image of a man twice the size of Todd fills the hallway. Despite Grey's outburst in the salon, relief washes through me. I open the door.

Grey looks like he lives in a black-and-white photo, a perpetually cloudy image on a winter day. And I'm in a storm...of emotions. Doubt. Fear. Worry.

He tows a large, rolling suitcase and carries a shoulder bag. "This was brought to my room." He pinches the tag printed with my married name *Everly Adams*. His last name.

My cheeks are already pink and the flush spreads to my ears. I'd already started changing my name to Todd's and didn't want to go back to my maiden name. I don't want to associate with either one if I can help it. Instead, I chose the fantasy life of Mrs. Adams, wife to a Viking who'd rescue me on his valiant steed.

A small furrow forms between Grey's brows. "Does your boss know, given we share the same last name?"

I shrug. "It's a common last name, but she hasn't said anything, yet."

"If she asks, what will you say?"

"What should I say?"

"Tell her the truth." Grey shifts from foot to foot as if he's not entirely comfortable with it, but wouldn't risk lying.

I nod, afraid that if I open my mouth again to speak, I'll fall apart in a fit of sobs. All the emotion, the regret, and pain build up like water behind a dam. It seems like no matter how hard I try, nothing goes right.

He eyes me carefully. Can he tell that I was upset or is he measuring my receptivity for an apology after what happened in the salon?

"May I bring it in?" he asks.

I step aside and his foresty, fresh split wood scent fills my nose, the same as it did when I was cutting his hair.

Grey wheels my suitcase to the corner and puts the bag on the table.

The suite is spacious with a sitting room, a kitchenette—not that I'd ever use it since I don't even know how to scramble an egg—a washroom, and a bedroom.

He sits down on the sofa without asking, but I'll review manners later. Who am I to judge? I haven't even offered him a beverage.

I lean against the table and fiddle with the file, recalling Cateline's

comments. I'm in charge of my student, but how can I be if I'm barely holding myself together?

Sensing Grey's gaze on me, I slowly look up.

Gone is the gruff football player. His eyes are soft, honest, and trustworthy. "You look like you've been crying."

If I open my mouth, I'll stumble and reveal more than is wise.

"Do you want to—?" he asks.

I shake my head.

"If you change your mind—"

It's like neither one of us wants to commit to the consequence of finishing those sentences or answering the questions. When I don't reply, he grunts and walks to the door.

His muscles ripple and shift under his T-shirt, but I hate the sight of his back, of him leaving. An inner tug yearns for him to stay.

"You don't seem much like the talking type."

He grunts. "I'm not."

In the quiet between us, I realize that Greyson Adams is the strong and silent type, but maybe what isn't tacked onto the end of that expression is the part about him being a great listener. Perhaps we both need one of those.

It's obvious that he too carries around a bag of broken bones. Skeletons in his closet. Something damaged inside him. I can't be the one to fix it, but I know what it's like to tip too far into the vacuous pit of despair. I spent three days there when I found out about Todd, got the diagnosis, and had to make two tough decisions. I vow never to return. Seeing Grey on this track, I know that I'm strong enough to extend a helping hand. Yes, even though he's twice my size. The bigger they are, the harder they fall, and as his wife, I'd probably feel the aftershocks if I don't do something.

"What position do you play?" I ask.

He looks over his shoulder and the corners of his lips twitch. "Linebacker. Why?"

"I'm supposed to get to know you...and," I twist the ring on my finger, "I'm sorry about cutting your hair."

"Is that what this is about?" Grey's eyes fill with thunder. He crosses the room in a few short strides.

I freeze, determined to hold my ground. Not because I'm afraid he's going to do something dumb or dangerous, but because he needs an anchor in the storm that rages inside him.



## GREY



I can't deny that Everly and I butt heads. I admit that I'm frustrating and have a tendency to break things, but I want to fix whatever is bothering her. To cheer her up. But the idea that she thinks she did something wrong busts me up.

Her gaze holds mine as I open my arms. It's an invitation. One I can't, in recent memory, recall offering anyone.

She steps forward into my embrace and grips me like a life raft.

I fold her against my chest. Her heart pounds, but after a moment she melts into me. I don't let go as I take long breaths. We both need this.

I'm a large man and have taken down guys even bigger than me, but Everly's steadiness is the ballast I need in this storm and I sense the feeling is mutual as she clutches me tightly.

After my man-trum in the salon, Wolf tracked me down. Then I took a long run, trying to outpace what exploded inside of me. I didn't get far before my breath betrayed me. I leaned against a mighty oak tree, slid down to the ground, knees drawn to my chest, and like a handful of puzzle pieces, put together a picture of grief.

Bran had lost numerous brothers in battle, and when Dad died, he mentioned aspects of grief, including denial, bargaining, anger, and depression. He said acceptance was the last one.

I'm still a long way from there, but I recognize the various stages now, even if I've experienced them out of order. I already denied I lost Bran, then I bargained before sliding into depression. But the anger surprised me. And Everly too, I'm sure.

Her very presence threatened to jolt me out of the misery I've been in.

The strange comfort of sadness. Like if I can't have Bran, at least I can have the familiar emptiness.

I snort, because Bran would say that's so like me, then order me to snap out of it.

The stirring within that started when Everly cut my hair had turned into a whirring. Like I left a fan on somewhere in the house and can't find it to turn it off. It's like an indistinct voice in the wind. I can't quite make out what it's trying to tell me.

But I do know that I was little more than an empty shell when I lost Bran. I knew the inherent risk of his role in the military, but he was my hero. Invincible.

While everything and everyone in the world is material and tangible, I'm a ghost, a shadow of my former self. Invisible.

I didn't feel anything when I got married, except when Everly and I kissed. Winning the Super Bowl was just another day in the void. The cheering reached my ears, but the pride didn't settle in my bones. The guys clapped me on the back and we celebrated, but I went through the motions, knowing when to nod, smile, and laugh.

When I learned about the situation with my son, I went straight into mission mode, focused on getting him safe, no matter what.

By any standards, I have a good life. A great one. I'm blessed beyond measure. I'm not ungrateful, I'm just empty.

Or I was.

These last days, as much as I resisted and attempted to remain fixed in my solitude, I can't escape Everly's sweet sunshine scent, her addictive smile and laughter, her cheery carefree attitude, or her spring green eyes that shine like peridot gemstones. I gaze into them now.

I hold back a grunt because I want to talk to her. To say more than make caveman sounds.

But that puts me in a vulnerable place, and although I can take a hit on the field, I know better than to put myself in a risky position. That's the secret to my longevity in the roughest sport, on the toughest team in the league. I've put in so many hours playing football that I can anticipate where to be when. What to do when I need to do it. To break for a play or accelerate to block one. I don't need to take risks because I anticipate and eliminate them before they happen.

I know what to do so I don't get crushed and I know what to do to make

sure we win.

But I can't see a winning way out of this situation without getting crushed. Who'd have thought a woman who is the opposite of me in every way would have the power to destroy whatever's left of me? Nothing about an us could possibly make sense.

She blinks a few times, her soft lashes caressing her cheeks.

That's just it. I can't resist her softness. Not when she massaged my scalp and washed my hair, smoothing away the tension that has served as the glue to hold together what's left of me.

I close my eyes, no longer trusting myself to remain in control.

"Everly, none of this makes sense. You, me, marriage," I whisper, finally acknowledging the elephant in the room that's been alternately drenching us both with water and waving its ears to dry us off.

"It doesn't have to."

"I'm probably not suited to a relationship," I add, breaking the Marriage of Convenience Club rules.

"Two months ago, I wrote in the Cookie Dough Diary that I wouldn't date for a year."

"Because you were married?"

"Because relationships have never worked out for me. I make one bad decision after another until I'm rolling downhill like a snowball in an avalanche and cannot stop."

"There are things about me that I'm not proud of. Things you don't know." The way I handled custody with my ex comes to mind, leaving me in a quagmire of uncertainty about my son's future.

"You've never seen me with blue hair, a nose ring, and a mouth like a sailor."

I arch an eyebrow. "Really?"

"I was a sucker for my father's attention. Never got it no matter what I did."

I frown, unable to understand how anyone could resist Everly. "I'm much older than you."

"And wiser?"

"Definitely not. I married you for selfish reasons."

"I did the same thing," she counters as if nothing I could say would make her let go.

"I'm grumpy, not at all gentle."



“A gentleman though.”

“A dangerous one.”

She tips her head up and our eyes float together and click.

Everly’s smile is irresistible. “What if I said I’m okay with that?”

Like closing an envelope, I seal us back inside the hug and we tuck away that conversation for now. Maybe forever if I let myself stay in the void.

For the first time in months, someone took care of me. Everly, my wife, honored her vows without even realizing it. She did for me what I didn’t even realize I needed.

After we lost Bran, my mother was there, but she was lost in grief of her own, having seen the death of her husband and then son. Of course, we talked about him, but I quickly and quietly went back to work, to cope.

I’m quiet now. Too quiet for this moment to be normal, but it’s like Everly senses that I’m going through something and gives me space and time.

But not too much space, because we’re still hugging. This might be the longest hug of my life. The longest hug in history. The best one too.

But she doesn’t let go either. Maybe she needed it as much as me.

When we part, I keep her less than an arm’s length away.

Everly lifts her chin to meet my eyes. The words are on the tip of my tongue, desperate to tell her that her hands on me, cutting away the evidence of how little I’ve cared about anything these last months, loosened something inside. She unlocked the door to the cage in my chest. She opened the windows and let the light in. Some part of her, that kindness she showed me, the simple yet intimate gesture of washing my hair and cutting it, threatened the void—the one I’ve become all too comfortable occupying. I’m afraid that if I let myself feel, I won’t be able to handle it. I want to tell her this.

But I stutter. The words stall. And for the first time in my life, I fumble the ball.



# EVERLY



Just when I sense Grey and I are about to have a breakthrough, my phone beeps. I'm not exactly Miss Popularity and don't have countless text threads consisting of multiple family members and friends who treat the form of communication like a social media app, sharing photos of their half-eaten pancakes—okay, Heidi does that sometimes. But there are only a handful of people who text me.

She's one. The wedding planner, seeking a refund, is another. I receive the occasional message from my aunt in Quebec City.

More than likely, it's a *thrext* (that's a threat text) from the Spider.

I'm afraid if Grey sees, he'll track Todd down, Hulk out, and squish him like a spider.

But that's the least of my problems at the moment, because his expression is pure stone. It's like the phone's sound caused a Pavlovian response, and we silently but mutually agree to forget the hug and return to our corners in the boxing ring.

He says, "Everly, let me make one thing clear. You didn't do anything wrong at the salon earlier. That was all me and—" He scrubs his hands down what remains of his beard. "And I'm sorry. It won't happen again."

I lift my gaze to meet his and all I see are those gray eyes battling with something deep inside.

"I'm truly sorry. I usually take my anger out on the field or in the gym," he adds.

"I feel bad for the opposing team and the weight machines. We ought to incorporate a *Hulkout* into your daily workout." I mean it as a joke. Sort of.

He grunts. My phone beeps again.

“I’m sorry for cutting your hair and beard, though. It was a bit of a shame to see it go.”

The corner of his mouth twitches.

I liked the wild, untamed aspects of him, yet haven’t fully appreciated the way he looks cleaned up. His trim hair reveals the masculine planes of his face and the cut of his jaw is visible through the shorter beard. Overall, he still has an intimidating look about him, but I didn’t truly feel in danger at the salon.

More like, concerned for him. Even though he’s huge, whatever he’s dealing with is bigger.

I open my suitcase and lackadaisically go through the contents to find something to wear.

As far as ever feeling secure with a guy, my high school boyfriends don’t count, since we did little more than go on a few dates, to dances, and hang out, er, and make out. Todd was a mistake that my father forced upon me.

Grey, on the other hand, is entirely new territory. Some people say marriage is just a piece of paper, but it means more than that to me, despite the unusual circumstances with the insurance. And despite our rules, neither one of us could resist talking about it, acknowledging this connection.

I wanted an easy way out and to wipe our hands of each other, but it’s like we were dragged back together.

Something about his wildness attracts me even, though my better sensibilities should sound warning bells. Instead, a sense of belonging pushes away the doubt and fear I’ve so desperately wanted to shake for months. It has nothing to do with Grey and everything to do with Todd, who repeatedly texts. I put the phone on silent.

“Why do you think it was a shame to see it go?” Grey rubs his fingers along his jaw.

Hope lightens his tone, like that mess of hair meant something, but that can’t be right.

“Sometimes the way we look impacts the way we feel.” My breasts had been part of me, part of my identity. I was shocked at the effect losing them had on me. Though, the Wise Warrior Women helped me through it.

“Is that so? Then explain this.” Grey tugs on one of Heidi’s hand-me-down garments that I hold up.

“It’s a babydoll dress that my best friend’s grandmother made at the height of early twenty-teens fashion—the time period, not the age, though she

and I were teenagers.”

Grey’s eyes float up my body. My skin, already warm, melts like chocolate chip cookies in the oven.

“My dad had a box of these in the garage to wipe up greasy messes.”

“They’re not rags. They’re handkerchiefs. Heidi, Jimmy’s sister, and I collected them and thought this was the coolest style. We’d take turns wearing it. Lucky me, it still fits.”

“I guess I was too old for that fad.”

“What’s a decade?”

“Ten years.”

I swat him. “I know that. But when you reach a certain point, does age matter?”

“Depends—”

“On the people,” I finish.

“You knew how old I was when you—”

“Rules—” I remind us both.

“Right. The Club rules.”

A series of bad decisions float into my mind. “All the guys I dated to tick my father off, years later, Heidi convinced me to look each of them up on social media. Status update and all that. They were all around my age and it didn’t look like they went anywhere with their lives. Maybe I’d like someone a little older.”

“A guy who isn’t stuck in neutral.”

“A guy who has a car and a valid license would be a start.” I think specifically of Tony Mackie. “Also, their own place. You know, not in their parents’ basement.”

“Is that still acceptable?”

“In the era of helicopter parenting, it’s sometimes encouraged. Also, having a clean police record would be preferred.”

“Can’t help you there,” Grey mutters.

“Were you caught robbing a bank?”

“Got into a few fights when I was younger, dumber, quicker to swing. Went with the Bruiser territory, but now that I’m the old man on the team—”

“You’re not old.”

He grunts.

“I’d imagine a woman would want someone who matured, grew out of being young, dumb, and quick to swing. Someone who knows who he is and

what he wants.”

Grey’s eyes lift to mind and lock. A long moment passes without us breaking any Marriage of Convenience Club rules.

Swept into the moment, I blurt, “I’d sure like to work on a DTR.”

“A what?”

“A Dutch thingamajig radish,” I ramble, not wanting to say what the acronym actually stands for, because that would break all the MOC Club rules again.

“I speak Norwegian, not Dutch, but I don’t think that’s what DTR means.”

“Define the relation—” I can’t say it. A few minutes ago, wrapped in each other’s arms felt like a safe haven. But now, out in the open, I’m afraid to discuss what it might mean to say no or yes.

Grey’s expression goes flat, like we belatedly realized we’d soared too close to a no-fly zone and are both waiting for missiles to fire.

Clearing my throat, I say, “Anyway, these clothes are on loan. And for the record, I liked you the way you were before as much as I like this version.”

“I’m not too pleased with either right now. But thanks.” A subtle grin widens on Grey’s face, giving him a shy, boyish look, even with the trim beard and scar.

Despite everything I’ve been through, I still somehow believe in second chances and seeing the best in people. Grunting and the outburst in the salon aside, I see good in Grey.

He tucks his thumbs into the loops of his jeans. “You’re kind on the eyes too, if I do say so, Mrs. Adams.”

At that, the moment ripples with an electrical current that wasn’t there before. It’s like those words plugged something in. I’m lit up and my pulse hums.

Grey’s lips quirk as he lets out a low, husky sound that almost, but not quite, sounds like laughter.

“Sounds to me like you need to knock the rust off that thing.”

He grips the back of his neck. “You wouldn’t be wrong. It’s been a year.”

I puff an exhale and my shoulders drop a measure. “You’re telling me.”

“Do you want to?” he asks.

“Do I want to what?”

“Tell me. Talk, I mean.”

“First rule of—”

Grey pumps his hands. “I know, I know. The first rule of Marriage of Convenience Club is we don’t talk about Marriage of Convenience Club.”

It’s like we’re rapidly going through the states of a relationship, but out of order. Comfortable companionship, support, and flirtation.

“But, uh, speaking of that, do you happen to have a copy of the marriage license around here? I need a copy.”

“Do I want to know why?”

“Probably not. The second rule of Marriage of Convenience Club is we don’t talk about Marriage of Convenience Club.”

I chuckle. “Got it. I like this policy. I think it works for us.”

Us. Now there is an interesting notion. Who’d imagine little ‘ole me interacting with a beast like Grey? Compared to Todd, this guy is completely wild, whereas my ex wore tailored suits and rarely had a hair out of place. He was fit but not capable. It’s obvious Grey puts his body to good use with the muscles capping his shoulders, the bulge of his biceps, and the cut cords wrapping around his forearms.

He’s definitely the strong silent type and seems like he prefers to observe. His dirty blond hair and gray eyes remind me of the LARP warriors the guys in college fantasized about being.

I recall the breathy little whoosh that left my chest when I was done trimming his hair and beard. Hidden underneath all that mess is a very handsome man and I don’t even think he realizes it.

But I do.

Our gazes meet for another curious moment as if we’re wondering how far to take this thing. Maybe because we both have the same unspoken question, we realize we’re on the same team. Or perhaps that’s just wishful thinking. Either way, the mood lightens.

“I’ll admit that very little about this situation is funny, but I’ve been on the edge of laughter because this whole thing is absolute lunacy.” I clap my hand over my mouth. “Oops. I broke the rule. Moving on. Grey, did you learn anything at etiquette school today?”

He remains mute, as usual.

On thin ice, I leap, jumping over it, and continue my dazzling program. “What did I learn at etiquette school today? So glad you asked, Mr. Adams. In much the same way there is a light spectrum and an electromagnetic spectrum, there exists in nature what I’m calling the ‘Triple G Spectrum.’ It

starts on one side with The Grump. They're someone who displays fits of moodiness, are gruff, and complain about how banks no longer give out lollipops."

Grey rocks back on his heels like he knows I refer to him. But I detect a hidden smile, so I continue, wearing one of my own.

"Moving along the axis, there's The Grouch whose tendencies toward ill humor are longer lasting. They binge on their own bad moods and might remain in this state for days on end."

"I don't like where this is going."

I wink. "Then there is Grey. Grey Adams to be precise. He encapsulates all of the above, plus his communication is limited to guttural grunts. He seems annoyed at the world for existing, and prefers his own company, which seems challenging, at least for those forced to spend thirty days with him."

"You missed one, Buttercup."

I dip my head in question. "Buttercup?"

The corner of his lip twitches like calling me Buttercup is a matter between him and, well, him.

Ignoring me, he says, "There's also the ghost. I'm not grumpy or a grouch. Well, some of the time I am. No, I'm hardly here." He sighs like it's a foregone conclusion.

I'm not entirely sure he realizes he's saying this out loud.

"That's bleak and concerning. I've come across people like that." In fact, my father is the original. He ghosts in and out of my life like a super grumpy ghoul.

Just then, a whistling sound followed by a clatter comes from somewhere beyond the main room of the suite.

On alert, I stiffen and glance at my phone, reminded of Todd's call earlier and repeated texts.

Grey lazily glances over his shoulder like nothing spooks him.

"What was that?" I ask when he doesn't budge.

"Something fell?"

"We're the only two people here. Things don't just fall on their own."

"Do you think the manor is haunted?" If I'm not mistaken, he fights a smile.

"Are you trying to scare me? I've heard things at night. You said it yourself, you're a ghost. Go scare off the other ghosts." I wave my hand as if to shoo him in the general direction of the sound.



“Are you saying this is my territory?”

“I’m saying please go look to see if there’s a rodent or something in my closet.”

“Sounds like something a husband would do.”

“We have an agreement, Grey,” I say through clenched teeth.

“Right, right. We don’t talk about—” He exhales long. “I have some work to do, huh?”

“If you mean to make sure I’m not going to wake up with rat droppings on my pillow, by all means. If you’re going to call the Ghostbusters and have them zap the ghost out of you, go for it. If you’re looking for a life coach to help you out of a rut, I’m right here.” I don’t know if the manor is actually haunted, but something is haunting Grey.

“I thought you were an etiquette coach.”

“Both. I also have a degree in business with a focus on hospitality and have continued studying Victorian history since I graduated college where I minored in it.”

“Hence the fear of ghosts.”

“If you’re asking if I’m afraid of you, no. If you’re asking if I trust you, I’m not sure yet.”

“I’ll take a look around and make sure I don’t see any of my kind.”

“Har har.” What I don’t say is that if he meant am I his wife and want to help, to be here for him, *Reply hazy, try again later.*

Okay, fine. Yes, yes I do. Even though I still didn’t know why Grey had the freak out in the salon, as he pokes around, checking cabinets and closets, I realize I too have my work cut out for me.

His table manners need a bit of improvement, particularly when he devours his food like he’s been out at sea, raiding and plundering for months and it’s the first solid meal he’s had in ages. He also has the unfortunate *grunting* habit, but all I need to do is preface a conversation with football and that usually breaks the seal.

He sometimes plods down the hall like a herd of buffalo and forgets to wipe his feet off before he comes inside—particularly after we spent yesterday horseback riding, something I hadn’t done since I was a teenager. But we’ve been working diligently on his manners and Grey proves to be a willing student—the salon incident notwithstanding.

He closes a closet door and I startle, realizing he’s caught me staring. Don’t judge. It’s hard not to wonder about #BruiserButt.

“All clear. Before I go, do you have that document?”

My phone continues to vibrate while I search for the marriage license in my folder of important papers. “Here it is.” I pass it to Grey and our hands brush.

My skin tingles and what he says next comes in pieces.

“I’ll get it back to you tomorrow afternoon. Again, I’m sorry about earlier.”

“Are you going to explain or drop any hints?” I ask, finding my voice scattered around the room from his touch.

His shoulders lower as he exhales. “No, but *I* was the kid who got yelled at for going on the neighbor’s lawn, Buttercup.”

As he saunters down the hall, my skin doesn’t only tingle, it warms. We broke the rules and I can’t say I entirely mind.



## GREY



The windows weren't foggy when Coach Hammer gave us the ultimatum about staying away from women. If any of us fool around, get bad press, or otherwise break the rules, we're *all* off the team. I don't know what my future holds, but Declan, Wolf, and Chase still have some good field years in them.

Before we left Boston, I proposed the playbook. It's kind of like the Marriage of Convenience Club rules, except it forbids anything a married couple might do. *No kissing, no dating, eyes up, hands-off.*

The guys joked that I'm married to the game, so they don't have to worry about me. Little do they know that I'm actually married, and to be honest, I'm not sure how to handle this situation other than by adhering to the first and second rules of Marriage of Convenience Club.

However, I never expected the comfort, relief, and surge of attraction while holding Everly in my arms when I went to her suite to apologize.

I'm the teammate they can trust but have to quell this surge of *something* (Desire? Yearning? The urge to sweep everything off the table and say, *Let's try this?*). That's crazy thinking, because I'm Grey, the guy who grunts, ghosts, and gives a football and all the players on the opposing team a solid whooping.

I know the playbook rules. I'm aware that I'm in a state, not a fragile one, but an unknown one. It's obvious the stirring and whirring within have transformed into something bigger, brighter, warmer. But I can't break any of the rules. The problem is, I'm not sure I can trust myself.

Unable to promise to adhere to the playbook and Marriage of Convenience Club rules, I anticipate breakfast and Everly. She's a ray of light

in the morning with wavy brown hair streaked with sunshine. Eyes that remind me of spring and a smile that keeps me craving another.

I should probably stop the mushball thinking and eat some steak, elk, bison, or something raw and manly to get this poetry and pining under control. Who is this guy and what did he do with Grey? I catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror next to the door to my suite. Hair is cropped shorter with it a bit longer on top. My beard is groomed to perfection. Everly has a golden touch and I'm not sure how to feel about that, other than that I like it.

I look slightly less beastly than I did when I arrived at Blancbourg, but nothing else on the outside suggests I've changed. And I'm okay with that because I'm not quite ready to reveal that this woman who breezed into my life shifted something inside me. It feels too soon to reenter the world of emotional vulnerability, never mind navigate situations where I have to actually smile, laugh, or relate.

Being a cold, quiet, pillar of emptiness brought with it simplicity and zero expectations.

However, I am confident that I won't do anything to make Everly's meal miserable like criticizing her eating habits or her outfit. Now that I know she lost her luggage, I understand why she wore the same thing a couple of days in a row.

I like that she has my T-shirt. Something borrowed, something blue...something old, something new, or whatever the saying is.

Before I head downstairs, my phone rings.

"Grey, it's Ted. I got the marriage license, you sneaky scamp. Kept that secret locked up tight. I guess a guy in your position prefers privacy. We ought to redo your will. But good for you, settling down and making an honest man of yourself. Congratulations and all that."

"Thanks," I say dully, instantly worried about what's going to happen when the guys on the team find out. They'll be happy for me but disappointed I didn't tell them about any of it. Who can blame me for not finding the words when up until recently, I could hardly string two sentences together?

After everything that went bad with my ex and she blew up my life, I committed to being single—the marriage of convenience notwithstanding.

"Three more days until your life changes forever. Ready?" Ted asks.

And there it is. The prospect of taking full responsibility and custody of a child is becoming more and more of a reality with each passing moment.

My life already did change and I'm not prepared for more of that. The

flickers of hope that lit inside at finally digging myself out of this pit of despair fizzle. "I'm in Concordia."

"Come again? You took up the accordion? That can't be right. You do realize I charge for these calls so if we have a bad connection, let's hang up and try again or at another time."

"No, I'm in Concordia," I say slowly. "The country."

"Never heard of it. But I get it. Lying low until the moon-gate fiasco blows over. Speaking of, I had to do a little damage control with the other attorney." His whistle indicates he refers to me showing my backside to the world. Yeah, not exactly something I'd share with my lawyer.

Everly would tell me to thank him profusely, but all I can manage is a grunt. It's like I took two steps forward and then slammed back to the beginning of the gameboard, landing, you guessed it, on my backside.

I opt not to explain #BruiserButt or the consequent reform school situation. However, since I am stuck here, I tell Ted that I'm arranging for my son's care for a couple of days until I return to Michigan.

"Nancy will be in touch with logistics. If you have any other questions, don't hesitate to reach out. Good luck."

The line goes dead. Do I have any other questions? Yeah. I do. I trust Ted Brown to work in my best interest, so when the documents came for me to sign, I didn't even review them. Stupid, I know, but these days I don't even know the total in my bank account, no less whether I have any clean laundry.

The shirt I gave Everly being an exception.

So yeah, I have questions galore. Will my son recognize me? Is he potty trained? How do diapers work? Does he have teeth? What if he bites? Scratches? How do I trim his nails?

Does he look like me?

It's been over a year since I saw him and I despise myself for it.

I'm late for breakfast but don't pick up my pace as I plod down the halls of the manor. The dining room is empty except for the server I tormented the first morning here. I'd make small talk, but preoccupied with what's going to happen in three days, I opt to toss him as friendly a smile as I can muster. Making note of his name tag, Arthur Fitzwilliam, I'll donate to Chase's charity in his name.

The grandfather clock chimes, indicating Everly is also late for breakfast. Where is she? Is she okay? Did she oversleep because she's in a sugar coma? Can't find her shoes? What if she's trapped in her room because a giant

spider blocks the doorway?

These are the thoughts of a guy who's afflicted. Infatuated. Hooked. My leg jitters and I get up to walk it off like a nervous mother duck. The door opens. In walks a beam of sunshine and fresh air. Today, Everly wears a shirt and shorts with a badger school mascot on the thigh. Her light brown hair is smooth and shiny. Her spring-green eyes shine like gems.

"Why are you late?" I ask.

"Good morning to you too." Up close, I was mistaken. Dark circles ring the space under her eyes. "Remember, you're supposed to be learning etiquette and how we initiate an interaction sets the tone." Her voice crawls slightly, as if she's exhausted.

"How'd you sleep?" I ask, chastened at the reminder that I'm a student, not a waterfowl or a beast, and would do well to behave myself.

Everly stands by the chair and then gestures to it.

I hop to my feet, belatedly remembering to pull it out for her like a gentleman.

She drops heavily into it. "I'm convinced the manor is haunted."

After the server brings us each coffee, I refute the possibility with stone-cold logic.

"And there I thought you were a ghost." She points to my napkin. "Remember to put that in your lap."

"Then I'd know all about the ghosts, wouldn't I?" I tease.

"In that case, you'd also be aware that ghosts have manners."

"Is haunting people considered proper?"

"Victorian ghosts were part of polite society."

I lift my eyebrows, not sure whether she's joking, considering she said she minored in that era of history during college.

She shimmies a little in her seat and lengthens her spine. "Also, sit up straight. Napkin in your lap. Come on, I don't want to fail you. By now, we should be making progress."

"I'll never forget why I'm in this class, but I'll keep trying to wipe that memory from my mind."

"You're so surly."

"You're bossy," I reply.

"I'm your coach. You're supposed to listen to me." She yawns.

The server appears and I'm relieved for the interruption so we can place our breakfast order. Also, it provides the opportunity to get back on track. I

thought I'd returned to the rails, but it's proving difficult to reconcile my inner changes with my outward manner.

The server says, "I was just informed that there is a meeting in the front salon."

"Right now?" Everly asks, scrambling for her purse to check the itinerary.

The server nods.

"Oops. I didn't realize." She jumps to her feet and starts toward the door.

Before I catch up, my phone beeps. It's an update from Ted. We're still waiting, sending a bolt of uncertainty through me. Custody in the courts isn't something I can muscle my way through. I can't sit down and talk sense into my ex because no one knows where she is. Until last month, I didn't know where Sonny was. I push these thoughts out of my mind because there's nothing I can do about them now.

But trust me, I'd like to blame someone and bring down Lightning and Thunder on them—or their windows, doors, walls, anything punchable.

We meet the headmistress, the other coaches, and Declan, Wolf, and Chase in a room that looks too delicate for the likes of us.

Declan got lucky because his coach happens to be his high school best friend. From what I've gathered, they've had a slow simmering thing for years. Can't imagine how that'll turn out.

Cateline is giving Wolf a run for his money, which, as far as I'm concerned, is a good use of resources. He's one of my best friends, but I've only ever seen Hammer put him in his place, and the guy needs an attitude adjustment.

Then there's Chase, who is a charmer. By the way his coach looks at him with those big brown eyes, she's under his spell.

The guys and I exchange our usual greetings, involving fist bumps and hushed locker room language, as if we anticipate a scolding from Coach Hammer.

I drop into a vacant spot on the couch. Chase tosses me a frilly decorative pillow, I huck it at Wolf.

Wearing a sharp expression that could sever heads, Cateline plucks it out of his hands and then calls for our attention. "Gentlemen, I want to remind you why you're here."

"Because we're a bunch of studs, on the field and off." Wolf chuckles at his joke.

Cateline's lips resemble a pair of blades. "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 prank was amusing. That’s where Blancbourg comes in. We want to teach you to think before you speak and act. I expect progress has been made on that front this week.”

Everly, standing by herself across the room, shifts from foot to foot. I lose track of what Chase says and the rest of the back and forth, because Everly is by herself when she should be with me. Or I should be with her. We should be together and we will be as we continue the program Cateline outlines.

How that will work? A lot like pushing a boulder uphill, but when I’m with her, I feel less crushed under its weight, and not because she’s shouldering my burdens. Rather, because with her they feel lighter.

The headmistress 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.”

“Let me reiterate, I prefer to think of us as studs,” Wolf says.

Cateline’s nostrils flare. “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 Super Bowl?” Chase asks.

Cateline ignores him and outlines the posh event.

“If you haven’t noticed, we’re not particularly fancy,” I say.

“Speak for yourself.” Declan brushes imaginary dust off his shoulders.

Ignoring our antics, Cateline continues, “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.

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.”

The reality of what’s next lands on my chest with a thud. My gaze rushes to Everly, and even though I know the ins and outs of football, I’m not sure how to play this game.

She’s my wife, I’m gaining custody of my kid, and we’re supposed to stick together for three weeks. I can’t get out of this because that would betray the guys on top of my not telling them those two important facts.

Lost in thought, I don’t realize Everly is by my side until her hand lands on my shoulder. I want to lean into it and plant my palm on top of hers, but instead, I get to my feet and tuck them into my pockets.

“Hungry?” she asks.

My stomach growls in response and I follow her outside.

Other than that, I remain quiet until we reach the village. I hardly realize we’ve left the manor grounds until the buttery, malty scent of waffles fills my nose.

We stop under a wooden sign printed with the name *Scooper Dooper* hanging on a wrought iron bracket. Two tall windows frame a couple of bistro tables and flower boxes, popping with petunias and daffodils and overflowing with sweet alyssum my mother would appreciate.

“You’re seriously going to have ice cream for breakfast?” I ask.

“It’s now after eleven, so I consider it brunch.”

We enter the cool of the parlor with a long counter on one wall and a chalkboard behind a glass display case featuring flavors like Moosetracks, salted caramel pretzel, jalapeño honeycomb, and espresso fudge.

Everly orders a large. Gesturing to me, she adds, “And whatever he wants.”

