

a sweet romantic comedy

# BUCKET LISTS

&

# Midnight Kisses



MARIE LANDRY

# **BUCKET LISTS & MIDNIGHT KISSES**

by Marie Landry

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## **ALSO BY MARIE LANDRY**

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\*Take Them by Storm (Angel Island #3)

\*Only You

\*Maybe You

\*Hung Up on You

\*A Very Perry Christmas

\*A Very Perry Wedding

\*Escaping Christmas

\*Matchmaking & Mixtapes

\*Reunions & Ruses

\*Do-Overs & Mixed Signals

**Coming Autumn 2023:**

\*Silver Bells & Serendipity

## **DEDICATION**

For anyone who has ever been told they're too soft, too sensitive, or feel too much. As Fergus would say, your softness is your superpower. Remember that. Embrace it. Don't let the world make you hard.

And for Mum. Always.

## CONTENT GUIDANCE

While *Bucket Lists & Midnight Kisses* is mostly a lighthearted, fun romance, it does deal with some heavy topics that might be sensitive to some readers.

Louisa's mother died when she was a teenager, and her father became fiercely overprotective. His attempts to keep Louisa safe from harm caused her to develop severe anxiety that eventually developed into agoraphobia. Through therapy, Louisa is managing her anxiety, but still deals with some, particularly of the social variety. Serious anxiety is something I've experienced myself, so I tried to handle these topics with as much care and compassion as possible.

There are also mentions of other deaths within both Louisa's and Fergus's families, and the grief they still experience.

This book also contains mild swearing and alcohol consumption.

## CHAPTER ONE ~ LOUISA

“And how does that make you *feel*, Louisa?”

After a decade and a half of therapy, I’ve come to expect this question. I’ve also come to hate it in a way; if I knew the answer, would I have scheduled an emergency Zoom therapy session that’s costing more than usual because it’s Christmas Eve?

I suck in a deep breath and let it out slowly. How does it make me feel that my best friend is leaving tomorrow to spend a week and a half in London with her new boyfriend? Hollie will be gone for Christmas and New Year’s Eve, which also happens to be my thirty-fifth birthday. Even though we had an impromptu early Christmas celebration with our other best friends and their boyfriends, it’s not quite the same. We’ve known each other our entire lives and have always seen each other at Christmas.

“I feel...conflicted,” I say finally. “One part silly because we’re adults and it’s unrealistic to expect to always be together for holidays. One part sad because so much has changed recently and this is one more thing. One part guilty for feeling sad. And one part—I’d like to think the *biggest* part—happy because my friends are in love and they deserve that.”

“They do, yes,” Dr. Woo says. “And, may I remind you, *you* deserve happiness too. The conflicted feelings are natural; you’ve always struggled with change, and you’ve experienced a lot of it over the last several months. You’ve watched your three closest friends pair off and fall in love. Now this.”

“I really am happy for them, though,” I say quickly.

Dr. Woo smiles gently. “Of course you are, but it’s perfectly normal for you to have mixed feelings underneath. Your feelings are valid, Louisa.”

Dr. Woo is sitting in what I assume is her home office. This is the first time I’ve ever seen her with her hair down; it’s usually in a neat chignon or braid, but tonight it cascades over her shoulders in glossy, dark waves. She’s been my therapist since I was twenty. I should have started seeing someone six years earlier when my mom died, but my dad wouldn’t hear of it. He wouldn’t hear of a lot of things after my mom died. He pulled me out of classes to homeschool me for my last two years of high school. He would only let me go out with my three best friends and their families. Even then, I had a strict curfew and he had to know where I was at all times and how to reach me. He became afraid of the outside world and all its many perils and, as a result, so did I.

“How do you feel you’re coping with everything?” Dr. Woo asks.

“Okay, I think?” It comes out sounding like a question. I try again. “I’m coping well. I’ve been working, sleeping and eating well, plus exercising daily.”

“Good, good.” Dr. Woo nods approvingly. “Keep that up. With the holidays looking different for you this year, I want you to be sure you don’t shut yourself away or cut yourself off from your friends. It would be easy to tell yourself that Evie and Stella are too busy with their new partners, but they love you and want to spend time with you. They’re there if you feel unsteady or need someone to lean on. Remember that. Don’t let the gremlins in your head tell you otherwise.”

I laugh under my breath. When I started therapy all those years ago, I referred to my intrusive thoughts as gremlins. The negative self-talk could take over so easily and was tricky, wily, and sometimes downright nasty. Dr. Woo eventually picked up the term herself, and that was when I knew I’d made the right decision to start therapy and stick with it, even though it was painful. These days, I only make appointments



as needed, and Dr. Woo is willing to fit me in for emergencies, like today.

“I promise not to listen to them,” I tell her.

“Good.” I can’t see what she’s doing, but I hear pages rustling and the tapping of a pen on a hard surface. “How are things with Fergus?”

My cheeks heat at the mention of my friend-turned-crush. He was friends with Hollie first, and she invited him to Thanksgiving at Evie’s parents’ place in October. He became part of our expanding friend group after that night, and we’ve spent a lot of time together since. I’m normally painfully shy and nervous around men—I tend to either clam up or babble, all while sweating and experiencing a non-stop internal diatribe from the gremlins—but it was different with Fergus from that first night. There was something about him that put me at ease, even while butterflies used my stomach and esophagus as a playground.

“Nothing has changed, if that’s what you’re asking,” I say. “He’s been good to me and *for* me. Just like my other friends.”

Dr. Woo makes a hum of acknowledgment. “And you’re still certain he doesn’t return your romantic feelings?”

I swallow a sigh. “I’m sure. He would have said something by now or made a move.” As much as I wish the sexy Scotsman saw me as something other than a friend, it’s clear he doesn’t, despite what my friends keep saying. It’s fine, though; Fergus is kind and thoughtful, attentive and sweet. Not only do I feel at ease around him, I also feel more confident, like I’m able to do more of the things that once frightened me. He’s aware of my anxiety and my limitations, and he’s been patient and encouraging, which isn’t something I can say about everyone that’s come in and out of my life over the years.

After a few more minutes, Dr. Woo and I wrap up our session. We wish each other happy holidays, and I thank her profusely for seeing me on such short notice.

“I’d like you to make another appointment in the new year, preferably an in-person one,” she says. “A follow-up to see how you fared over the holidays.” She shifts in her chair, and I think she’s going to say goodbye and disconnect, but she hesitates. “I want you to remember how strong you are, Louisa. How far you’ve come. I can see a change in you since our last meeting, and I’m proud of the work you’ve done and the ways you’ve continued to step outside your comfort zone and take chances. I’d like for you to keep that in mind over the next week as your birthday and the new year approach, and find new ways to continue your growth. Spend some time with the people you love, but try to do something unexpected too, okay? I believe in you.”

I’m teary eyed as I thank her. She wishes me a happy early birthday, and we disconnect.

*Do something unexpected.* For some reason, my mind goes straight to Fergus. I’ve toyed with the idea of asking him out, but the very thought of it makes my stomach hurt and my throat close up. If he said no, I’d be mortified, and I’m not sure I could handle the disappointment and inevitable awkwardness that would likely affect our friendship. I’ve only known Fergus for a couple of months, but he’s a bright spot in my life, and I’ve come to rely on him.

I get up from the couch and pace around the living room. When my phone pings, I assume it’s Hollie with more instructions for keeping an eye on her house while she’s away with Spencer. My heart gives a strange little squeeze when I see the text notification is from Fergus.

*Lulu, are you busy right now? Can I come over for a few minutes?*

As I type out my response—*Sure, come on over*—I can’t help wondering if this is a sign from the universe, a nudge to take action. I *have* been known to hesitate, after all. With my birthday only a week away, I’m going to need to muster every last ounce of courage if I want to accomplish Dr. Woo’s suggestion of doing something unexpected.



## CHAPTER TWO ~ FERGUS

I pull into the tiny parking lot behind the row of shops where Louisa's apartment is. From here, I can see the lights on in the living room of her apartment directly above *Stitched With Love*. The string of colorful lights I hung around her windows earlier this month are illuminated, and I can just make out the glow of her small Christmas tree inside. I wonder if she switched them on for my benefit when I asked to come over, since I doubt she's feeling all that festive tonight.

At our group Christmas celebration two days ago, I kept a close eye on Louisa and, despite her attempts to hide it, I could see the lingering sadness in her eyes when she thought no one was paying attention. She's a creature of habit, our Louisa, and having her closest friend take off to London at the last minute must be throwing her for a loop.

With my recent purchases in hand, I make my way to the back door of the building. After Lulu buzzes me in, I pause and use the streaky window as a mirror to prepare my surprise before climbing the stairs to the second floor.

Louisa opens the door before I can knock. She stares at me for a beat, eyes wide, and then laughs so hard she has to use the door jam for support. It's the best sound I've heard all day, and the sight of her pink cheeks and sparkling eyes makes the itchy beard and fluffy red hat worth it.

"Well, hey there, Santa," she says. "You're a few hours early. Aren't you supposed to wait until after I go to bed?"

"Aye, normally." I step past her when she moves aside to let me in. "But I come bearing gifts in the form of festive food, and it would be a shame if you were asleep and couldn't enjoy them." I hold up the bakery bag stamped with the logo of our favorite café, *Cravings*.

Her eyes go wide once more as she plucks the bag from my fingers and peers inside. “Mince pies! How did you manage this? They’ve been sold out of them every single time I’ve been there this month.”

“Santa has his ways,” I say with an enigmatic smile, tapping the side of my nose the way I’ve seen my cousin Hugh do when he plays Santa. Louisa expressed her disappointment to me a week or so ago at her inability to find mince pies at any of the bakeries, cafés, or supermarkets in Bellevue. Since mince pies were always a holiday tradition back home in Scotland, I filed that wee tidbit away and kept an eye out during my travels around town. When I couldn’t find any, I beseeched Willow Stewart, the co-owner of Cravings, to make a special batch for Louisa, and she happily obliged. I picked them up half an hour ago after borrowing part of my cousin’s Santa suit.

“You are the absolute best,” Louisa says. “Will you come in and have one of these with me, or do you have to get back to your sleigh?”

“I’ve got plenty of time.” I resist the urge to say ‘I’m all yours’. I can imagine how she’d react: a pretty blush followed by a nervous giggle, with the wheels almost visibly turning in her mind as she comes up with a response she won’t say out loud.

“Great. Coffee? Tea? Hot chocolate? Whisky?” She smirks as she says the last one; when she found out about my fondness for a good Scottish whisky—or scotch as it’s called here—she bought a bottle to keep on hand.

“Tea with a splash of whisky would hit the spot.”

She tells me she’ll meet me in the living room in a minute, so I take my time shucking my boots, hanging up the red velvet Santa jacket and matching hat, and removing the big white beard. I may have only worn the get-up for a few minutes, but it was worth it to see the grin on Lulu’s face.

In the living room, I sit and admire the Christmas tree. It's small, only about four feet tall, and decorated with an assortment of colorful baubles, woodland creatures in wee scarves and hats, and lacy snowflakes. Before long, Louisa enters the room carrying a tray with a plate of tarts, two cups of tea, and the bottle of whisky.

"Did you know children in Scotland leave mince pies for Father Christmas instead of biscuits? And whisky is often customary in place of the milk you lot leave here in Canada and the States." I add a splash of whisky to my tea and hold up the bottle in offering.

"No, I didn't know that," she says, holding out her cup. "Just a tiny bit."

"A wee nip," I say. She grins and, even though she's looking at the cup rather than at me, the flash of her smile fills me with warmth. "So, I spoke to Spencer earlier and offered to drive him and Hollie to the airport tomorrow. They insisted they'd take the bus, but I said traveling on Christmas Day was bad enough, they could at least have a friend act as their personal chauffeur. Or *friends*, if you'd consider coming along for the ride."

Her eyebrows lift in surprise. "I'd love to. It'd be nice to have a couple extra hours with Hollie."

"That's what I thought. And we'd be back in time to catch the tail end of the Christmas party at Evie's parents' place."

"Wow, you've thought of everything."

I've certainly tried to. This week will likely be difficult for Louisa with Hollie gone, but I'm hoping she'll let me step in and help fill the void. The majority of the time we've spent together since October has been in a group setting, and I'm hoping this week will present opportunities for us to spend time alone.

For weeks, I've been biding my time for the right moment to tell Louisa how I feel about her. She's confessed her aversion to dating, her nervousness around most men, and

what she considers a general lack of experience in the romance department, so I don't want to frighten or overwhelm her. I *do* want her to see what I see when I look at her, though: an incredible woman who's intelligent, funny, sweet, and beautiful.

If I can do that, maybe Louisa will open up and admit what I've known for some time, which is that my feelings for her aren't one sided. I haven't missed the way she watches me or the longing in her eyes when she thinks I'm not paying attention. Nor have I missed the hushed conversations with her friends when I'm just out of earshot, where they shoot surreptitious glances in my direction. Subtlety is not one of Louisa's many charms, but to come right out and say what I'm feeling would be to risk frightening her off or causing her to clam up. That's the last thing I want.

I've done my best to be a friend and show her she can trust me, count on me. I love spending time with her, and although it's difficult sometimes not to act on impulses—for instance, she gnaws on her lip sometimes when she's nervous, and it makes me want to nibble on that lip myself—I haven't. And I won't, not until she's ready.

We settle back on the couch and sip our tea in silence. In the time we've known each other, Louisa has gone through three phrases: at first, she was shy around me and didn't say much. She'd speak when spoken to and we even had some interesting and memorable talks, but she almost never initiated conversation. After that was a short period where she spoke in quick, run-on sentences and attempted to fill every silence with chatter. This newest phase is my favorite; she's relaxed and seems comfortable around me, chatting easily, or allowing companionable silence to fill the space between us, like now.

"Are you sad not to be going home for Christmas?" she asks suddenly.

I sip my tea, buying myself a moment to come up with a response. "There's really nothing to go home *to*—"

She winces, her cheeks flooding with color. “I’m so sorry, Fergus, that was an incredibly insensitive question.”

I set my tea on the coffee table and rest my hand on her knee. What can I say, some impulses are too much to resist. This one at least is innocent enough and seems to put her at ease. “It’s fine, love, don’t worry yourself. This will be my second Christmas without my mum. It won’t necessarily be *easier*, but I don’t think it will be quite as painful as it was last year spending it alone in her house in Scotland.”

Louisa covers my hand where it rests on her knee. “That must have been awful.”

“It was hell.” And it was. After a prolonged illness, my mum died last summer. I had moved from Edinburgh back to my childhood home in Callander to live with her and care for her earlier in the year, and I was lost in a fog for months after her death. Last Christmas passed in a whisky haze as I packed up her house and prepared to sell it.

“Don’t get me wrong, I love Scotland and still consider it home, but I have no close family left there and no place to stay anymore,” I continue. “I’ve created a family of sorts and a home here, though.” I turn my hand under hers and lace our fingers together. Louisa is part of that family and home. A big part.

“I’m glad. Tomorrow will be an unconventional Christmas, but we’ll make it a good one.”

“We will. We’ll draw out the celebrations all week, right ’til your birthday on Saturday.” I study the emotions that pass over her face—surprise first, then that hesitant look she gets when she’s the focus of attention and thinks she shouldn’t be. Once that passes, a hint of excitement lights her eyes.

“Okay,” she says. One simple word, but it leaves me feeling oddly triumphant. This woman deserves to be celebrated, and I’m going to show her that.

I reluctantly let go of her hand so I can reach to pick up my tea. It’s then I notice a pamphlet from Evie’s real estate agency



peeking out from under the plate holding the mince pies. “Planning to invest in some real estate in the new year?”

Louisa’s eyes dart from the pamphlet to me and back again. “Umm...well...not exactly?”

I was only kidding, but the slightly panicked look on Louisa’s face has my full attention. “Not exactly?”

Louisa lets out a heavy sigh and slumps back on the couch. “I haven’t told anyone this yet, but I have to move in the next few months.”

“Have to?”

She nods. “This apartment belongs to the woman who owns the dress and alteration shop downstairs. She was a friend of my mom’s, and she let me move in here when I was ready to live on my own about ten years ago. She’s planning to retire in the spring and she’s selling the shop and the apartment, so I’ll need to find somewhere else to live.”

The way she twists her fingers in her lap tells me the thought makes her anxious. I’ve often wondered why she lived in such a small, rather shabby apartment when I know she could afford something better. I suppose it goes back to her being a creature of habit; Louisa feels comfortable and safe here, and change is difficult for many people who deal with severe anxiety. That was certainly the case for my mum.

“It’s fine, though,” she says in a rush. “I need more space anyway. It’d be nice to have a proper office and not have to work at the kitchen island or the coffee table. And I really should have something more modern with better amenities. *And* I can find a place that’ll finally allow me to have a pet.” Her gaze slides briefly to her closed bedroom door as she says that last part.

“Lulu.” She startles when I say her name, her head whipping back in my direction. “I know you said it’s fine, but it’s okay if it’s *not* fine. If you have mixed feelings about such a big change.”

She sighs again, and this time it ends on a quiet groan. “I *hate* the thought of moving, Fergus.” She whispers the words, as if making a confession. “People have been telling me for years that I’m wasting money by renting, but I’m not ready to be a homeowner. I don’t want to be responsible for everything on my own.”

“That’s understandable,” I say. “You need to do what feels right, and if that means continuing to rent, that’s what you’ll do. You know we’ll all help you find a place, even if it’s somewhere temporary while you search for something you truly love.”

She offers me a shaky smile. “Do you have any room to spare in that Victorian mansion of yours?”

I chuckle. A few months ago, my cousin Hugh, who’s an international businessman and philanthropist—and also currently my boss—bought a Victorian mansion that was formerly a funeral home. He’s unsure what he wants to do with it, so while he figures that out and assembles a crew to do renovations, I’ve been living in the caretaker’s apartment on the second floor. I had been staying with Hugh and his wife Ivy before that while looking for a more permanent place, so this has been an ideal situation; we all get our privacy, and I’m able to keep an eye on things at the house so it’s not sitting empty.

“I’d be happy to share my flat with you,” I tell Louisa. “Or you can have your pick of any of the empty rooms until construction starts.”