I give my head a shake.

“Oh, come on. Live a little.”

I grunt.

“Oh, I forgot. You only have two settings. Grump and grouch. Guess that means more ice cream for me.”

“I’m not a robot and have more than two settings.”

“Prove it.”

I snort, but only because it’s the closest I can come to a laugh. It’s been hard to see past the clouds lately, but with Everly, I can almost glimpse them parting in the distance. Blue sky. Green eyes. High on life. Low on gloom. I want to meet her in this sunny clearing, but am not quite there yet.

When I don't order ice cream, she does the job for me. "In that case, he'll have the wasabi Tutti Frutti with a sprinkle of Doritos on top."

I almost gag. "Actually, I'll take the cookie dough, please."

"Ah, good choice. So, you are a kid at heart and the perfect gentleman. Maybe our lessons are paying off."

I can't help it, craving Everly's touch, I bump her with my elbow. I instantly regret it when a surge rushes through me, making my heart race. A shout from the void tells me to maintain my distance, to push her away. Instead, when she gets her ice cream, I steal a bite.

I'm afraid to wonder what of mine she's already taken.



## EVERLY



Until today, I never gave much thought to the sight of a man of powerful stature, undeniably good looks, and large hands eating an ice cream cone. The corners of Grey's lips lift ever so slightly like he's enjoying himself, rather than his usual stony expression as if his meal did something to offend him. He tilts his head to lick a drip.

Even though I stand in the shade, I warm all over.

"Your ice cream is melting," Grey says, gesturing with a napkin in his hand.

"Oh, right. Forgot." My laugh is of the high-pitched variety that suggests I was distracted.

His brows pinch slightly because, after all, this was my idea, so forgetting about the frozen treat in my hand seems unlikely.

But then what would've captured my attention?

"Oh, look, a bird!" I point over his shoulder.

Grey turns his head slowly, as if expecting a prank or for me to say, *Made you look.*

"Didn't want it to swoop in and steal your ice cream."

"Are mourning doves known to do that?"

"Absolutely. They're thieves, scoundrels. Make sure you still have your wallet."

Something rumbles from Grey's chest and I half expect him to laugh. Instead, he looks at me carefully. My cheeks tint pink in response. But not because I just tried to cover myself by making up something stupid. Rather, his eyes on me make me very aware of his proximity. Of what he might see and whether he likes it.

I go to work eating my ice cream cone, but can't help but be distracted by Grey—his small movements, the way he watches the passersby, the cloud of sadness that seems to follow him wherever he goes.

While I make quick work of eating my ice cream, he savors his, licking it like he hasn't had something delicious in a long time. Like he's not sure when he'll have ice cream again.

"So, you have to adhere to a pretty strict diet for football, huh?"

"Yes, but my parents had a garden, we raised our own animals, and I've always eaten clean." He takes another taste of his ice cream.

I choke on the little end of my cone filled with the last bits of creamy ice cream because the way he delights in his is almost personal, intimate, like I shouldn't be watching.

"What?" he asks, peeking at me.

Clearing my throat, I say, "Enjoying that?"

"Immensely. Thanks," he says as an afterthought.

"I should thank you because you insisted on paying."

"As I mentioned, I'm a gentleman."

But there is nothing gentle about this beast of a man, except, as it turns out, the way he eats an ice cream cone.

"I figured this would be a good time to explore your people skills before we turn you loose into the wild tomorrow."

"But you're coming, right?"

My inhale catches in my throat. "Yes. I'll be with you for the remainder of the thirty days."

Up until this exact moment, I didn't think about what returning to the United States might mean in terms of my security. Todd has texted and called numerous times. Sometimes he tries to make nice, plying me in a friendly tone. Other times, he's all bite and venom, spewing threats if I don't make good on our marriage arrangement.

I don't want to get tangled in his sticky web and yet, it's not enough to tell myself that he's all noise and to forget about him. I'm hoping to get some of my money back, but that means keeping the door to our history open.

"Everly?" Grey asks from what sounds like another room even though he takes up all the space beside me.

I give my head a little shake. "Yeah?"

Grey must've asked a question and I didn't hear. He squints slightly like the sun just caught in his eyes or he's concerned about my well-being.

“Yes, I always wanted a pony,” I test an answer.

Those eyebrows of his pinch tighter. “My mother has a couple of horses.”

Apparently, my stab at what he was talking about was off the mark. “I love popcorn, kettle corn especially.”

“They had a popcorn-flavored ice cream inside.” He tilts his head toward the door to the ice cream parlor.

“Yes, I even eat the licorice flavor jellybeans.” Another guess in response to what he may have said.

I get a full forehead furrow in response like my head is full of jellybeans. I guess that’s not the right answer either, but don’t want to admit that I wasn’t paying attention or have him ask what I was thinking about.

“I’m fine. Everything is good.”

Two children race each other toward the ice cream parlor, then pause when they see me and look back toward their mother. She gives a friendly wave.

“Hard to believe we’ve been back a week. I’ve been meaning to call you,” Patty says.

“Yes, I love kids,” I say more to Grey than to the woman I met at the baggage claim as the question he asked filters back to me. At least, I think that’s what he was talking about.

“Glad to hear it. This week has been hectic as we settle back in after the trip. Zoe just started swim lessons and Sam’s pet frog keeps escaping.”

I smile fondly at the delightful chaos of family life—not that I ever experienced that. “Did you get your suitcases back?”

“Believe it or not, they were waiting for us when we got home. A small miracle if you ask me. How about your stuff?”

I glance at Grey because he returned my suitcase to me. “Sure did, but I’ve hardly unpacked and am leaving again. Usually, my job keeps me here, but I’ll be heading back to the US. This is Grey, by the way.”

“That rhymed,” Zoe says, swinging her mother’s arm with her hand.

Sam adds, “Your name can’t be Grey. That’s a color.”

“It’s a nickname. My whole name is Greyson. It’s nice to meet you all.” The man almost smiles and I’d say that’s also a small miracle.

“Who gave you that nickname? Did they know it’s a color?” Sam asks.

Patty wears a *kids say the darndest things* look of apology.

“My brother called me that.” Rubble lays beneath Grey’s attempt at a cheerful tone.

“I don’t have a brother. Just a sister.” Sam’s lips pinch together.

Patty’s expression changes, warms. She winks at me. I glance at her belly and she beams. I mouth, *Congratulations*. There must be something in the water here in Concordia with Patty and Shonda both pregnant.

“Our dad is meeting us for ice cream,” Zoe says.

I’m guessing they’re about to announce the exciting news to the kids.

“What’s your favorite kind?” I ask.

They both start talking at once, and I consider suggesting to Cate that we run a manners program for kids.

Before I find out what their order is going to be, their dad appears, kisses his wife on the cheek, and scoops up each child for a hug.

Even though I’m wearing Heidi’s high school gym shorts with the school mascot on the leg and a red shirt with white polka dots that Heidi once had a matching skirt for, a mature tug pulls me toward maternity, motherhood, and marriage. More than anything, I want a family of my own. Not sure how that’ll work, considering I’m married but don’t plan on dating.

We make brief small talk before they go inside.

“So, you like kids?” Grey asks.

“Love ‘em.”

“You?”

He grunts as he tosses out his napkins. I don’t peg Grey for being a family man. But there’s a lot I don’t know about him, including his life before we got married. Who knows, he could have an ex-wife and little brooding, grunting duplicates of himself terrorizing the neighborhood.

My phone beeps with a text message. I check, dread dropping inside as I fear it’s yet another message from Todd. Instead, it’s from the pharmacy, telling me my prescription for a post-surgery medication that I have to take for another month has been filled. It’s only down the street, so when we walk by, I’ll check the hours. I’d rather pick it up later when Grey isn’t with me.

I don’t want to open up the conversation about his insurance, other than to thank him profusely.

“It would be a shame for you to come to Concordia and not get to see the sites. Would you like to take a stroll through the village?”

“Sure,” Grey replies which is more of an answer than I expected.

I point out a few good restaurants, some historic buildings, and the library—my favorite. It’s in the beaux arts style with a dome, dramatic arches, and stained glass rosettes.



When we pass the pharmacy, I surreptitiously glance at the hours and see they're open late, a contrast to the rest of the places of business which close on the earlier side.

The scent of bread and baked goods wafts from a bakery. Yes, even though I just had my fill of ice cream, complete with a waffle cone, I'm still craving something.

*Someone?*

But this reminds me that I "borrowed" some ingredients for cookie dough and ought to replace them before we leave tomorrow.

When we reach the market, I pause. "Would you mind if I run in and grab a few items?"

Grey gestures toward the door. "By all means."

He trails me while I locate the sugar, vanilla, and chocolate chips.

"Okay, all set."

He eyes the items in my arms. "When was the last time you ate something grown in a garden? Something green?"

"Do mint-filled chocolate cookie sandwiches count?"

Grey looks like he's concerned for my health.

"I'm kidding. I had a salad last night with dinner, remember?"

A little twinge inside suggests I'm disappointed he didn't notice that I'd been a good girl and ate my greens because I sure noted the way he tore into his tenderloin...and how he handled the ice cream earlier.

While we wait at the checkout, I explain the cookie dough replacement ingredients.

"You know you're supposed to cook the dough, right?"

"No, I didn't get that memo."

"Well, that explains why you like your steak rare, barely cooked."

I frown. "You're one to talk. Yours was practically bloody." But my lips reverse course because he did notice what I ate. I'm not sure why that should matter. But I guess being invisible most of my life, and now trying to get off the radar insofar as Todd is concerned, makes me want to be selectively seen—but why by Grey?

His lips quirk and I realize, that once more, I lost the thread of our conversation and didn't hear something he said.

I glance at the last-minute items available at the checkout. "I prefer mints over gum."

He gives his head a little shake as if to say if this were a game of hot or

cold, I'm freezing.

"The Great Gatsby is a literary masterpiece."

"Never read it."

"You're missing out." Trying again, "Rainy summer days are a delight."

"Not even close."

I refuse to break and admit I didn't hear his question or comment, but it's my turn to pay. I demonstrate impeccable people skills with the cashier, making me feel like a slightly better coach than I was a minute ago.

When we exit the store, Grey starts to say something, but the call of my name drowns it out. With Todd's threats fresh in my mind and because the voice is low and hoarse, my chest constricts, but thankfully it belongs to a female.

A woman with a shock of white hair opens her arms wide. "Everly!"

"Goodie!"

We exchange a hug like we've been best friends for decades and haven't seen each other in nearly that long.

"My sister and I haven't stopped talking since I arrived. I've practically lost my voice." She presses her hand to her throat.

"I take it the surprise visit worked out nicely?"

She nods. "Marvelous. A real treat. But who do we have here? He looks like the Viking."

My cheeks heat. She must've seen me drawing in the Cookie Dough Diary when we were on the plane.

In my head, I spin a story about my grand imagination. Out loud, I say, "You have a good eye. Found him on the seashore and figured I'd help him clean up—learn to be civilized."

"Nice job." She waggles her eyebrows and invites us both over for cookies next week. "I figured we get the gang back together. Turns out Manimal is my sister's mailman."

"And there I thought he lived in one of those caves in the foothills."

"See him every day and he's as horrible as we suspected. I even tried to sweeten him up with cookies."

"Some people just don't know what's good for them."

When we part with a promise of a recipe exchange and to keep in touch, Grey chuckles softly.

"Are you amused by my ability to coax older women out of their best-kept secrets?"

“Cookie secrets? You’re quite popular,” Grey says.

“The talk of the town,” I say facetiously.

“You’re friends with young and old.”

“And in between.” My phone beeps.

“And you get a constant stream of text messages.”

“Those? Pshaw. They’re spam, and I don’t mean the meat-like product in the can,” I say dismissively.

“Do I want to know what a Manimal is?”

“A man-animal hybrid, obviously.”

“And I’m a Viking.”

“I had to keep myself entertained on the airplane.”

I tell him the story about meeting Goodie and the Manimal in the seat between us, leaving out the part about how my Viking warlord sketch rode in to save me. We soon figure out we were on the same flight and our conversation opens from there, with us chatting about travel.

Wrapped up in the fact that Grey is talking to me like a human and not a reanimated cave beast, I forget that we’re about to embark on a trip until later that night.

As I repack my suitcase, my chest feels unusually achy. The forecast predicts rain. I’ve noticed that weather changes bring on a dull, almost arthritic pain along my breastbone. The doctor said I may sometimes experience phantom sensations.

Unfortunately, I haven’t gotten rid of the vampire-spider-ghoul from my past. However, I haven’t heard from Todd since earlier today and am relieved. He probably found something else to occupy his time—a mistress, a business scam, or other sketchy dealing done under the guise of the prestige given to his family name and job.

It’s already dark, but the night is pleasantly mild and the moon rises in the sky. I’m about to settle in when I remember I put off picking up the prescription at the pharmacy. I slide on the metallic ballet flats, head outside, and hurry along the lantern-lit path.

Thankfully, I get there minutes before they close. Prescription in hand, as I return to the lane that leads to Blancbourg, a figure enveloped in shadow approaches from the other side of the street.

Where is the sun or a silver bullet when I need it?

As I near the gate to the manor, I glance over my shoulder. The man takes shape. He’s slender, pale, and his eyes are dark. Could be a vampire. But no,

it's the Spider.

I hasten, but it's too late. There is no avoiding Todd, my ex-fiancé.



# GREY



I pad through my room in Blancbourg manor, admiring the vista of the moon shining off the lake in the distance.

My career has taken me around the world. Unexpectedly, I feel at home in Concordia. I snort at the notion of *feeling*—I felt the warmth of the sunshine on my skin earlier. The cold of the ice cream on my tongue and something I cannot name when with Everly. I guess that’s progress.

The only two other places where I experience rootedness and belonging are on the football field and Isle Royale north of the Upper Peninsula in Michigan. It could be the silver tint to the light that both places have in common so far north, the hint of crispness in the air even in summer, or something else altogether.

Out the window, a small figure dressed in shorts and a polka dot top walks briskly along the lantern-lit path leading away from Blancbourg Academy. I watch Everly leaving, wondering where she’s going by herself after dark. I don’t love the idea of her walking at night alone. Then my stomach sinks when I realize that a beautiful woman like her probably has a date. Sure, we’re married, but it’s a marriage of convenience and we have our rules.

She might even have a boyfriend. I’m not sure how I feel about that, given our arrangement. I haven’t so much as flirted with anyone else since that day in the courthouse, but it’s not necessarily because of loyalty, more like the clouds hadn’t parted long enough for me to think about being single.

Everly is free to date, right? I’d like to consult our Marriage of Convenience rules but we haven’t gotten that far.

Hands fisted, I lean against the windowsill. “What does it mean to be

married but not for love?” My voice is a husky whisper as if I expect someone to answer.

I’ve felt vaguely unsettled ever since I found Everly upset in her suite when delivering her missing luggage. Like our marriage of convenience, it’s something we don’t talk about.

I have a hunch something upsets her—perhaps it’s related to whatever prompted her need for my insurance. But she seems in perfect health, even if her food choices could use some improvement. Whatever it is, she hides it away as carefully as I do my past.

Even though Everly bears the refined grace of someone familiar with a luxurious lifestyle—you have to be to live in Concordia, it’s like paradise on steroids—she isn’t the kind of woman to lose it over a chipped nail. Whatever gnaws at her is bigger.

We’re stacking up secret, forbidden subjects like dominoes. Everyone knows what happens to those. They inevitably fall.

A twinge of guilt butts into my thoughts. I still feel bad about my outburst in the salon even though Everly forgave me. Seeing my reflection in the mirror after she cut my hair and trimmed my beard was like looking at my brother—same light gray eyes, identical chiseled jaw we inherited from our late father, and the lopsided smile that lifts a bit higher on one side than the other—though a scar blemishes mine.

We resemble each other so much, not even my mother can look at me without a stain of sadness in her eyes. The thought breaks me.

While in that swivel chair, looking in the mirror, memories pressed against the pain and it burst out in one ill-conceived, inescapable surge of emotion. It probably scared Everly. Heck, it startled me, but I’ve tethered my inner angst in the days since and we’ve gotten along reasonably well. Can’t deny that something sparks inside whenever she’s close. It warms the impossibly dead thing inside my chest.

Although, she seemed distracted today. I know I was when she stood between my legs, carefully trimming my hair. Breathing in her sweet sunshine scent, the warmth of her body, and gazing at the pair of lips I haven’t been able to forget softened something in me.

Out the window, Everly returns the way she came. I’m relieved, because unless she was speed dating, only about fifteen minutes has elapsed. That would’ve been the quickest date in history. Unless he was an ogre or he stood her up. The idea of anyone treating her like anything except a queen tightens

my fists. Then again, she claims that I'm a Viking and that's in the same category as a pirate who'd pillage a village.

I'll admit that I'm hopeful we're becoming friends—a bit backward since we're already married.

Everly glances over her shoulder and my gaze follows. A dark figure skulks in the shadows, following her.

A strong sense of protection grips my arms, legs, my entire body. My stomach twists, but I don't hesitate a moment longer as I pound downstairs and outside. I'm built extra-large, but I'm also fast, mostly because I've spent so much time trying to outrun my thoughts and get to the place where all I can concentrate on is my breathing and the pulse of blood in my ears.

Worried about Everly's safety, adrenaline kicks in, pushing me even harder, but I soften my steps as I near the gate where I saw the shadow cross her path. She's badgered me about my heavy footfalls, saying I walk like a herd of buffalo, so I lighten my step, which might surprise my opponents on the field. I put that unexpected trick in my back pocket of football plays this season. I'll creep up on an opponent in a way that they never see coming...and will do the same right now if someone is harassing Everly.

Nearby, voices rise and fall as I steady my breath.

An acidic male voice hisses, "How dare you humiliate me."

"I did no such thing. The moment I dissolved our engagement, I stepped out of your life, Todd. I'd appreciate you'd do the same for mine." Everly's voice is even, firm.

"Our marriage was simple. Husband, wife. Work, duties. Kids, smiles. What didn't you understand, Everly?" Todd asks.

"We've gone over this a dozen times. More times than that probably. Do you want to know what I didn't understand? Your infidelity, for one."

Todd snorts. "I was in the top running for executive and the breakup blemished my reputation," he says, skipping past her accusation as though it doesn't matter.

Red hot lava pounds through my veins, but I won't involve myself unless I have to. Don't need to add to my rap sheet, especially after what she said about having a clean police record.

"You should have thought about that when you were hooking up with your sidepiece." Exasperation streaks Everly's voice.

"What can I say? I have needs."

"Well, I do not need you. Please, leave me alone."



“No, that’s not how this is going to go. You didn’t satisfy me. You never did anything right. But now you have the opportunity to redeem yourself,” Todd says.

“I’ll be doing no such thing. I’ve started my new life here and I’d like you to leave it.”

“No, sweetheart,” he says in an oily tone. “You are going to come crawling back to me, begging me to take you back. You’re going to get reconstructive surgery—don’t worry. I’ll pay. Then you’ll show up at all of my events, on my arm. You’ll finalize the arrangement between our families and seal the deal, which will one day make me the owner of your daddy’s metal empire.”

“I want nothing to do with you.”

“I don’t really want anything to do with you either, but your last name is my ticket to the wealth that I’ve worked so hard for.”

“Good luck with that. My father doesn’t intend to leave anything to me.” Everly sounds bitter, yet brittle.

Todd scoffs. “Don’t be fooled. This was his idea.”

“Just give it up, Todd. It’s over.”

From my hiding place, I hear a moment’s pause and then several footsteps.

When Todd speaks, his tone is a mixture of surprise and accusation. “What is this? Do you honor your sham marriage?” He wheezes a laugh.

She must still have on the wedding ring. The fact that she hasn’t taken it off adds a little more water to what I thought was a half-empty glass inside of me.

“Let go of me,” she says as though spitting darts at the guy.

The sound of fabric shifting like she’s trying to get out of his grip fills the darkness and cements my next move. I take two long strides around the corner.

Todd grips Everly’s hand as if he’s going to try to drag her back to whatever hole he crawled out of. For a moment, he seems familiar. Slim, slick, and slimy.

Everly’s eyes are liquid and whatever fight she had in her, standing up to this leach, drains out of her.

“She asked you to let her go. What wasn’t clear about that?” I grind out.

“This is none of your business,” Todd says.

Stepping closer, I fire a verbal warning shot. “Hands off her.”

Like a boa constrictor, the words only make him clutch her wrist tighter.  
“What are you going to do about it?”

I swat him away like a fly and without thinking, I take hold of Everly’s hand and draw her close. She’s shaking and all I can think about is making it stop, making her feel safe.



## GREY



Everly's eyes are damp, but her hand is still in mine, clutching tightly. I didn't want her to see me Hulk out again but wasn't about to let the loser manhandle her. Taking a cooling breath, I move us toward the gate in front of the manor, eager for this to be over.

But it isn't, as Todd quickly gets back to his feet, glaring and snarling. He looks me over carefully, warily, perhaps realizing that I'm a real-life Hulk. As though shifting tack, he slowly, methodically brushes off as though no harm was done.

I've been around every kind of machismo with guys posturing and puffing up like they're the alpha dog. I know Todd's brand well—make other people feel vulnerable and powerless to build himself up because, in reality, guys like him are cowards.

"Have we met?" Todd asks, extending a hand.

I angle myself protectively in front of Everly and ignore his gesture. Forget manners, I won't dignify the guy with a handshake.

His lips pucker with superiority. "I'm Everly's husband."

I scoff. "I'm her husband and if you ever touch her again, I'll introduce you to Lightning and Thunder—" At least, that's what the Bruisers call my fists.

"You're her what?" Todd thrusts his chest out and sneers. "I thought it was for show. Who'd actually want to marry you?"

A growl grows inside. "She broke up with you. She moved on. Try to keep up with the times, buddy." I say, once more shifting toward the gate.

"You haven't seen the last of me, Everly." He stabs the air, pointing at me. "You're going to be hearing from my lawyer."

His threat to Everly and his arrogance toward me cause my caged rage to boil to the surface. “You think money and the lawyers it can buy will protect you from me if I ever see you near her again?”

“She’ll have no idea what hit her,” Todd hisses.

I turn to Everly, because those words alone sounded like a slap, when a pair of arms wrap around me. Todd is like a toddler trying to move a football sled across the field during practice. I don’t budge as he attempts to take me down. I almost laugh but spare him the embarrassment.

Instead, I turn around slowly and pick Todd up by the scruff of his neck. The guy’s feet dangle in the air as he kicks out.

“Dude, I suggest you give it a rest.” My voice is a growl. To make my point, I say words that I hope the Good Lord will forgive. After I lower Todd down, he twitches but acts like I didn’t intimidate him at all. Apparently, Everly’s ex is a bully and an idiot on top of being a coward.

I take her hand because I need something soft and strong to hold onto otherwise, I’m going to pound Todd into the ground.

“She’s mine,” he shouts. “You haven’t seen the last of me.”

I stop mid-stride and bellow, “I heard the entire exchange before I stepped in. You’re using her and if you know what’s good for you, you’ll listen to what she said and get out of her life.”

“This isn’t over. I’m going to prove she cheated on me with you,” he says as though thinking up the scheme on the spot. “I’m going to ruin her life...and yours.”

I laugh darkly. My life has already been ruined. There is nothing Todd could do to compare with what I recently experienced.

“You already did ruin my life, Todd,” Everly says as tears make a slow crawl down her face.

“I know people in high places and they’re going to make you both pay,” Todd shouts.

Everly throws her hands in the air. “Haven’t I paid? Haven’t I suffered enough?”

“Oh, yeah. That’s right.” Todd’s laugh echoes in the night. “I guess I ought to find myself a real woman.”

“She’s every bit a real woman,” I growl. “Come on, let’s go.” Once more, my hand closes tightly around Everly’s.

She sinks into herself. I want to get her out of here immediately. There is no sense in hearing any more of Todd’s poisonous words.

“Oh, I guess you don’t know about her surgery.” Todd’s lips slide into a sinister smile. “Strange that a married couple doesn’t share a room. Though I guess with a house that big, you can afford all the space you desire. Speaking of money, you can buy my silence,” Todd says.

“The only thing I’ll be buying you is a knuckle sandwich with your name on it. Now, get lost.” I shake with anger. I turn to Everly who grips my hand. “This guy doesn’t quit, huh?”

She shakes her head. “No. He doesn’t.”

But I’m not going to give him another inch or second of my time. With Everly close by my side, we return to Blancbourg. Preoccupied with the conversation I heard between her and Todd, the threats the idiot made, and the fury knocking around under my skin, begging to be let out, I don’t stop until we’re in front of the door to my suite. It’s much smaller than Everly’s but has a living area and an adjacent bedroom and bathroom.

I’m not going to lie, my space isn’t the picture of tidiness. Dirty athletic clothes hang off a chair, several cups of water litter the table, and I haven’t made my bed all week.

“I should go to my room.” Everly lingers in the doorway.

“How’d he know we don’t share one?” I ask, pacing in front of the windows where I’d seen her leaving the school and then returning when Todd appeared from the shadows.

“Good guess?”

“Has he been up here? Maybe you’re better off with me for now.”

“He’s as perceptive as he is manipulative. You’re not wearing a wedding ring. But he hasn’t been up here that I know of.”

“How’d he know you’re here to begin with?”

She shrugs. “He’s been texting me.” Her face falls as if she realizes something and scrambles in her purse for her phone. “He set up my phone, so he’d know where it is. Where I was.” She taps it a few times and then closes her eyes briefly as though recovering from the encounter with her ex.

A dark thought stops me in my tracks. What if I hadn’t seen her at that moment? What if I’d ignored the urge to run to her aid? What would that despicable man have done?

I guzzle a glass of water to cool myself off because I have a mind to go find the guy and make sure he never sees the light of day, or night, again.

“Where are my manners?” I mutter.

I pass Everly a glass of water. Our hands brush when she takes it and

she's still trembling. More than anything, I want her to return to her sunny, smiling self.

"I only have water and beef jerky. Want some?"

A faint grin flits over her lips. "You were more than a gentleman back there. A dangerous gentleman. Thank you."

I brace myself on the back of an armchair. "Do you want to talk about it?"

Tears fill her eyes.

"I'd like to know what's going on. I heard what he said."

My brother once told me there are three kinds of people in the world: wolves, sheep, and sheep dogs. The wolf, not to be confused with Connor Wolfe, is vicious and not to be trusted with sheep. The sheep will blindly walk into the wolf's den. However, sheepdogs are there to protect them and will do so viciously, if necessary. Bran said we're sheepdogs. I may not have joined the military, but I am here for Everly. Todd pushed me to the edge and the teeth came out.

"You heard everything before you Hulked out again?" She avoids looking at me. Is she ashamed? Embarrassed? Hurt?

"You didn't do anything wrong." My tone is as solid as rock.

"Didn't I?" she asks in a small voice.

"I heard enough to be certain that there is nothing you could do to satisfy a guy like Todd. He's a monster and only wants power over you."

A sad sound of affirmation breaks loose and she presses her hands to her face.

It hollows me out seeing her so upset and thinking she did anything wrong.

I crouch down in front of her, gripping her hands. "Everly, please talk to me. Let me help you..." I hesitate before saying the next part but seeing her small hands nestled in mine and wearing the ring draws them out. "I'm your husband."

At that, the tears fall. Once again, she seeks refuge in my embrace. I bring her into my arms and hold her, keeping her safe while she cries.

I despise the idea that Todd caused her any amount of pain. I want to drain it all away, so she can be her energetic, carefree, tear-free, bubbly, dream girl, self.

Time doesn't matter as I keep her in the shelter of my embrace. But when she does stop crying, she says, "Now I have something to add to my thankful

three of the day. You, you, and you.”

*Me?*

“I don’t know what sewer that guy crawled out of, but if he ever comes around again—”

“Thank you,” she interrupts as if not wanting the details of what I’ll do to Todd’s face if he so much as looks at Everly again.

A beat passes and I ask, “Where’d you find him?”

She snorts. “Todd was the original marriage of convenience. Er, engagement of appeasement. When Todd expressed interest, my father, for the first time in years, paid attention to me. He strongly urged me to go through with it. Looking back, they arranged it all before Todd and I met at a dinner party, hosted by one of my father’s associates. It was a business merger with me in the middle.”

“I take it you didn’t bring along one of your tattooed biker boyfriends.”

She snuffles a chuckle. “No, this all happened well after that phase.”

“Did you love him?”

“Todd? No. He was toxic, ornery, demanding, and deceitful. T-o-d-d. I ran out on our wedding and I gave up on love, figuring it’s not going to happen. Coming here was my chance to start over. Funny, it led me back to you.”

Our eyes drift together, not sure where to land.

Everly bites her lip. “I got a second chance at life, but I’d never give Todd a second chance. I didn’t love him in the first place but thought it could grow into love.” She lets out a breath then adds, “What about you? Did you get hit by the unrequited love arrow or are you walking around with a wounded heart?”

“More like a cold heart.” I press my hand to my chest. “A lifeless lump.”

“Sounds like you’re describing a dead fish.”

“May as well be.”

“Oh, come on. Did some gorgeous vixen trample all over your ego?”

“Hardly. I was engaged once too. Life happened and—” I pause, tentative about whether to share more. I brush a loose wave behind Everly’s ear. “I wasn’t in love, though.”

“Sounds like you have a story there.”

“A story for another time.”

“I’m in your debt, Grey. Twice now.”

“You don’t owe me anything,” I say softly.



With us seated on the sofa and my arms wrapped around her, she nestles in. It's pure comfort. Everly takes my hands in hers and studies the callouses and lines. "You sure I can't do anything to help you? You have big hands."

"They're full."

"I can try to lighten your load, but they don't look full."

"Trust me. They are."

Through long, feathery lashes, she looks up at me. I take flight in her sunny green eyes.

She says, "I do trust you."

I crash land and say, "That's probably not a good idea." The guilt about my ex and Sonny takes swipes at me. But I'm too tired to fight back at the moment. Too comfortable. Too lost with this woman in my arms.

We both must doze off because the grandfather clock from downstairs in the manor strikes midnight.

I don't sleep much as my mind winds around what I overheard and witnessed, the threats Todd spewed, and Everly's response.

I'm on alert and watchful, even though Everly is with me here and not alone in her suite. Protecting her reminds me of how my brother always looked after me when we were growing up.

I arrived late to my girth and strength. I'd been relatively scrawny through middle school and the first couple of years of high school. Then I had a huge growth spurt, shocking my brother when he came home on leave.

Bran wasn't afraid of hard work and taught me everything he learned in bootcamp—when most guys on leave would be lounging around and relaxing, he was exercising and studying. Bran's influence served me well afterward when all I could do to keep going was to continue lifting, running, and working out. It's the only thing that keeps me sane.

The sense of protectiveness for Everly collides with a new, unfamiliar desire to see her lips lift into a smile and for her to be able to take a deep breath and feel calm. I want to do whatever I can to lift this burden, to see her happy.

But how can I do that if I'm as grumpy and grouchy as a guy can get?



## EVERLY



Twisting to the side, I snuggle with my pillow, dreaming of an enormous ice cream fountain, with a waterfall and surrounded by waffle rafts. A hill of cookie dough turns into a roasting marshmallow, but I don't care that I'm going to get all sticky from it. I'm just so comfortable in this fluffy nest of sweetness.

Strange though, the marshmallow lifts and lowers rhythmically, slowly, as if it inhales and exhales. I didn't know they could breathe.

I somehow surface into consciousness and open my eyes.

The scent of fresh split wood and the northern forests fills my nose and my fingers grip the sheet. Jersey cotton sheets? The curtains on one window are open. The other one blocks the faint brush of gray morning light.

*Grey!* I fell asleep in his arms. I'm clutching his T-shirt. It's the next day. Panic seizes me, but if I move, I might wake the sleeping giant. The beast. The Hulk.

When I think about how he Hulked out on Todd, I have to admit I feel a tiny bit of satisfaction. Okay, a whole busload of kids sticking their tongues out and saying, *Nanny, nanny, poo, poo* at my ex.

The fact that he came here and said things that suggested he's been watching me and wants me back for purely corporate ladder-climbing purposes knots my stomach. I'll admit that I feel vulnerable. It's not like Todd is going to suck my blood—he didn't say that, but I certainly feel like it's something he could do. Nor does he actually have a sticky web to wrap me in and leave me in his lair for later. Rather, he lacks scruples, is power-crazed, and probably could use treatment for narcissism. As always, I pray for him...and for me to know what to do. How to handle this situation, which

is a lot less pleasant than the kissituation.

This reminds me that now I have another problem. I practically cried myself to sleep in Grey's suite, in his arms. Which are still wrapped around me. Not going to lie, they're kind of heavy, but it's a pleasant weight, like one of those soothing blankets I saw advertised on an infomercial during the many nights I couldn't so much as get five winks when I was staying at Heidi's.

I'm pretty sure this breaks Marriage of Convenience Club rules along with Blancbourg rules.

But I can inhale fully, deeply, dreamily. Grey loosened the tightness that's usually present in my chest. He stood up for me when no one else has. I don't know what Todd has planned, but I have someone on my team. A big someone.

I study his hands, palms calloused, nails trim, but one looks like it tore. Though, I don't see any evidence that he bites them. His knuckles are huge. Wrists too. With my face pressed against his chest, I hear the steady *thrum*, *thrum* of his heart. I can only imagine how big and strong it is. His lungs, too, as they slowly expand and contract.