She’s about to answer when a thumping sound draws her attention to her closed bedroom door once more. Her cheeks are pink as she turns back to me, but she doesn’t say a word.

“Louisa?” I prompt after another soft thump sounds from behind the door.

“I don’t suppose you’d believe it was the wind? Or maybe a ghost? Surely there are ghosts kicking around in that two-hundred-year-old house of yours.” When I shake my head, she

presses her lips together, appearing resolute. She rises from the couch and walks the few steps to her bedroom, giving the door a light tap before inching it open. She squats down and speaks in a soft, high-pitched voice before scooping something into her arms.

She returns to the couch with a beautiful dark-gray cat. The cat looks at me warily with huge, green eyes as Louisa retakes her seat beside me.

“A cat,” I say, completely unnecessarily.

“A cat,” Louisa echoes. I wait a beat, expecting an explanation, although she doesn’t offer one. I watch as Louisa rubs the cat’s head and it presses its body against her chest, closing its eyes. A second later, a low, rumbling purr fills the silence.

I’m about to ask what’s going on when Louisa speaks. “He’s from the shelter. Someone dropped him off there a month or so ago. He’s had all his shots and he’s been neutered, so they weren’t sure why someone just left him.”

Louisa volunteers at the local animal shelter in her spare time. She loves animals, so it’s a good way for her to spend time with them since she’s not allowed to have a pet in her apartment. Or at least that’s what she’s always said...

“He took a liking to me right away,” she says around a smile as the sound of purring kicks up a notch. “He doesn’t really bother with any of the other volunteers or employees. Apparently nobody has considered him for adoption so far, which makes absolutely no sense to me because he’s so beautiful and he’s such a lovebug.”

She presses a kiss to his head and, for one ridiculous moment, I’m jealous of a cat. God help me.

“So you decided to adopt him?” I ask.

There’s that sweet blush again. Her gaze flicks to mine briefly before returning to the cat. “Not exactly...”

“Louisa Henshaw, did you kidnap this cat from the shelter?” Once again, I’m joking, but her wide-eyed expression tells me I’m not far off the mark.

“Sort of?” A laugh bursts out of her, startling the cat. He side-eyes her before closing his eyes again. “The shelter is closed for the next week except for bare-bones staff going in to check on the animals,” she says in a rush. “I couldn’t stand the thought of him being there all alone with no one to play with or pay attention to him. A few of the staff members and volunteers took animals home for a few days, and I offered to take this guy, even though I’m not *technically* allowed to have a pet in the apartment.”

Now it’s my turn to laugh. “You surprise me, Lulu. I never expected such hijinks out of you.”

“Hijinks,” she repeats slowly.

“Aye, is that not a word you use here?”

“No, it is, but...” She trails off, sitting back further on the couch. The cat rearranges himself so he’s lying with his head tucked under Louisa’s chin. “He didn’t have a nametag or anything when he was dropped off. The shelter normally gives the animals names because apparently it helps with the adoption process, but no one could think of a name for him. I think it should be Hijinx, with an X, like Binx from *Hocus Pocus*.”

“Won’t naming him make it harder to give him back?” I ask as gently as possible.

“Yes. So maybe I won’t give him back. If I’m being forced to move, maybe I’ll figure out a way to adopt him.”

I chuckle again, shaking my head. I’m about to tell her I like this unexpected, somewhat rebellious side of her when something occurs to me. “How about this? If you have an attack of conscience or your landlord finds out you’re harboring a secret pet, I’ll take him until you get a new place. My flat is closed off from the rest of the house, so he’d be contained, but still have plenty of room.”

“You’d do that?” Louisa asks.

Oh, this woman. When will she realize I’d do anything for her, especially when it means bringing that lovely, heartstopping smile to her face? “I’d be happy to. In fact, when the shelter opens up again after the holidays, why don’t you start the adoption process?”

She makes a little squealing noise that has the cat meowing in response. I can tell she wants to hug me; Louisa and her friends are a huggy bunch. Our initial few embraces were quick and stiff, but after the first time she melted against me and let me hold her properly, I became addicted to having her in my arms. Now hugging her is yet another impulse I don’t hesitate to act on. With the cat in her lap, she’s unable to hug me, so she hugs him instead, the lucky wee beast.

An hour later, when Louisa walks me to the door, I gather her close, drawing in the warmth of her body before heading out into the cold, snowy night.

“Off to do your Christmas Eve duty, Santa?” she asks as I collect the Santa jacket, hat, and beard from the closet.

“Aye, something like that. I’ll see you tomorrow, Lulu.”

I suspect, much like Jolly Ol’ Saint Nick himself, I have a twinkle in my eye as I think about cooking up a bit of Christmas magic for Louisa. If I have my way, this will be a week that changes both of our lives.

## CHAPTER THREE ~ FERGUS

Things feel more somber than magical the next evening as we make the return trip to Bellevue. Louisa maintained a cheery facade on the drive to Toronto, chatting away with Hollie in the backseat of my car while Spencer rode up front with me. The facade slipped as we watched Hollie and Spencer enter Pearson International Airport together hand in hand. I didn't even have time to comfort her the way I wanted to because we needed to move my car out of the temporary drop-off area.

Louisa's tear-stained face and soft sniffles are nearly my undoing for the first twenty minutes of the ride home. I don't know what to say or how to cheer her up. Every time I open my mouth to speak, I shut it again straight away, plagued by an uncertainty I'm not accustomed to feeling.

Beside me, Louisa takes a deep, shuddery breath and releases it with a gurgled 'ugh' sound. "I'm sorry," she says, swiping at her eyes and nose with a soggy tissue. She'd been dabbing at the tears before, but she blots them almost angrily now, like she's mad at herself for her display of emotion.

"Nothing to be sorry for, love," I assure her. "You're allowed to be sad about seeing off your best friend on Christmas Day."

"It's such a first-world problem," she says. "Boo-hoo, my friend is leaving for a week and a half with her hot Brit boyfriend for the holiday of her dreams in London, and I'm going to miss her. *Ugh.*"

Her words drip with self-censure and, for some unholy reason, it makes me laugh. Maybe it's because I've never heard Louisa speak like this or perhaps it's from the relief that she's actually speaking again after a torturous stretch of

silence. She whips her head in my direction, and I'm glad when her expression morphs into a rueful smile, followed by a soft laugh.

"That's better," I say. From the corner of my eye, I watch as she flips down the sun visor to use the mirror while she cleans herself up. I know this is about more than missing Hollie while she's away. There have been a lot of changes in Louisa's life recently, and I suspect the tears are caused by a mix of emotions coming to a head. My mum was the same way; change always made her fearful and sometimes even angry because she didn't like when things were beyond her control.

"How about some music?" Louisa says, snapping the visor back into place.

I turn on the radio. It seems like our choices are either talk radio with a religious bent—which I suppose makes sense, given the day—or holiday tunes.

"Don't worry, I won't start crying again if we listen to Christmas music," Louisa says.

"You sure? You can hook up my phone and call up one of my playlists if you want."

"This is fine." One song ends and a familiar jaunty piano tune starts: "Driving Home for Christmas" by Chris Rea. "I love this song," she says. "It came out in 1986, the year before I was born. My mom said it was popular again the next year when she was pregnant with me, and it became one of her favorites. She said I'd start kicking like mad whenever it was on."

There's a hint of sadness in her tone and around her eyes, but she's smiling. When she starts humming along, I know better than to look at her; the first time she hummed to a song in my presence, she stopped abruptly the second my eyes landed on her, and her cheeks had turned scarlet. That was also the first time I wanted to press my lips to her cheek and see if

the rush of blood was enough to warm them. Silly sentiment, but that's what being around Louisa does to me.

Now she's the one looking at me, which makes me realize I've been singing along quietly. "Sorry," I say.

"No, no, keep singing. Please?"

"Only if you'll sing with me."

"*Ha!* Absolutely not."

I laugh at her vehement refusal, but start singing again anyway. After a few seconds, I peek over to see her lips moving, although I don't hear her singing. Maybe she's working her way up to it. Either way, she looks happier than she did a few minutes ago, so I'll take that as a win. The song transitions into another familiar tune: "Last Christmas" by Wham! I sing along louder to this song, delighted when Louisa joins in, albeit quietly. By the end, I'm tapping my fingers to the beat on the steering wheel, and we're both belting out the lyrics.

Louisa Henshaw, singing at the top of her lungs, completely uninhibited. Talk about Christmas miracles.

We stop about halfway home for a bathroom break. Since it appears we'll miss the dinner portion of Evie's parents' Christmas gathering, I talk Louisa into getting something to eat. She agrees to an order of fries, then lights up when she sees the holiday-themed milkshakes on offer.

"Go on," I say, giving her a nudge. "You know you want to. It's Christmas." She only hesitates a moment longer before ordering a Chocolate Peppermint Elf shake. I pick the Caramel Gingerbread shake, and we decide to walk around the nearly deserted building to stretch our legs while we enjoy our sugary confections.

The rest of the drive only takes about an hour. Traffic increases as we go—people returning home after Christmas celebrations, most likely—but it's smooth sailing, even after a light snow starts. When we returned to the car after our short break, I wondered if our impromptu sing-along was a one-off,



but once I started singing, Louisa joined in again. If a song one of us didn't like came on, we switched stations until we found something suitable.