In college, I visited the forests in the northwest of the United States and couldn't wrap my head around how the sequoia trees grew so big—I also couldn't wrap my arms around the trunks. Though I do have a photo of me trying to hug the tree.

Grey is like that too. I don't know what made him so grumpy and grouchy, but I think he needs a hug. I don't dare move though, because I might burst this little happiness bubble. Instead, in my mind's eye, I sketch the two of us hugging. I'll put pencil to paper later.

What I'd rather he not see is how puffy my eyes are sure to be from crying last night. I'm also jittery like I've had too much caffeine, even though I haven't so much as said good morning to a cup of coffee.

Grey grunts...yes even in his sleep. Or maybe that's a signal that he's awake. I crane my head up slightly, taking a peek.

His lashes rest on his cheeks and his expression is serene, not stony. But then his grip on me changes and he shifts slightly before blinking a few times as if bringing me into focus.

I tuck my head and keep my arm around him.

"Good morning." I'm as perky as ever—my college roommates never understood how I could go from a sound sleep to being perfectly awake while

they were groggy until they met their daily requirements for caffeine, pancakes, and showers.

“Morning.” Grey’s voice is rough.

He picks his hands up as though trying to figure out how we got into this tangle with him halfway reclined on the sofa and me tucked in under his arm with his other wrapped around me. Mine lace underneath, but just like with those huge trees, I can’t clasp my fingers.

“I like it here,” I whisper before getting up and running toward the door.

“Everly,” Grey calls.

I pause, afraid for him to see my smile.

“Good morning,” he says as if correcting himself.

Maybe it will be a good morning.



I traveled a bit as a child, but usually in the company of a nanny and never in first class. That was reserved for my father—if he flew commercial. In recent years, that’s rarer for the man who his enemies and friends alike call the Ice King. Hungry for wealth and success, he’s grown richer and richer. Apparently, Todd wants a few chips off that block and will do anything, including marry me, to get it.

*All I have to offer is cookie dough, folks, so unless you want a scoop, move right along!*

During our short time together, the only trips Todd and I took were by car and never fun—it was all hoity-toity sites and events for business deals. If the hosts saw me in my most recent outfits, I would’ve been denied entry. Then again, I could’ve explored someplace off the beaten path, which, let’s face it, is more my speed.

My father once said he and my mother were opposites. He also commented that I’m a lot like her. I take that to mean I get my carefree, winsome personality from Mrs. Ice King, aka the hockey fan sweetheart, who swept my father off his feet—supposedly, she scored a goal on him during a charity event and the rest was history.

Seated beside Grey in the spacious leather seat with ample foot room, and the VIP service with warm towels to freshen up, drinks, and snacks makes me

understand the lure. It's a far cry from my last flight, wedged between the window and the Manimal.

Still, I can't help but feel slightly guilty. "I could've just sat back there with the rest of the villagers," I say, thumbing over my shoulder.

Grey pockets his phone and stretches out his legs. "If you haven't noticed, I won't exactly fit comfortably back there."

"No, I meant me. I could sit in economy to save money." Because I'm all about the budget these days and Cate purchased regular tickets for all of us coaches. Grey got me the upgrade.

He blinks slowly at me as though I don't understand something obvious. "Life is short. Enjoy comfort when you can."

"Wise words coming from someone who takes his life entirely too seriously."

"You do realize you're talking to one-quarter of the #BruiserButt scandal."

My eyes bulge. "So you're admitting that you have a playful side?"

A lopsided grin traces its way across Grey's lips. "I'm not denying it."

"Prove it. Dixie Davis, the country star, is seated two seats ahead. Go ask her about her dogs."

"What if she doesn't have dogs?"

"Trust me. She does."

"Why would I want to know about her dogs?"

"Ask her and you'll find out. Maybe even make a new friend."

"Maybe I don't want a new friend."

"That's a problem."

"What if she asks me about my #BruiserButt?"

A belly laugh grows inside. I try to restrain it, but there's no stopping the tsunami of laughter that pours out of me.

A few people turn their heads as I shake in my seat, trying to laugh as quietly as I can.

"If I go ask Dixie Davis about her dogs, will you stop laughing?"

"Can't make any promises. Oh, and be sure to offer her a cookie recipe."

I wink, but it's more of a twitching eye movement because I can't stop the hysterics.

Grey gets to his feet under the guise of having to use the bathroom. I've been to Dixie's house in Tennessee. She's my friend Mila's grandma. Todd cut her out of my life and I should reach out and catch up. Dixie is a born

entertainer on top of being a singer and dog lover.

Before he goes on to have the best conversation of his life, he says, “Oh, and you’re not going anywhere. We fly together.”

Since the incident the night before with Todd, he’s become undeniably protective. It’s like I have my own bodyguard. Cue the lights and music because this feels like the beginning of a movie—or a dream, though I have to admit there is nothing soft or marshmallow-like about Greyson Adams.

He’s all hard muscle and observant eyes like he doesn’t miss a trick, and if he did, it would hit the cement wall of his muscles.

Todd’s sudden appearance and threats shook me up but his behavior isn’t entirely surprising. Early on, I saw glimpses of his jealous side, but it wasn’t until after our almost-wedding that I realized I was mistaken. I was witnessing envy.

The flight attendant advises passengers to power down our phones for takeoff. I would’ve preferred to leave mine in Concordia altogether. I’m one text or voicemail away from blocking Todd’s number, though thankfully, I haven’t heard from him—or his lawyers—since before the incident yesterday.

Grey comes back with a smile. “Snickerdoodles?”

“The dog or the cookie?”

He lifts his hands and shrugs, but then his eyes crinkle at the corners as if he belatedly understood something from his brief convo with Dixie.

After he lowers into the seat, he nudges me with his elbow. He must’ve glimpsed the name attached to the latest text message. Todd seesaws between trying to sweet-talk me and threatening me, but that’s hardly anything new.

“Any of those from Todd?” Grey asks.

“I don’t want to talk about it. I’m not proud of the mistakes I made and the way Todd can make me feel about the size of an ant.”

Grey’s eyes float over me with warmth, understanding, and not the judgment I expect—not that Heidi or any of my other friends ruled me guilty of ruining my life, but my father sure did.

“Do you know much about ants?” Grey asks.

My brow furrows. “That’s an odd question, but no. Not really.”

“They might be small, but they’re mighty. Cool fact number one,” Grey says. “There are over ten-thousand kinds of ants.”

“I guess that’s cool.”

“That means if you feel the size of an ant, you’re in good company. There

are a lot of you and there's power in numbers." His low, rough voice plows through the words.

My lips quirk with amusement.

"Cool fact number two." He counts on his fingers. "The creature with the most painful sting in the world is an ant. Fact three, there's another species that's the fastest."

"So, they're strong."

"I haven't even gotten to number four. Ants are the *strongest*. Relative to size, they can lift over fifty times their body weight."

"They're powerful and strong." The corner of my lip lifts because for all his grumpy, gruff girth, I realize that Grey was once a kid—probably fascinated by all things creepy and crawly.

He nods. "And number five. Ants don't have ears."

"How is that cool?"

"They don't have to listen to nonsense spewed by some loser who thinks you're small when they're actually powerful and strong. You're powerful and strong, Buttercup."

Grey's meaning rushes at me and I lean back in my seat. My look of amusement grows into an unexpected, perplexing smile.

"That's better."

I snort a laugh. "You surprise me in so many ways."

He's too big to fit in a coach seat. His muscles flex under his shirt like he hides boulders under there. However, deep inside there is a softness and understanding I never expected or experienced from a man.

"Thanks for that," I say.

His eyes flash, reminding me that he's a dangerous gentleman.

I like it. A lot.

He says, "Don't mention it."





## GREY



Once the flight out of Concordia is underway and after I relay to Everly everything Dixie Davis told me about her dogs, a runaway lizard, and a wedding day pie recipe she promised to share with my mother, I select an action movie. My eyes dip, exhausted after last night. But before they close, I glimpse a sketch of a Viking in the same notebook Everly had during our first meeting.

Asleep, I dream of rescuing the fairest maiden in the land and then bringing her home to my island castle.

“Hey, sleepy head,” a scratchy voice whispers on a waft of sweet sunshine.

I blink my eyes open to Everly, her head on my shoulder, looking up at me appreciatively as if I’d actually rescued her from an ogre hoard.

“We just landed,” she says.

As if hypnotized by her green eyes, I can’t think straight until after we disembark from the airplane and I down a large coffee with a shot of espresso.

“Are we going to Canada?” she asks as we navigate the airport to the connecting flight.

“Toronto and then Thunder Bay. Isle Royale is closer to Canada than anywhere in the US, so that’s my typical route even though it involves a bit of travel.”

“So, we’re heading to Michigan?”

She knows her geography.

Although I’m football famous, aside from the charity work I participate in, I don’t get involved in all the press hoopla and high-profile events the

other guys do—keeping up with the media circus. I save my energy for the field. At least, I do now. Earlier in my career was a different story.

“In my downtime, I visit the cabin my father left my brother and me.”

“Isle Royale is secluded, right? The plan is to avoid people for our real-life etiquette lessons?”

“You can observe me communing with the squirrels and chipmunks. But you’d better believe I’m not at all polite when it comes to weasels.”

Everly rubs her hand down her face but reveals a smile because yes, I made a joke.

On the second leg of our journey, I skip watching a movie. Once again, Everly takes out her notebook. She flips past the Viking.

The likeness to me is uncanny, same long hair as I had before she cut it, eyes, broad shoulders... All that’s missing is the armor, and my football pads could qualify. Though, I can’t say I’m in possession of a sword.

Did Everly appreciate my wild, Norseman looks? I sense a smirk building behind my beard. Since the day in the salon, I keep telling myself to trim it again, but perhaps I’ll keep it a bit longer—or let her do it.

I grunt and tap the notebook. “Hmm. He looks familiar. I feel like I’ve seen this guy before.”

Heat creeps up her neck and warms her cheeks. “You’re not supposed to look at someone’s diary.”

“I thought it was a sketchpad.”

As she moves to close it, the pencil catches on the binding and the pages flip to reveal another sketch that’s unmistakably me.

“And this one? Did you draw it? I’m not sure if I should be flattered or appalled.” I narrow my eyes as I study the image. She is incredibly talented. But I look like a brute fresh off a Berserker bender.

She frowns. “It’s just a doodle I did during your initial interview.”

“This is what you’d call a doodle?”

“I sketched it that first day but never meant for you to see it.”

I snort. “My mother would frame it if I didn’t look like such a wild man.” I peer closer at the fine attention to detail, the lines around my eyes from the sun, and the cloudiness that seems to surround me.

Everly and I are nearly temple to temple, hovering over the image—not exactly difficult since I take up so much room and we’re seated side by side on an airplane, but I can’t deny that this woman is taking up more and more space in my mind.

“You really call this a doodle?” I repeat.

“Yeah. It’s just a silly thing I do. It’s nothing,” she says humbly, almost embarrassed.

And yet she saw so much of me and somehow translated it onto a piece of paper. “You even got the scar.” I tilt my head a couple of inches so we’re eye to eye. In hers, I see the depths of trials, tears, sweat—everything worthwhile.

My breath stalls as Everly traces the scar with her gaze. “What happened?”

I’m not sure I can tell her. But I want to ease the pain that clouds her from seeing how beautiful and amazing she is. However, I also have a practical reason. If Todd tries to make any trouble in our lives, I have to know what I’m dealing with and be prepared.

The notebook sits in her lap and as it flips closed, it not only reveals long entries of her writing, but more sketches of people and places, illustrating the beauty she sees in the world.

I want to hold up a mirror so she can see that she too is part of that. I sense she doubts herself despite what she said about the diagnosis and surgery. Whoever truly makes Everly his wife someday will be a very lucky man.

But I’m not that guy, because I’m made of stone and grunts and clouds.

Without a word, I nab the pencil and notebook from her hands. Our fingers brush, sending something like liquid washing over me, through me. I’m immersed, yet buoyant as I enter this uncharted water.

She grabs at the notebook, asking for it back.

When I tease her with it out of reach, she says, “Okay, fine. Those sketches are of you. Happy?”

“Me? Happy? Not at all. Appalled? Nope. But am I flattered? The answer is yes. I’ll give you this back if you explain what you think you did wrong.”

Her forehead wrinkles. “What do you mean?”

“Before, you said that you did something wrong.”

“Cutting your hair? I’m sorry. I was just doing my job. Well, Shonda’s job.”

I run my hand through the blond on top of my head. “Nah. I like this look just fine. That’s not what I meant. Last night I said, ‘You didn’t do anything wrong.’ And you said, ‘Haven’t I?’”

I’m ready to refute any and all claims she’ll make against herself. In my eyes, Everly is perfect.

“Only if you tell me why you went along with our marriage.” She flashes the ring on her finger.

Mine is ringless. “I had my reasons.”

“And they were?”

The real answer is simple. Reckless altruism. Anything to bring me closer to my brother. I shift uncomfortably because I’m not ready to tell her why it was lucky that we got married. Everly will have questions about why I’m in this situation with the state and custody and I can’t bring myself to talk about it.

But I should know more about Todd in case he becomes a problem. “How about we take turns? I’ll share something personal and then you do. Back and forth.”

“It’s a deal.”

I say, “I grew up with relatively modest means. My father was a local pilot in the UP. The Upper Peninsula of Michigan,” I clarify, though she likely knows the geography since that’s where we said our vows.

I continue, “The winters can be brutal, and sometimes the only option is to fly in and out. Dad would bring people, supplies, and the like. Our mother raised my brother and me as well as working as the secretary at the pastoral office at our local church. Still does. But when I say office, I mean our kitchen table. She scheduled Bible studies, groups, charity events, and kept everything running smoothly. She gave a lot and asked for little in return, except for my father’s attention anytime he was home.” My throat tightens at the memory. “Granted, this was mostly before cell phones and those kinds of distractions, but she made it a point to feed their marriage and our family life as often as possible.”

“That’s beautiful. She sounds like a special woman.”

“Sure is. Anyway, I went off to college and she was proud of me, but that left her alone much of the time with Dad still flying. Then he was in a car accident. Tragic irony, considering Dad spent so much time airborne. He didn’t make it. Around the same time, I was drafted for the team. I went home, but she insisted I return to Boston. I was worried about her being alone, but she told me she had Jesus.”

I know how powerful the Lord is, but can hardly bear the guilt at the memory of leaving my mother like that.

“She also told me that I was lucky to have been given three gifts in life: talent, opportunity, and faith. For the first two, she was referring to football.

She told me not to squander any of them. So for that reason, when I have the opportunity to give someone a gift, I do. No questions asked. When Jimmy said you needed help—” I shrug. “In truth, I just took action.” There is more to it, given the situation with Bran and now my lawyer, but I can’t dig deeper than that. Not yet.

“I’m in your debt,” Everly says in almost a whisper, as though more debt threatens to crush her.

“You’re not. Not at all. That’s the thing about gifts. The giver doesn’t expect anything in return. The joy we find is in our ability to give.”

“Well, thank you.”

I nudge her shoulder and take a risk. “Little did I know I was going to get a hot wife out of the deal.”

“First rule of Marriage of Convenience Club...”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. But you asked. I broke the rule and answered.”

“It’s a gray area.”

“Har har. Are there any other official club rules we should have?” I ask.

“We have the first two rules. Borrowing from the—”

“Should I be concerned that you watched the Fight Club movie? Are you part of a secret, underground boxing ring?”

“It was a book first and don’t worry, Brad Pitt doesn’t have anything on you.”

“I should hope not because if he came at me, fists flying—” I stop because I don’t think that’s what she meant. If the sketches are any indication, she finds me pleasant enough to replicate on paper. “Back to the rules.”

“There are eight. You know the first two. We don’t talk about it. Three, if one of us wants out—” She thumbs over her shoulder.

“You mean separation? Divorce?”

She nods slowly. “Number four, only two people to a, uh, well, not a fight, but—”

“It’s just the two of us. No one else.”

“Exactly. If the desire should arise, that’s what rule number three is for. Now, five. Let’s see, if we do find ourselves in a fight, we can only stick to one topic at a time. No hitting below the belt with other topics.”

“I should hope not. Number six?”

“Officially, that one is no shirt, no shoes, so we—”

Declan would rail me for the flirty smile that I can’t hold back. “No funny

business. Not even with my wife?"

Her cheeks go a shade darker. "Those are the rules. Seven, this club will go on for as long as necessary. Until we mutually agree to number three."

*If we mutually agree to number three.*

"The last one, if it's your first Marriage of Convenience, you have to be married."

I squint into the past, straining to remember the original rule from the movie and the template she's using for the rules. "Does that mean honoring our vows?"

"Yes, and embracing marriage through communication."

"Respect."

"Trust."

As we hammer out the terms of the Marriage of Convenience Club, something unspoken passes between us even though Everly emphasized the importance of communication. It's like the agreement we made in the courthouse received its final stamp of approval and we're moving forward with this thing.

"Communication," I repeat, emphasizing it because it's not my strong suit.

"Speaking of, what did you say about a hot wife?" she says in disbelief. "I've been called many things, but not *hot*."

I stifle a smirk. "Even the other guys on the team think so."

She squawks a laugh. "As you can imagine, I'm not in the mood to be teased."

The ache in Everly's tone suggests she's not being falsely modest or fishing for flattery. She really doesn't see what's so obvious.

"Too bad, because it's true." And she could be mine. All mine. But can I risk getting close to her?

"You still owe me a question from when I admitted that I drew you in the Cookie Dough Diary."

"The what diary? Wait. That doesn't count as my question," I say as if this is a genie wish situation.

"Consider an explanation of my diary a freebie because it's fun." She tells a story from her college years and how each day she writes down her thankful three.

"That's cool. Now, you tell me what you did wrong."

She presses her lips together as though giving one more effort to keep the

answer to herself. An exhale escapes and her sweet sunshine scent tickles my nose.

“You’re going to get bonus insight because I can’t answer this question without also telling you about my father,” she says.

“Ooh. My lucky day. Two for one,” I joke, rubbing my hands together.

“Have you ever heard of Lefevre Metal Holdings?”

I scan my mind. “Actually, I think they’re a sponsor for a football arena in Georgia.”

“Yup. They, meaning my father, owns the second biggest metal manufacturer in the world. Up until he inherited the corporation from my grandfather, it was the first, built by my great-grandfather. In fact, I’m guessing this airplane is made of Lefevre metal.”

“So your maiden name was Lefevre?” I ask, piecing it together.

“Yup. Glad I didn’t become Mrs. Todd Devlin. But yes, my maiden name was Lefevre.”

“But you took my last name. You’re Everly Adams?”

“Not out of lack of respect for my grandfather and great-grandfather, but my father is...how do I put this? An incredibly difficult person.”

“How so?”

“Cold. Distant. Controlling. He arranged the marriage with Todd because his connections in the industry would put him back at number one in the world. I agreed to it to appease him. Because I thought it might work out and we could have a happy family.” She stares at her hands. “Turns out Todd didn’t want one.”

“No kids?”

Still not looking up at me, she shakes her head.

There is nepotism and shady dealings in football, but Everly’s own father treating her like a commodity to be traded for financial gain is horrendous.

“He’s so ruthless people call him the Ice King and he wears it like a badge of honor.”

“But I don’t understand. How’d you do anything wrong?”

“I don’t have much family. It was silly, but I was willing to do whatever I could to please him, so I went along with his proposal to marry Todd. I didn’t want to disappoint him.”

“What would’ve happened if you had?”

“I’m a peacekeeper and never dared to upset the equilibrium because I’ve seen what happens when people do. He routinely ruined careers and lives.”



Everly tips her head back with a harrumph. “The ironic thing is, I went along with the engagement and ended up exactly where I’d be had I just said *no*, to begin with.”

I absentmindedly run my thumb across the ring on her finger. “Are you sure about that?”

“Maybe not exactly, but he’s practically disowned me. I’ve made bad decisions. That’s what I did wrong.”

“Everly, he didn’t own you to begin with. But don’t beat yourself up about it.”

“Says the guy who’s been beating himself up about *something*.”

I grunt.

We descend into silence. All this talk about fathers reminds me that I am one and my son is about to become a much bigger part of my life.

Which means I have to find a way to tell Everly, and fast.



# EVERLY



For hours now, I've been breathing in Grey's woodsy air fragrance, reminding me of fresh split cedar or cypress. I think it, or the long day of travel so far, has me thinking sideways or upside down.

I don't know why I told him about my personal life and past. Smoothing a fresh page in the Cookie Dough Diary, I write an entry about the last twenty-four hours, pouring out my confusion, but also that I'm grateful Grey stepped in when Todd threatened me because I don't know what he planned to do or how I would've gotten out of it.

"Did I say too much?" Grey's voice floats to me.

"Are you over there overthinking? That's my gig."

"You're an overthinker?"

"Over analyzer. Over feeler. Over everything. Over and over. Probably used to be an over spender, but I don't have that problem anymore. Though, when I got my first paycheck from Blancbourg, I did buy an adult-style pair of pants, shorts, and a couple of tops because I'd started to consider fashioning a frock out of the drapes in my suite a la the film *Gone with the Wind*."

The corners of Grey's lips tease a lopsided smile which is a step up from the ghost of a grin I usually see.

*This is progress, people!*

"Since we're going to be together for the next few weeks, I, um, thought we should try to get to know each other better." He seems nervous, like there's something else he wants me to know, but isn't sure how to say it.

If the guy can tell me I'm hot—I have to fan myself just thinking about it—I'm sure he can come clean about whatever other secrets lurk in the

recesses of his mind.

“Want to play two truths and one lie?” I ask and explain the rules in which we each reveal two facts about ourselves and one fabrication that’s outrageous but plausible.

“I was thinking more like twenty questions.”

“How long is this flight?”

Grey takes my diary and opens it to a new page. He writes the numeral one and then proceeds to write a list, numbering each one. “This is what I want to know about you.” He gives me the notebook back.

“You want to know about my relationship with Todd?” I read the first one.

“When we got hitched, I didn’t realize you were engaged before.” His eyes land on the ring he’d given me on that very strange day several months earlier.

“Does it matter?”

“If the guy is threatening you, yeah. It’s my business.”

“Might I remind you of the MOC Club rules?”

“And one of mine is no woman in my life, least of all my wife, Marriage of Convenience Club or not, is going to be threatened by some jerk knob.”

“Fair enough. Don’t Hulk out here, we’re in a metal tube hurtling through the sky, thousands of feet in the air, no trapeze net below.”

“My Hulk days are behind us.”

“You want to know if I’m afraid of Todd’s blackmail and threats?” I don’t even pause to think. “When I’m with you, no. With him? Yes.”

He stiffens beside me.

I read the next item on the list. “You still want to know what I did wrong.” My lips turn down. “I told you. I almost married Todd. Didn’t think I’d get a second chance at marriage.”

“So, you believe in second chances?”

“To a fault. Sometimes third and fourth chances too.”

“Are you referring to Todd?” Grey says my ex-fiancé’s name with disgust.

“But there’s no chance I’ll ever give him the time of day again. Okay, if he was waiting for a train, I’d tell him because that would mean he’d be traveling away from me.”

Grey runs his finger down the paper. “My mother taught me to make lists. She said it keeps the head organized. Out of the mind and onto paper. Frees

up space for creativity.”

“You don’t strike me as a particularly creative guy. More strategic. Analytical.”

He wears a lopsided smirk. “Ah, that reminds me. I have one more question. Your father and our marriage. How will that go over with the Ice King?”

At the mention of my father, my insides freeze like I’ve been tossed into a vat of dry ice. Fitting, since Dreven Lefevre is the *Ice King*.

I write my own list of questions on the page and Grey reads them.

“I’ll tell you about the scar if you answer one more item from this list,” Grey says.

There’s more I want to know about him than that, but it’s a start.

Turning to face Grey, I take in his distinct cheekbones, the crystalline gray eyes that see more than I expected, and then land on his lips—they’re perfectly proportioned, only interrupted by the scar running across his lower one. I touch my finger to it from where it runs through the scruff of his beard across his lips. My entire body quakes.

For once, Grey doesn’t frown. “The story goes, I wasn’t born as a boy, but as a fish. My father had been out in his boat one day on Lake Superior. My mother was home with my older brother, Bran, and pregnant with me.”

He says his brother’s name with a mixture of affection and something else I can’t identify.

“Dad cast his line and almost instantly the bobber disappeared. Whatever he caught fought with him, practically dragging the boat through the water. At last, Dad let the line go slack. His catch also went still as though Dad and the fish had reached an agreement. The man could catch the fish if he did it peacefully, reverently. So, he said a prayer and when he finally pulled in the line, it was a massive sturgeon—the biggest he’d ever seen. By his estimate, it weighed about two hundred pounds. He released it, of course, but—” Grey taps his scar. “Not without leaving a mark.”

I lean close, transfixed.

“I was born on the same day. The fish and I were one and the same. Big, strong, and tranquil in our own ways.”

I have to agree. Well, except when he Hulk smashed the salon and nearly broke Todd in half. I’m making a list of my own about him. What changed that made him go from peaceful to enraged?

“Okay, your turn,” he says.

I'm sure that isn't the real story of how he got the scar—a fishing accident, maybe? Brothers horsing around? I too have a vivid imagination and like the fish version better than whatever probably sent his mother in a panic to the emergency room.

Now it's my turn to bear my secret. My hand drifts to my chest. "I have scars too."

Grey stiffens.

"Don't worry. They're not from Todd, but they explain his comment about me being a real woman."

Grey's eyes shadow. "Everly, you don't have to talk about it if you don't want to."

"No, it's okay." I'm going to try to be strong like the ant and want to tell him. "Even though Todd's comment was intended to hurt me, I don't believe what he said. I know the truth even if it's a tough one. I want you to know that."

He nods.

"While Todd and I were engaged, I went for a regular checkup and learned that there were some concerning results to my blood work. Ultimately, I learned that I had abnormal cells in my breast tissue. To spare you the details of the doctor's visits, the anxiety as I waited for test results, and discovering Todd's multiple cases of infidelity, I was officially diagnosed with breast cancer." My voice falters.

It still doesn't seem real, but I'm not removed enough from it yet for the words themselves not to have an effect.

Grey's hand grips mine, strengthening me to go on.

"This isn't true for everyone, but in my case, the clear way to proceed was a double mastectomy because I carry a unique gene that could cause a mutation, putting my life at risk in the future. I didn't think I'd have to face something like that so young. It was my first screening for breast irregularities." I pause and swallow back the tightness in my jaw. "Turned out Todd was already cheating, but he was appalled. I was also already on his health insurance. When I didn't say, 'I do,' we reached an agreement. Kind of like your dad and the fish. He'd leave me alone if I walked away quietly, leaving everything to him. In the process, I lost my home, my health insurance, friends, family..."

"That's where I came in. Health insurance."

I nod. "I'd exhausted all of my options. Partly because of the cost, but

also because it just didn't feel like the right choice, I opted not to have reconstructive surgery." I glance down at my mother's pale pink scarf draped over my shoulders and hanging across my chest.

Grey fills the space in front of me as he inclines his head and then tucks a piece of hair behind my ear. "You are so brave and every bit a woman as there ever has been, Everly. You're the most beautiful woman I've ever seen, inside and out. I didn't mean to push you, but thank you for sharing that with me. Now I understand why—" He loops his finger around my fourth finger on my left hand, squeezing it.

"And thank you for your generosity and understanding."

I rarely tell anyone, but he offered me his hand in marriage and thereby his insurance with very little explanation.

He flashes his lopsided smile, and with it, I risk telling him anything...even the tickly tease coming from low in my belly, the hidden chambers of my heart, and the back of my mind.

I like Grey Adams. I like him a lot.





# GREY



On the third and final leg of the journey, I break up the nervous quiet of what feels like a first date, skipping between Everly and me, by telling her all about where I grew up and Isle Royale.

“It’s a National Park now, but my family has owned a cabin there for over a hundred years and we were grandfathered in. No pun intended. Generally, no one lives there year-round because it’s so remote, but come summer, it’s the most beautiful place in the world.”

I lean over her, pointing out the window. “That’s Lake Superior. The clearest water you’ll ever see surrounds the island. There are also moose, coyotes, wolves, and foxes. Lots of hikes, fishing, and swimming, if you’re part polar bear.” I can’t help but talk about my home with affection. “Every summer, my family would go there with my dad flying in and out on the seaplane.”

“Are you part polar bear?” Everly asks.

Her breath is warm on my neck as we both peer out the window.

“You tell me. I thought you had me pegged as a Viking.”

Her eyes twinkle.

The stirring in me turns to a sizzle. Everly ignited a fire inside. The sun finally rose in my life and brought with it this unpredictable, adventurous, confident woman who I can’t get enough of. A woman who also happens to be my wife.

It can’t be helped. My lips lift into a lopsided smile that hasn’t seen the light of day in far too long.

“I like the looks of that.”

“I like the looks of you,” I whisper.

Are we flirting?

By the rosy glow of her cheeks and the heat in my veins, I'd say that yes, yes, we are indeed.

After landing, we take the ferry boat to Rock Harbor on the eastern end of the island so Everly can get the full experience of the pristine wilderness. After disembarking, I steep in the relative silence. A deep relaxation washes over me. The surrounding lake dampens my inner fire—and not the one Everly stoked. In addition to being beautiful, she's adorable as she takes in our surroundings with wide, wonder-filled eyes.

"It's beautiful here," Everly says. "But, um, no cars?"

"Nothing with wheels other than a wheelchair or a wagon is allowed on the island."

"That explains why the air smells so fresh."

I know the island's topography like the back of my hand and start walking toward the trail leading to the cabin.

Everly catches up. "What about our luggage, food, necessities, and that kind of thing? I spent the second half of the winter in the Upper Peninsula with my friend Heidi, so I'm not exactly a stranger to remote areas, but, um, I don't know how to hunt or forage."

My stride is long, and I'm a step ahead, but I can hardly contain my excitement at sharing this place with Everly. "I had a seaplane drop all of our stuff at the cabin."

"Ah. So, at least we won't be camping."

"Not at all."

"It just seems like we're really far away from everything."

"That's the idea."

"How about, um, I don't know, modern conveniences, newspaper at the corner store, coffee from a cafe, chocolate cake at the bakery?"

"My birthday is in a couple of weeks and that sounds pretty good, but you don't have to worry. If you want chocolate cake or caviar, just let me know."

She wrinkles her nose. "I'll stick to cookie dough."

Standing over Everly, I shade her from the sun. Still, her eyes are bright as she looks up at me.

"I come here to regroup. After everything, I thought you might need to do the same," I say.

During the twenty-minute walk to the cabin, the tension in my shoulders and jaw that I've carried since the incident with Todd dissolves with each

step.

The sloped roof of the stone and rough timber multi-level “cabin” comes into view.

Everly stops short.

“Welcome home,” I say, sweeping my hand in the direction of what had once been a ramshackle hunting cabin that I transformed into a million-dollar lodge.

Her mouth hangs open. “It’s amazing. Not what I was expecting at all.”

We continue to walk down the path, nearing the structure consisting of mostly windows on the front, a wide deck in the back overlooking the lake, and custom stonework on the lower half.

“After roughing it so long, I spent the last handful of years slowly making improvements.” I bring my finger to my lips. “Shhh. I didn’t officially get a building permit, just had seaplanes bring in shipments and materials, had workers camp out for the summer, and labored alongside them. It’s one-hundred percent eco-friendly and self-sustaining.”

“It’s exquisite,” she says as we step inside.

I draw a deep breath and stretch my arms. “Make yourself at home. I’ll give you a quick tour.”

I guide Everly through the lower level with a game room, movie theater, and a fireplace.

She points. “I thought you said the island is closed during the winter.”

“Closed to visitors. If I ever have the urge, I can fly in. Special privileges. I figured a fireplace down here would be good for after ice skating, fishing, and things like that.”

“I haven’t skated in far too long.”

“Maybe we can do something about that,” I say as we head up the stairs.

The main level has an open floor plan with the kitchen and living area spanning much of the space, along with a long table for dining and a grand hearth that reaches the vaulted ceiling. Everything is wood, granite, and river stone.

I lead us up the staircase and to the bedrooms.

She pauses, getting the bird’s-eye view from the landing. “Spectacular. I have to admit, I envisioned a hut befitting a Viking with a hole in the ground filled with your plunder.”

I make a battle cry and in one swift motion, pick Everly up, cradling her in my arms, and crash down the hall.

She laughs and mock-pounds me on the chest before I carefully deposit her on the floor of an enormous bedroom.

As she lowers to her feet, our eyes catch for one long, heart-pounding moment. Her lips part as though she's going to say something. But words don't come. Not from her or me. Instead, something else pulses between us. I can feel it along with my desire to protect her.

Everly's shoulders drop on an exhale. She eyes her suitcase, then the floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the lake, and finally, the king-sized bed.

"See? The airline didn't lose your baggage." I wink.

"That's a relief. If they did, I doubt they'd deliver my stuff all the way out here. And it would've been a shame to have lost the new clothes I bought to mix in with Heidi's hand-me-downs. Then again, I guess I don't have to worry about people wondering why I was dressed like a preteen since we're in the middle of nowhere."

"And there I thought you were just a little bit manic pixie dream girl."

"I don't know what that means."

"Me neither." I chuckle, recalling a term I heard one of the guys use.

"But you said, *dream* girl."

"Did I? Enjoy your stay, Mrs. Adams. If there's anything I can get you, please let me know." I wink.

As I pad down the hall, I'm pretty sure she threw herself on the bed with a bounce and let out a happy squeal.

With a little skip to my step, instead of my usual buffalo stomp, I realize that I'll do anything for her. But what is she going to think about the situation that's about to unfurl?

Once downstairs in the kitchen, my domain, my stomach growls like a true Viking and I get to work. After marinating chicken thighs, I toss together a salad with spinach, strawberries, onions, and poppyseed dressing. Every summer I have food deliveries made to compensate for what I don't grow, but this is the first time I'll be cooking for more than just myself.

A little while later, Everly appears wearing a white sundress with little pink flowers and looking refreshed.

I pour us each a glass of sparkling water with lemon. "Snacks on the kitchen island and dinner prep is almost done."

She strolls through the space to the bookshelves—they're taller than me and packed full.

“Read much? This is impressive. You even have your books nicely arranged and backlit.”

“The winters are long up here. Got into the reading habit young.” I have a few favorites, reading, gardening, football, my son...and now Everly too.

“What you do with your spare time is very telling of your character.”

“Agreed. Other than football, I enjoy long walks on the beach, watching the sunset, and growing and preparing food.” I rinse some of the fruit we’ll have with dessert later.

“You’re not kidding, are you?”

The corner of my lip tickles toward a smile. “Nope. I also like the quiet, nature...”

“It’s quite the contrast to your Bruisers persona. It is very peaceful here, and for the most part, you’re a man of few words.”

“Wasn’t always. Bran and I used to carry on well into the night, but it didn’t matter because there’s no one around here for miles. No one to file a noise complaint. It was the only time our mother didn’t have to tell us to keep it down.” I close in on a smile at the memory.

“Where’s your brother now? Will he be visiting too?” Everly asks.

My mind shudders like windows rattling in a storm. That’s a question I can’t answer.

But someone knocks on the door. I am well aware that when I open it, my life will change forever.

I try to take a deep breath and it sticks. I instantly regret not telling Everly my whole story. Clouds roll in across what so briefly felt like a blue-sky day.

“Ready to play house?” I mean for it to sound lighthearted, but my tone is more in the vein of a dangerous gentleman.

“Is that the neighbor? Do you want me to pretend we’re actually a happily married couple?” There she goes with that easy laugh.

“Something like that.”

Elsie, laden with bags, nearly tips over as the blond little kid that I still can’t believe is a real boy rushes toward me.

“Pappa!” he calls.

I quickly unburden Elsie then crouch down and open my arms for a toddler tackle. He’s a bit sweaty and sticky after the long trip, but I love him all the more for it.

“How’s my favorite little man doing?”

He answers in Norwegian, telling me he’s hungry and then wiggles out of

my arms.

“Me too.” I scoop him up and then greet Elsie with a half hug.

Also, in Norwegian, she asks how I’m doing.

“You know I have the vocabulary of a three-year-old, so if you two keep this up, soon I won’t understand you.”

She laughs and goes about organizing the bags, telling me what’s where, which I only half hear because Everly stands at the foot of the stairs, eyes bulging.

“Everly, meet Sonny.” He waves at her and drives his little toy car across my shoulder.

“You’re a father?”

I grunt.

“A single father?” Eyebrows raised, she glances at Elsie.

“Yes, a single father. Forgive me, Everly, meet Elsie.”

“Hello, it’s lovely to meet you,” Elsie says in accented English.

“Likewise.” Everly swallows thickly but extends her hand all the same.

Confusion streaks Everly’s features. “Are you—were you—?”

Elsie smiles because she’s likely not following, but I just realized what this must look like. “Elsie Olmsted is my cousin.”

Everly presses her hand to her chest and lets out a breath. “Oh, I understand. Actually, I don’t, but—never mind.”

“She was taking care of Sonny while I was away.”

“So she’s not your wife, er, ex-wife?”

Elsie and I exchange a glance and then she chuckles. “No, definitely not.”

“But he’s your son?” she asks, gesturing to the little boy who looks strikingly like me.

I nod as I pour Elsie something to drink and get a snack for Sonny.

“Does that mean I’m a stepmom?” Everly’s voice is barely above a whisper as confusion flickers across her features.

“It would appear that way.” My tone is decisive, yet a little hopeful that this is the life that she also wants.



# EVERLY



Elsie excuses herself to the bathroom and Sonny munches on some small carrots with the green tops still on.

“Grey, in the future, relaying this kind of information is something you have to prepare someone for. Suggest they sit down or tell them in advance. Is there a reason you didn’t tell me that you’re a father?”

His shrug is apologetic rather than dismissive. “Some days, I don’t believe it myself.”

As if this isn’t the biggest deal of the century, Grey dumps a wooden puzzle onto the counter and they put it back together while Sonny eats his snack.

Elsie returns and asks about our trip. They’re both acting like this is all perfectly normal while I freak out inside. I skim through every conversation I had with Grey, wondering if I experienced temporary and selective amnesia, having blocked out this surprising and adorable fact.

At no point did Grey mention that he has a son, named Sonny, or that he’s a miniature version of his father, minus the beard, which has grown back in record time, by the way. Then again, I quickly enacted the MOC Club rules, thereby giving him a reason not to tell me about this situation.

The early summer breeze wafts from the doorway and I realize Elsie is saying goodbye.

“It was so nice to meet you,” she calls to me.

“Are you sure you can’t stay?” Grey asks.

“You know I’d love to, but—”

“I know, I know. You did me an immense favor and have to get back to your life—Mathias and the big wedding coming up.”



“Will you be able to make it?” she asks me.

“To your wedding?” My gaze searches Grey’s.

She slaps him on the shoulder and shakes her head. “There is something you must know about the Olmsted men, whether they’re speaking English or Norwegian, they’re men of few words. Thankfully for me, I’m marrying into the Norgaard family.”

“Who’re notorious for having stinky feet.”

Elsie glares at Grey but mirth fills her eyes.

“What? It’s true. The summer we had to bunk in the same room as Mathias, all Bran and I could—” Grey falls quiet.

Elsie’s eyebrows dip together and she hugs him. “Good luck.”

“Safe travels.” Grey’s voice strains ever so slightly.

With a wave at Sonny, who chomps on his last carrot, she leaves us with this little kid. For the record, he’s adorable, but not someone I was expecting.

Neither is Grey, who seems to come alive around him. Having moved on from the puzzle, Grey bounces him on his shoulders as they parade down the hallway, singing a nursery rhyme in what I’m guessing is Norwegian.

I trail behind, following Grey’s echoing voice as he shows Sonny his new room.

Remaining in the doorway while the two of them play on the floor, I say, “You didn’t show me this room during the home tour.” Accusation contrasts with the smile I can’t help at the sight of father and son, heads bent together in concentration, as they untie a knot on the string that holds together a rubber mat printed with roads for the little guy’s toy cars.

Grey glances up at me and gestures for me to come over. “Can you help us untie this?”

“If you help me make sense of this,” I say softly because I don’t want to make a scene or upset Sonny.

After I loosen the knot, Grey smooths the mat and sets up the cars for Sonny and gestures that we go into the hall.

“I’ll be right back and then we’ll go look for bunnies,” he says to his son.

Preoccupied with his fleet of miniature four-wheeled vehicles, the little boy says, “Okay.”

In the hall, Grey lets out a breath. “It’s a part of my life that I don’t really like to talk about.”

Aghast, I say, “That you’re a dad?”

“Unexpectedly.”

I incline my head. “Cateline warned us about you football *players*.”

Grey’s expression hardens. “I didn’t—”

“But you’re an adult, you know how that works, right?” I realize I’m waving my finger between us because if this guy needs the birds and the bees talk, we have more work to do than I thought.

“It wasn’t like that.”

I roll my eyes. “No, of course not.”

“A few years ago, I decided it was time to settle down. I was dating Sonny’s mother, a performer from Norway. She was popular on the cruise lines. Thought we could make it work. She had him, but then our relationship unraveled. She was happy enough to get child support, but then started to restrict my time with him. I was busy. Selfish, I guess.” Grey scrubs his hand across his forehead.

My eyebrows lift because that sounds like a knot that’s not so easily untied, but I’m not sure I’m ready to travel down this road with him. “I’d like to remind you that I already have a job, teaching you etiquette, so if you want me to take over Elsie’s job as the nanny around here, then we’re going to have to backtrack. Lesson one, tell the woman you married that you have a kid.”

“It’s a difficult subject.”

“Maybe so, but it’s one that’s your responsibility. So, do you expect me to be a nanny?” I imagine my life like the second run of a movie in a warped sort of way with Grey playing my cold, distant father, Sonny depicting me, and my role as the nanny instead of the invisible child.

“Not a nanny. My wife.”

“Wifey? Wannyy? Nifey.” I wince. “That sounds aggressive. I’m not going to knife you over this, but is there anything else I should know?”

This time Grey inhales. “I wasn’t a good father. Wasn’t around as much as I should’ve been after my ex and I broke up. Then she pulled an ‘ole splitsville from Sonny’s life and left him with her mother. Last month, Sonny’s grandmother passed away, leaving Sonny with the state. I wasn’t aware of that until I’d been trying to reach my ex to arrange a visit. She wouldn’t respond, so I got the police involved. Found out she abandoned our kid.”

My heart breaks in two and I grip his arm. “I am so sorry, Grey.”

He grunts. “Everly, I essentially did the same thing. Traded my family for my football career.”

“But you’re here now.”

He swallows thickly as though struggling with guilt and regret. “Yeah. I am. But that’s why I didn’t tell you. I’m not proud of the man I was, and had my brother been around, he’d have whooped me good for being such an idiot.” He turns to the little boy. The love in his eyes when he looks at Sonny puts those broken pieces in my chest back together.

“So, tell me about the little dude.”

Grey beams. “Sonny just turned three, loves cars and trucks, swimming, and strawberries. But blueberries are his favorite. Seriously, you have to be careful because he’ll eat a pound of them. Found that out the hard way.” A grin plays on his lips, reminding me that boys, guys too by the looks of it, all think poop is funny.

Sonny toddles over and hugs Grey’s legs. He looks up at him with big blue eyes that are the same as his father’s in every way except the color.

Grey picks him up. “Sonny, I forgot my manners. I didn’t introduce you to—” He pauses as though not sure what to call me. “Buttercup?”

Sonny giggles then in his squeaky little kid voice, he says, “I like smør.”

“That means butter,” Grey says.

“Hi, Sonny. I like butter and buttercups too. It’s nice to meet you.”

The little boy looks at me for a long moment. Hope lights in his eyes and his chubby little fingers reach for me. “Mamma?”

Grey grunts.

I take Sonny into my arms and he clamps down with a hug like he doesn’t ever plan to let go.

There is something else Grey isn’t saying. Something hidden beneath the surface. Another piece of his sad story that he won’t tell. Over Sonny’s shoulder, as he clings to me like a little koala, my gaze floats from Grey’s chiseled cheekbones, to the scar on his lip, to the snug bind of his T-shirt around his muscles. Had it not been for the fish story, I’d think he was hewn out of the solid rock of the island.

After a walk around the property where we try to track down the bunnies, or the *kaniner*, as I learned in Norwegian, we return to the cabin, as Grey calls it. More like a mansion, but I’m learning the man who isn’t much for talking has plenty to say and more answers he owes me. While he finishes preparing dinner, I read to Sonny from a stack of books Elsie brought.

Out the big windows, the sun hovers just above the tree line, painting the lake shades of citrus.

Once at the table, the three of us join hands in prayer, completing the moment. It's like we found a missing chapter of the story I didn't even know I was part of.

The three of us quickly form a connection and it fills me up.

I could attribute it to the natural environment, Grey and I telling each other personal stories or the fact that he brought me to the place that's very special to him, but I've seen another side of Grey that I couldn't have imagined. From hiking around the island with Sonny riding piggyback, to the two of them singing together, to him blowing raspberries on his sweaty little neck.

Sonny brought him to life.

And as upset as his omission of this very major detail makes me, seeing him in the kitchen, in jeans and barefoot while making dinner—fully domesticated yet every bit still a Viking—makes my heart race and stop at the same time. What could this mean? Have I fallen for my marriage of convenience husband?

“What?” he asks in a new, non-gruff flirty tone when he catches me staring.

Smirking, I shake my head. When Grey looks in the mirror, I'm guessing all he sees is the Viking, the Hulk, so he acts like one when there's so much more to his man if he'd only allow it.

I'm only three bites into the meal with balsamic grilled chicken, sweet potatoes, and a salad when I realize that this could be my life...

And I could eat this way every day for the rest of my life. I close my eyes, savoring the moment and the fresh flavors. When I blink my eyes open, Grey stares at me with...curiosity? Mirth? Something else?

We talk about all the things from the garden on our plates. Sonny gives us a long list of the foods he likes and the ones he doesn't. At the top of that list is *lutefisk*.

Grey sticks out his tongue. “It smells as bad as Mathias's feet.”

Sonny giggles.

“*Bestemor*, Grandma, used to make me eat it when I was your age. She'd even try to disguise it in a grilled sandwich.”

“Do I have to eat it?” Sonny asks as though petrified.

Grey raises a pointed finger in the air. “No. There will be no *lutefisk* in this house by order of official decree.”

“What is *lutefisk*?” I ask.

“It’s yucky,” Sonny informs me.

“Very yucky—”

Hearing Grey use that word makes me laugh before he finishes.

The laugh that comes from his chest cranks like a rusty machine starting up after a long year in the rain. Sonny giggles.

Grey says, “It’s like eating one of my football cleats after it’s seen a season on the field.”

“Glad I’m done eating because this was delicious, unlike, at least from your description, lutefisk.”

“You can thank me for making it.”

“If you get to make an official decree, does that mean I do too?” I ask.

Grey tips his head from side to side.

“Everyone gets ice cream for dessert.”

Sonny cheers.

Grey says, “On Fridays only.”

“And Mondays.”

“Deal.”

We sit on the back deck and eat bowls of vanilla fudge swirl. Sonny takes his with rainbow sprinkles and focuses on getting each bite evenly coated. Grey tossed some fresh berries in his.

In a low voice, I ask, “Why’d you do this?”

“Do what?” he asks, taking a bite.

“Bring me here?”

“I already told you, but it’s also because it’s where I live. You’re supposed to coach me up on living right. We’re doing that.”

“I happen to know that football players like you have a lot going on.”

“I happen to know that I’m not great at communicating but am working on it.”

“So, you admit that you’re an idiot?” In movies, I’ve seen women try to push the guy away by pretending they don’t like him. The words fell out of my mouth. Maybe to protect myself? But it feels wrong. Dishonest. Stupid. And I know that if I try to push Grey away, my magnetism to him will only grow in an unkind twist of fate.

His face pinches and he presses his hand to his chest like he’s been struck by an arrow. “Ouch. But if you recall, you did make the first and second rules of Marriage of Convenience Club very clear.”

“But this is real life, not a club.” All the same, my heart tugs so strongly

for these two people—one big, one small. One protecting himself at all costs, the other born into a family whose story I don't know exactly, but would be painful if he weren't so young.

“Life etiquette lesson. Tell your wife that you have a kid.”

“What if I was afraid you'd—?”

“Leave?” I steal the last bite of ice cream from Grey's bowl. “Sorry, not sorry. You're stuck with me for the next twenty-one days.”

“And after that?”

“We'll see, but I suggest if you want to pass the Blancbourg program, you start talking more...and singing. I like that too.” I can't be too mad, because a family is what I've wanted more than anything, and it seems that I may have got one in a really roundabout way.

Sonny, who somehow got the vanilla portion of the ice cream into his mouth but not the chocolate, clobbers us both with a sticky-fingered hug.

Full of energy, he bounces up and down. We head to the basement, where Grey has a playroom set up. Once we've played cars and trucks, which involves the three of us on hands and knees, pretending to be talking vehicles, he's finally out of gas.

“Elsie lets me watch *Biler og Lastebiler*.” It's cute hearing Sonny speak Norwegian, but I have no idea what he means.

“I'm going to need a translator.”

“Cars and trucks. It's a show. How about one episode, a bath, and then some books?”

Sonny cheers and I melt. How can this beast of a man be so sweet, so tender? I didn't see this coming, not by a long shot. A prickly part of me urges anger at Grey, but this is what I wanted, even if I walked backward into it with the least communicative and grumpiest man I've ever met, and that's saying something, given my father is the Ice King.

Grey brings his hulking frame upright and winks at me before turning on the television where we settle in for an animated show about cars and trucks in Norwegian, which would ordinarily give this overthinker plenty of time to prepare a cross-examination. I'd grill Grey on keeping secrets like this. I want to be rip-roaring mad. I have every right to be irate.

But I'm not.

Somehow, Sonny softens it all. Smooths Grey's sharp, gruff edges. Soothes the part of me that thought I'd never get to feel the kind of affection I have these last few hours.

With the little guy nestled between us and Grey's arm stretched across the back of the couch, his hand gives my shoulder a little squeeze. Our gazes meet and he winks.

It trips something in me. A reminder that everything is going to be okay if I let it. Sure, this situation is unusual and most would argue that Grey's actions are unacceptable, but it's like I'm at a crossroads. I can embrace what's sure to be a challenge at times but also a joy, or I can go my father's way and turn my back when things get difficult, and retreat into a cold and lonely world.

I can say yes to marriage and family life, or turn my back.

The part of my chest that felt so empty for so long warms, fills, overflows. This wasn't how I expected things to look, but I was made for a moment exactly like this, and my answer is yes.

Yes, I'll be a wife and mother. A thousand times yes.





## GREY



*I* give up trying to follow the plot of *Biler og Lastebiler* and not because I don't understand the dilemma the cars and trucks that speak Norwegian are trying to solve. The plot doesn't quite make sense. But neither does this one, the real-life story that I'm living. I zone out, thinking about what just happened.

I admit, I'm an idiot because I didn't clue in Everly about Sonny. I took the easy way out by not telling her even if it was difficult to do, even if I was afraid she'd pick up her bags and leave.

The truth is, I'm not the big, honorable guy I portray and that blemish burns almost as bad as temporarily losing my son and permanently losing my brother.

It's been easier to block out that I have a son and didn't tell anyone about him; that I didn't try harder to work things out with my ex and be a dutiful father and husband. My brother wouldn't even be able to look at me.

The guy he believed I was and the loser I turned out to be have been at war inside of me for months. I can't reconcile the two. The shame and guilt spar daily.

After a bath and books, we say our prayers, then Everly and I say goodnight to Sonny.

"*God natt, Pappa. God natt, Mamma.*" His eyes dip and he's out like a light.

Liquid fills Everly's eyes as she whispers, "Good night, Sonny."

Once down the hallway, I ask, "Would you like to go out on the deck? The window for beautiful nights like this up north is small."

She nods, but her smile tinges with sadness.

The night air is like a warm, light blanket. Tiny waves roll into the lakeshore like a lullaby, and the woodsy scent coupled with Everly's proximity makes the island feel like a version of home I rarely feel—except when I'm here.

We sit side by side on the oversized bench swing outfitted with all-weather pillows. Everly tucks her feet underneath her while I plant my feet firmly on the wood deck, rocking us slowly.

I sigh and it's like the earth itself is content at this moment. Me too, but I sense that Everly still has questions and I owe her answers.

After a beat, I inhale deeply, not at all sure how this will go, but I have to try. I have to do better. "My brother Bran loved it here. I wish he could see what I've done with the place."

"You said that in the past tense," her voice is barely above a hush.

"This was our place, our island. We'd hike, hunt, and camp. We were a lot like two cavemen." I pause, trying to anticipate how she'll see this and for a moment, can almost see myself through her eyes—stony silence, hulking figure, lacking in personality. "Maybe that's where the grunting comes from."

Everly's easy laugh prompts my own. Since arriving here and reuniting with Sonny, my laughter comes easier and I chuckle, but this next part is going to be tough.

I go still, holding my breath until this is over, even though I know it'll be easier if I let go. "Bran and I looked a lot alike too. We were called the *Adams twins* even though we were several years apart. Our mother said that the difference in our size when we were young was sometimes the only thing that made it so people could tell who was who. The truth was our eyes were different. His were—" I brace the swing, bringing it to a stop. "Kinder. More honest. Honorable."

As if she knows this story doesn't have a happy ending, Everly's hand finds mine and grips it tight.

"I haven't said his name out loud until tonight. The loss hurts, but so does the disappointment he'd have in me for how I've handled things. He was a hero. Airforce pilot. When we were kids, I looked up to him. Still did as an adult, but we were also best friends." Into the night, I add, "I'm not the man he thought I was and now it's too late to prove otherwise."

"If you mean with Sonny—"

"Exactly. I've failed everyone. You included. I heard from my lawyer not

long ago and I had to be married to get custody—it had something to do with various state laws.”

“Technically, you didn’t marry me for convenience.”

“But I didn’t tell you that you’re Sonny’s other legal guardian.”

“Wouldn’t I need to sign something or—?”

“We’re married. The lawyer took care of it. I pay them a lot of money.” I exhale through puffed cheeks. “I’m trying to do the right thing, but it seems like I keep messing up.”

“I appreciate you telling me all this now, and let’s agree that you’ll tell me everything from now on.”

“What about rules one and two?” I ask.

“Forget the rules.”

“It’s hard to forget my mistakes.”

“You know how that Viking rode in on a stallion and rescued me?”

I remember her sketch.

“Grey, you’re not a damsel in distress, but—”

I interrupt. “Neither were you.”

Everly’s laughter is dark. “I was definitely in distress, both when you and I got married and when Todd tracked me down in Concordia. I could choose to be upset with you for going along with the marriage of convenience and not telling me about Sonny. But we had our rules and made our choices. Ultimately, the choice you made was the courageous one. The right one. You picked Sonny.”

“And I want to pick you, but I can hardly look at myself in the mirror, knowing I turned my back on my family. Shame burns me up.” My explosion in Shonda’s salon comes to mind.

She rearranges herself so she’s looking into my eyes. Searching, determined to find the fire or prove me wrong. “But you didn’t. We’re here now. It’s not too late to make things right. In fact, you are doing just that.”

The swing goes still. The air too. The crickets are quiet. The lake holds its breath.

Everly fixes me with those sunny green eyes, cracking something open inside of me.

The corners of her lips lift and her eyes soften. “I don’t see the emptiness, darkness, or fire. I see kindness, honesty, strength.”

My lips part to argue, but as usual, words don’t come. Instead, I tip my head left-right, wanting to hold onto the silence, the true peace spreading

between us, surrounding me, and inside of me, because Everly sees the real me. Because I let her.

“What happened to Sonny’s mother?” Everly’s question almost disappears into the velvety night.

“She works for a cruise line. The police tracked her down. The lawyer informed her of her parental rights. She forfeited them. Said she didn’t want the responsibility.”

Everly whimpers and her eyes fill with liquid.

“So, Sonny is stuck with me.”

“Doesn’t sound too bad to me.” Everly rests her head against my chest as we resume rocking on the bench swing.

“If you don’t mind me asking, what happened to your mother?” I ask.

“She had an aggressive form of cancer and passed away before I turned five.”

“So, you were raised by a single dad.”

Everly nods and pulls the scarf she wears tight. “That would’ve been the end of my story too, but I made a difficult decision.” She glances down at her chest. “I’m guessing my mother would’ve as well had it been caught in time.”

“Was that scarf hers?”

“Yeah, I’ve had it forever. Now that I’m too old for a security blanket, I wear it because it feels like she’s giving me a hug from heaven.”

Sudden fear for Everly’s health and guilt for bringing her into my mess practically capsizes me. “Listen, this is probably asking a lot of you. It’s not fair. I’m sorry.”

“You’re sorry? Grey, this is a blessing.”

“But you don’t have to do a thing.”

She sits up, meeting my eyes. “What if I want to?”

“Sonny isn’t your responsibility. I don’t know what I was thinking—” I scrub my hand down my face.

Instead of fear, she wears a fierce look of determination. “I’m your wife, meaning this is also my responsibility.”

“You don’t owe me anything.”

“Don’t you dare push me away right now, Greyson Adams.”

The fight inside continues. I reach out for her, not wanting to let it beat me. I pull her close. “I don’t want anything to happen to you.”

“Things are going to happen to me. That’s life. And I’m going to laugh about them. And pray, and talk because the first rule of Marriage for Real

Club is communication.”

“Marriage for Real Club?” I ask, processing that she didn’t instantly enact rule number three, divorce.

“You don’t have to do everything yourself.” Authority fills her voice.

“You don’t either.”

“Then we agree. We’re going to play house.” She launches to her feet like it’s an official proclamation then pulls me to mine.

A smile slides over Everly’s face and our eyes meet. “I think there’s candy in the pinata, after all,” she says, bringing to mind her comment about hitting a wasps’ nest when we reunited as client and coach.

A moment breezes between us and I could plant my lips on hers, revisiting the kiss on our wedding day and see what happens. My pulse thunders and lightning flashes through my veins.

Her eyes sparkle in the low light.

My lips quirk. “In that case, we probably ought to test things out. We should do what married people do.”

“Such as?” Her smile turns flirtatious like she knows exactly what I’m thinking.

If I were to look in the mirror, I wouldn’t see my brother or anyone I recognize, because I can hardly identify the feelings that consume me. Longing, desire. All for Buttercup, for Everly.

We’re suspended in time, held here between our pasts and whatever will happen in the future, but on this secret island, there is only this moment.

Only the two of us.

I pick up our hands and kiss the slim wedding band on Everly’s finger.

She turns my hand over and wiggles my ring finger. “Looks like you’re missing something.”

“Not anymore.” I’ll put my wedding band on after I unpack and I never plan to take it off again.



# EVERLY



The sky overhead is dark, but something flickers between Grey and me. It takes on a shape and light of its own. Giddy excitement builds inside. I never expected to feel sparks of interest in my husband. Rule number two hundred nineteen of the Marriage of Convenience Club, do not fall for each other.

However, just when I think we have a breakthrough, Grey's eyes drop to the ground. He shoves his hands into his pockets, suddenly shy.

"Where'd you go?" Did he float back into the clouds?

He scuffs the deck with his boot.

"What are you doing?" Desperation fills the space between the words because I thought we'd made progress. I'm afraid that I'm falling...and if he doesn't say something soon, it'll be smack dab on my non-Bruiser-butt.

Grey's voice is rough when he says, "Everly, if I take my hands out of my pockets, they'll be all over you. There will be no stopping me."

My pulse takes flight. Falling? Nope, I'm flying now, at risk of floating away. That wasn't what I expected to hear. "I'm willing to risk it, Grey."

The flicker turns to flame when our gazes meet. I give a slight nod as the kissituation sails into my mind.

Grey's large, rough hands grip my upper arms and he looks at me like he's been offshore on his Viking ship longer than advisable. My breath catches in my throat, but my heart continues its persistent gallop. I can feel it in my toes.

Grey leans over and kisses my bare shoulder, the length of my neck, and then my jaw, where he pauses. It's tentative at first, as though he's dipping his toes into the cool water of the lake. Little pecks, one, two, three. Either

that or he's afraid of what'll happen if he starts out too strong.

I may be smaller than him, but I've proved that I can handle this dangerous gentleman. "Trust me, I won't break."

His fresh split wood scent sends my eyes fluttering closed as I experience him with my other senses—smell, touch, taste as his lips land on mine.

I try to find my breath. The world has stopped spinning, time has slowed to a crawl, and it's just the two of us at the center of it all. I no longer need oxygen. All I need is my husband's mouth on mine.

My hands find their way to the back of his neck. It's smooth and warm and welcome as I move yet closer to him. I'm on tiptoe, practically levitating off the ground, and our chests push together.

With this kiss, I want to show him how I feel, because, for all my talk about communication, sometimes words aren't enough.

His hand cradles the back of my head as we move together.

It's like we're making a different kind of list. A *we belong together* list. Trusting each other is number one. Believing in each other is number two, this kiss is number three. I can't think about anything beyond that as the kiss deepens.

Grey's beard is like a soft cushion against my skin, a nest where I can make myself at home. I don't mind the bristle against my cheek either. I like that he's a little bit rough against the smooth.

His hands knot into the waves in my hair, drop to my back, and race along my waist. By the way he explores my skin, I imagine he likes what he's found.

My chest swells as I melt into him. The steady beat of our hearts reminds me that the kiss is real and it goes on and on to the beat of our hearts.

After I surface from the depths of Grey's embrace, a different kind of sigh escapes him as though he's enjoying himself, enjoying me, like he, too, can breathe again.

When we pull apart, we drop back onto the bench swing. I nestle under the crook of his arm and the rocking resumes.

The kiss we shared was the answer to the question I didn't even know to ask. It provided the information I didn't realize I needed. It's the solution to a problem that had always been just out of reach.

"Everly, you asked if you should be worried—about me getting angry. No. Not at you. Never at you. I will only ever protect you. From men like Todd. You're safe here with me. I promise." His massive arm wraps around



me and he gives me a comforting squeeze.

“As I said, you answered my question.”

The clouds disperse. Stars twinkle in the sky. I count them, wishing on each one for another kiss with Grey. But soon I lose track as they light up the sky. I take it as a sign that they’ll be many, many more kisses.

“I don’t know exactly what this means for us,” he says after a while.

“Yeah, I’m supposed to be teaching you etiquette.” I try and fail to keep reality at a distance. I much prefer this happy little island.

“So, I take it that I’m not supposed to kiss my coach.”

“Probably not. I didn’t read the entire employee manual, but I’m guessing it’s forbidden.”

“What happens on Isle Royale stays on Isle Royale,” Grey says.

I giggle.

“But I might want to take it off the island at some point, in which case, there’s one more thing I want to know and you owe me an answer to a question,” he says.

A thread of tension appears in my neck where there had been none.

“Anything else I should know about Todd, aside from him being a world-class jerk?”

My breath turns shallow.

“I’m not asking to pry, but because I want to know what we’re dealing with if he decides to show up.” Grey goes silent.

He’s quiet long enough that when I turn to look at him, his expression is all stone.

Letting out a sigh, he confesses, “Since we’re already married, I don’t want to be the kind of guy you’d want to divorce.”

We let out a joint exhale. For Grey, likely because confessing that came with a pang of vulnerability. For me, I feel invincible. He said that we’re dealing with Todd together—we. Having someone in my corner and his comment about being the kind of man I’d want to spend my life with is better than cookie dough.

“So do you want to talk about it?” Grey asks.

My first answer is found in a kiss I plant on his lips, telling him how much he means to me. The second is also on my lips. “Yes.” I’ll tell him anything.

“In addition to my father’s desire to rule the world with his ice and iron scepter,” I say only half-joking, “he set the lofty goal for me to become an

Olympic medaled figure skater.”

Grey cocks his head. “Seriously? Wow. So you were good.”

I nod. “Up at four a.m. every day but Sunday. That was the one respite, thanks to my mother who was a woman of faith and believed in a day of rest.”

“Tomorrow is Sunday.”

“How will we get to church?” I ask.

Grey points to the far edge of the property where the reflective tips of a seaplane rock gently in the water. “We fly.”

A shaky finger points at him. “You mean *you* fly that thing?”

“You can trust me. It’s safe. My father taught me from a young age and then I became licensed.”

“I’ll have to see your ID, sir,” I say in a mock-official tone.

“Sure thing, Mrs. Adams.” He winks.

“So you fly airplanes.”

“Not commercial, but small prop.” He nods. “And you skate. It was hockey or football for me growing up. Unfortunately, I was lousy on a pair of blades. But when the lake freezes over, maybe you can teach me a thing or two.”

“I bet it’s beautiful up here at Christmastime.” A sneaky, but happy little thought appears like a gift under a tree at that comment. Yes, we got married at the courthouse, but what if we had a celebration during the holidays? Then I realize I’m getting way ahead of myself.

“As you were saying...” Grey nudges me.

“Just thinking about weddings,” I singsong.

“Plural? To Todd?” His tone darkens.

“Dodged that bullet. I’d rather forget about that. Anyway, despite my years of training, competing, and being on a team, at some point my father decided I was too old to skate anymore. I missed my chance at Olympic fame.”

“You’re younger than me,” Grey says. “I still play football. I don’t necessarily think there’s an age limit on your dreams.”

My lips tip into a smile that conveys how his comment makes me feel hopeful like someone in my life finally tells the truth. “While I loved figure skating, the whole gold medal thing was my father’s dream—the Ice King. Or just an accomplishment he could claim by default. He cut me off from that and decided to marry me off. The whole thing was out of my hands.”

I glance down at the simple ring Grey slid there and that I've never taken off. "Actually, I realize now that I let him have control over my life. I didn't think I had a choice."

"But you do. I never want you to feel that way again. This is your life and what you do, who you marry, and what dreams you pursue are all in your hands, Everly. Truly."

Grey squeezes me close, serving to assure me and give me the courage to go on. I've only shared the details about what happened between Todd and me with Heidi, my counselor, doctor, and lawyer.

"Only fourteen days before we were supposed to say our vows, I found out that I had cancer. It was basically stage zero, but as I said, because of a genetic factor, I was at a very high risk of it becoming worse, rapidly. I waited and went for second opinions and tests. I was afraid to tell Todd because he was very superficial about appearances. He wanted me on his arm at events, the daughter of the famous Lefevre metal magnate, to parade me around like a trophy."

Grey grunts.

I take a deep breath. "It took me five days to fully accept that he'd cheated on me. Five more and I realized he was seriously messed up in the head. Delusional. Paranoid. I guess I didn't let myself see it sooner. Denial is powerful."