As I pull off the highway, Louisa texts Evie to let her know we'll be at her parents' place shortly. Louisa doesn't comment on the fact I'm now driving a little slower than necessary. I'm sure she figures it's due to the snow rather than assuming the truth: I'm prolonging our time alone together. There's something about being in close quarters in the dark, surrounded by her sweet perfume and equally sweet singing voice, while snow falls softly around us.

We stop at Louisa's apartment so she can check on Hijinx. She confessed her secret to Evie and Stella today before we left, and Stella offered to check on the cat while we were gone. I hover inside the front door as Louisa gives the cat a snuggle and puts out more food for him, speaking quietly to him the entire time. She promises him she'll return soon, and then we head back out into the cold night.

We have our own personal greeting committee when we arrive at the Hathaway house. Evie, Wesley, Stella, and Leland are waiting for us, and there are hugs, kisses, and Christmas wishes as they take our coats and ask us about the trip to the airport.

Evie's mum rushes over to greet us next, ushering us into the warm, bright house and offering to take us to the kitchen for something to eat since we missed dinner. I doubt either of us is hungry, but I have a feeling Louisa is relieved to have an excuse to hide out in the kitchen for a few minutes before we head out to the crowded party.

Once we join the others, Stella pulls Louisa away to introduce her to someone while Evie's and Stella's dads offer me a whisky and draw me into conversation. They introduce me to various business associates of theirs, and I recognize quite a few faces from the Hathaways' Thanksgiving gathering in October. As I make the rounds and get pulled into various conversations, I keep an eye on Louisa. My gaze is naturally

magnetized to her, but I also know large gatherings like this are difficult for her.

Unlike Louisa, I consider myself a people person. While I enjoy my own company and don't mind solitude, I've always been outgoing, and have found enjoyment in being with others. I particularly enjoy big holiday events like this since holidays were always a quiet affair in my family. My dad left when I was ten, and after that, it was mostly just my mum and me. Mum's parents passed away before I was born, but my dad's mum—my nana—was a wonderfully eccentric and superstitious woman who lived on the Isle of Skye. I loved her cluttered little cottage and spent many a summer there. As much as I loved Callander—and my mum—it was nice to get away.

The only other family I have are my cousins, Hugh and Clarabel. I didn't even know about them until one day when I was sixteen and Nana and I ran into Hugh when we were on a day trip to Inverness. Nana had introduced us and explained our paternal grandfathers had been cousins, which made us distant kin. We stayed in touch sporadically, but with Hugh being several years older, we didn't have much in common. We saw more of each other as we got older, and after my mum died, Hugh offered me a job with his company here in Bellevue.

When I spot Louisa talking to an older man—or rather, he's talking *at* her—I make my way over to them. I know Lulu can handle herself, but I also know she typically appreciates an out when it's offered. I smile and nod at the older gent as I approach, and lay my hand on the small of Louisa's back. She stiffens, but relaxes immediately when she sees it's me. The man holds up his glass and says he needs a refill, then excuses himself. The second he's gone, Louisa lets out a sigh and surprises me by inching closer to me. I allow myself a moment to put my arm around her and tuck her against my side, dropping my chin to the top of her head.

Evie waves us over to the dessert table a moment later. Wesley, Stella, and Leland join us, and we crowd around the

table, admiring the offerings.

“I’m going to slip into a sugar coma at any moment,” Louisa says, and the others laugh. “And yet I can’t seem to stop myself.” She selects a brownie with tiny pieces of crushed candy cane sprinkled on top.

“Same,” Evie says. “After all this food and peopling, I think I’ll spend the day in bed tomorrow.”

“I like that idea,” Wesley chimes in, and Evie laughs and elbows him in the side.

“Thanks for that image,” Stella says, elbowing her brother from the other side.

I chuckle to myself as I watch the others banter and laugh together. I’m soon drawn into the conversation, and my chest feels as if it expands to accommodate the swelling sensation in my heart. I find myself wishing Hollie and Spencer were here; I’m sure the others feel Hollie’s absence even more acutely than I do since she’s their best friend. She’s come to mean a great deal to me over the last few months, and I’m forever grateful to her for introducing me to this wonderful, boisterous group, who have made me feel welcomed and loved. It’s been a long time since I’ve felt such a strong sense of belonging. Of *home*. And as I look at Louisa, who’s giggling over something Stella is saying quietly in her ear, that feeling of home intensifies.

## CHAPTER FOUR ~ LOUISA

As Fergus turns the car onto my street, a strange sense of dread mixes with the exhaustion that's causing my body to feel heavy. I envision returning to my quiet apartment, turning on the lights, and sitting in the living room with Hijinx. I'd do the same thing I do every night: some variation of reading, watching TV, and thinking way too much about Fergus. I could really lean into my spinsterhood and go to bed, even though it's way too early.

Remembering what Dr. Woo said last night about doing something unexpected, I make a snap decision. "Are you in a hurry to get home?"

A passing street lamp illuminates the surprise on Fergus's face. "No...did you want to go somewhere? I reckon most places are closed."

"I was wondering if you'd like to come up for a bit." The words come out so fast, they sound slightly garbled. When Fergus doesn't answer right away, I think he must not have understood me, but as we approach my building, he veers around to the parking lot rather than pulling up in front of the dress shop.

"I'd love to," he says.

A relieved breath rushes out of me and I cover it with a light cough. Fergus parks in my spot and we head inside and up to my apartment.

Hijinx greets us as soon as I open my front door. Fergus offers to hang up our coats and put away the food Mrs. Hathaway sent home with me, and I let him, because it gives me a moment to not only lavish Hijinx with affection, but also to collect myself. My tiny apartment feels so much smaller with Fergus in it. He has such a large presence and he seems to

fill whatever space he's in. I've *almost* convinced myself that's the reason I'm constantly aware of him when he's around, and why my senses are full of the warmth of his body, the sound of his voice, and the scent of his cologne and shampoo.

Maybe asking him up here tonight wasn't such a good idea after all.

"Is it safe to assume you're as full as I am?" I ask once Hijinx has apparently had enough of my love and has disappeared into my bedroom.

"Stuffed," Fergus confirms.

I need to do something with my hands before they take on a mind of their own and reach for the man in front of me, so I offer him a drink. Thankfully, he asks for tea, which will give me a couple of minutes to rein in my feelings and remind myself Fergus is here as a friend and nothing more.

I take my time preparing the tea, even though there's not much to it. At least the routine of it soothes my anxiety somewhat. When I finally set our tea on the coffee table and sit beside Fergus, Hijinx has returned and is curled up on Fergus's lap, purring. The sight tugs at something in my chest.

"Your purse fell over and a bunch of stuff fell out," Fergus says, waving a hand toward my purse, which is now sitting on the armchair beside the couch rather than the coffee table. "I tidied it up. Sorry if things aren't where they're meant to be now. I used to catch hell from my mum if I went anywhere near her purse, so I felt weird about touching your things, but didn't want to leave them all over the floor."

I hold back a laugh at his rapid-fire explanation. "It's okay, there's nothing in there I wouldn't want you to see." I reach to close the zipper all the way and notice a ragged piece of folded paper poking out of the small opening. *Nothing but that.*

"A bucket list of sorts?" Fergus asks, following my gaze.

"Of sorts," I say faintly. "Did you...um..."

“Read it? Nah, ’course not. It unfolded when it fell out, so I saw the title at the top, but that’s it.”

My fingers itch to pull the list out. I don’t need to look at it to know what it says; I’ve read it countless times over the last five years. The items that haven’t been crossed off have been mocking me the last few weeks.

“Why a deadline, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“It’s stupid, really,” I say, wondering if there’s a tactful way to change the subject. Or maybe I could just jump up and leave the room under the pretense of checking on something. What is there to check on in this tiny space, though? Fergus’s curious, patient expression reminds me I can tell him anything. “I had a bit of a freakout before I turned thirty. I wasn’t in a great place mentally, and I felt like I hadn’t accomplished anything I wanted to. My friends assured me everyone has different paths and just because certain things hadn’t happened yet didn’t mean they *wouldn’t*. I suggested creating a practical five-year plan, and they countered with something else: a list of things—mostly fun things—I’d been putting off doing or that were outside my comfort zone, with a deadline of my thirty-fifth birthday.”

Fergus’s smile tells me he’s not surprised my friends would come up with an idea like that. “And did you accomplish everything?”

The ‘not quite’ that hovers on my lips would be a massive understatement; there are more unchecked items than ones I *did* accomplish. I shake my head and pull the list from my purse. “I took it seriously for a while, but then sort of forgot about it. I found it recently and have been carrying it around.”

“Can I see it?” he asks, holding out a hand. “Maybe I could help you check a few things off.”

Despite my hesitation—and embarrassment—I hand over the list. I hadn’t realized I’d been gripping it tightly until Fergus chuckles and gives a gentle tug, pulling it free from my grasp.

“Let’s see here.” He unfolds the paper, resting it against Hijinx’s back and smoothing out the well-worn creases. The cat doesn’t even move. “From all the different handwriting, I reckon your friends took over?”

“Of course they did,” I say with a laugh. “I couldn’t come up with anything at first, so they started throwing out ideas. I was only allowed to veto so many, and the ones that were a go went on the list.”

“Learn to drive is checked off. I didn’t think you drove?”

“I *don’t* drive, but I *can*,” I tell him. “I always knew my anxiety and driving wouldn’t mix, so I never bothered learning. I finally let Evie talk me into getting my permit and taking lessons, but I hated every second of it. Bellevue has a great transit system and is fairly walkable, plus all my friends drive, so...”

“No need to justify it to me, love,” he says with a gentle smile.

God, I love it when he calls me that. The first time he said it, I nearly melted into a puddle, although I quickly gave myself a mental slap and told myself he likely calls everyone that. In the two months I’ve known him, I’ve never heard him refer to anyone else that way, though. It’s ridiculous, but it makes me feel special. So does his easy understanding and lack of judgment of the things I normally keep hidden from people other than my closest friends.

Fergus murmurs to himself as he reads through several of the other items on the list. “I know the sushi making must have been a success because we’ve eaten sushi together. How much convincing did the tattoo take?” He nods toward my left arm where the small four-leaf clover bearing my initials and the initials of my three best friends is hidden under my sleeve.

“It was actually my idea.” At his incredulous look, I laugh and tilt my head to the side in concession. “Okay, it was Stella’s idea initially—she was the one who added it to the list,

which I'm sure is no surprise—but I was the one who suggested the four of us get matching tattoos.”

He's grinning as he returns to the list. He continues reading, making the occasional comment. “Do something brave isn't checked off. I'm sure you've done plenty of things in the last five years that could apply.”

“Mm, you're right.” I fish in my purse for a pen. “Want to do the honors and cross it off?”

He takes the pen, but doesn't remove the cap. “Who added this one?”

“I did. Past Me clearly had issues with being vague, which is why I let the others come up with most of the ideas.”

Fergus nods slowly, tapping the page with the pen. “The list entry itself is vague, but I suspect you had something in mind when you wrote it.”

I usually love how well Fergus knows me. Right now, though? Not so much. I blow out a long breath and straighten in my seat. “When we wrote this list, I'd been thinking for a while about how I should get...not a *proper* job because I have that, but something other than a work-from-home job. Or at least not exclusively from home, anyway. In an office or something, you know?”

Over the years, I've worked my way up to being more comfortable in public—with strangers, in unfamiliar places, in crowds. It's not always easy, even after years of hard work and therapy. A few years ago, Dr. Woo suggested that since I work from home and could easily become *too* comfortable doing that—as in, it would be far too easy to only go out when prompted, like to shop or see friends—I should volunteer. I took her advice and started somewhere familiar: the Belle Vie Community Services Center, where Hollie works. I've stocked shelves, helped in the meal center, and participated in food drives. Once I felt I'd mastered that, I also started volunteering at the local animal shelter, walking dogs and playing with the



more sociable animals like Hijinx who craved interaction while they waited to be adopted.

“I love working from home, but it’s a crutch in a way,” I continue. “Ideally, I’d keep working mostly from here, but mix in a few hours a week in an office setting. I can’t imagine finding a boss who would be understanding enough to accommodate my weird requests, though.”

Fergus’s lips are pulled to one side, and he appears deep in thought. When he notices me watching him, his expression clears. “Something to think about in the new year, perhaps.” He returns to the list, tapping the pen on the paper as he reads. “Ahh, here’s one you’ll be able to check off by the end of the week: Host a fancy party.”

He means New Year’s Eve, which Hollie offered to host at her place this year. When Spencer invited her to spend the holidays in London with him, Hollie wanted us to go ahead and have the party at her place since she’d already bought decorations and some of the food and alcohol. My birthday is the same day as the party, but I’ve always hated being the center of attention, so each year, my friends throw a small celebration on the thirty-first with my choice of breakfast or lunch, and a cake. I’ve always secretly considered our New Year’s Eve parties as ‘for me’ but without the proverbial heat of the spotlight or people giving me gifts, which suits me just fine.

“I guess you’re right,” I say slowly. “It’s at Hollie’s house and I’ll have a lot of help from the girls, but Hollie *did* ask me to step in as hostess.”

Fergus nods once as if it’s decided. “One down, then. There must be others...” His gaze moves slowly down the list. “‘Spend a night under the stars’. Not sure there’s anything we can do about that one in this weather. This one’s out too: ‘Spend your birthday in New York City and watch the ball drop in Times Square at midnight’. Can you explain to me how this one ended up on the list because...well, have your friends *met* you?”

I laugh and shove Fergus's arm playfully. "When I was little, my parents and I always watched the TV footage of the ball drop. It was the one night each year I was allowed to stay up late, and they always made a huge deal of it because it was my birthday. We'd have all my favorite foods for dinner, then cake and snacks throughout the evening as we watched the performances and waited for midnight. My mom always said we'd do it in person someday, but..." I trail off. There's an unmistakable glimmer of sympathy in Fergus's eyes, so I charge on before he can say anything.

"The tradition ended after my mom died, but the girls picked it up again the next year. As for going to New York, the thought of the crowd absolutely terrifies me, but there's always been this part of me that thinks it would be thrilling. And that my mom would be proud of me for doing it."

"That's a lovely thought," Fergus says, patting my hand where it rests on my thigh. He lets his hand linger and I'm tempted to turn mine over and lace our fingers together, the way he did last night. I can't bring myself to do it, of course, and I swallow a sigh when Fergus pulls his hand away and returns to the list once more.

"Huh," he says, tapping the paper again. "This final one is interesting: 'Kiss the man of your dreams before midnight on your birthday-slash-New-Year's-Eve'."

Heat floods my cheeks so fast and with such intensity, it feels like they're going to burst into flames. I aim for a lighthearted, carefree laugh that comes out sounding like a strangled duck. I pluck the list from his fingers, but he stops my shaking hands as I mangle the paper in my attempt to refold it.

"Wait."

I freeze, waiting for him to continue and wondering what he's about to say. I think I'm even holding my breath.

He squints and points at the paper. "That's not the last item on the list. There's something on the back."

The air rushes from my lungs. “Oh, no, that’s just a little scribble I did. Grocery list or something when I didn’t have any other paper handy.”

He gives me a wry look. “Lulu.”

Lulu—or even Little Lulu—is a nickname my closest friends have used for as long as I can remember. It’s different when Fergus says it, though. Between his deep voice and the way his accent wraps around the vowels, it feels like a whole new name. It lowers my defenses and, despite the lingering embarrassment at knowing what he’s about to read, I hold out the paper.

“I won’t read it if you don’t want me to,” he says solemnly. I simultaneously press my lips together, shake my head, and wave a hand for him to go ahead. He watches me for a moment, one side of his mouth twitching like he’s trying not to laugh. “This handwriting is much different from the others.”

I start to speak, but the words come out choked. I clear my throat and try again. “My grandma wrote it.”

Fergus lowers the paper and gives me his full attention. I love that about him and yet, in this moment, I wish he’d look anywhere else. I rarely talk about my grandmother. She was my mom’s mother; my dad’s parents died when I was a baby. When my mom died, Grandma moved in with Dad and me, which was equally wonderful and awful. While it was comforting to have a living piece of my mom with us, it was also painful because she was, naturally, lost in a haze of her own grief. I hoped she’d be an ally against my dad when he pulled me out of high school, laid down a whole new set of rules, and tried to keep me wrapped in a proverbial bubble to keep me safe from the big, bad world. Unfortunately, that wasn’t the case.

My dad died when I was twenty. By then, I’d developed what would soon be diagnosed by Dr. Woo as agoraphobia. I was taking some college courses online because Dad didn’t want me going away to school and I was such an anxious mess, I couldn’t bear the thought of attending classes at the

local college. With my grandmother's help, I got into therapy, started taking medication, and began attending school part-time. We stayed in my childhood home until I was ready to sell it. At that point, Grandma moved into a nursing home and I moved in with Hollie for a while until I felt steady enough to live on my own.

In some deep recess of my mind and heart, there's a part of me—a part I hate to acknowledge—that resents my grandma for never speaking up, and for allowing my dad to basically make me afraid of the world. She came through after he died, though, and we developed a close relationship, which is why I feel guilty for admitting those feelings, and have only ever said them out loud to Dr. Woo.

I clear my throat again. “I knew Grandma would get a kick out of the list, so I showed it to her. She asked if she could add something, and I allowed it without question.”

I was hoping it would be something that would give me guidance and help me feel less lost. Without having to tell her, I knew she understood the reason for the five-year deadline: my mom was thirty-five when she died.

I watch Fergus's face closely as he reads the final item on the list. He takes so long, I assume he's reading it more than once. When he lifts his head to meet my eyes, I can't decipher his expression. The soft smile is back in place, but there's something unfamiliar in his eyes. Something that makes my breath catch.

“Fall in love with a wonderful man and let him take care of you’,” he says. “Your granny was a romantic, I take it.”

“I've gone back and forth over the years about whether it's romantic or just old-fashioned and kind of sexist.”

Fergus sputters out a laugh. “Explain, please.”