"Yeah." Grey snorts.

"He knew I was waiting for marriage, but kept pressuring me and didn't appreciate that I repeatedly delayed things between us." As I spoke, I felt disconnected from the past and firmly in the present.

Grey clenches and unclenches his fists as though itching to have a go at Todd's face. The only reason I didn't buy a dartboard and stick a photo of his face on it was because I was broke.

"Did you want to have kids?" Grey asks.

"Not with him. That much quickly became clear."

"But you do want a family?"

My gaze captures his. "We do have a family."

He laces his fingers with mine and leans back in the chair, at ease. An owl hoots and the moon appears, a bright, glowing crescent.

"I immediately sought a way out, but requiring health insurance, I felt trapped. On my wedding day, all dressed up and ready to go, I overheard one of his groomsmen asking about the sidepiece. They said some lewd things

about the woman Todd cheated on me with. I froze. Hid in a storage closet. Couldn't go through with it. The sidepiece showed up and paraded down the aisle, objecting to our wedding. I fled."

Grey's eyes are milk saucer, moon size. "Seriously?"

"Quite."

"Things got worse. The police became involved when his behavior escalated with a series of drunk driving stops. His parents suppressed the charges. Money can do that. We'd signed a prenuptial agreement, and as an heiress, I thought it solely protected me. I didn't read the fine print. He had access to my finances and everything of mine went to him when I didn't walk down the aisle."

"Everly," Grey growls like the only thing keeping him in the chair and not flying to hunt down Todd is my small hand in his.

"Money isn't everything. But I spent every penny I had and lucked out when the law firm wasn't a big fan of Todd after he'd been in litigation with one of their other clients over renegeing on a business deal. I was able to break our ties. Then I left Virginia, taking the diagnosis with me. That's where you came in. Looking back, you saved my life, Grey. And that's it. The whole story."

Grey hugs me. My eyes flutter closed like telling him the entire truth took my last drops of energy—or perhaps it's jet lag.

A short time later, I have a vague sense of floating. Only, it's Grey carrying me to bed and kissing my forehead before quietly padding out of the room.

I dream of flying through the clouds with my Viking, free from the past.

When I wake up, a few yellow and orange flowers fill a clear vase on the bedside table. The scent of buttery malted vanilla drifts from downstairs.

I stretch and gaze out the window at the lake, a new woman. When I hear the chatter and laughter of one booming voice and one small one filtering up here, I remember I'm also a wife and a mother.

As I recall the kisses Grey and I shared on the deck below, I realize I'm also in love.



## GREY



With Sonny on the counter, we add ingredients to the waffle mix. Mostly, he eats blueberries. I hear the soft patter of Everly descending the stairs. I smooth my beard and then set the plates of waffles with fresh berries and real maple syrup on the table.

My gaze repeatedly drifts to the ring around my finger. During the impromptu ceremony with Everly, we'd exchanged rings to make it official—presumably, in case the insurance company started sniffing around. I stashed the band in my wallet and after the kiss last night, I felt a tug from deep inside to slip it on.

When my eyes land on Everly at the foot of the stairs, three words spring to mind. Beautiful. Radiant. Gorgeous.

She wears denim shorts and a neon knit tank top—I'm guessing she's mixing and matching her old clothes and new ones. I make a mental note to make sure she gets whatever new clothing she wants.

"Good morning," she says, bright-eyed.

"Morning, Buttercup."

"*God morgen*," Sonny says.

"I didn't realize I was going to be staying at a bed-and-breakfast."

"You're the first guest since I finished the place. Never really any before that either." The cabin, if it could now be called that anymore, was a special place for my family. It's where my memories live and I look forward to making new ones with Sonny and Everly.

"I'm honored to be the first houseguest." She looks at the table. "And look at this. You're spoiling me." Everly's eyes widen at the sight of the Belgian waffles. "What can I do to help?"

Sonny splays his fingers. “Look! I have purple fingers.” Only, he says purple like *poo-rple*, then starts giggling.

Everly tickles him. Then, as if this is one of many mornings we’ve spent as a family, she helps him wash his hands and get ready for breakfast. The two of them laugh about something. The sound is addictive, contagious.

Once we sit down and say a blessing, I say, “Tell me if I added too much cinnamon.”

I help Sonny slice his waffles into rectangular soldiers all in a line.

Everly wipes her hands and says, “My work here is done.”

My expression drops like an elevator. “What do you mean?”

“I’m supposed to be teaching you etiquette and you’re my best student yet. My only student. Well, at Blancbourg anyway.”

“Did you work elsewhere before?”

She nods and takes a bite of a waffle. Like with the dinner the night before, she closes her eyes as though in reverie.

Around a mouthful, she says, “Little did you know, little did I know, the way to my heart is through my stomach.”

More questions volley through my mind. What kinds of berries does she like? Is she a breakfast person? Brunch? What are her hobbies besides sketching, smiling, and ice skating? There is so little I know about her. My wife. The woman I want to spend my life with. The thought causes me to inhale a piece of waffle and cough.

“You okay?” she asks, her attention darting to me with alarm.

Sonny carefully gets down from his seat and then pats me on the low back.

I boost him onto my lap and he proceeds to eat all of my *poo-rple* blueberries. “I’m alright, little buddy.”

But I’m not entirely sure that’s true. The choking fit passes, but feelings swirl around inside before landing like a gameboard spinner on the kiss we shared last night. It was then that I knew she is the woman for me.

Everly continues, oblivious to the awakening of my heart. It expanded and made room for Sonny and grows again, welcoming her in, what she’d been doing for me all along.

If the guys could read my mind right now, I’d get a whooping on the field, but feeling something, anything, is better than the cold, isolating void of nothing for the last several months.

Without realizing it, she’s given me so much: trust, grace, and patience.

That's not something I'm going to ignore or deny because I want to seem like tough, gruff Grey.

My eyes land on a family photo framed on the wall. My father with his beard stands in the back. His hand rests on my mother, Ingrid's, shoulder. Young versions of Bran and me sit in front of them.

"Is that Bran?" Everly asks.

I nod, emotion pouring through me like syrup. "I was five and he was seven."

"Bwan, Bwan, Bwan," Sonny sings.

Everly wears a sad smile as though aware that this is a tough situation.

For the first time since I hung it there, the pain of loss doesn't bite with sharp teeth. Instead, I feel blessed.

"You asked me where I worked before. Sorry, sidetracked by this amazing meal," Everly says. "Yes, I did image consulting—kind of like what I do now for individuals at Blancbourg but for companies. Officially, I worked for Lefevre Holdings. That's where I got my start, but I set up a small side business doing private sessions with," Everly's eyes widen and her voice lowers to almost a whisper, "the competition. I've never told anyone but Heidi this. I mean, they weren't the direct competition. I included a life coaching component for the company members which helped everyone identify strengths and weaknesses so we could best leverage those. I also started to think about my own and began to question my father's business practices. I wanted to raise awareness about metal recycling and alternatives, so I aligned with some smaller companies doing amazing work to keep places like this pristine and not strip them of their natural beauty due to mining or factories."

"Admirable. Did your father find out?"

"Thankfully, no. That was during the year before I got involved with you-know-who. I had to scale back a little bit and then needed to come up with an exit strategy. The great recommendations I received from past clients got me the job at Blancbourg. Speaking of that, let's see, I get to check off all the boxes on your evaluation. So far, you're passing with flying colors." She smiles. "Don't tell anyone, but the secret to winning me over is food. Waffles, cookies, chocolate cake..." She laughs. "Just saying."

"I noticed."

"Mamma, are you going to eat your blueberries?" Sonny asks.

Everly's smile grows. "How about we share?"



She helps him count all the berries and then they divide them up evenly. After seeing her with the two children outside the ice cream shop in Concordia and now with Sonny, Everly is a natural, balancing the responsibility of being a parent—and knowing eating all the berries is going to cause Sonny problems in the bathroom later—educating him with the counting, and making it fun by tucking the berries into the waffle squares and seeing how many they can fill.

The little guy is delighted. So is the big guy. But guilt rises to the surface of my mind. “I’m passing the program, except for one thing.”

“What’s that?” Everly says, not at all suspecting what’s coming.

“The guys and I had an agreement. Well, it came down from the coach. If any of us, you know, fooled around, then we’re *all* off the team.” I waggle my eyebrows so she knows I’m using code for *fooling around*.

Everly goes still. “Is fooling around something you do often?”

“No. Never. The other guys do, though. But for the thirty days in the program, we made a pact. Called it the playbook. No kissing, dating...” I leave off the rest because of Sonny, and I don’t want her to feel uncomfortable.

“I think we broke the rules,” Everly says, suppressing a smile.

I can’t help but have the same response at the recent memory of the kiss we shared. “Maybe it’s time we make up new rules.”

In Norwegian, Sonny says, “I have rules. Stay with my grown-up, say please and thank you, and no potty talk.”

I tip my head back with laughter, then translate for Everly. “Sounds like Elsie made quite the impression during the short time he spent with her. Sonny, those are very good rules. I have one more. Remember that I always love you.”

“I love you too, Pappa. And you too, Mamma.”

Everly hops to her feet. “I love you, and I’d like to add a rule. We do family hugs.” She picks him up and we wrap our arms around each other.

“I like this and you smell good, Mamma. Like a cookie. Do you like cookies?”

“She sure does. I do too,” I whisper.

“Yes. I love cookies and cookie dough. Do you?”

Sonny nods.

“Me too.”

“Can we make some?” he asks.

“Of course. But first, I think Pappa has some fun things planned for us today.”

Sonny plays in the living room while we clean up.

I pick up my thoughts about the playbook where I’d left off. “The coach wanted us to settle down, and if I’m honest, I’d be the only one accused of being married to football. The rule was more for the others.”

Her eyes flash.

“I invested everything in the game. But I don’t mind the idea of a second chance at settling down.”

“What about breaking the playbook rules?”

“I suppose we’re already married, so maybe the rules don’t apply.” I can’t see myself but am sure that the lopsided grin that matches my brother’s spreads wide. “A loophole of sorts.”

Everly beams a smile as though that’s what she hoped I’d say.

“Except for #BruiserButt and a few other misdeeds over the years, football saved me.”

“I wish I’d let skating save me.”

“It’s not too late. Have you been lately? There’s a rink in town. Well, across the lake.”

“I’m just not sure what I want for the future.” The words are like a lead fishing sinker.

I rinse the last of the dishes. “Where does that leave us?”

She takes the plate out of my hand and grips my jaw, gazing into my eyes as though belatedly understanding what the conversation sounded like. “Where does that leave us? Here. Right here. I just meant that I’m not sure what to do with my life. I’m probably not going to have a job after this, at least at Blancbourg. I guess I’m getting ahead of myself by thinking about what’s next.”

“As you said, we have right now. Also, sometimes in life, we need to do something physically to change or improve a situation, but when it comes to things beyond our control, when worry or uncertainty takes hold, when there’s nothing more that we can do and it’s out of our hands, my mother always said, *We fold them together and pray*,” I say, reaching for her hands.

Funny, I forgot about that until now.

They’re so soft and small and perfect inside mine. Like they belong to me, and I feel like mine belong to her.

My eyes skate to the framed family photo. Fear pricks me just then

because, in the past, everyone I love except my mother has been taken away.  
What if I lose Everly too?

“Seems like something to pray about. Good thing we’re going to church,”  
she says, pulling me from my desperate thoughts.



## GREY



After cleaning up from breakfast, we cross the lawn to the lakeshore where the seaplane is docked. Sonny gambols around, chasing birds and driving his toy truck along a fallen tree limb. I have numerous old friends and connections in the area. They're always eager to help, and I compensate them well for the upkeep of the cabin, grounds, food delivery, and of course, maintaining the plane.

Sonny spreads his arms like wings and flies around as I prepare. Then, like flight is as much in his blood as sailing—my father's side and mother, respectively—he hops into the plane.

I pat the metal side affectionately. "Ah. The old girl." My ring glints in the morning light, but whether Everly notices, she doesn't say anything.

"Old?" Everly asks, uncertain about flying in such a small contraption.

"This was my father's and was named after Mom." I point to where the name *Ingrid* is printed in red script near the belly. "It was Pierceson Adams's first plane. The investment he took a gamble on and grew into a small fleet to support the family," I say fondly.

"It works?" Everly asks.

"Trust me. Also, according to my dad, Mom wore the same look on her face when he proposed to her."

Everly's eyebrows lift.

"I mean when he proposed flying. They were early in their relationship and knew they were going to marry one day. Anyway, we should get going. Don't want to be late for church." I'm not operating on autopilot, but I fall into the rhythm of preparing the plane for takeoff with practiced ease. I make quick work of getting off the ground and soon the house and property shrink

and become a miniature scene below.

Sonny is delighted. Everly has white knuckles as she peers out the windows.

I'm in one of my happy places, especially with the two of them along for the ride.

After a few minutes, she sighs and says, "It's almost like I can walk out on the clouds." Her voice has a dreamy quality.

"It's peaceful up here. Well, aside from the sound of the propellers."

"This place truly is magical," she says.

Shortly after we're airborne, we land on the other side of the lake on the shore of my parents' property. Or *parent*. My mother still lives here after my dad died.

It's a short jaunt to the church from here. Everly wears practical shoes for walking, but it doesn't escape my notice that she plants her feet firmly on the ground after the flight.

"That was intense, but exhilarating. I feel like we're on our very own adventure."

I chuckle. "That brings me back in time. Bran and I used to mess around on the property, build forts, and swim in the lake during the summer until it got so dark, we were afraid a monster lurked in the deep. Camped out in the backyard, we'd read our favorite book series called *Choose Your Own Adventure* by flashlight."

She giggles—presumably at the monster comment. "I remember those books from school. Well, before I started homeschooling with tutors so I could increase my time on the ice. Do you still have your copies? When Sonny is old enough, I bet he'd like them."

"My mother saves everything, so there's a good chance they're somewhere around here."

Sonny grips my leg. "Monsters?"

"No, no monsters," I assure him while hoisting him into my arms. "In a way, we're choosing our own adventure. Whatever we want to make of life."

"Sometimes life chooses our adventure for us, though." She pulls the scarf tighter around her shoulders.

"True, but we get to pick how we respond and the adventure we're on right now includes meeting my mom, so we'd better get moving." I extend my free hand for Everly to take.

She starts walking in the other direction until there's no more slack and I

draw her back to me.

“Where are you going?”

Forehead a ruffled mess, Everly says, “I didn’t realize this was a meet-the-parents adventure. What if she learns that I’m helpless in the kitchen?”

“Your cookie dough will win her over.”

“What if she notices that I’m wearing a scrunchie circa 1998?”

“She’ll appreciate your thriftiness.”

“What if she finds out I married you for reasons of convenience?” But I pretend not to hear her because I haven’t yet figured out how to handle that particular issue. Hopefully, at least for this first meeting, it won’t come up in conversation. It’s not like I plan to blurt something like, *We got married in the courthouse, and lucky thing too, because it allowed me to obtain custody of my son. She needed my insurance, and don’t worry, we don’t have rules that resemble those outlined in the book and movie Fight Club.*

I don’t plan to bring up marriage at all. At least not during this first visit. Hopefully, Sonny will provide enough of a distraction.

We turn from the lake and climb the well-trod path, past the house, and to the church that I’ve been going to since I can remember. However, what I hadn’t remembered to do was mention to my mother that I have a visitor, or that I’m going to be here at all.

Ingrid Adams’s life is predictable and she likes it that way, but I imagine she’ll appreciate my visit and meeting Everly no matter that I didn’t let her know ahead of time. I come home as often as possible and know I should make an effort to get here more, especially now that she’s alone.

“This is where you grew up?” Everly asks when we pass the mailbox printed with the name *Adams* in a little boy’s scrawl.

I nod and point to it. “When I was in first grade, I was very concerned that Santa wouldn’t be able to find our house way out here, so I snuck out on Christmas Eve and wrote our last name on the mailbox.”

“Santa comes here?” Sonny asks.

“He sure does, and we have an extra-large chimney at home, so don’t you worry.”

“I’m guessing Santa appreciates that.” Everly giggles.

The sound sends tingles through me that is akin to the excitement I felt on Christmas Eve as a little boy. Anticipation, joy, warmth.

In the entry to the church, the white-haired ladies I’ve known since I was a baby gather like cotton in a field. I pick my mother out of the crowd and

stride over, leading Everly by the hand.

“Grey? Well, bless. I did not expect to see you today. My prayers have been answered.” She coos and fusses over Sonny.

I wrap her in a bear hug.

“You trimmed your hair and beard,” she says.

“Looking good, right? Sorry that I didn’t phone ahead. We only got in yesterday afternoon.”

“This little man has grown so much. Elsie called but said she couldn’t stay because wedding plans had to be made. It was good of her to look after him. Glad you’re home.”

“Me too. But that’s not all.” I step aside, realizing my massive frame blocked Everly from view.

She smiles and gives a little wave.

The women in my mom’s book club descend on Everly, chirping about how lovely she is and how wonderful it is to meet her and asking about a million questions—presuming she’s Sonny’s mother. They don’t know about my ex or the trials I’ve been through trying to track her down and obtain custody.

And my mother certainly doesn’t know what Everly means to me. I didn’t until yesterday. The piano rings out.

“We’d better head inside,” I say, shepherding everyone forward.

Preoccupied with Sonny, Mom doesn’t have a chance to ask questions. I grip Everly’s hand so she isn’t swallowed up in the commotion.

After a prayerful morning, we end up where we started in front of the church, everyone talking a mile a minute. I try to slow them down as they tell embarrassing stories about me when I was a little boy and got into all kinds of trouble.

“Who has the pie?” I ask, hoping that’ll keep us on track.

Each week one of the women in my mom’s group bakes a pie and the others go to her house afterward and eat it, catch up on life, and praise the Lord.

“Blueberry crumble,” Mrs. Nelson says, claiming her day.

“Mmm. Sounds good. Now, let’s show Everly what UP baking tastes like,” I say, rallying them.

They start walking, but my mother remains on the steps of the church, motionless and pale. While my grief manifested as anger, I often found my mother paralyzed as though deep in thought, in mourning.



I turn back and say, “Mom, are you coming?”

Ingrid blinks a few times, strides over, and glances at my hand and then at Everly’s hand. “Are you...are you married?” Her words are crisp.

My mouth goes dry. I haven’t prepared a response.

Everly’s lips part but nothing comes out.

We didn’t come up with a Marriage of Convenience Club rule for this moment, but it’s up to me to figure out a way to explain.



# EVERLY



When Grey doesn't answer his mother's questions, I step forward. "Mrs. Adams—" But I hesitate because this isn't something we can explain in a few short sentences.

It certainly isn't conventional and marrying for convenience may not be favored in the eyes of God, but surely Ingrid can understand the direness of the situation. However, the right words tangle in my mouth.

How do we explain?

Ingrid's nostrils flare, silencing me. She focuses on her son as though wanting to hear the truth from him.

Grey says, "No. We're not married, Mom." He doesn't meet his mother's eyes or mine. His shoulders sag slightly. I've never seen him in any posture other than commanding. A presence that can't be ignored, but he fades into the clouds as if wishing to disappear.

I stammer.

Mrs. Adams's head turns from him to me several times.

With Sonny's hand in his, Grey takes a few more steps away from the church as though trying to distance himself from the lie. "Come on, we don't want them to eat all the pie. It's been ages since I've been in Mrs. Nelson's kitchen."

Ingrid catches up with Grey.

I walk a few steps apart from them because likely, they need to talk. But it's also the heavy weight of his deceit that slows me down. Why did he lie? I don't take Grey to be the kind of person to do something like that, especially to his mother.

"You're not married, but you have a ring on your ring finger. Pie or not, I

want an explanation.” Ingrid’s voice floats to me.

Grey clears his throat but his voice is thick when he speaks. “There’s nothing to explain really. Um, this ring is a football thing. You know me, married to the game.” He laughs it off. “And, uh, Everly wears her grandmother’s ring. She’s very sentimental.”

I don’t have any jewelry from either of my grandmothers—my father’s mother will probably be buried with her precious metal and on my mom’s side, she passed away when I was younger.

Still a few paces behind Grey and his mom, I hold out my hand, gazing at the wedding band. It’s thin and nondescript. There is no accompanying engagement ring. Compared to the rock Todd gave me, so I could flaunt his wealth and that he was engaged to marry the Lefevre Metal magnate’s daughter, it’s easy to overlook this gold loop around my finger.

If Grey says we’re not married, why is he wearing the ring? Until now, he’s never done so before.

In my heart, I value marriage. It’s a sacred covenant and it’s a lie to deny our status even though the circumstances didn’t originally involve love. They involved gratitude. I was so deeply grateful to the stranger who offered his health insurance, likely saving my life. Because I was acting fast to prevent further disease in the future, I pledged my life to him as a way of saying thanks. Wearing the ring is a reminder of what he did for me. I never expected to see him again. And after Todd, I wasn’t eager to get into a relationship again.

I glance back at the church. Ahead, Grey continues to field his mother’s questions.

“So you’re not married to Everly?”

He grunts.

Oh, so he plays his mother like that too, eh?

How could he lie to her? Especially after going to church? Then guilt about judging him punches me back. I didn’t exactly come forward with the truth either.

Grey’s deep voice rumbles. “Everly is my coach. For the remainder of my time in the Blancbourg program, she observes me and makes sure I’m minding my manners. Remember the whole moon-gate thing?”

“Me and the entire town, Greyson Harris.” However, that answer seems to placate his mom, and she doesn’t say anything else.

I feel like a shadow. I was never good enough for my father. Todd just

saw me as an opportunity to get what he wanted out of his career. I failed at becoming an Olympic skater and then put my job on the line with Blancbourg by falling for Grey, for kissing him... But now I know the truth. He probably just wants me around to help with Sonny.

Forget wifey or nanny. Now I feel nifey. Knifey. Totally stabby.

However, at the memory of his lips on mine, a fluttering sensation fills my chest, then crash lands. I'm not a liar. So how can I go along with the deceit?

The Marriage of Convenience Club rules come back. Number one and two. We don't talk about it. But he and I will later.

Ingrid's friends from church welcome us inside. Mrs. Nelson introduces the Literary Ladies Lunch Book Club, which, over time, just became an excuse to eat pie and gab.

Esther, a short woman with round cheeks, says, "When we started reading a lot of cozy mysteries, I wanted to rename it, Pies and Spies."

"We voted it in, not that we discuss books much these days," Mrs. Nelson says.

Esther leans into me. "I like the abbreviation, P.S. Like PostScript."

"I like that too. I'll call you the P.S. Book Club."

"Thank you," Esther says, self-satisfied.

This reminds me of my three thankful things in the Cookie Dough Diary, but right now, I feel so thrown by Grey's denial, it's like I got smashed in the face with a cream pie and then tossed into the lake.

Mrs. Nelson's kitchen is farmhouse style with a border of cherry wallpaper around the circumference of the room. In fact, there are cherries everywhere. Cherry salt and pepper shakers, cherry dishtowels, and even a cherry soap dispenser.

We all sit down around a wooden table. Mrs. Nelson takes credit for making the pie as she serves everyone's slices.

"It's so wonderful to have you both here," Mrs. Nelson says. "Now, you may notice that I have a fondness for cherries—" She tells me how she's distantly related to George Washington, bringing to mind the story of the cherry tree and the value of honesty. A big red arrow points to our mutual lie, the omission of the truth.

Grey leans into me, seated by my side. "More like an obsession. See that potholder?" He points. "I made that when I was nine. Earned a Boy Scout merit badge too." He winks at me as though the lie he told and what I thought

we meant to each other after last night doesn't burn between us.

What are we? Husband and wife? Coach and client? Friends? Tightness in my stomach vies with the fluttering in my chest. I want more with him, but after the bald-faced lie he told, I can hardly look at Grey. And yet, my body betrays me as our hands brush when we reach for our plates, sending something warm and sweet across my skin.

"Anyway, I could go on about my cherry collection all day." Mrs. Nelson joins us with the last slice of pie. "But I had frozen blueberries that I picked from last season, so I figured I ought to make room for more since we're now into the summer. I also made the whipped cream from scratch."

"Booberries!" Sonny cheers, sitting on his Grandma's lap. She dotes on him but doesn't look my way as if she knows that something doesn't add up about Grey's story.

The women gathered make sounds of approval and appreciation.

"Enough about the pie, we weren't expecting guests." Mrs. Nelson turns to Ingrid. "Why didn't you mention Grey was visiting? I'd have made his favorite, strawberry rhubarb. We all know the boy has an appetite." She tosses me a friendly wink.

"It was as much a surprise to you as it was to me," Ingrid responds in a flat tone.

"We arrived yesterday. Everly had never been to Isle Royale before and we all know this is the best time of the year to visit," Grey says.

Several women comment on how true that is as if they already dread the idea of the coming winter even though it's still many months away.

"I take it you're not from around here," Mrs. Nelson says.

"Actually, I grew up in Michigan. My best friend Heidi lives in Powell and I stayed with her last winter, so you have my sympathy for just how cold it gets. But most recently, I lived in Virginia."

"What's Heidi's last name? Maybe we know her," Ingrid says.

"Heidi Weaver—Hastings now. Her grandparents lived in Powell and she inherited the family home. She and I grew up a few towns over. The house needed a little work, but it's on a beautiful piece of property." I leave out how after the surgery, we'd take long walks in the woods. It was so peaceful—the perfect place to recover and retreat from Todd.

While the blueberry pie is delicious, I've only taken a few bites. Meanwhile, Grey inhaled his portion.

"So, did you two meet there or—?" Mrs. Nelson asks.

“No, we met in Concordia. Everly is my coach,” Grey says.

“That’s partly true,” I blurt.

The women laugh as though we’re playing coy about our romantic meet cute. Unlike Mrs. Adams, they still think we’re married.

Mrs. Nelson says, “I get it. My better half is my coach too. In fact, Roger feels the same way. He’s said, if it weren’t for me, he’d be failing on the field of life. Truth be told, I owe everything to him. But I suppose that’s one of the beautiful things about marriage. Both people give so much to each other.”

Ingrid sets her fork down. “They’re not married, Margaret.” Her eyes fix on her Grey as if giving him a chance to tell the truth.

“But the rings—” the older woman starts, wearing an expression of bafflement.

My stomach knots with anxiety and in the center is the dead weight of the lie. I bite my lip. “Actually, we are married.”

Everyone jerks their gazes in my direction.

Grey laughs like I’m being silly.

I shake my head. “I cannot rightfully lie to all these lovely women, your mother, or at all.”

His eyes narrow. “But we had our rules.”

“I thought—” I thought we ditched the MOC club and started the Marriage for Real Club.

His eyes darken and he gets to his feet. “You didn’t mind lying to an insurance company.” The words are like grit against my skin.

I stand up too. “Why would you say that?”

“Everly,” he starts on a growl, but it’s like his words and thoughts scramble.

I thrust my chest and swing my arms to my sides. “But I didn’t tell the insurance company that I love you.”

The air leaves the room and so does my husband.

I drop my face into my hands and a sob breaks loose.





# EVERLY



*M*rs. Nelson is on her feet, guiding me out of the kitchen. We sit down on a brown couch with cherry-shaped throw pillows. She passes me a tissue from a box with cherries printed on it. “Sweetie, I know I’m a perfect stranger, but do you want to talk about it?”

“I don’t know.” This is the truth.

I don’t know any of these people and truly, the only person I owe the truth to is Grey. I professed my love without thinking. I unexpectedly love my husband, but clearly, he doesn’t even want to acknowledge me as being anything more than his coach.

Guess I failed there too because that was poor etiquette on his part.

*Then what was that kiss? Why is he wearing the ring?*

Heavy footsteps clomp by in the hall. A screen door opens and closes.

The other women flock to the living room, including Ingrid who carries Sonny. They all join hands, saying a prayer.

Afterward, Mrs. Nelson says, “Can you tell us the story?”

Feeling comforted by their grace and understanding, I start at the beginning with a snapshot of my father so they’ll understand why I went along with the engagement to Todd, how that all fell apart, and what happened next.

Esther, one of the women who had also fought breast cancer, offers words of understanding. Everyone applauds us for how strong we are, but especially me for telling the truth.

Sonny, previously occupied by several small bowls of blueberries he’d sorted by size, crawls onto my lap and says, “*Jeg elsker deg, Mamma.*” He wears a bright smile and nuzzles into me. I don’t know what he said, but the

sweet little boy somehow knew exactly what I needed, and more than anything, I want to give him what he needs—a mother.

Ingrid gasps.

Everyone turns to her.

Margaret, aka Mrs. Nelson, says, “It’s hard enough to decipher toddler speak, what did he say?”

Ingrid presses her hand to her chest. “Everly, our family has been through a lot. That’s no excuse, but when I saw those rings on your fingers, I felt both sad and angry. Sad because I didn’t get to be part of something that would’ve brought me a lot of joy—seeing my son get married to you, obviously a lovely young woman. And angry because Grey kept it from me. As I’m sure you know, he’s not the best at communicating.” She imitates his grunt.

My lips twist toward a smile because she has that right.

“And things between us haven’t been the same since we lost his brother. He won’t talk about it. And I guess I haven’t shown the best example because I’ve done the same.”

“He’s hardly mentioned Bran to me.”

“It’s difficult to talk about. Earlier, I had a feeling Grey lied. I’m not quite sure why he’d do so though. He’s going to have to reckon with that, me, and our Good Lord. But as we all saw, he’s wearing the ring, so that must mean something.” Ingrid folds her hands in her lap.

“But I blurted that I love him.” My cheeks go the color of cherries.

“Sometimes the heart speaks up for us when we’re feeling nervous,” Mrs. Nelson says.

“But he left.” I look in the direction of the door, feeling suddenly alone even among such a kind group of women and with Sonny singing one of his songs about a lumberjack who picks blueberries while looking for trees to chop down and forest animals to rescue.

Ingrid gets to her feet. “I’ll go find him. He and I need to talk.”

“Would you like company?” Esther asks. “The Pies and Spies ladies stick together.”

“Thank you, but Greyson and I are long overdue for a mother-son heart-to-heart.”

When the screen door closes, Mrs. Nelson presses her lips together and shakes her head with dismay. “Bran was such a good boy. So brave. So strong.”

“It was a risk when he enlisted with the Air Force, but everyone was so

proud. One of our own going out there. We never thought anything would happen,” another of the ladies says.

The next one seated in our circle adds, “The heartbreaking thing is he was never found. Missing in action.”

“Presumed dead,” Mrs. Nelson whispers.

“I suppose it’s the kind of thing that never quite heals. Ingrid struggles, mostly in the form of quiet tears,” the next one says.

Taking in this information, I add, “I don’t think Grey had let himself feel anything until a short time ago.”

“Let me guess, it came out as anger,” the woman next to me says.

They discuss the phases of grief, including denial, anger, and depression.

“But why’s he angry with me?” I ask.

Ingrid returns and takes a seat on my other side. She grips my hand. Her eyes are darker gray than her son’s, almost slate, but I see the resemblance between them. “I take it you hadn’t told him how you feel until today.”

I shake my head. “I didn’t plan to like that either.” If at all.

Ingrid lifts her shoulders slightly with a shrug. “He’s probably upset that you’re braver than he is.”

Some of the women titter.

“But clearly, it’s one-sided. If he felt that way about me, he would’ve said that we’re married when you asked.”

“Are you simply married legally or in both word and deed?” Mrs. Nelson asks.

I take this to mean whether we discussed wanting to be together as partners or if we just exchanged vows for the insurance. “I don’t know.”

“Then you need to talk with him.”

I’m afraid. Not because of his anger, but what if he doesn’t care about me? What if the feeling isn’t mutual?

Ingrid pats my hand. “Thank you for telling me the truth, Everly. Now, I’ll admit that I’m not too pleased with him for lying or not telling me the truth in the first place, but I believe in forgiveness and second chances. I offered him both. I hope you can too.”

Mrs. Nelson straightens a cherry-shaped candle holder on the coffee table. “If I’ve learned anything from fifty-one years of marriage, it’s the importance of communication. When I met Roger, he was like a caveman, grunting all the time. Would you like the newspaper, dear? *Grunt*. Would you like to go to the new restaurant in town for dinner? *Grunt*. Are you a

caveman? *Grunt*. I actually asked him that once as a test to see if he was paying attention and he grunted, not listening at all. That's when we had a talk. If our marriage was going to thrive, never mind last, he needed to talk to me. Now, I knew he was a man of few words, but all that grunting was ridiculous." The corner of Mrs. Nelson's lip twists.

"Sounds familiar," I say.

Esther adds, "Think about it this way. No one enters into a relationship or marriage knowing how to do it. You grow together. So while Roger, or in this case, Grey, needs to learn how to communicate his thoughts and feelings, in a way, Margaret needed to find the courage to let her husband know how she felt too. We know you're brave, Everly. We know you can do it."

"But what if he doesn't—?"

Ingrid says, "I know my son and the way he was looking at you while you were eating your pie...I've never seen him so enamored."

"Speaking of pie," Esther says. "We have a rule that we don't abandon ours."

They head back to the kitchen with Sonny in tow.

"You'll find him at the church," Ingrid calls as if needing that slice of pie more than ever.