“Love isn't something to be crossed off a list, you know? It shouldn't have a timetable.” A hint of defensiveness creeps into my voice. Privately, when Grandma wrote that, I'll admit I thought it was possible. Five years to start dating, find a

wonderful man, and fall in love? Why not? But here I am, just days away from turning thirty-five, I've barely dated, and my one experience with a relationship was a joke. "I also don't need a man to take care of me. I may have had a later start than most and I've experienced plenty of missteps along the way, but I can take care of myself."

Fergus sets the paper aside and reaches for my hand. I love when he does this; love the feel of his long fingers engulfing mine. "I know you can take care of yourself, just as I'm sure your granny did. You're brave and smart and independent, but that doesn't mean you can't let someone take care of you now and again. Maybe your gran didn't mean it in an archaic way, but rather as a *mutual* caretaking. The kind where two people look after each other. Personally, that doesn't sound so bad to me."

I hum in acknowledgment, keeping my gaze on his fingers wrapped around mine. "I suppose that wouldn't be so bad."

Fergus lifts my hand and kisses my knuckles. Inside my head, a little voice screams with glee and I nearly expire on the spot. It's not the first time he's done it, but it feels different tonight somehow, maybe because we're alone and I'm feeling vulnerable.

"If you let me, I think I can help you cross a few things off your list," he says.

I want to tell him it's not important. The list was meant to be fun, and the date is arbitrary; I don't need to check items off a silly list to feel accomplished. Still, a little thrill zips through me at the thought of Fergus helping me. Of getting to spend more time alone with him, like last night and most of today. "We only have a few days, though."

Fergus's eyes twinkle in a way that says 'challenge accepted'. "Guess we'd better get started then, hadn't we?"

## CHAPTER FIVE ~ FERGUS

I spend the day after Christmas calling in favors and making deals. While I agree with Louisa's assessment that the date on her list is arbitrary and she doesn't *need* to complete it, I think she could use the boost. Unexpected side bonus: it's the perfect excuse to spend as much time with her as possible over the next week.

If there's a chance I can get her to see herself as I see her—smart, funny, competent, beautiful, and desirable—I'll take it. And if she finally realizes *I* see her that way, well, that's yet another bonus.

We arrive at Bellevue Village shortly after it opens. The Village, which is owned by Hugh and Ivy, stretches over several acres on the outskirts of the city and boasts a variety of shops, eateries, businesses, and a small amusement park with games and rides. This is a strange in-between week; the Village is no longer the Christmas attraction it was between mid-November and December twenty-fourth, but there are still plenty of people around since school is out for winter break and many people are on holidays.

"Are we going to Cravings?" Louisa asks, referring to the popular café inside the Village.

"Aye, that's one of our stops," I say. "But we're going somewhere else first."

Once the last of the arrangements was in place yesterday, I called Louisa and asked if she'd like to spend the day with me today. I didn't give her any details beyond a suggestion to dress comfortably in an outfit she didn't mind possibly getting a bit dirty. As we stroll through the Village, I sneak glances at her, pleased to see she's wearing the blue cashmere scarf and matching toque I got her for Christmas. Her puffy black coat

hides most of what she's wearing underneath except for her form-fitting jeans and black boots. She looks adorable and fresh-faced, and it takes all my willpower not to reach for her hand and link my fingers with hers.

I settle for resting my hand on the small of her back and guiding her toward the entrance to the amusement park section of the Village.

"Where are we going?" she asks, a hint of wariness creeping into her voice.

"You'll see." I catch sight of one of the Village's managers, Meredith Cormier, who's waiting for us at the gates to the amusement park. The rides and games don't open to the public until noon, but it pays to have friends and relatives in high places.

"Wait, are we going in there?" Louisa asks, slowing her pace.

"Only if you want to." I grip the sleeve of her coat and pull her to a stop, signaling to Meredith with my other hand that we'll be a minute. "One of the items on your list was to go on a ride in an amusement park. I have a feeling you meant something more along the lines of a roller coaster or one of those terror-inducing drop contraptions, but you'd need to head to Canada's Wonderland for something like that. What I have in mind is much tamer."

"Tamer is good," Louisa says. "But now I'm kind of worried about why you said to wear clothes I wouldn't mind getting dirty."

"Ahh, that's for something we're doing later." Amusement and affection mingle inside me at the sight of her curious expression. I give her a gentle nudge toward the gate, which Meredith has opened. Louisa doesn't respond, although she follows Meredith into the park.

A row of booths with carnival-type games gives way to an area with the rides. Louisa looks around with wide eyes, likely wondering which one we're headed for. Meredith stops near

the elaborate, colorful carousel and waves her arms like an assistant on a gameshow.

“Are you up for a private ride on the steed of your choice?” I ask Louisa.

Delighted laughter spills out of her. She watches with bright eyes as Meredith steps into the small booth to the side of the machine. She inserts a key and flicks a few switches, which activates the lights all around the carousel, along with calliope music.

“How did you manage this?” Louisa asks.

“I asked my cousin Hugh for a favor or two.” More than two, actually, but she doesn’t need to know that right now.

“Have you ever met Hugh?” Meredith asks Louisa as we approach the carousel. When Louisa says no, Meredith says, “Let’s just say he’s one of the kindest people on the planet and loves to help make people’s dreams a reality, big or small.”

“It’s true, he’d do anything for anyone.” I wink at Meredith, who’s one of my cousin’s closest friends as well as his employee. She jumped at the chance to help me today and with one of my other plans for Louisa. I turn my attention to Lulu and gesture toward the carousel. “Now...which of these beasties strikes your fancy?”

Louisa immediately heads for a white horse with a sparkly silver mane, blue and purple saddle, and delicate flowers painted in a garland pattern around its neck and shoulders. She hoists herself up and gets settled in the saddle, then glances around for me. A flash of surprise crosses her features when I mount the horse beside her.

She lets out a little squeak followed by a giggle as the carousel starts and our horses glide forward, rising and falling gently. Even though I can only see her profile, I can’t take my eyes off Louisa’s face. Her smile is a thing of beauty, and it warms me like sunshine on a spring day. I checked the weight limit with Meredith when I arranged for us to be let in; I would have watched Louisa from the side or even ridden in one of



the bench seats, but I'm glad I get to experience this moment by her side.

She doesn't speak for the first few turns. When she does, her voice is wistful. "I loved carousels when I was little. My parents used to have to pry me away from the merry-go-round in the McDonald's playroom. They also took me to the Bellevue fair at the end of every summer, and my mom and I would ride the carousel over and over."

"Is that why a ride at an amusement park was on your list?" I ask.

She shoots me a sidelong glance and scrunches her nose. "No. I don't remember which of my friends added it to the list, but I *do* remember the reason."

"You don't have to tell me."

She makes the little tsking sound I've come to expect when she's about to tell me something she finds embarrassing. "It all comes back to conquering fears. Right after high school, the four of us went to Canada's Wonderland for a day. They all knew I had no interest in the rides, but they didn't want to go without me, which I appreciated. I figured I might be able to suck it up and go on some of the smaller rides, but at the very least, I'd be there to hold their stuff while *they* went. The only 'ride' I did that day was the bumper cars. I couldn't work up the courage to try anything else. I did, however, eat my weight in junk throughout the day, and was sick on the way home."

I make a choking sound as I attempt to hold back a chuckle. Louisa shakes her head and laughs. "It's okay, you can laugh. I didn't find it remotely amusing then, but I can admit it's kinda funny now. Some part of me was more embarrassed about the fact we spent ten hours at Canada's largest amusement park and I only managed to go on the bumper cars."

"Did you have fun, though?" I ask.

"Yes," she says without hesitation. "At least until the ride home," she adds with another laugh. "Being with the girls is

always fun, and they never made me feel bad about the rides. We walked around a lot, played games, and saw some of the other attractions.”

“As long as you enjoyed yourself, I’d say that’s all that matters.”

We fall silent again as the carousel continues. The smile returns to Louisa’s face and she’s positively beaming by the time the carousel slows and comes to a stop. I dismount my horse first and watch as Louisa slowly climbs off and runs her fingers over the finer details in the horse’s mane. She drops her hand when she notices me looking. On impulse, I catch her hand and hold it loosely as we make our way down toward Meredith.

Louisa doesn’t pull her hand away as we thank Meredith and say goodbye. There’s a hint of pink in her cheeks, which could easily be from the pleasure of riding the carousel or even the nip in the late-December air. As we pass through the gates into the rest of the Village and she nestles her hand further into mine, I’d like to think that’s the real reason behind her blush.

Our next stop is Cravings. As we approach, I see my cousin and his wife through the front window. As planned, they’re having coffee and breakfast at a table big enough to seat four. Ivy’s face lights up when we step inside and she spots us. That isn’t part of the act; Ivy is a sweetheart—my cousin’s perfect match—and she welcomed me with open arms when I moved to Bellevue to work for the MacKinnon Group. She knows about my new friends and about my feelings for Louisa, and she was all too pleased to be included in today’s plan.

“If it isn’t my second favorite Scot,” Ivy calls, waving us over. Louisa and I join them at their table, where I embrace Ivy and Hugh and introduce them to Louisa.

“It’s so nice to finally meet you,” Ivy says. “We’ve heard a lot about you from Fergus.”

“Oh.” Louisa’s cheeks turn a deeper shade of pink as her gaze ping pongs from Ivy to Hugh to me and back to Ivy. I’m sure she’s wondering what I’ve said about her. “It’s nice to meet you too. Both of you.”

Hugh motions to the two empty seats at the table. “Care to join us?”

I look to Louisa for confirmation; part of my plan hinges on her accepting this invitation, so I’m relieved when she nods. I offer to place our order at the counter, and Hugh comes with me.

“Did Louisa like your first surprise?” he asks quietly as we step into the short line.

“She loved it.” I glance over my shoulder to where Louisa and Ivy are deep in conversation. When I turn back, Hugh slips me a key, which I tuck into the inner pocket of my jacket. “I can’t thank you enough for this.”

“Happy to help. In fact, you’ve challenged me to step up my game in the romance department. It’s been awhile since I surprised Ivy, and now you have me cooking up ideas.”

“Happy to help,” I echo, shooting him a grin as I step up to the counter to place our order. When we return to the table, Ivy is telling Louisa about the Village’s new family support center. I place Louisa’s tea and croissant in front of her and she smiles up at me before returning her attention to Ivy.

Hugh and I sit in silence, shooting each other the occasional glance as we observe what’s clearly a budding friendship between Louisa and Ivy. After talking about the family support center and the Village in general, they move onto how they spent Christmas, and then Ivy tells Louisa about the book club she hosts at her bookstore. I love how animated and responsive Louisa is, especially considering I suspect she’s dealing with some nerves while talking to Ivy. Nobody else would likely notice, but I see the way she’s clasping her hands in her lap, and how some of her sentences come out overly fast.

I tune back into the conversation when Ivy says, “Fergus has mentioned you work from home?”

“Yeah, as a virtual assistant,” Louisa says. “I work for different companies in town and a few online-based businesses.”

“Do you enjoy it?” Hugh asks.

“For the most part,” she says, seeming surprised that Hugh has chimed in after remaining silent all this time. “I like getting to work from home and setting my own hours. Lately I’ve been wondering what it’d be like to work in an office. Sometimes I feel like I’m missing out, even though I know I’m lucky to be able to work from home.”

“With the MacKinnon Group and the Village growing all the time, we’ll be hiring more people in the new year,” Hugh says. “Sounds like you’d have the perfect skill set for some of the jobs we’re looking to fill. If you’d be interested, I’m sure we could find something that fits with your other work. You can do it online or in one of our offices.”

“That...that would be amazing,” Louisa says, her voice high with suppressed excitement.

“We could even skip the formal interview process,” Ivy says, glancing at Hugh, who nods. “We could have a casual meeting like this in a couple of weeks and figure something out that works for all of us. If you’re interested, of course.”

“I’m definitely interested,” Louisa says quickly. “Thank you.”

The pair exchange numbers, and then Ivy and Hugh tell us they need to get going. As they don their coats, I study the shifting emotions on Louisa’s face. If I’m not mistaken, she’s working up the courage to say something else. Finally, she sucks in a sharp breath and sits up straighter.

“You probably already have plans, but I’m hosting a small New Year’s Eve party on Saturday. You’re more than welcome to join us, either to drop in or spend the whole evening.”

“We haven’t finalized our plans yet, but I’m sure we could at least swing by,” Ivy says. “Text me the details later today, okay?”

After a round of hugs, goodbyes, and promises to speak soon, Louisa and I are on our own again. Lulu faces me, her eyes bright, but her expression otherwise unreadable.

“That wasn’t a coincidence, was it?” she asks.

I attempt to look contrite, but I can’t fight the smile pulling at my lips. “Busted. Are you upset?”

She huffs and slumps back in her seat. “Are you kidding? If I’d had a formal interview with someone like Hugh MacKinnon, I would have worked myself into such a tizzy beforehand, I’d probably have had to cancel. Now not only am I leaving here with a new job prospect, I also feel like Hugh and Ivy could be friends.”

“That was my hope,” I tell her. “I didn’t want to ambush you, so I thought a casual, not-so-accidental meeting over coffee and pastries would be the way to go. Hugh has created a number of bespoke jobs for people recently, and I knew he’d be happy to do the same for you.”

She hesitates for a moment and then reaches out to lay her hand on mine. “Thank you, Fergus. For the impromptu meeting and for the carousel ride earlier. I even feel better about checking ‘host a party’ off the list since I invited people myself.”

“How do you feel about crossing one more item off your list today?” My gaze shifts beyond Louisa to where Willow, the co-owner of Cravings, is waving to me from behind the counter.

“What did you have in mind?”

“The one about the cookies,” I say.

“Ahh, perfect, soft chocolate chip cookies,” she says wistfully. “My mom and grandma made them all the time when I was little. I have their recipe and I’ve tried it over and

over, but they never come out right. Wait, are you secretly a baker and you know how to make them?”

I chuckle and incline my chin toward Willow as I say, “No, but Willow Stewart is a *not-so-secret* baker who knows how to make them and would be happy to teach you.”

Louisa whips around in her seat. Willow gives her a little finger wave with one hand while holding up a spare apron in the other.

“Right now?” Louisa asks me. “Here? In the café kitchen? I’m sure Willow has better things to do. Maybe I could—”

Willow appears beside our table. “I have absolutely nothing else to do today,” she says. “All the baking for the café is done for the day and no one else needs the kitchen. I have everything we need and I promise by the time you leave here you’ll know how to make cookies just like your mom and grandmother did.”

I can practically see the wheels turning in Louisa’s brain. She hates putting anyone out in any way, even after they’ve assured her something isn’t an imposition. I sense she’s made up her mind a split second before her expression and body language change. A smile breaks over her face as she gets to her feet and takes the apron from Willow.

“I can’t believe I get to learn how to make cookies from my favorite baker,” she says. “Thank you so much for doing this. And *you*,” she adds, turning that bright smile on me. “Thank you for arranging this. Will you come back to the kitchen with us?”

“Of course,” I say, glancing at Willow, who nods and tells me she’ll find an extra apron. I trail along after them, listening to their back-and-forth chatter and thinking how I’d follow Louisa Henshaw anywhere, especially when she smiles at me like that.

## CHAPTER SIX ~ LOUISA

“I’m having flashbacks,” Evie says, slumping against the red vinyl seat of our booth and closing her eyes. “A sunny kitchen with gauzy curtains. The scent of chocolate in the air. A plate of cookies and a glass of ice-cold milk.”

“Don’t forget the radio playing in the background,” Stella says. “And the sound of Lulu’s mom’s laughter. I’ve never cried while eating a cookie, but I might cry right now.”

I laugh at my friends’ reactions to the cookies Willow and I made yesterday. They really are perfect, and I’ll admit I nearly cried myself when I took my first bite and was transported to the very kitchen Evie and Stella just described.

Willow and I made enough cookies to feed a small army. First, she walked me through the process, giving me tips that would result in the perfect soft-to-chewy ratio. After that, she’d had me make my own batch, and then we made several more together while Fergus sat nearby, watching and sipping tea. Willow deemed our cookies worthy of selling in the café and immediately put two dozen in the display case. They’d all sold out by the time Fergus and I left, arms laden with takeout containers full of cookies.

The girls and I normally meet on Saturday mornings at B&H Diner, but I messaged them last night to ask if we could move our weekly breakfast to today instead. I told them it was because I’d be getting ready for the party on Saturday and, while that’s true, I also needed to talk to them about Fergus.

“I can’t believe you let Fergus see that list,” Evie says.

“And I can’t believe he offered to help you.” The words are barely out of Stella’s mouth before she waves a hand and shakes her head. “Never mind, of course I believe it.”

“What do you mean?” I ask.

Stella and Evie share a Look. “Sweet, unsuspecting Lulu,” Stella says.

“That man is head over heels for you,” Evie says.

Bea, our favorite waitress approaches the table with three plates skillfully balanced in her hands. She and her husband Horatio own B&H, where my friends and I have been coming to for most of our lives, first with our parents, then on our own. We’ve spent so much time here over the years, we’re like their honorary children, and Bea always knows most of what’s going on in our lives.

She sets our plates on the table, saving mine for last so she can meet my eyes. “You girls talking about that fine Scotsman? That boy has it bad.”

“We’re just friends,” I say automatically.

“Mmhm. I seem to remember these two singing the same tune about the men in *their* lives not so long ago,” she says, jerking her head toward Evie and Stella. “Hollie too, come to think of it. How’s our girl liking London, by the way?”

“She’s loving it,” Stella says. “We’re going to video call her to check in as soon as we finish eating.”

“Make sure you flag me down so I can say hi,” Bea says, then turns her attention back to me. “There have been thousands of people in and out of this diner in the last handful of decades. It didn’t take long for me to become an expert at reading people, and I can read that man like a book. He’s as smitten with you as you are with him.”

Stella bangs her cutlery on the table. “Bea has spoken,” she says in a deep tone, then in her normal voice, “If you won’t believe us, maybe you’ll believe her.”

This isn’t the first time my friends have tried to convince me Fergus has feelings for me. While a small, secret part of me wishes and hopes it’s true, the bigger part of me—likely the part controlled by the gremlins in my brain—tells me it



couldn't be. If it was, why hasn't he made a move? He's had plenty of opportunities. And even if he *did* make a move, I have no idea how I'd react. I have next to no experience with dating and I've never been in a real relationship. Fergus is incredibly patient and kind, but could I expect that to extend to us dating and me wanting to take things slow because I have no idea what I'm doing when it comes to anything related to romance?