I thank them and head outside, wishing to go home. But where is home? I'm not homeless per se, but I don't have anywhere to go and lick my wounds after telling the man I loved how I felt in front of a roomful of strangers and his mother, resulting in him storming out. Heidi isn't far away, but I'm contracted with Blancbourg. Even if we did bend some rules, I'm still supposed to be coaching him. However, the ladies are right. I have to talk to Grey and tell him to get his head out of his #BruiserButt.



# GREY



*I*'ve run into a ditch. Not literally, but it's like I lost control and slammed face-first into a wall of dirt. The sides are high, the sky distant, and I'm not sure how to get out of it. Go forward? Backward? Try to climb?

I made a mistake lying to my mother. I was wrong to storm out when Everly blurted the truth about being married.

But she said something else too.

As I sit in the same pew at the church that I recently vacated, the words come back. "*I didn't tell them that I love you.*"

It's like the bottom drops out from the ditch. Shame and embarrassment and regret rain down on top of me, burying me.

I blink a few times, replaying the scene in Mrs. Nelson's kitchen.

Everly confessed that we're actually married.

I felt put on the spot, and before I could backtrack, I got defensive. When plays don't go as planned and the guys in the locker room get heated and hurl insults at each other, Hammer always says the only place defense belongs is on the field.

Why did I respond that way? Why did I say the thing about Everly lying to the insurance company? It was a low blow. I broke our rules with a comment intended to silence her.

Why?

Because I didn't want my mother or her friends to think poorly of me for marrying someone for reasons of convenience. Because I married for reasons apart from love.

I did it because my brother's friend said someone he knew needed help.

Because it felt right, generous.

I didn't *undo* it when I had the opportunity because I needed a wife on paper for custody. Because that was the right thing to do for Sonny's welfare.

But I know my mother would've understood if I'd just started with the truth. Right?

I'm at a crossroads. I could venture back into the void, but Everly busted up my stone walls and filled in the holes. She woke me up from a long slumber. I trust her. Feel safe with her.

A rectangle of light brightens the carpet along the aisle as the door to the church opens and closes.

My mother was here for less than five minutes. We made our apologies, but I don't feel forgiven. I still feel wrong, all wrong. Though, I suppose that's better than the deep pit of emptiness where I felt nothing for the last several months.

After I let out a breath, Everly slides onto the wooden bench beside me.

Despite what happened, her presence is welcome. A relief. Being near her, even thinking about her, makes my heart beat faster and my body flood with warmth.

Then why did I say something to hurt her? Why did I lie? Why did I run when she said she loved me?

"Grey, we need to talk. I'm guessing you don't want to, but give me one grunt for *yes* and two for *no*. Okay?" Her voice is soft, and understanding. She is so gentle.

Has Everly already forgiven me? If so, I have to forgive myself and make things right.

Turning toward her on the seat, our knees bump. The thrill that rushes across my skin tells me more than my thoughts do about how I truly feel about her. I start with a sputter, but my words quickly smooth out. "I'll give you more than that, Everly," I say. "I'll give you an apology. I'm sorry I lied. I'm sorry that I ran out."

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you how I feel about you at a more opportune moment."

Emotions scramble in my mind. I don't know how to accept the offer she's given, the verbal expression of how she feels. What do I say? Before I can summon a response, she continues.

"I was hurt that you didn't tell your mother the truth, even if you don't feel the way I do. I mean, I didn't love you when we got married, but I do

now.” Her cheeks stain pink.

The empty space that I’ve dwelled in for so many months opens up. It’s almost overwhelming. I can’t find my footing or where it begins or ends. But then light pours in as Everly looks at me with her spring-green eyes. I can’t help but inhale her sweet sunshine scent. Her smile and easy laughter are addictive and I want more. I want it all.

She loves me. I’ve never before been the recipient of this kind of intense, unrelenting, unapologetic, all-encompassing love. And I love her too. I love Everly with all of me and am going to tell her.

But the only thing that comes out of me is a grunt.

She sits up straight, drawing away from me slightly.

I try again. “Everly—” My voice is a growl and that won’t do.

She tilts her head to the side and her arms fold in front of her chest.

Closing my eyes, I try a third time. “*Jeg elsker deg.*”

She shakes her head. “I don’t know what that means, but it sounded like you just angrily and begrudgingly said that you don’t hate me.”

I try again, but it hardly sounds better.

“Why so angry, Greyson?”

I scrub my hand down my face. “I’m not good at this. I feel a lot of things right now. It’s hard for me to name emotions other than animosity toward the opposition when on the field, emptiness and anger when it comes to my brother.”

“But you like things too, right? Ice cream, football, Sonny.” Here she goes, always able to say the right thing.

Like the times Bran and I parachuted out of planes, I take the plunge and blurt, “I like you, Everly.”

“That’s a start, but what does *jeg elsker deg* mean? Sonny said it too.” Hearing her stumble through the Norwegian pronunciation, the English translation comes to my lips.

This time, I don’t need to think. I take her hands in mine. The words, the truth, channel out of me effortlessly. “Everly, as God in this holy church is my witness, I love you.” I glance at the rings on our fingers.

She leans back as though in shock. “What?”

I gather her into my arms and hold her tight. I feel her chest against mine, her heartbeat, the rhythm of her breath. I can have this for the rest of our lives if I can just get out of my own way.

When we part, I say, “Everly, I put this ring on this morning because I’ve



fallen in love with you. We've done things backward, I suppose, but I won't deny my feelings for you to my mother or anyone else again. Back there, I got scared. I felt defensive when we were in the kitchen. I was angry at myself for lying. It all came out wrong and I'm sorry."

"I forgive you," she says.

Those three simple words make me thank God Almighty. I say, "I'm grateful for that. I'm going to admit that I'm new to this. I've never been married before. Never truly loved someone before, not like this."

"I haven't either, but we have our Marriage for Real Club rule. We talk about Marriage Club."

"I'd like that," I say.

"I suppose it's not all that common to get married and then fall in love."

Our eyes meet. Hers glisten from recent tears and I kiss her cheeks and then press my mouth to hers for a kiss, sealing my intention to honor Everly as my wife.

When we part, she says, "What other rules should we have for our Marriage Club?"

I smile. "Okay. Number one. We talk about Marriage Club."

"Number two, we talk about Marriage Club."

Our laughter echoes in the church. My goodness, it feels good.

"Three," I start. "We'll always tell each other the truth."

"Number four. And how we feel, even if we're not entirely sure or know how to name it."

"Can I use the grunting method of communication until I warm up to that?" I ask.

She nudges me with her shoulder. "No, you cannot. That was a onetime offer."

We laugh again.

"I think we're off to a good start," Everly says, getting up. "We'll keep adding to it."

"Do you suppose I can go finish my slice of blueberry pie?" I ask.

"As long as you tell me how to say *I love you too* in Norwegian."

Everly and I spend the rest of the afternoon in Mrs. Nelson's kitchen before we go back to my mother's house for dinner. She and I haven't talked about Bran yet, but the door has been opened and I know that when we have a chance alone, we will.

Even though Mom only just met Everly, it seems like the two women

already bonded and have known each other for ages. Not only that, but they're all about Sonny, making me feel like I have a family again.

I wonder what it would be like to spend Christmas here—though after losing Bran, it's never been the same. Without my brother and father, the house feels lonely. I worry about my mom being alone through the harsh winters, but she has the Pies and Spies group of friends and as she always assures me, she has Jesus.

Even so, I don't understand how she can stay here. For me, it's impossible to walk into my childhood home without feeling the strain of loss—Dad, Bran, and how I felt like I've let them down.

I glance at a framed photo of Bran in uniform, gazing innocently and proudly into the future. A future he'd never experience. The guilt of living when my brother didn't threatens to consume me.

While Mom, Everly, and Sonny make homemade play dough, I step outside. Thunder and lightning roll and bolt through me. My fists clench. I want to punch something so I can squash down the powerful emotions rising to the surface.

I miss Bran but I'm still mad at myself.

A grunt stomps its way out of my chest and I consider driving my fist into the wall of the shed on the edge of the property. Throbbing pain would be a good distraction from the ache in my chest.

As I clench my fists, the late-day sun glints off my wedding ring.

I can hardly believe it's real, but it, the earnestness in Everly's eyes when we were in the church, and the rapid thump in my heart anytime I think about her tell me this is my new life and it's time to leave the old one behind.

I've been thinking about retiring, but the game has been my outlet and input for who I am. Or who I thought I was.

But who do Everly and Sonny need me to be?

Am I ready to leave the Bruisers behind? Say goodbye to the field and hello to farm and family? I can't very well play football forever, but can't let the guys down by bowing out now.

I also don't know what Everly and I will do when the season starts. But my thoughts mute when a radiant beam of sunshine parts the clouds, reminding me of the living, breathing beam of light I married. I don't want to start the clock for when we'll have to make big decisions or potentially enact MOC Club rule number three.



## EVERLY



The following weeks pass with daily hikes, a couple of kayaking trips, and Grey drafting plans to build a play structure for Sonny, teaching him to swim, and the two of them puttering around the garden.

That kid loves blueberries and I love him and his father.

We spend Sundays on the mainland and visiting Grey's mom. He says that she adores me, and maybe that does have something to do with my deluxe double-chip cookie recipe.

As days go by, it's hard not to look at the horizon. Will I spend the football season in Concordia? Michigan? In hotels traversing the country with Grey and the rest of the team?

Every morning, he leaves me a word puzzle, but in Norwegian. He's helping me learn some basic words, including practical and romantic ones alike. Every night, we read to Sonny, one book in English and the same one in Norwegian.

I've also perfected my pronunciation of *jeg elsker deg også*. I love you too.

As Grey, Sonny, and I get to know each other and form relationships—husband and wife, father and son, mother and son, it's interesting to think about how we all got a chance to start over. With each passing day, although Grey and I are officially married, it's like we're in the early stages of dating. It makes me a little nervous and a lot excited.

One cloudy afternoon, we spend in the game room playing billiards, watching movies, and occupying the coolest pillow fort ever. Sonny and I make sugar cookies that we shape to look like two-bite blueberries, using juice from the latest collection to color them.

My mind skips and hops from family traditions like Easter and egg dying, Fourth of July cookouts, the first days of school, and Christmas.

Interrupting my daydreaming while I clean up our cookie-mixing mess, Grey comes in from splitting wood, shirtless and smelling like him.

“I was going to jump in the lake, but it started drizzling. Glad for it, too, because it smells like sugar cookie sunshine in here.” He peeks in the oven and then kisses me on the head while I pass him a tall glass of water.

Grey sits on the floor for a few minutes with Sonny while he plays with his toy cars.

When the oven timer dings, Grey peeks out the window. “Still raining.”

“I was hoping for sunshine today. A dip in the lake sounds good.”

“You’re as bright and sweet as can be. Where do you get your endurance? Your sunshine on cloudy days? You’ve been through so much.”

My shoulders bounce because I’m not entirely sure, and when I speak, my answer is almost in the form of a question. “Grace. The desire to do the right thing. To give. The diagnosis put things in perspective. I could’ve let the distress and fear consume me. Some nights when I was alone and waiting for test results it did. But the sun came up the next morning. I carried on.” I glance at Sonny. “Plus, this life isn’t only about me, me, me. It’s about you, us, neighbors, well, if we had any. Friends. Family. Strangers on the street who need a smile and a kind word.”

My phone beeps, interrupting my stream of thought. Likely, it’s Todd, so I ignore it. He mentioned settling some debt recently, and all I have is a little bit of money left from my Blancbourg paychecks. He can’t get blood from a stone. Then again, he has enough money to never work another day in his life.

No, this is about power, control, and my connection to my father.

Grey nods in response to my answer. “And maybe cookies too, because if so, I’m going to form a new habit.”

“A cookie habit?” I ask, playfully.

“That and a *you* habit. I was thinking, I haven’t been on a proper vacation in years and even though technically the cabin is home, I feel more relaxed than I have in a long time. I think you’re wearing off on me, Everly.”

“That’s better than wearing you out.” Because that’s about where I am with Todd. My stomach knots when my phone beeps again. I should just block him, but then I’d have to hire a lawyer to do the communicating and although he might be able to afford the hourly rate, I cannot.

All the same, I power down my phone and leave it off for the night. Slowly, the knots inside untangle, easy enough with my thankful three: Grey, Sonny, and cookies. At last, I relax while Grey and I play cards by candlelight.

And fine, I admit it. We make out too.

The next morning, I wake to fresh flowers, a word puzzle I solve before getting out of bed, quickly recognizing the words for car, truck, and blueberry—Sonny’s favorites as well as learning some new ones: cookie, dough, and hug.

When I get downstairs, I kiss Grey on the cheek and nab a piece of bacon from the skillet.

“Good morning, gorgeous,” he says.

“Good morning, handsome,” I reply.

Sonny replies with the same in Norwegian and we all laugh.

“I’m sorry I’m not more of a morning person,” I say.

“What do you mean? You’re not grouchy. Upon waking, the PS ladies would say you’re as pleasant as pie.”

“No, I mean, I’m sorry that I don’t get up earlier. I think it’s because, for the first half of my life, I had to get up well before the sun. Usually, at four a.m. and I’m making up for the lost time.”

“That’s harsh but relatable. I’ve been doing my workouts well before you and Sonny get up. But I can understand why you’d want to sleep in a bit.” Grey glances at the clock. “It’s only eight. This still counts as the morning.”

I wrap my arms around him, not even coming close to clasping my fingers. “I guess I don’t want to miss anything.”

“I don’t mind at all that you get a little extra beauty sleep,” Grey says, pecking me on the cheek when I steal another piece of bacon.

I share it with Sonny and kiss the top of his head.

“Even though Bran was the one that joined the military, Dad drilled an early morning wake-up call into us early on. We were up with the sun, spent time in prayer, and then did a workout. Not much has changed.” A lopsided smile slides onto his face. “Actually, everything has, and I’m here for it.”

“And I’m here for breakfast,” I say, joking. “What do we have on the menu this morning, Chef Adams?”

“Your standard bacon and eggs plus a blackberry, sweet potato, and fresh greens salad.” He sprinkles a bit of granola over the top. “And when I say fresh, I mean it. Sonny and I picked everything twenty minutes ago.”

I wander over to the back window overlooking the garden. “A chef and a farmer. I’m impressed and lucky.”

“Don’t forget football player,” he adds. “I know a salad in the morning is a bit unusual, but I work closely with a nutritionist to keep me in top form. He says protein and greens are the way to go.”

“And blueberries,” Sonny says.

We chuckle and then sit down to eat breakfast.

After a blessing, I take a bite. “No complaints here. This is delicious. What else do you have growing out there?”

Grey and Sonny take turns listing what they have in the garden, including tomatoes, hot peppers, herbs, squash, and of course, blueberries.

A thought has been nagging the back of my mind for days now, but I’ve been trying to remain in the present moment, yet it repeatedly tries to find a way out. “How do you take care of it when you’re not here?”

“Mrs. Hancock’s daughter and her family come out a couple of times a week and tend to things. But I hope that when I retire, I can do it myself, expand it to include corn, potatoes, and even pumpkins.” Grey leans back in the chair, cradling his head in his hands as if envisioning the future.

And there it is...my question and thought and fear and doubt all rolled into one.

“You’ll just putter around in the garden and—?”

“And cook,” he says, sitting up.

“I have to admit, I really love this hidden talent of yours, but it surprises me.”

“Because I’m a big, grunty, football player?”

“You haven’t grunted in days.”

Wearing a lopsided grin, he says, “I like to garden and cook. You like to draw and ice skate. Any other secret talents?”

“I’ll tell you what I don’t know how to do—keep anything green and growing in dirt alive...or cook, though I’m not bad at baking.”

“We make a good team.”

“I agree, but I hardly know how to boil water.”

“How do you eat? What do you eat? When I’m not cooking, that is.”

“If it weren’t for the freezer section at the grocery store, microwave, and takeout, I’d starve to death.”

He taps the air. “Don’t forget the cookie dough.”

“Never.”

“I’m very happy to spend the rest of our lives cooking for you, but I’d be remiss if I didn’t pass along some of my skills. Plus, Sonny is a great helper. We’ll start cooking lessons this afternoon. But first, we have to go scout a spot for the new swing set.”

The three of us roam the property where Grey identifies wild plants, names trees, and points out animals and birds, including a falcon which he said is relatively rare to see.

Later, while Sonny “reads” to himself from a board book, Grey makes good on his promise to teach me how to cook. He opens the pantry closet and gets out an apron. “Here, put this on.”

I bump him with my hip. “Only if you wear one.”

His lips quirk. “This one?” It says, *Kiss the cook*. He pulls it over his head and then pushes up his sleeves, exposing his forearms.

I fan my eyeballs.

*Is it hot in here? The oven isn’t even on yet.*

Who knew forearms could be so attractive? They’re strong and tan and make me feel secure. Like he can handle heavy things, including the burden of my past.

“Bran got it as a gag gift for Christmas one year. We had a tradition where we had to get each other one funny item.”

“I bet there was a lot of laughter in your house.”

Sonny starts giggling and then snorts.

We both turn to face him. Something blueish purple rockets out of his nose and bonks me on the head.

My eyes widen and Grey rushes over as we both realize what it was at the same time.

“Don’t put blueberries in your nose,” he says, reverting to Norwegian in his panic. At least I think that’s what he says because I recognize the words blueberries and nose.

Sonny’s little face crumbles and Grey hugs him, explaining why that’s dangerous.

We have a family hug and then spend the rest of the afternoon preparing a delicious dinner.

My heart trips at the sight of the football player and former single father doing domestic things, thoughtful things, and delicate things with his big hands. Hands that find their way to me while Sonny watches *Biler og Lastebiler* and we clean up.



A piece of my hair comes loose from my scrunchie and I repeatedly try to blow it out of the way since my hands are wet. Grey tucks it behind my ear and then kisses me on the cheek. He wraps his arms around from behind.

“That piece just doesn’t want to grow,” I say absently.

“Was your hair shorter before?” Grey asks. “I can’t picture that, or did it have something to do with your treatment?”

I turn around and his look is so tender, it soothes my heart. I meet his crystal-clear grey eyes and take a deep breath. “Marriage Club rule number one. We always tell each other the truth. It used to be a lot shorter. But before that, it was a lot longer. Down my back.” I use the edge of my hand to demonstrate.

“Todd and I were at a birthday party for someone I worked with. A guy there started flirting with me. I informed him that I was engaged. Todd must have witnessed it because the next day, when I met him at his house after visiting the gym, he cut it off.” My voice shakes.

“Todd cut off your hair?”

“It was in a ponytail and he just cut it. He said that he didn’t want other men to look at it, admire it, or want me for it.”

Grey scowls and pulls me into a protective hug. “That guy was slime.”

“There were red flags. I should’ve gotten out sooner. Never should have accepted his proposal in the first place. Looking back, this is super embarrassing to admit, but I just wanted to do something that would make my father happy. I figured Todd got tense and acted that way because of work stress. I made a mistake trying to see the best in him.”

Grey listens and holds me close, letting me pour my sadness and anger into him.

His tone is almost a growl when he says, “It wasn’t your fault, Everly. And I won’t ever let him hurt you again.”

Todd is a dull memory from that night in Concordia, but I trust that Grey will keep that promise no matter what.

But he should also know that Todd has been texting me again, though it’s not an official Marriage Club rule, and given Grey’s tendency to Hulk out, I’m hesitant to tell him.



## GREY



*I* wake up to the pleasant patter of rain and the scent of chocolate. Rarely do I need an alarm to wake up, but I overslept. It's almost nine am.

From downstairs, I hear the rise and fall of Everly and Sonny, singing and laughing. How we've woven into each other's lives is nothing short of a miracle and I'm grateful, but I can't deny that I still feel like part of me is stuck in the past. Maybe to avoid the future?

But there's no stopping time, especially considering today is my birthday, something I prefer not to think about.

Downstairs, Everly and Sonny greet me like a king, complete with a paper crown. Sonny starts singing the Happy Birthday song.

"Let's wait to sing it until we have candles on the cake." Everly wears my *Kiss the Cook* apron.

So I do and then ask, "Cake for breakfast?"

"No, silly. But we can have ice cream." Everly winks and gestures to three smoothies lined up on the counter. "Don't worry, yours has that protein powder you use. They're healthy."

I glance at an assortment of bowls and ingredients there too. "Looks like you guys were up early."

"We had to make preparations for a feast fit for a king, including a special birthday cake."

"You didn't have to go through the trouble, Buttercup."

"You deserve a cake. You deserve more."

"I'm not a huge fan of my birthday."

She shrugs like it's no big deal. "Then think of it as your *Unbirthday*

instead. Like in Alice in Wonderland, it can be any day, so we picked today, which happens to be the day you were born. But next year it can be some other day.”

I give my head a little shake. “I can’t quite follow you down that rabbit hole, but okay. I’ll play along.”

“I should ask, did you have any special birthday traditions growing up?”

“Day out fishing with Dad. Typically, Mom cooked the usual meat and potatoes kinds of meals, but on our birthdays, we could have anything we wanted.”

Everly rubs her hands together. “Ooh. What was it? I love special birthday meals. Heidi did something similar and would have cookies for breakfast, lunch, and dinner.” I notice she doesn’t mention her father celebrating her birthday.

“Mine was macaroni and cheese and Bran loved pizza rolls.”

She inclines her head. “Did you share a birthday?”

“No, but it’s hard not to think about him today. No matter where we were or what we were doing, we always made it a point to do something together to celebrate.” Sadness pits my voice. “I wish he wasn’t the one who lost his life.” The words spill from me, ugly but true.

“Grey, don’t think that way. I’m not sure if it’s my place to say this, but we have our new set of rules.” She swallows as if moving past trepidation. “Bran went into military duty knowing the risks. Although I never met him, from what you’ve said, I can promise he would not want you to give your life up for him. He gave his for you. For our country. For freedom.”

My jaw trembles and my muscles hum with energy. I want to bolt or break something. The vulnerability is too raw. Bran was invincible, or so I thought, so where does that leave me?

Everly rests her hand on my forearm, instantly calming the furor inside.

“It’s okay to be upset or confused about how you feel. Speaking from experience, you have to let it pass through you. If you bottle it up—”

Sonny runs between us, calling, “Hulk smash!”

Our gazes meet, both of us wide-eyed. “Where did you learn that?” she asks.

“Mathias.” Sonny lumbers around with his arms wide and his pudgy little hands in fists, chanting, “Hulk smash, Hulk smash.”

I grunt. “Elsie’s fiancé.”

“The one with the stinky feet?”

We stifle laughter and I say, "Let me handle this."

A strong sense of affection for Sonny and protection of his innocence replaces the tumult of emotions I felt. It's like they drop from my mind and erase like chalk off a blackboard.

As I chase after Sonny and then say, "Hulk tickle," I can't help but laugh it all away.

Everly joins in and soon we're in a family tickle and hug pile. I whisper, "Thank you. Thank you for diffusing the bomb that is my heart and mind."

We spend the afternoon swimming and floating around in the lake. I plan to get a boat for next season and once more, think about the future and how ours will look.

For dinner, we have macaroni and cheese pizza rolls. Everly and Sonny sing a robust rendition of the happy birthday song and I blow out my candles.

"Forty of them? Really?" From time to time, I think about how I'm a bit older than Everly and if the age gap will work in the long term. What if she wants someone younger? More fun like she is and less moody?

"And I'm thankful for every single one of those candles," she says, kissing me on each cheek. "Now, prepare yourself for a Concordian delicacy made by yours truly with a little help from my sidekick." She cuts into the cake. "I have to make a big deal out of this because it's your birthday present too since there aren't any stores nearby."

"Best gift ever."

"Best day ever," Sonny says. His eyes sparkle and I realize this family is actually the greatest gift ever.

Everly proceeds with her grand cake reveal. "The pressure is on. Okay, ready? This is a triple-layer cake. The top and bottom layers are your standard rich and moist chocolate. Then sandwiched between is the fudgiest chocolate brownie you've ever eaten. I sampled it."

"I'm drooling."

"The glue that holds them together is a ganache. Think thick chocolate pudding. Then on the top, as you can see, is a double chocolate frosting with dark chocolate chips sprinkled all over...and some rainbow sprinkles too. You can thank Sonny."

"Do you really love chocolate?" I ask, hugging her to my side.

"I really love you," she says.

"I love you too. Thank you for making today special."

We dig in and I have seconds, because birthdays, and preseason starts

soon, so that means no more sweets...but what does it mean for us?

We take an after-dinner walk, exhaust Sonny with a game of tag, and then do our usual bedtime routine.

Afterward, Everly and I meet on the back deck to watch the sunset. The dusky rays sparkle in her eyes like it's shining for us alone.

Today has been about me, but it wouldn't be but for her. "So, tell me more about Everly, book lover, baker extraordinaire, and accomplished figure skater."

We talk about her years spent on the ice.

"If you could go back in time and follow your dreams instead of what your father had planned for you, what would you do?" I ask.

She lets out a long sigh. "I wouldn't go back because then we'd never have met. But be things as they may, moving forward, I suppose I'd like to get back into skating at some point."

"Like make another run for the Olympics?"

She laughs. "No, that ship has sailed...into an iceberg."

"Like the Titanic?"

"If that boat had my father's face on it, yes."

But I instantly regret asking about the future because I'm not sure how a family fits into a professional football player's plan.

"Your turn. Tell me about the guy who I thought was a grumpy beast, but turned out to be the most amazing man I've ever met."

A smile plays on my lips. "Don't tell anyone. I have a reputation to uphold." My voice is husky in the dark, like I'm well acquainted with wood and sandpaper and other manly things.

Everly tilts her head and I meet her big green eyes.

As the fireflies blink in the field surrounding the deck, I lean in for a kiss. As ever, it's magical. Unlike anything that I've ever experienced. It lights me up from within, but in contrast to the flashing fireflies, the glow doesn't go dark.

My mouth presses against hers. Hungry, desperate. Am I trying to distract myself from thinking about the future? How will we make things work?

I give back as our mouths move together. The kiss deepens, and our hands and hearts tangle. But with her lips on mine, I can't help but think about how I got the scar.

When we part, my fingers drift to it and I say, "Want to know how I really got this scar on my face? The fish story was a little tale Mom used to

tell me before I went to sleep. I always asked how I didn't have a mark from the fishhook." I fear what she'll think about this so-called amazing man, but she needs to know.

"If you want to tell me."

"I went dark after I found out about Bran. I smashed everything I came into contact with, including a few faces. One of the faces I smashed wasn't too happy and shoved me into a window. For a split second, I saw my reflection and was glad for the pain because it dulled what really hurt."

"I'm sorry, Grey." Ache fills Everly's voice like she hates that truth for me.

"As you've said, I'm a dangerous gentleman, and I regret some of the things I've done. I—"

"You don't have to beat yourself up...or anyone else." She can't help but let in a little sunshine as she bumps me with her shoulder, lightening the mood.

All the same, I'm painfully aware of the dog tags around my neck. While in the Air Force, Bran was more open about his assignments. When he became a special operator, he never talked about where he went or what he did. My brother was told to take off the tags before he went on a covert mission. He couldn't have any identification on him, which is why his body was never found.

As if sensing I'm spiraling into a muddy thought hole, Everly says, "You voiced your regrets. I imagine the scar is enough of a reminder."

"Yeah, I suppose so." Little by little, the burden of who I was and what I've done these last months begin to leave and in place of the nothingness are two amazing people—Everly and Sonny—who fill me up with so much purpose, I hardly feel worthy. But I'll prove that I am with everything I do from now on.





# EVERLY



*I*n the following days, life feels easier and lighter, but the swift countdown until our thirty days are up is like a ticking clock. Three, two, one.

Fitting then that Grey added how to say and spell numbers in Norwegian to my daily word puzzles.

We play with Sonny and he teaches us to look at the world with wonder and patience. Grey cooks and gardens. I draw and read. We all hike and swim in the lake.

One rainy afternoon, after I put Sonny down for his nap, I find Grey on his laptop in the great room, studying football stats.

He comments that Coach Hammer congratulated him on passing the Blancbourg program—it's officially over, and being secluded up here, resulted in little fanfare.

“And now he wants me to get back to work and by that, he means prep for the season.”

I perch on the arm of the sofa and rub his shoulders. “I’m still wildly impressed by your bookshelves. They’re well organized and worthy of a #BookShelfie post on social media. I’d take one of those over #BruiserButt any day.”

“Not a fan of my butt?” he jokes.

“On the contrary, I’m rather fond of this Bruiser’s butt. But it’s mine and I don’t want to share.” I give him a little squeeze.

He chuckles and pulls me onto his lap. I’ve never been married, so I’m not entirely sure if this is normal—but our relationship didn’t start like it would for a typical couple—and we make out for the next ten minutes.

When we part, my lips are bee-stung, but I cannot resist a smile. “So, you’re an amazing kisser, a skilled gardener, a cook, and have a big collection of books.” It’s impossible to ignore Grey’s lidded eyes as he trails me with his gaze while I study the contents of his shelves.

“What can I say? I like to admire the view.”

Flattered, I laugh inwardly because there’s no doubt he’s talking about me. I can’t imagine he brought too many women up here who’d appreciate the fine attention to the book display and bespoke items decorating the shelves. “Fiction, biographies about football players, cookbooks, and gardening guides.” There is an entire shelf dedicated to each subject. “You like things that grow,” I say absently.

“I like to eat,” he says simply. “Eventually, I’d like to have a small farm and raise our own animals.”

Sounds like an adventure in the making. But in some ways, he seems stuck with one foot in the past. We haven’t talked much about it, but just as pain from my previous life occasionally sneaks through like it did when I told him about my hair, I’m afraid it’s keeping us both from looking at the future. The near future at that, because I’m supposed to report to Blancbourg in a matter of days.

But I won’t make today any cloudier than it is with a drab topic of conversation. “I love reading too. The classics, romance, and even books about art—history, technique, and artists. The perfect thing to do on a rainy day.”

“Books are where I go to escape when I’m not on the field,” Grey says.

I pause my perusal. “Did your brother love football as much as you?”

Grey shakes his head. “Not especially. He was more of a baseball guy.”

“What else?” I ask, sliding onto the sofa beside him.

“He always knew what to say or do. You know how some people claim that there isn’t a manual for how to be a parent or live life or whatever? It was like Bran was born with one. He knew how to handle any situation. Stranded on an island during a lightning storm? Bran to the rescue. Get a flat tire with no spare, thirty miles from home? He’d be there. He was so together. So good. Always helping people.”

“So are you.”

Grey stares at his hands. “But—”

“But...if you’re thinking about how things didn’t work out with Sonny’s mother, people make mistakes. Not that your son was a mistake, but in terms

of not being there for him.”

“It’s only been a short time, but I cannot imagine a life without you and Sonny. For so long, I didn’t think I was up for the task. She’s the one missing out. And to be honest, it makes me mad.”

“It hasn’t escaped my attention that Sonny instantly called me Mamma. It felt kind of strange at first, like I was peeping in someone’s diary. But it also feels right. What or how do you want to tell Sonny about her? Or have you already?”

“According to reports, she hardly took care of Sonny, leaving him with babysitters, friends, and her mother. He bounced around from person to person. It should’ve been me.”

“You’re here now.”

“I haven’t talked to him about Princess yet.”

I press my lips together, fighting a smile, fighting laughter. I squeeze my eyes shut, hoping it’ll pass. But it’s no use, it pours out of me.

“What’s so funny?”

“Just that you call your ex princess. No offense to the biological mother of your son, but she’s more like a wicked witch.”

“No, that’s her name.”

I whack him with my fingers. “Her name is not Princess.”

“Honest truth.”

My laughter continues because he’s not joking after all.

Grey’s lip quivers like it’s contagious, and I give him a little nudge. “Come on. It’s okay to laugh a little. Let it out, big guy.”

He does, a long bellow of a laugh. It shines in his eyes.

“See? That was good, right?”

He bobbles his head in affirmation, which is much better than a grunt.

“I’m sorry, I can’t believe your ex’s name is Princess. I still think it’s hilarious. That should’ve been a red flag. I cannot picture you with a lady named Princess.” I try putting their names together in my head. Nope, Grey and Princess don’t fit.

“Yeah, in hindsight, her name was fitting in that spoiled, bratty, entitled kind of way.”

“But you got Sonny out of the deal, so I’d say you came out the king.” At the mention of that term, I think of my father and my laughter dies.

“He’s the best thing that ever happened to me. And you,” Grey adds.

The warmth within returns and brings with it a question. “Branson is your

brother and you're Greyson. Did you name him Sonny as per tradition?"

"Princess wanted to name him Aero Moon Hero, so that was the compromise."

"Where did you find this woman?"

"Late night. Waffle House. She was Norwegian. I thought it was meant to be. We'll never speak of it again."

"It's probably for the best." Another squawk of laughter escapes.

"But about her, Sonny is barely three years old and I want to wait until our lives settle before I gauge how to approach the subject about Princess and you. Without my prompting or any discussion on the matter, he started calling you Mamma, so I went with it. But we can talk about how to handle it at some point."

"Speaking of things we ought to talk about..."

My phone beeps. My spine tingles, but I do my best to ignore it.

"Someone missing you?"

I snort. "Not likely. I should visit Heidi before I leave, though."

"Before you leave," Grey echoes, reminding me of when we first met and he was all clouds, rain showers, and ghosts. "How about you stay? I don't want anyone else in my life leaving."

This is the cue to ask Grey about the football season, but I'm not as brave as I was at Mrs. Nelson's house. Instead, I say, "Tell me more about Bran."

His voice cracks a few times, but for the next hour, Grey tells me stories of growing up with Bran, when he enlisted in the military, and how he was a hero. Their brotherhood, the pranks the boys would pull. Grey's family, which I want to be part of, roots me back to life in the Upper Peninsula.

He grips the back of his neck. "After losing Bran, I devoted one hundred percent of my energy to football. It was the only way I could deal."

"And now?"

His mouth opens and closes. "I don't know. I haven't thought about what's next."

And without meaning to, at last, we arrive at the destination we've both been avoiding. "...Aside from puttering around in your garden and cooking."

He shifts as though the conversation about the past and future makes him uncomfortable.

Doubt smudges the perfect landscape of our future that I'd drawn in my mind. "I don't want to think about it either. But the first two rules of Marriage Club stand."

Grey's phone rings and the word *Hammer* slides across the screen. "He sent me some footage to watch. I should get that."

A cookbook with a shiny spine that caught my attention earlier brings me to my feet. I decide to learn a new recipe each week. I run my finger along the grilling cookbooks, Italian cuisine, camping cookbooks, and others with recipes that specialize in foods that go in bowls, wraps, and juices. I settle on breakfast and bookmark a recipe. Then, since it's a rainy afternoon, I search for a good mystery. I reach the end of the lowest shelf where a slim leather book is wedged next to a bicycle repair manual.

I pull it out and part the pages to discover it's a photo album. I'm nosy, but know that I shouldn't pry. However, a familiar face stares back at me from a picture of a beardless Grey and a woman who must've spent a lot of time in the sun and even more at a hairstylist getting her hair bleached.

I hardly believe my eyes, but as I flip through, I recognize the woman on Grey's arm, the one holding a newborn, the one from my wedding day.

She's a princess all right.

My stomach knots. I don't know what to do with this information because it's no longer funny. It's galaxies-colliding crazy.

Grey's voice rumbles in the other room. A whisper in my head says to go directly to him and tell him what I discovered, but I remain glued to the spot as I study the vaguely familiar face. However, it's more the woman's voice that echoes in my head like a bad dream. Behind Grey and Princess, stands someone else, someone I didn't recognize until now. He looks a lot like Grey and I've seen him before as well. Not long ago, in fact.

An icy cold feeling pours through me. It's like I plunged into the lake and a heavy pressure pushes against my chest. I've made a lot of bad decisions in my life and bringing this to the surface will likely turn into one of them. I'm too close to the situation not to get burned.

However, I grab my cell phone and send a text because I'm done being threatened. The tables have turned.

Just as I press *send* on the text, Grey's heavy footfalls approach. I shove the photo album under the couch cushion.

"I forgot to tell you, I didn't get around to fixing the kayak oar."

I nod as if through a fog.

He continues, "The one that accidentally got stuck between two rocks the last time we were out."

I'm frozen, locked in what I just learned.

Grey claps his hands together. “When Sonny wakes up, I was thinking of going for a row, but maybe a hike instead since the rain let up, and I think there are a few wild blueberries left on the bushes over by the cove. He’d like that.”

When I don’t answer, Grey adds, “Buttercup, you okay? You look like you saw a ghost.”

“Something like that,” I mumble. “But I’m fine. Going out on the lake sounds perfect.”

“I suggested a hike.”

“Oh, right.” I get up on shaky legs and leave my phone on the counter. I’m probably just overthinking this, but how can we move forward when it turns out there is so much in our past that we share?

Whereas before, it was just Grey, Sonny and me occupying the planet, now it feels like the whole world stands between us and the future. I’m not sure how to navigate this unforeseen turn in the road.



## GREY



I'm typically a man of few words, but Everly has been unusually quiet during the hike. I've spent months on end on Isle Royale and love the peace, the quiet, and the solitude, but have heard about *island fever*. It isn't an actual illness where someone gets a high temperature. Rather, some people feel isolated from the rest of the world after spending a long period on an island. Maybe she's experiencing it now. Though her smile is as bright as ever when Sonny sings a song in Norwegian about, you guessed it, blueberries.

When we get back to the cabin, it's nearly dinner time.

"You hungry?" I ask.

"Not especially." She sits on the couch where she spent the bulk of the afternoon before the hike.

I want to do something to cheer her up.

"Even though I'm officially done with the Blancbourg program, there's still the First Annual Boston Bruisers Charity Ball. Would you like to be my date?"

The corner of her lip lifts. "I'd love to. Sorry, I just had something on my mind."

If it's the complicated equation of what comes next for us, I get why she's preoccupied. We've been playing house, but now we have to return to real life and I don't know what that will look like. We're like two people awkwardly shuffling in a hallway so we don't collide, and we keep dancing around discussing plans for the future.

I crouch down. "Listen, I know we haven't talked about what happens after we leave our little island bubble, but we'll figure something out. Declan



has a private jet that I haven't cashed my credits in on yet."

Her eyebrows lift.

"He's offered me the opportunity to use it numerous times, veiled as generosity if I didn't say anything about some of his misdeeds." I wink. "If you're thinking you'd like to continue to work at Blancbourg, we can fly to each other every chance we get."

"What about Sonny?"

I rock back on my heels because I haven't quite figured this part out yet. "Elsie can't take care of him again. Maybe my mom—"

Everly's expression remains blank as though she's purposefully trying not to show emotion. I know the look all too well since I'm the master of concealment. Turns out, sometimes even from myself.

"We can make it work and the truth is..." I've been thinking heavily about my career as the end of the month nears and my time in the Blancbourg program ended, but I'm not ready to bring those words to life. "The truth is I'm not sure I want to be known as the old grandpa football pro."

That earns me an upturn of Everly's sweet lips.

"Forty is not old."

"Tell that to the rest of the team."

She cocks her head. "I'd be happy to."

I don't think she's joking.

"You don't think I'm too old for you? We have a nearly ten-year age difference."

"Nope. I think it's just right. Minus #BruiserButt, I prefer a mature man. Someone ready to settle down. Have a family. Who knows who he is. But I have to ask, where is this coming from?"

"I don't know who I'll be without football."

"Greyson Adams, husband, father, Hall of Famer. Gardner, chef, hot Viking love lord."

I burst into laughter.

"I spent some time LARPing in college."

"I sure like getting to know you and I like the sound of that." I link my fingers with hers. "What about you?"

"Wife, mother, still figuring the rest out." There's an edge to her tone that drops off into emptiness.

"I don't want you to feel like you missed out on things if we—you know." I scrub my hand through my hair. Why is this so hard?

“Nope. I won’t be missing out on anything if we live the rest of our lives together. You and Sonny are everything I ever wanted.”

“Do you miss the mainland?”

She lifts her shoulder. “I miss cookie dough.”

I chuckle. “How about we close up here tomorrow and then fly to Los Angeles a few days ahead of the charity event? We could go to the beach and see the sites.”

She eyes her phone in the kitchen.

I take her hand. “Help me make our last home cooked meal for a while. I want you to show me what you’ve learned while at Camp Adams.”

The weeks on the island have been something like summer camp filled with hiking, swimming, learning, and falling in love. I’ve never felt the way I do about Everly with anyone else. She’s like the sun that rises in the morning and the moonlight that shines at night. I deserve a team tackle for that one and I’d take it like a man.

Officially, the thirty days of reform school are over. I succeeded in passing the Blancbourg program, yet we’re still here, still together.

Everly dons an apron and her phone buzzes again. Ignoring it, she says, “What’s on the menu tonight? Celebration cupcakes? Ice cream? Ooh, how about cookie dough sundaes? Or if we were in Concordia, we’d get one of their famous chocolate cakes.” She says the words clearly enough, but her usual enthusiasm is dull.

“Nah, the one you made for my birthday was better.”

“How do you know? Concordia is literally famous for the chocolate cake.”

“Because *you* made it.”

I anticipate Everly’s sunny smile, but it’s dim, a partly cloudy day instead of the warm rays of light blast I’ve grown used to.

While I’m worried about what comes next, perhaps she’s concerned about me handling the grief that still appears from time to time. But I can no longer avoid it, for her sake, Sonny’s, and our future. I’ve been writing my brother letters like I used to do when he first joined the military. I’m getting it all out on the page even if he’ll never read them.

I stifle a sigh. “I want to grill this fish.” I set it on the counter. “How about I leave you in charge of the salad? Use up everything in the fridge since we won’t be back for a little while. We’ll call it *everything but the kitchen sink salad*.”

In the pause, I wait for her to giggle at my dumb joke. It doesn't come as her phone buzzes and the name *Todd* blinks onto the screen.

The anger that I keep locked inside rattles the bars of its cage and causes my jaw to twitch. "Is he harassing you again?"

She shakes her head.

"Remember the Marriage Club rules?"

The phone's buzz repeats. I want to snap the thing in half. Instead, I ask, "Have you thought about blocking his number?"

Everly says a panicked, "Yes, no." She grabs her phone.

"Yes? No? What do you mean? That guy is dangerous. I don't want him bothering you. I don't want him anywhere near you. Not in real life or over the phone."

"It's not that." Desperation underscores each word.

My brow furrows. The kitchen turns a deep shade of red as my anger grows. "Everly, please tell me what is going on." It's a command rather than a request.

She flinches.

"What do we have if we can't be honest with each other?" I ask.

She shakes her head rapidly as though fighting with herself over telling me.

A pit grows in my stomach. "Is he asking for you back?"

The turning of her head from side to side slows.

"Is he hassling you? Threatening you?"

Again, tight-lipped, she shakes her head.

I now understand her frustration at my grunt responses. "Then what is it?"

"I can't tell you yet." At that, she hurries up the stairs.

I toss the dishtowel onto the counter and scrub my hands down my face. "What the heck just happened?" I mutter, but also hope for an answer.

Sonny toddles into the room, dragging his big yellow "Dumper" as he calls his dump truck, which we've been using to haul our garden bounty. I pause dinner and give him my full attention while we pretend that we're cars and the pillow fort is our garage.

When he gets distracted by building a smaller one with blocks for his toy cars, I return to making dinner. Or rather, I pace around the kitchen for a solid ten minutes, preoccupied with the conversation with Everly.

When she comes down to eat, she's her usual chipper self, but I can't stop the flurry of questions that burst into my mind like the soapy bubbles she and

Sonny blow on the back deck when we're done cleaning up.

She has a childlike playfulness that made the two of them bond instantly. I have to admit, I don't mind it either. She helped me lighten up and live again. Everly is a breath of sweet sunshine and fresh air. Yet, I can't help but sense a wedge growing between us.

Maybe she is having second thoughts about us as a couple. Perhaps she wants to get back with Todd for reasons I'll never understand. A lightbulb pops in my mind. It could be that her father is pressuring her.

Perhaps she doesn't like me anymore and it's not going to work out. She'll return to Concordia. I'll rage-play football, and we'll both pretend it never happened. After all, it seems too good to be true.

Or this could all be in my head and she's just having a moment. She's been through a lot too.

Temptation draws me toward Everly's phone. I could peek at what she and Todd have been texting about. Maybe we're going in reverse. We've done everything backward, anyway. Marriage first. Relationship second. It would make a twisted kind of sense for us to break up next. Not that I want to lose the love of my life.

The thing is, it was easier not to feel. This would be a good time to talk to my brother. He'd splash me with cold water and tell me not to drift back into the clouds. To be here for Everly and Sonny.



The next day, we close up the cabin and take the seaplane to my mother's house. She's excited to have the little guy for a long weekend and he's eager to go to Mrs. Nelson's house to pick blueberries.

Everly remains relatively quiet on the flight to Los Angeles. When we land, realization knocks into me like turbulence even though we're back on the ground.

Maybe she got bad news? Received the results of a test, indicating the cancer is back? I have incredible insurance and with my connections in football, will get her the best doctors.

"Listen, whatever is going on, I am here for you. Please talk to me."

"It's nothing to worry about. It's going to be fine." But her smile wilts a

little.

“I can’t help you if you don’t tell me.”

“Seriously. Everything is okay. What should I wear to the ball?”

The plainness of her question and the perkiness in her tone calm my concern...at least temporarily.

“It’s a ball, so we’ll have to get you a gown.”

“Like a princess?” she asks.

A question pricks my awareness. Perhaps this is about my ex. “No, Everly. A gown for a queen.” I take her hand, but she hesitates.

She glances at her chest. “I forgot my scarf at the cabin.”

I run my hands up her arms to her neck and then caress her jaw. “Everly, you are beautiful how you are. Every part of you. From top to bottom. Inside and out. When I look at you, I see a woman that I’m proud to have married. And if you ever hear Todd’s voice in your ear saying something disparaging, even louder is the sound of my growl telling him to back off. You. Are. Mine.”

Everly’s grin grows, but when I gaze into her eyes, there’s liquid there.

“Thank you. Today, Grey, you occupy all three of my thankfals.”

“I’ll do whatever I can to stay at the top of that list.”

Taking her hand, we head toward the shops.

I plan to pamper Everly with a beach and spa day tomorrow and then the First Annual Boston Bruisers Charity Ball where we’ll make our debut as a couple—while young and dumb with Princess, I avoided hanging out with the team and her. Partly because she’d flirt with them and because I’d often cringe at the ditzy things she’d say, embarrassing us both. Princess is the original “Head empty” meme.

Why I thought we had a future together was beyond me.

But I’m pumped to see the guys with Everly on my arm. It’ll be a happy reunion to be together again now that we’ve come through reform school.

However, my teammates will crush me when they find out that I’m dress shopping with Everly. Sure, Princess had me wrapped around her finger, but I drew the line at shopping and simply gave her my credit card. Then again, I was younger, dumber. But having graduated to the *shopping together* stage with Everly feels right.

Sitting in the chair reserved for bored husbands, I imagine other stages: shopping at home goods stores, buying a car together, more kids?

Just then, she pops her head out of the dressing room. “I think I found the

one.” Her sunny gaze lingers on mine for a long breath.

“Yeah?” I ask.

“Yeah.” Her smile is flirty.

“Can I see?”

“Nope. It’s a surprise.” She winks and disappears, taking my trepidation that something is wrong between us with her.



# EVERLY



*I*'m the worst at keeping secrets, subterfuge, and masterminding plots. Keeping this from Grey is killing me. But it helps that I feel very fancy with little waves in my hair and a gown fit for a princess, er, queen. I'd rather not think about Princess Braaten aka Princess Papaya—yeah, I've been doing my homework—but now that I have, so much makes sense. Or doesn't, but hopefully it will soon.

The gown I chose for the charity ball is dark blue with lace on the top and the skirt is dusted with sparkly thread that catches the light when I swish and twirl.

When I exit the room at the hotel, Grey stands a few paces down the hall. His eyes widen as I approach, suggesting he likes what he sees.

I turn in a circle.

He admires every second of my spin. "Gorgeous."

"I could be wearing a paper sack and you'd say that."

"Not true." He smirks then adds, "True."

With an appreciative smile, I lift onto my toes and peck him on the cheek. His trim beard showcases the good looks that often remain hidden.

I whisper in his ear, "And you, Mr. Adams, look dashing."

His neck flushes. "You think so?"

"We clean up real fancy."

He extends his elbow for me to take. Grateful for his steadying presence, because he has no idea what's coming, my heels click on the hotel lobby's marble floor as we exit. They fall into rhythm with my pulse which is like a countdown. T-Minus one hour until the falcon lands, aka I got some important info out of Todd and plan to give Grey a belated birthday gift.



A sleek black SUV brings us to the event space hosting the First Annual Boston Bruisers Charity Ball.

Grey's voice floats to me as we pass through the glittery city, lit up at night. "Even though we've been married all along, I'm excited for everyone to meet my wife, Mrs. Adams."

I lace my fingers in his. "I get a little thrill every time you say it, Mr. Adams."

Regrettably, I've been to numerous events with Todd where he'd parade me around like his trophy wife-to-be and then ignore me when someone who'd give him a leg up on the social ladder came along.

When we pull up and get out of the limo, this charity ball is next level. There's a blue carpet rather than a red one, and paparazzi line up outside black velvet ropes. Black and blue lights bathe the white stucco building in the Bruisers' team colors.

I have to admit, after being at the cabin for a few weeks, I experience a bit of culture shock upon returning to civilization. Being at the beach was relaxing and the day at the spa was a treat, but the frenetic energy of the city replaces the slow pace of the island I'd gotten used to as camera flashes pop and reporters volley questions at us.

Once we get inside, my breath doesn't come any easier. Not with the tinkling of the piano or the soft flicker of candlelight.

It doesn't help that Grey is suddenly tense. He's probably dealing with his own reintegration into team life. Standing a head taller than most people, he cuts his eyes in the direction of the arched opening leading to the banquet room.

"Everything okay?" I ask.

He leans down and kisses my forehead. "Wait here. I'll be right back." Grey loosens his hand from mine and strides away.

I stand next to a tall banner displaying the names of all of the individuals and companies, along with their logos, that had donated to the charity ball. A top donor is a familiar metal-style font with the letters *LH* fused together in a familiar logo. Beneath it is the name *LeFevre Holdings*.

One tier down is Mercer Corp, the company where Todd used to work.

Those rats.

Anxiety swims in my stomach even though there's no chance they're here. After seeing the picture in the photo album, a series of texts exchanged where I used some top-level negotiating—a skill I'd observed in my father—I

thought I got what I wanted.

I'd been reluctant to tell Grey anything, even though it broke our Marriage Club rules, in case I was mistaken.

I also learned that Todd is no longer at Mercer, but in our exchanges, he didn't specify his new job. It's mean to think this, but I secretly hope that he was fired.

However, the Ice King and Todd have important things to do, places to go, and people to crush. There's no chance either of them would attend this ball. I hope.

As guests mill around and take their seats, I scan the room for Grey. Tall and handsome, dressed in a suit and tie, he ought to stand out from the crowd, but all the guys wear black suits...and the women are in blue—the theme.

Eventually, I spot him talking to a plump, bald man with a frown on his face.

I cross the room and Grey introduces me to Commissioner Starkowsky, which is just the beginning of a round of introductions that leave my head spinning. For weeks, I've seen little more than Grey, Sonny, and a smattering of visitors to the island. Oh, how I wish we were watching *Biler og Lastebiler* in a pillow fort and eating blueberries.

But that isn't what almost makes me dizzy. Despite Grey's good work for the charity and position on the team, I feel like a trophy on his arm with little to contribute other than a polite nod and smile—much the way I had with Todd as a prize for winning the metal magnate's daughter.

Well, until I left him at the altar in a state of utter humiliation. Then again, he drove the nails into that vampire coffin when he cheated.

When I was a little girl, I'd watch my father get dressed up and flounce around with women dressed fancy in silky and shimmery gowns with jewelry dripping from their ears, necks, and wrists. Pangs of excited jealousy would stick with me after their heels clicked out the door.

As an adult, I care little for networking events and social hours where my only job is to smile politely. I don't miss Todd or his antics at all. But I can't deny that I feel uneasy.

The guests funnel into the banquet hall and I sit at the head table with Grey, the coach, and the other players involved in the #BruiserButt scandal, along with their plus ones who turn out to be a pleasant surprise—all the Blancbourg coaches are honorary guests...or dates?

*Ladies, spill your stories.* Then again, I suppose I have one to tell too.

Grey eyes his teammates, but I sense an undercurrent of tension rippling across his skin as Coach Hammer roasts them all, followed by a few kind words, applauding them for their efforts after #BruiserButt. The guys each express their appreciation for the Blancbourg program when I spot a familiar face in the crowd.

My blood runs cold.

An icy wind gusts from the north.

I jerk my head in Grey's direction, begging for an explanation, but there's no way he'll have one to offer.

A speaker acknowledges several key donors and how their contributions help fund the featured charity. Everyone applauds the positive impact it'll have, complete with slides illustrating graphs and statistics.

It would be rude for me to get up, but every cell in my body commands me to seek refuge. There is no good to come from my father being here.

However, another speaker takes the microphone. "Just before the close of our fiscal year, we had a sizable donation from Lefevre Holdings. You may be familiar with them. In fact, I think they're responsible for providing the metal for this microphone, the light fixtures," he points overhead, "and just about everything made out of the material in this country. May we have a round of applause for Mr. Lefevre?"

My father's slim smile is anything but appreciative. After all, he is the Ice King.

The saddest part of all is he has no idea I'm up here with one of the honored guests. A band tightens around my heart and I wish I had my mother's scarf. But tonight isn't about me, my father, or Toad Prince Todd and Princess Papaya.

Nope. The man of the hour just walked through the doorway.

Or not.

Instead of the person I expect, Todd strides past the tables. He points at me and then my father who shakes hands and accepts a certificate from the speaker onstage.

Todd approaches me. "We have unfinished business."

All I hear is static in my ears as shock rushes through me because this wasn't how tonight was supposed to go. Yes, I contacted Todd to help me locate someone we thought was MIA. But he's obviously using the opportunity to get back at me.

Grey's expression turns to stone and he gets to his feet. "You have no

business here unless you've come to reckon with—" His hands ball into fists.

The other guys on the team get to their feet.

Declan says, "All of us."

Wolf cuts his eyes at Todd.

Chase glances around the room and I follow his gaze to see the rest of the Bruiser players on their feet.

"You stole my wife," Todd accuses.

"Todd, you're nuts if you think I was going to marry you after what you did."

"You humiliated me. Left me at the altar."

I can't deny I feel the heat of a lot of eyes on me. "There was no way I could make myself walk down the aisle after I found you and—"

"Todd, what are you doing? I thought you said—" Princess Papaya struts toward Todd and then stops. She looks my husband up and down like it took her a moment to place him out of context. "Grey? What are you doing here?"

He narrows his eyes because it's obvious to anyone that she's not the brightest bulb. "This is a private team event."

The other guys step forward, ready to escort out the unwelcome guests.

"The plan wasn't for my father, my ex-fiancé, or Princess Papaya to crash our party."

"I couldn't resist," Todd hisses.

"Leave my wife alone. Leave this building, now," Grey grinds out.

"Your wife? Do you know anything about her? Do you know why she married you? It was all fake."

Then the Ice King himself inserts himself into the situation. "And your intentions to marry my daughter were genuine?"

Todd shifts from foot to foot because Princess Papaya already did the honors of outing their affair in front of all our wedding guests, which made me feel slightly less guilty about not making it down the aisle.

But I am fresh out of embarrassment and am going to handle this thing like a boss. A mom-wife-girl boss hybrid.

Until the other day, I didn't know Grey's ex's name was actually Princess, er, Princess Papaya, which the castaway man at my wedding shouted as he chased after her. The man I was hoping would be here instead of the others.

My ex glares at me and goes on to say, "It's my understanding that your *I dos* were rather unusual."

“I love this woman and honor our vows, which are none of your concern.” Grey’s jaw ticks.

My father says, “Everly.” It’s not a question or even a greeting really, more of an acknowledgment. Proof of life.

“Father.”

“You’re married?”

“Yes, this is Greyson Adams, my husband.”

Emotion flickers across his features before he returns to his normal and neutral, if not a little hostile, Ice King expression. “I know who he is, and it looks like he has the situation well in hand, but it would be a greater honor than this award,” he waves the certificate in his hand, “to see this man out the door.” His voice is as sharp as an icicle as he grabs Todd’s arm.

My eyebrows lift ever so slightly. Did I hear my father right?

He eyes Princess Papaya, possibly recognizing her from when she did the whole, *I object to this union thing*, well before the pastor asked, but still. She showed up on my wedding day, dressed to say *I do*, and kissed the groom like they were lawfully wedded husband and wife.

“Wait? You know each other?” Grey says, pointing from Todd to Princess.

My father glowers. “Yes, they’re the ones who ruined my daughter’s future. I’ve since made it a point to pay Todd back in kind.”

My lifted eyebrows bump against my forehead rippling with confusion. “Dad, you’re not upset that I didn’t marry Todd?”

“Not after I found out what he did.”

“How do Toddy and I know each other? We’re in love.” Princess Papaya practically hangs off Todd’s shoulder. I notice her slight Norwegian accent.

“Did you know about this?” Grey asks me.

“Sort of. But I made a connection. A big one. And tonight was supposed to be special because—” I pause all eyes on me and wish I’d arranged a private reunion.

“Princess? Princess Papaya!” the voice of a man who has been lost at sea calls from the entryway, breaking the silence.

Even though I hid while the drama played out at my would-be wedding, I’m having a slight sense of *déjà vu*.

Princess huffs. “I told you to wait in the car.”

Just then, a tall, tan man wearing an unbuttoned tropical shirt and flip-flops walks into the room. His focus remains on Princess Papaya then Grey

does a very aggressive double take.

“Bran?”

The man blinks with bewilderment before his gaze lands on his brother.

But the flash of recognition I’d hoped for isn’t there.

I envisioned a happy reunion complete with music and a choreographed song and dance number. Like a musical. Theatrical. But the expression on Grey’s face is more like a tragedy.



# GREY



My pulse picks up as though I've been running the bleachers in the stadium on a cold winter day. I'm hot with anger and cold with confusion.

My gaze remains frozen on my brother. There's no mistaking his eyes, the same grey as mine. He's alive, but he doesn't recognize me.

Everly's father pumps his hands. "Hang on a moment. Let me make sense of this." He points at his daughter. "You and Todd were supposed to get married, but you didn't make it down the aisle because—"

"Because we're in love," Princess repeats, peppering Todd with kisses.

"Babe, not here. I'm doing business," he says.

"Todd, you're delusional if you still think you have a chance with Everly, especially if it has anything to do with *business*. You're washed up. Time to sail into the sunset, son."

"That's what I've been saying," Princess exclaims. "The ship is waiting, babe."

Bran blinks a few times as if that has meaning for him and as if Princess means something to him.

"But you—?" Everly's father points at Princess.

She splays her fingers and plants them on her chest. "I'm Princess Braaten. Also known as Princess Papaya on the Caribbean's Premier Royale Cruise Line. It's a far cry from Isle Royale. I'd never survive there. There isn't even a coffee shop." She bunches up her face.

The space between Mr. LeFevre's eyebrows shrinks, along with my hope as my brother stands there blankly, looking at Princess like a lost puppy dog.

"Isle Royale?" Bran whispers.



“So, how do you know him?” Mr. Lefevre wags his finger between Princess and me.

“Oh, we used to be together,” she says like it’s no big deal.

“But you’re married to Everly now?” her father asks.

I extend my hand to shake. “It’s nice to meet you, sir.”

His grip is firm. “Okay, and how does this guy fit into it?” When our hands drop, he points at my brother.

That’s a great question, but before I can hear an explanation, everyone starts talking at once and applause echoes through the banquet room like a dinner murder mystery was solved.

But it’s not. Not even close. I try to make my way to Bran, but everyone is bustling around, chatting, and carrying on as if my world didn’t erupt in a violent storm of thunder and lightning ricocheting off nearby clouds.

“Hold on,” I bellow, but no one hears me.

I’d like to reverse the route that took me to Los Angeles and go home to my cabin and son. It’s my safe harbor and right now I feel like I’m drowning from all the people and pressures pushing in on all sides—the team, the future, and my brother’s questionable health status. He’s bedraggled, sunburned, and far too thin.

Or have I been under so much stress that I’m imagining the whole thing? My vision blurs around the edges and my muscles tense.

I blink a few times, watching Todd in Everly’s face, talking aggressively. I wind up, ready to clock him, but someone beats me to the punch. Literally.

I’m not sure what happens next, other than a lot of black and blue, shouting, and a regular ole Bruiser’s dust-up. Guess you can take the guys out of the fight, but you can’t take the fight out of the guys.

Only, instead of throwing more punches, everyone is throwing food. I find my way to Everly as she hucks a doughnut at Princess’s head. “Here’s your crown, Princess Papaya.”

“What are you doing?” I ask.

“I don’t know, but it’s fun.”

“I just barely got out of hot water with the team.”

“If Coach Hammer sends you back to Blancbourg, I’ll put in a good word for you.” Everly winks.

“You’re not going to teach there anymore?”

“No, silly. I’m a mom now. I have a family and playing the role of metal magnate in my future.”

“Seriously?”

“Well, my dad did punch Todd. So, the likelihood of them teaming up is slim. I wouldn’t say no to taking over for him when the time comes.”

“Except you’d be Queen Sunshine instead of the Ice King.”

“I like that.”

“Also, punching Todd was my job,” I say.

“The Ice King doesn’t have a coach or commissioner he could get in trouble with. At least, not anymore. Then again, the Ice King didn’t do much to try to avoid the penalty box back in the day. I also think that was my dad’s way of telling me that he’s on my team, a surprise after all these years of supreme chill.”

A grape flies in my direction. I catch it midair and squeeze. “I have to admit, I’m over these kinds of shenanigans.”

“Oh, come on. Try throwing one of these doughnuts. It’s fun. See if you can ring it around one of the centerpieces on the table.”

“Everly, we’re going to get into so much trouble for this.”

Wolf and Declan play monkey in the middle with a loaf of bread and Brandon Campos, our new center and the guy who started this thing.

But then my gaze lands on Branson, standing alone in the midst of the chaos.

“But how did you find him?”

Everly and I duck for cover when asparagus spears sail our way. “While I was hiding on my wedding day, Princess Papaya—who, at the time, I only knew as the woman to whom I owed a great debt for saving me from marrying Todd—waltzed into my wedding and professed her undying love for the groom.”

“Princess, my ex?” I ask.

“The one and the same. They kissed like a couple would after saying I do. As my thoughts scrambled and I fled for safety, a man wearing a Bermuda shirt and a pair of shorts hurried after her like a lost puppy dog, calling for her, but I didn’t think I heard right. I figured I was caught in some kind of wacky love triangle.”

“Seriously?”

“Yeah, I realize now, he was calling, ‘Princess Papaya.’ Only, in my frenzied state it just sounded like gibberish.”

“But why is my brother following my ex around?”

Everly gives me a little nudge as we get to our feet. “Why don’t you go

ask him?”

“I’m afraid he doesn’t know who I am.”

“There’s a chance he doesn’t know who he is, but miracles happen, Grey. Every day. Me not marrying Todd. You and I getting married. This.” She holds up her hand as blue liquid sprays everywhere.

“The Bruisers sports drink shower is not a miracle, Buttercup.”

Everly steps toward me, closing the space between us. She’s a bit taller in heels but still has to lift her chin to meet my eyes.

“I saw a photo of you and Princess in a photo album at the cabin. Bran was in the background. You don’t have any recent photos of him around, so I didn’t make the connection until the other day.”

“Because I lost him and couldn’t bear to—”

“No, I found him, and it looks like he needs you to help him find himself.”

“So you brought him here?”

“I reached out to Todd and asked him for Princess’s info to find out if she knew anything about the guy who trailed her on my wedding day. Turns out he washed up on a Caribbean Island, didn’t know who he was or where he was but must’ve heard her doing her cruise ship routine as Princess Papaya, and that tripped something in his memory.”

“Why didn’t she contact me? She met my brother once when he was on leave—took a trip to Barbados. That’s when that photo was taken. We saw her performance. But we look alike. Why wouldn’t she have—?”

“No offense, but I don’t think Princess is the most perceptive fruit in the bunch. I reckon if Bran was a Missing in Action soldier or escaped as a Prisoner of War, then he wasn’t quite looking himself either.”

I glance over at the man who was once a behemoth. Now he has shaggy hair, a bedraggled beard, and a tan like he’s been hitting Margaritaville hard for the last six months.

The harsh reality that he doesn’t know who I am or who he is hits me like a tackle from an opposing team. I’m thinking specifically of Garrison Wheeler from the Miami Riptide. The guy is a brick house of muscle.

“I asked Princess to give him the info for the event tonight if she could. I figured he’d show up, though I wasn’t expecting the rest of this motley crew. Todd took advantage of the situation and Princess followed. At the time, I thought it was the right thing to do, though, in retrospect, perhaps I should’ve arranged a private meeting.”

I scrub my hand over my face. “I could probably use an escape to a remote island after this.”

“I know just the place.” Everly winks.

“Not the Caribbean.”

“Nope. A few clicks north where there’s a beautiful cabin on a lake.”

“Now you’re speaking my language.”

“Go talk to your brother.”

“Thank you,” I say, kissing Everly on the forehead.

I brace myself, not sure what to expect as I approach the man who wears a bewildered expression, repeating “Princess Papaya,” like he’s not sure where he is, no less who he is.

I take to the field, ready to win no matter what I have to do for my brother.

“Bran?” I ask.

His eyes land on me and I search for a flash of recognition. “Bran,” he repeats.

“It’s me, your brother.” Emotion bubbles to the surface when he doesn’t answer.

He blinks slowly.

If he had a brain injury or experiences some type of amnesia, I’m guessing there’s a way to do this that doesn’t involve being in the middle of a food fight, but I need my brother right now. Likely, he needs me.

“Remember camping with Mom and Dad? That eagle would always fly overhead in the morning. You’d always talk about joining the Air Force—the logo for that branch of service has an eagle on it. Well, you served bravely, heroically. Then you went missing. We thought—” It feels like I’m breathing through a straw.

I can’t help it, I pull Bran in for a hug. Mom is going to be beside herself. Sonny gets to have an uncle.

“Bran,” I whisper. “If you’re in there. I need you right now, buddy. I don’t know how to do this.”

The metal of his dog tags that I’ve worn all this time press against my chest and I pull them out. “These are yours.”

He takes them in his hands and turns them over a few times. “Branson Adams,” he reads.

My eyes fill, hearing his voice. Mine shakes when I say, “That’s you. Branson Adams.” As soon as the words are out of my mouth, I fear he’s

going to ask me who I am.

But a piece of cake with blue frosting lands at our feet. We both laugh. Another comes and then another. I pull him toward a table to take cover.

There, I find Everly and a bowl of mashed potatoes that she hurls with a spoon like a mini catapult.

“It’s war.” Then her face pinches. “Sorry. I didn’t mean—”

“It’s okay. At least he’s here and not wherever he was. If the most danger he has to face today is getting beaned off the head with a, well, a string bean,” I hold one up, “I think we can live with that.”

A large figure in a black suit and gray hair jumps behind the table with us. “Hey, Grey. Good job completing the Blancbourg training. Sorry, I had to do that to you, but next time think twice about going along with those guys and their pranks.” Coach Hammer jumps to his feet and chucks shrimp rapid-fire.

“I will, sir. But—”

He drops to a crouch again. “I know I don’t have to worry about you. You’re the most strait-laced player on the team.”

My mouth works but no words come out.

“I hope everyone learned their lesson and look forward to only seeing you guys in the news when you’ve done a good deed. Although, did you hear about the commissioner?”

I grunt. “Talked to him earlier.”

“I imagine you’ve been up there at that cabin of yours, living the good life.” The coach chuckles and chucks the rest of the shellfish before taking cover once more.

“Coach, doesn’t this seem a little—?”

He waves dismissively. “With you boys all passing the Blancbourg program with flying colors, we couldn’t let anyone think the Bruisers lost their mojo.”

“Am I in an alternate reality?” But my surroundings are in focus. My pulse is steady.

“Nope, just bring me to the Super Bowl one more time then we’ll celebrate your retirement.” He winks and then does a somersault dive to take cover behind the next overturned table.

Meanwhile, Everly and my brother tag team tossing dinner rolls, alternately popping up like a pair of whack-a-moles—that was our favorite game when the fair came to town when we were kids.

The food fight continues until the people who didn't want to be part of it escape, my teammates sneak off, likely so they don't get in trouble, and only a giant mess remains.

Leaving Everly, my brother, and me. The two of them sit on the floor next to a couple of toppled chairs.

The woman with her childlike innocence, cheerful spirit, and sunny smile breathed new life into me. She brought my brother back. Perhaps miracles do happen. I take a moment to thank God for this blessing before I straighten a path as I make my way toward them, brushing aside discarded napkins, tables on their sides, and flowers spilling out of vases.

"What a night," I say, joining them on the floor, which is a place my brother never would've sat. It was beneath him, literally, but he was also a man with wings—a pilot, always gazing upward and conducting himself in faith.

In the quiet, only broken by the soft exchange between my wife and brother, I add a prayer to my words of gratitude.

Everly smiles as I approach. It's nighttime and the lights in the ballroom are dim, but the sun may as well be shining. With Everly, I know that everything will be okay. "Grey, there you are."

"Grey?" Bran asks.

"Yeah, Greyson, your brother."

I'll never forget this moment because time stops as Bran's face brightens. I can't explain it any other way than whatever was happening before or whatever is to come doesn't matter because Bran lifts his lips with the same lopsided grin I have, that our father had.

"My brother," he repeats.

"Yes. I'm your brother. You're a pilot, Ingrid and Pierce's son, baseball fan, and uncle, missing in action for far too long."

He looks down at himself. "And apparently a fan of Bermuda shirts and flip flops."

"Good look, by the way," I tease.

Everly's eyes bounce between us as if she also recognizes what's slowly happening.

Bran snaps his fingers. "Princess Papaya. Now I remember. We saw her show and I walked in on her serenading you once."

I shake my head. "No, nope. We do not need that reminder."

Everly laughs. "Can't say that I'm unfamiliar with her song and dance.

She used the same move on my ex-fiancé.”

“I heard her singing and somehow knew she’d bring me home,” Bran says softly as though he’s slowly making connections.

“We’re not home yet.”

With surprising strength, considering what he’s been through, vagabonding after Princess, Bran clobbers me with a hug.

“Yes, I am, Grey. I am home.”

Thankfully, it’s only the three of us, but we’re all in tears.

It’s a family hug and the only people missing are Mom and Sonny.

When we part, I wipe my eyes and say, “And don’t you dare tell anyone. I have to uphold my reputation as being the toughest guy on the team for one more season.”

“Did you say one more?” Everly whispers.

“Just one more,” I reply.

“Are you sure?”

“I still have a few plays to make, but yeah. I want you and Sonny to see me win the Super Bowl.

She waggles her eyebrows and makes a playful growl.





# EVERLY



Grey, Bran, and I spend a good portion of the night cleaning up the ballroom. Doing something mindless like cleaning seems like a good choice to help ease Bran back into his memories as he and Grey pick up and leave off conversation.

It's nearly sunup when we leave. We all sleep until noon before putting in a call to Bran's last known commanding officer.

We arrange to bring him to Walter Reed where he'll have medical and psych evaluations along with care before he's cleared to return to civilian life, if he wants to. As I pack up my things in the hotel, my diary peeks out of my bag. "I could really go for some cookie dough right now."

"How about cookie dough ice cream?" Grey asks.

I tilt my head. "That could work."

Before I zip my bag, I leaf through the recent entries, never expecting that when I drew the Viking on my flight to Concordia—who I wanted to ride in and save me from Manimal—would be the one to rescue me from Todd. I turn the page to the doodle I'd made of him before his makeover and couldn't have dreamed that I'd fall in love with my husband.

I send up a prayer of thanks to God who guided me through the tumult, uncertainty, and sadness of the last months and led me to Grey.

My husband pops his head out of the bathroom on a billow of steam. "Your phone is beeping."

"For the record, I blocked Todd's number." Looking back, something kept me from doing that and I'm thankful, otherwise, I might not have been able to connect with Princess who led Bran back to us.

She's already shipped out, in her own little version of La La Land where

she's at the center of it all. I can't fathom why she wouldn't want to spend every waking moment with Sonny, even the sticky ones, but I'm not going to complain because I get to be his Mamma.

"Buttercup?" Grey says, holding my phone. "I think you'll want to get this."

I brace myself for Cateline to give me an earful about Blancbourg's reputation. Then again, I already gave my notice and she partook in the food fight. Wolf even said something about it reminding him of their engagement party. I didn't ask for details, but the timeline would be worth noting if she has anything to say about my manners.

Instead, Ice King's name scrolls across my phone screen with an incoming call. I answer.

Skipping pleasantries, he says, "I put my best people on suppressing the events of last night. It's better that we keep this relatively quiet."

It takes me a moment to move past him wanting to save face because, once again, I did something to embarrass him, when I realize it was my father who punched Todd in the face.

"I have my lawyers on it. But I want to discuss your little episode."

I'm practically shaking. After all, my father is the king of intimidation. "Throwing doughnuts at people?"

"No, getting married and not telling me."

"Considering you didn't try to reach me after I didn't show up at my wedding, I figured you didn't care about my married life."

"Of course, I cared. Who do you think I am, the Ice King?"

"Well..."

Silence spreads between us and then we both laugh.

"I suppose I have some work to do, huh?" he says.

"If by work you mean thawing out and having a relationship with me and your grandson, then yeah."

"You have a—?" My father sputters.

I explain about Sonny

"I wish you'd told me about Todd."

"I could count on two hands the number of words we'd exchange in any given week. You weren't much of a talker."

In the background, Grey grunts.

"Dad, I was stuck. You'd pressured me to be with Todd and I wanted to please you. But then I found him with Princess well before the wedding day."

“Is that really her name?”

“Unfortunately, yes. But I didn’t know what to do, so I cried in the broom closet during the wedding march.”

Telling my father this is a risk. Personal or emotional matters were never something I discussed with him. The Ice King moniker is fitting for many reasons.

“Everly, don’t be stupid. Unless you were actually glued to the ground, you were not stuck. You were not *literally* stuck. No, you were afraid to make a choice because you feared it would be the wrong one.” He cuts right to the heart of the matter.

I could always trust my father to be clear and to the point.

“Were you alive? Were you breathing? Were you mobile, as in did you have the use of your limbs?” He doesn’t wait for me to answer. “Yes, you did. You could have walked up to me and told me instead of running away.”

“Dad, there were plenty of times when I did that and you hardly acknowledged me.”

“You were a kid and I was a single Dad—”

“Sounds to me like you were stuck,” I say.

He grunts. “I suppose you’re right. But in the future, anytime you feel stuck, ask yourself, what would I do?”

“You’d laugh fear in the face.”

“No, Everly. I wouldn’t. I got to where I am because every time I’ve been afraid, I bring it along with me. Fear wants to stop me, but no, it has to come along for the ride. Fear has the audacity to show up in my life?” My father laughs darkly. “Then fear is going to be with me when we deal with the consequences—good or bad. When the outcome is good, well, then fear learns to trust that I know what I’m doing. When the consequences are not so favorable, fear runs the other way, afraid of me, and the wrath of the Ice King.”

I can’t help myself and laugh. “You know that’s what people call you?”

“Oh, yes, and much worse. But they do that because they’re afraid of strength and leadership, of a man who is unafraid of success or failure.” It’s true, Dreven Lefevre is a force to be reckoned with...and I guess, at least in part, I got my ability to carry on from him.

My eyes grow damp. “What about me?”

“Everly Edith Lefevre-Adams, you are my daughter. You are strong.”

“I’m not. You pushed me and pressured me and left me.” The line is quiet

for so long that I think he's hung up. "Hello?"

"I'm here. The apology is coming." He draws a deep breath. "I'm sorry, Everly. I'm sorry for not being a better father. The truth is, there was one thing I feared. I was scared of you. Of messing you up and having you turn out like me. So it seemed easier to distance myself."

"I wouldn't say you messed me up, but you hurt me, that's for sure." My father's words are good to hear, warming me through, but confessing to the Ice King the way I felt also made me feel empowered and strong. The woman he inadvertently raised me to be.

We say goodbye for now and arrange to get together soon.

Grey crosses the room and wraps me in a hug. "I take it that went okay?"

"More than okay," I say, able to take my first deep breath since the ball.



We spend the rest of the week helping Bran sort through matters with the military completing paperwork, and helping him record his memories as they return. With each passing day, he regains more of them, however, he can't go back as far as what caused him to lose it to begin with. That's still murky and probably something best dealt with by a professional.

But soon, we head back to the Upper Peninsula where our favorite little man is happy to see us. We spend the summer with Sonny, in the garden, and swimming in the lake. We even invite my father up for a visit. It's not far from his headquarters, though there's no telling which of his many houses he's using as a home base these days.

Because of his jet-setting ways, it comes as a shock when he makes sand castles with Sonny, picks blueberries, not caring when the juice stains his fingers, and reads him bedtime stories—in English.

Life is good.

The night before my dad leaves, Ingrid comes out to the island. We all pitch in and make a big barbecue dinner.

"Is your brother joining us?" my dad asks Grey.

He answers with a grunt.

I'm not sure what that means, but the other day, the three of them—my husband, father, and Bran—argued over Sonny's future and whether he'd be

a football player, hockey star turned metal tsar, or a military pilot.

Meanwhile, Ingrid and I debate whether everyone would be more comfortable inside or on the back deck. “Never thought we’d have such a big group up here again. It’s a lovely evening. I think I’ll enjoy dining alfresco.”

“Are you sure? The bugs might come out around dusk.”

She waves her hand. “I’ll light some citronella candles.”

I don’t argue because I’m lapping up these summer evenings on the lake, but don’t want my dad to complain about mosquitos. Then again, since coming up here, he’s been surprisingly relaxed.

“The sunset from here is spectacular. We’ll just have to pace ourselves because it won’t be for another hour or so,” Ingrid adds.

Ingrid takes steaks off the grill, and I bring out the cold salads and dinner rolls.”

“Shouldn’t we wait for Bran?” I ask. “Wait? Where is Grey?”

“What’s that?” Dad points to the sky as the golden hour paints the glassy lake with a warm glow.

Overhead, an airplane loops and swoops, emitting a puff of fluffy white clouds. From them, letters take shape.

Ingrid gets to her feet and I follow her to the deck rail. My father’s hand finds its way to my shoulder as we watch the airplane doing skywriting.

I see letters, but I can’t read the words.

“Oh, this is so romantic,” Ingrid says.

“Indeed,” Dad adds.

I gave him a side-eye. When did he ever think anything was romantic?

Ingrid beams. “And to think, it’s Pierce’s plane.”

“But what does that say?” I ask. To me, it looks like a bunch of random letters.

Ingrid says “*Gifte seg med meg igjen,*” I don’t understand for a long moment.

Then sounds take shape in my mind when she repeats the words followed by my name.

Sonny points at the sky, calling, “Onk, Onk, Onk!”

“Do you mean oink?” I ask, nuzzling him.

“Onk Bran. He’s my new best friend. He’s getting a puppy. We’re naming him Pupaya.”

“Papaya?” Ingrid asks.

“No, pup, like puppy,” Sonny says.

I laugh and then go quiet. “Wait. Sonny, how do you say ‘*Marry me again?*’” Word search answers shift into place. My breath catches in my throat. “I think—” My pulse races.

Ingrid and my dad exchange a smile as realization drops, but I can’t quite believe it.

“Are Grey and Bran up there?”

“Yep, in their father’s plane.”

“And that says *Gifte seg med meg igjen?* Please marry me again?”

The early evening sounds filtering from the nearby woods go quiet. The gentle lapping of the waves is silent. The world is still. All my overthinking, over caring, and over stressing dissolves. In its place is certainty.

Everything is frozen except me. My thoughts match my heart as I shoot out of my chair and rush toward the water’s edge where the seaplane lands.

Grey picks me up and spins me around.

He takes my hand and with his other, he points to the sky. “That’s for you. Will you marry me, again, Everly?” He produces an engagement ring with a medium-sized diamond—not too flashy, but just the right amount of sparkle.

“Yes, yes I will.” There is no hesitation. No doubt. No fear.

“Remember that first day at Blancbourg when I said there were three things that you needed to know about me? The third thing is that I love you, Everly.”

“I love you too,” I say.

“We did things a little out of order, but I want to spoil you. For starters, we have a few additional guests arriving—Heidi, some of your friends from college, and a few others. We’ll eat dinner, have chocolate cake from Concordia and cookie dough ice cream for dessert, and then we’ll dance, celebrate, and do the things people do when they get married, even though we already are.

“Don’t forget the dress,” Ingrid says. “The PS ladies and I picked it out. They’ll be along too.”

“Is this our wedding reception?” I ask, breathy with shock.

“Since we’re technically already married, yes.” Grey beams.

“And then there’s the honeymoon,” Dad says.

I turn back to Grey, my eyes wide, my heart full of love and wonder. They must have all worked together to make everything happen.

Grey says, “As for our honeymoon, we’re going island hopping.”

“As long as we don’t make a pit stop to see Princess Papaya, I’m good.”

“Nope. We’re going to chase sunsets because I want to have many, many more with you,” Grey says, wrapping his arms around me from behind and kissing me. “I picked the setting sun because I know you like to sleep in.” He winks.

“I’d get up to watch the sunrise with you anytime.” I lift onto my toes, twist, and kiss him on the lips.

“I’ll take you up on that, Buttercup,” he says.

“Greyson, you’re the best decision I ever made.”

Sonny scrambles toward us and we have a family hug as the sun sets.

Grey whispers, “This is the beginning of my happily Everly after.”

## EPILOGUE



Dear Diary,

Remember the kissituation I mentioned? Well, you'll be pleased to know that it was resolved. Or I should say it has evolved into a once-a-day dose. Er, more like a dozen times a day. Okay, lots of times. All the time. Grey and I are head over heels for each other. Who would've thought I'd reunite with my marriage of convenience husband, we'd fall in love, and have a family?

Okay, a quick update while the Christmas cookies finish baking and Sonny paints his dad a picture with blue paint that we'll wrap and put under the tree.

Even though it's a little later in life than I'd have liked, my father and I finally have a relationship. We talk at least once a week on the phone. He'll be up here to celebrate Christmas with us too.

He's gone to church with Ingrid a few times. The P.S. Ladies mentioned he'd joined them for cherry pie not long ago.

As for Todd and Princess, I haven't even bothered to try to stalk them on social media. But I hope they get their happily ever after.

Bran is in surprisingly good physical health, considering everything he went through—a plane crash, hiding out on a freighter across the Indian Ocean to the Caribbean where he wandered for a while until he heard the familiar Princess Papaya song. He was never in enemy hands, but had hit his head incredibly hard and suffered the trauma of a plane crash. But the good news is, his memory is recovering and he's medically retiring from the military with plans to start a blueberry farm on the island.



Sonny is a little angel boy—except I’ve learned he has a rascally streak like his father. But he’s teaching me Norwegian and the joys of watching him grow. Truly, it’s a blessing to be on this adventure with my family.

Speaking of...the blue painting is significant. Wink, wink. Grey doesn’t know it yet, but we’re adding to our family and I can’t wait for him to find out on Christmas. After Sonny finishes his painting, I’m pasting the first sonogram to the front and framing it. Yep, little boy number two is due next spring.

And let me tell ya, the cookie dough cravings have been off the charts.

Well, that’s all for now. I can say that the Viking rode in and valiantly saved me...and I’m pretty sure I helped him too.

Love,  
Everly

P.S. My thankful three:

1. For my courage and health
2. The Viking and his kisses (and about a millionty other things)
3. Sonny and our family

**Looking for more from the Bruisers? Read the first chapter from Rylen and Rachel’s Christmas romance:**

## **Chapter 1: Rachel**

I don’t want to be *that girl*, but in about another thirty seconds, I’m totally going to be that girl.

Typically, I’m very rational, confident, patient, and friendly enough. Some people say I have a certain resting face that’s intimidating, but usually, I’m deep in thought. But I’m not *that girl*, not the mean one, the snobby one, or the selfish one.

I’m not shy. I prefer to think of myself as thoughtful, some might say

serious.

However, on days when I wake up with a smile, the captain on my boat will say something like, *Daily forecast: Really Rachel*. As in today is going to be a good day.

But today is not that day.

Or rather, this evening is not. I'm seated at a long dining room table with Tobias Flick to my right. Across from me, his older sister, Ursula, with purple hair and a face tattoo, scrolls her phone. She and her husband, the mouth breather with glassy eyes, appear to only be here for the free dinner. She chews with her mouth open and stares daggers at me like I'm not good enough for her brother. Or she might remember me from high school. I'm trying not to talk to her in case she gets it in her mind to shank me if I excuse myself to use the ladies' room. At Arapahoe High School, rumors abounded that she stabbed Mrs. Caruso in the hand with a box cutter because she wouldn't allow Ursula to keep her pet rat in the classroom.

Mr. Flick vacuums up his liver and onions like he's trying to scrub clean a crime scene before the realtor shows up to take photos for a new listing, obviously so no one thinks it's being haunted by the victim.

Mrs. Flick is the original Queen Bee on the social scene, though these days, she's more likely to show up at the lip injection clinic than be the popular girl section in the lunch room. I'm not entirely sure, but I wouldn't doubt that Tobias gets manjections too.

This all begs the question. What am I doing here?

It's a weird story.

Anyway, as Tobias elbows me and nudges his head toward his parents, I make a quick calculation of my current options.

1. I can continue to go along with this charade.
2. I can come clean and tell the Flicks the truth.
3. I can cut my losses and run. I have a thesis with my name on it and it's not going to write itself.

However, patiently enduring this ordeal is what I signed up to do. Living expenses while I write said thesis won't pay themselves either.

"Rachel, tell us what you do again. You work on a boat, collecting shrimp?" Mrs. Flick laughs like I'm some hillbilly creature from Colorado that washed up onshore only to be rescued by their son.

No, the Flicks with their gold painted wood paneling, the gaudy giant gold-plated pig set prominently on a shelf in the room along with a glass case stuffed with what appears to be a collection of gold designer shoes washed up in a pirate wreck. In the corner of the dining room is a six-foot-tall high heel that matches one pair in the case. If you're wondering, they have at least six dogs and twice as many cats. The former all wear clothing and some of the latter have dyed fur. It's quite the menagerie.

Also, it's worth noting that Ursula wears six-inch platform Crocs covered with charms and Mrs. Flick has a ring on every single one of her fingers. Some even host up to three.

Five years ago, they won the lottery, moved from our home state of Colorado to "paradise" aka Pensacola, and now think they're royalty. Mrs. Flick legally changed her first name to *Lady*, so she can go as Lady Flick. No kidding.

Around a mouthful, Mr. Flick says, "Shrimps good eatin' if you ask me."

"To answer your question, I work with dinoflagellate, which is a component of plankton. We're studying what marine species use them for defensive bioluminescence." I go on to bore them with the subject of the most recent study in my marine science graduate program. I am so close to becoming Dr. Moore, I can almost taste it.

Actually, all I can taste is the iron-rich flavor of blood in my mouth from the liver and onions. Only, it's like I'm the chum and Mrs. Flick and her daughter are the circling predators.

Mr. Flick orders his son-in-law, who looks like he spends more time underground than in the light of day, to pass the potatoes. Then he eats them right out of the serving dish.

I press my lips together and try not to throw up in my mouth—there's no telling where else his fork has been.

"Does collecting shrimp pay well?" Mrs. Flick asks.

"I'm a graduate student, so—" Before I can explain that it does not indeed pay well, Ursula, Tobias's sister, interrupts. Did I mention that's her actual name, and she bears an uncanny resemblance to the sea witch from *The Little Mermaid*? True story.

"Are you going home for Christmas?" she asks.

"Unfortunately, I have to be back on the boat, so—"

"I hear the big baller from Blizzard Bluff is making a homecoming." Ursula flutters her lashes.

Tobias throws a string bean at her. “If you mean Rylen Murphy from the Boston Bruisers, he wouldn’t even look your way, *Ugula*.”

She lobs an asparagus spear at her brother like a javelin. “Of course, that’s who I mean, and now that I’m *someone*—” By someone, she’s the host on a YouTube channel, starring, you guessed it, herself. She boasts half a million subscribers, so I guess doing dumb things online for likes is popular—no shade to people with face tattoos, but that’s forever, folks.

At the mention of my secret high school sweetheart, I can’t help but wonder if Ursula somehow knows, and brace myself for nosy questions. Then again, he ditched me, so there’s not much to say. Also, we did kiss at graduation, so perhaps that was us officially going public after years of being secret sweat hearts on the sly.

But more concerning is the fact that she’s suggesting interest in him, considering she’s married and her husband sits beside her, playing a game on his phone. When he scores, the sound of an explosion is at odds with the tinny tune of a pop song blaring from Ursula’s device.

Also of note is that I’m here under the pretense that I’m married to her brother, so the suggestion that I’d pursue another guy is wildly inappropriate. At least in the non-clown world, which is the opposite of this.

I walked under the big top without even realizing it, literally. Tobias gave me a tour earlier and they have a carousel in the game room, along with those grubby kiddie rides that used to be outside the supermarket. With the small fee of twenty-five cents, kids could rock back and forth, herky-jerky to a sad tune through a garbled speaker.

Mouth suddenly dry at the mention of Rylen, I take a sip of the electric yellow “refreshing beverage” as Lady Flick referred to it at my place setting. My only hope is it’s not radioactive. That would explain a lot.

Ursula’s phone pings, distracting her. And yes, Mr. Flick is still consuming food in alarming quantities. Meanwhile, Mrs. Flick hasn’t touched her plate.

“Have you set a date?” she asks.

I nearly sputter my refreshing beverage all over her face. “Have I what?”

“Set a date. I want to be intimately involved in all the wedding plans from start to finish. Ursula and Rubio eloped in Puerto Escondido, Mexico, and I missed out. You only get one daughter.”

I lift my eyebrows because I’m not sure how that works, but far be it from me to try to make sense of this, especially why I’m here. Tobias originally

said to pretend we're already married and now it sounds like there's a wedding to be planned. I give him a solid side-eye. *It's one for the history books, people!*

"Um, Mom—" His attempt to correct her is weak.

We're supposed to be fake married, meaning I could also get a fake divorce. Nowhere in our negotiations did I sign up to go along with fake wedding planning with Mom-zilla."

"If you haven't selected a date yet, things can change," Mrs. Flick purrs as if changing plans.

I nod because yes, I would like that very much. I would like things to change STAT, as in I'd like to get out of here and forget I ever agreed to this nonsense.

Mrs. Flick clicks her tongue. "In fact, Tobias, have you heard from Chardonni lately?"

At the risk of choking again, my side eye goes deep. Chardonni? Does she mean Chardonnay? Who is Chardonnay? Is Tobias cheating on me? Never mind. I don't want to know. This isn't real, anyway.

"Mom, I've told you a hundred times. It's over between us. For one, she changed her name to Chandi—"

"Candi?"

"Candy? I'd like some of those orange marshmallow peanuts," Mr. Flick says.

"I thought her name was Brandi," Ursula says, coming up from her phone hole at the merest whiff of gossip.

"Chandi ran off with Armanji, an up-and-coming street performer." Tobias sags in his seat like he's genuinely disappointed in losing whatever-her-name is.

"I heard she's in Texas with the DJ—" She elbows Rubio. "What was his name? The guy you saw on social media that looked like—"

I can't keep up. It's a miracle I've lasted this long. Oh, the things people will do for money, and by people, I mean me.

"Tobias, I, for one, think you could do better than a fisherman, shrimp catcher, or whatever it is you do." Mrs. Flick actually lifts her nose in the air like a snooty snob.

For the third time in the space of three minutes, I almost gag on my food because there is a bat in the cave. Alert, there is a nose goblin in the vicinity.

See? I'm not serious all the time, but that is a serious booger. Far be it

from me to do a sister a solid and tell her if being a marine biologist is beneath her esteemed *Lady* status.

“Mom,” Tobias scolds in a don’t-be-rude tone.

Rude? My friend—or Arapahoe Regional High School resident Loki who suckered me into this shindig—that ship has long since sailed.

“I adored Chardonnai. We would go shopping together and—” Lady Flick outlines all the ways in which she prefers Tobias’s former girlfriend over yours truly, his very, very fake and getting faker by the moment *something*—I didn’t quite get the story straight before I agreed to be his fake dinner guest. Originally, I thought I was his fake wife, hence the rings on my finger.

“I want dessert,” Mr. Flick barks, literally pounding the table with his fists, utensils in hand.

“I want a billion dollars,” Ursula says as if it, along with waitstaff, will appear in the room upon their utterance.

“I want to collect the Shadow Onyx Glyph so I can defeat Lord Valquaith the Destroyer, but passing this level is—” Rubio groans. Digital beeping plays from his phone and I wonder if he was raised by humans or a robot.

Mrs. Flick sniffs the air as if those demands are sillier than whatever she’s going to say. “I want my son to marry Chardonnai, not you.” Her serpentine gaze lands on me.

I want to be on the boat, staring into the expanse of the vast ocean and knitting the socks I make every year for Christmas. Instead, I got suckered into this shindig.

Notably, Tobias remains silent. Ironic, since he had something to say about every girl on the cross-country team in high school. The kid was a chameleon, one day bringing us doughnuts and the next, wrangling us into a ringing-and-running prank.

However, I am done here. It’s time to be *that girl*.

With a tight smile, I push out from my chair, set my napkin at my place setting, and consider telling them all what I really think. Instead, I say, “Well, folks, it’s been lovely. I really must be on my way. Thank you for your hospitality. The boat won’t wait for me and it’ll be a few months before I return, so do get those wedding plans under way. Ta ta.”

I hurry toward the door, thrilled they’re not the kind of well-mannered people who would show me out.

A Christmas jingle filters from behind me and I realize I left my phone on the sideboard. If it weren’t my lifeline to civilization when I’m out at sea and

I could afford a replacement, I'd cut my losses.

Going to retrieve it, I find Tobias arguing with his mother about our so-called wedding, as if he realized that he dropped the ball on our little act.

"Forgot my phone." I pluck it from the table in the corner.

Tobias scrambles to his feet and rushes after me as I speed walk toward the door.

"No need to apologize. But I really must be going."

"I wasn't going to apologize. But I thought we had something special."

"Your mother thinks you and Chardonnay have a love connection, so perhaps pursue her for your future bride."

"No, she only loved me for my money and good looks."

Standing in the foyer, I squint, wondering what exactly she sees in Tobias.

"I'd take her back, but I can't bring her on shopping sprees like I used to."

"And that's what bothers you?" I mutter.

He gives his head a little shake. "Rachel, I've known since high school that you and I are meant to be."

"Do you mean you realized I was leaving and that means your mother is going to continue to pressure you to get married, so you want me to stick around to deflect her nagging?"

"Yes, no. It's just that, you're so—"

My phone jingles again. With Christmas less than a month away, I thought it would be fun to change up my ringtone. But I really don't want to associate "I'll be Home for Christmas" with this particular household.

With a semester to go before I graduate, I can't take time off, which means I'll be working through the holidays. On the upside, I'll be meeting Mom in the Caribbean when the winter gets extra stark come late January and I have a week-long break.

"I want the rings back." Tobias holds out his hand, palm flat.

"Of course." I tug on the gaudy engagement and wedding band pair, but they don't budge.

He stares at me expectantly.

The heat and the salty liver and onions Mrs. Flick served must've caused my fingers to swell. "Why'd you give me the rings if your mom thought we hadn't yet gotten married?"

"I had the rings from before."

“Chardonnay?”

He hangs his head. For half a second I forget about what a jerk he was in high school and feel bad for him, especially having grown up with that family. For the other half of the second, I panic because the rings will not come off my finger.

“Um, can I mail it to you?” My phone jingles repeatedly, upping the stress factor.

“Rachel, you can keep the money for doing me this favor, but those rings are special. I even have the matching wedding band.” He flashes his pudgy fingers.

“I understand, but it’s hot out and my fingers swell from humidity and salt, so—” Again, my phone rings, this time with a call from my mom’s best friend, Bea.

My panic doubles as I step outside, edging slowly away.

I could describe Tobias Flick as a Loki-like character. A trickster, but not in a good-humored way like a pesky brother—not that I have one. More like he’d just as soon shove me in the fountain with a horse in a rearing-up position, but instead of a regular head, it has a giant snail on its shoulders with a googly-eyed face and steal my purse as chop off my finger to get the rings back. Okay, maybe that’s extreme, but so is the extremely bizarre fountain, befitting the Flicks. As my phone continues to interrupt and his stare turns into a glare, my mind melts down.

I give my device a wiggle and glance at the number scrolling across the screen. “I should take this. Someone with our old area code really wants to get ahold of me. I’ll get you the rings back.” With a wave to Tobias, I hurry down the front path.

If this were a Hallmark movie, it would’ve been the perfect setup for a meet-cute, but rapidly devolved into more of a meet-catastrophe.

In addition to Rylen, Tobias is another ghost from my past that I’m all too happy to leave behind when I get back on the boat. Despite eight years and a lottery windfall, Tobias hasn’t changed much. I doubt anyone else from Blizzard Bluff has either.

And that’s the last place I plan to go this year.

Good riddance.

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# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My thankful three:

You for reading, reviewing, and sharing my books!

Cookie dough. I'm not going to say a massive amount was consumed during the writing of this book, but I'm not going to say I stuck with Grey's fresh from the garden diet either.

For all the individuals and families who walk through health issues and difficult situations, and offer loving support even in the face of uncertainty and fear. You're heroes for journeying together no matter the outcome.



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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.

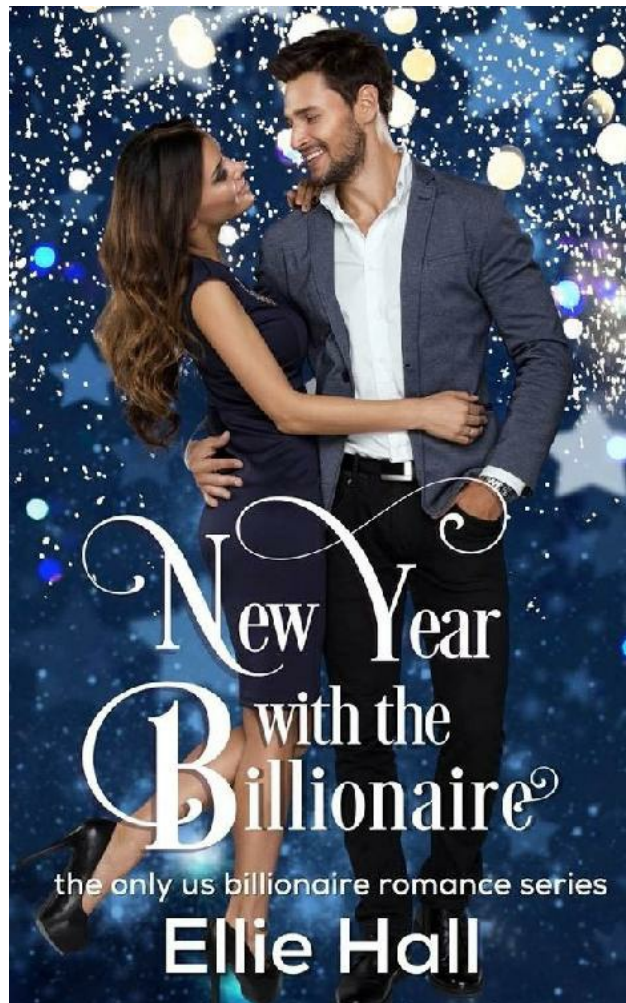


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