"What's with the cookie contraband?" Bea asks, spying the open Cravings container on the far side of the table.

"Louisa made these yesterday," Evie says, nudging the container toward Bea. "Fergus arranged for Willow at Cravings to teach her."

"He also arranged for a private carousel ride at the Village and an impromptu meeting with Mr. Hugh MacKinnon himself."

At the mention of Hugh, Bea practically gets cartoon hearts in her eyes. "Hugh MacKinnon. That man is a dreamboat."

My tightly bunched shoulders relax as I laugh along with Evie and Stella.

Bea recovers quickly. "What was the meeting for?"

"I mentioned to Fergus the other day that I'd like to consider working part-time in an office," I tell her. "He arranged a casual breakfast meeting with Hugh and his wife yesterday, and I'm going to meet with them again in a few weeks about potentially working for them."

A knowing expression passes over Bea's face. She glances at Evie and Stella, who are wearing similar expressions. "Imagine that," she says. "Arranging all of that for his *good friend* Louisa? Hmm." She winks at me and flaps a hand toward our plates. "Dig in before your breakfast gets cold. I'll be back in a few to check on you."

While we eat, Evie and Stella talk about work. Evie is a realtor for one of the biggest agencies in town, and has gained

some recognition after selling a handful of high-profile, high-dollar properties. Stella recently started working at FandomTown in the Village, which is owned by Leland's sister Felicity. I've always enjoyed hearing Evie talk about work, and it's been nice seeing Stella settle in at a job she loves and is good at, and where she gets to let her nerdy self shine bright for everyone to see.

Stella had been living in Toronto until this past summer; she moved there when she got married a few years ago, and stayed for a short time after her divorce was finalized earlier this year. Life wasn't the same with her away all those years, especially since we suspected she wasn't particularly happy. It took her awhile to return to her colorful, fun-loving self once she moved back, and I know the others are as grateful as I am to see Stella happy, strong, and living life to the fullest.

"I wonder how many times Hollie has called the center to check in," Evie says after taking the final bite of her pancakes.

"Probably not as many as she'd be willing to admit," Stella says.

"*Or* maybe she's been so busy in London, she's actually enjoying the break," I say.

Hollie is the Executive Director for the Belle Vie Community Services Center. Until recently, the center was chronically underfunded and understaffed, and Hollie took it upon herself to do a variety of tasks that weren't in her job description. During our second-last year of high school—the year my dad pulled me out to homeschool me—Hollie's family went through a series of difficult events that left her and her dad dependent on the center. It shaped who Hollie is in a lot of ways, including a penchant for taking her job seriously and often personally.

"Are we ready to call her to check in?" Evie asks.

We move our empty dishes aside, and Evie and Stella squish together to make room for me on their side of the

booth. Evie pulls up Hollie's contact info and hits the video chat icon.

Hollie is laughing breathlessly and looking offscreen when she answers. She focuses on us immediately, her already huge smile somehow stretching even wider. "My girls! It's so good to see you all. Spencer says hi."

Spencer steps into the frame and waves. There's a flurry of greetings on our end, and then he tells us he'll give us a few minutes to talk to Hollie.

"How's London?" I ask. "Is it everything you always dreamed of?"

"Everything and then some." From Hollie's dreamy tone and the way she's gazing off to the side, it's easy to assume she's loving the person accompanying her as much as the city itself. "Spencer has been the perfect tour guide. He'll take me to see a bunch of the touristy things on my list, and then take me off the beaten path to places locals hang out. We've crammed so much into the last two and a half days and there's still so much to see."

"All of your pictures have been incredible," Stella says.

"You're glowing," Evie chimes in. "I thought it was a filter at first, but I can see now it's not."

Hollie waves her off, but Evie is right. Every selfie or shot taken with Spencer has shown her rosy-cheeked and grinning. I figured part of it was because most of the pictures were taken outside, but she's inside now and her cheeks have that same glow.

"Love looks good on you, Hols," I say.

I expect her to deflect or deny, but she simply lowers her head and laughs under her breath, her cheeks turning a deeper shade of red. When she decided to accept Spencer's invitation to travel with him over the holidays, she'd panicked that it was too soon. They hadn't known each other long and weren't even officially dating until a few days before Christmas.

“It *feels* good.” She peeks back at the camera. “So much has changed in such a short amount of time. All that fear and worry I had before we left disappeared the minute we walked into the airport. Being with Spencer feels so right, you guys. I’m so glad I took the leap and trusted my gut.”

Emotion swells inside me at her words. Something about them rings true in a way I’m afraid to examine too closely. Thankfully, I don’t have time to think about it before Bea comes over to say hello to Hollie. We all chat for a few more minutes and then Hollie says she needs to go because Spencer is taking her to Hyde Park Winter Wonderland tonight.

“I’ll talk to you guys again soon,” she promises. “I love you all so much.”

Bea lets out a happy sigh as she straightens. “Can’t tell you how much good it does my old heart to see all my girls in love.” Her gaze swings to mine, a hint of a challenge glinting in her hazel eyes. When I don’t say anything, she looks far too pleased with herself. Letting her have this win is better than starting the ‘*we’re just friends*’ argument again. “Ahh look, if it isn’t another of my favorite couples,” she says, pointing toward the duo that just walked in.

Sylvie Bell waves and makes a beeline for us, pulling her boyfriend Cole along with her. They’re the newest addition to our ever-expanding friend group; Sylvie and Stella were friends in high school and they reunited recently when Stella returned to town. We all celebrated Sylvie’s thirty-fifth birthday right here in the diner last week.

“We were just talking about the party on Saturday,” Sylvie says. “Thanks again for letting me invite a couple extra people.”

“The more the merrier,” I say, which isn’t a sentiment I ever expected to pass my lips. “I’m excited you can come.”

Stella asks Sylvie something and they fall into conversation, with Evie and Cole chiming in. My phone buzzes in my purse, and I ignore it. When it buzzes a second

time, I realize the others likely won't notice if I check my phone, so I surreptitiously pull it out and find two texts from Fergus.

*How many cookies is too many cookies for breakfast?*

*Never mind. If having cookies for breakfast is wrong, I don't want to be right.*

I glance up at the others, who are now deep in conversation. I type out a reply: *We can be wrong together. I've already had three this morning...and then had a full breakfast at the diner.*

Fergus: *Atta girl! Hey, I have a question for you.*

Me: *Shoot.*

Fergus: *You trust me, right?*

Me: *You know I do.*

Fergus: *In that case, are you free tomorrow night?*

Me: *Wait, let me check my jam-packed schedule. Okay, yes. Yes, I am.*

Fergus: *All night?*

This gives me pause. Free all night as in all *evening* because we're going to be out late somewhere? Or all night as in *overnight*? I'd ask him for details, but I have a feeling he'd evade my question in favor of surprising me. I normally hate surprises; like many people with anxiety, it's always manifested in a need for structure, details, and even control. I was being honest when I said I trusted Fergus, though.

Me: *Yes...*

He replies immediately: *Great. I'll pick you up at 6:30. Bring an overnight bag. xx*

I tune back into what's happening around me. Cole has disappeared, but Sylvie is still talking to Stella. Evie is watching me from across the table with that same small,

knowing smile she wore earlier. I don't even bother trying to hide my own smile.

"Fergus?" she mouths, inclining her chin toward my phone, and I nod.

As I sip the rest of my tea, I ponder what Hollie said about how being with Spencer feels right. Even though I'm still not convinced Fergus sees me as anything more than a friend, being with him *feels* right. He puts me at ease and brings me out of my shell. Maybe it's time I pull a page from Hollie's book and take a leap of my own.

## CHAPTER SEVEN ~ FERGUS

“Please don’t tell me you’ve decided the carousel wasn’t enough after all,” Louisa says. “I already checked it off the list, so you can’t take it back now.”

I shoot her a wry look. “Do you really think I’d do that to you?”

A begrudging hum of acknowledgment is the only answer I get.

We’re back at Bellevue Village. It’s past closing time, so the parking lot is nearly empty and the front gates, which are usually bustling with people coming and going, are deserted. A lone figure waits for us, tossing a set of keys from one hand to the other.

“Hi, Meredith,” Louisa calls. “You’re in on tonight’s mystery outing too?”

“I am. I’m actually envious of this one. I’d ask to tag along, but a third wheel would definitely spoil the romance.”

Louisa’s eyebrows fly up at the mention of romance. Meredith and I are only friendly acquaintances, so it’s natural for her to assume Louisa and I are a couple. I don’t bother correcting her.

I can feel Louisa’s curious gaze on me as Meredith continues. “Hugh said you know how everything inside the building works. Here are the keys and a few phone numbers you might need. A pair of security guards make the rounds through the night and they know you’re here. Their numbers are on there, and if you need anything else, you can call me or Hugh anytime.”

We thank Meredith and say our goodbyes.

“I’ll give you one hint about our destination,” I tell Louisa as we set off. “We’re heading for the events center, so it’s a bit of a hike.” We all came to the events center last month for a ’90s roller skating party that Wesley was DJing. “Hugh is working on reconfiguring some things to build an access road and a parking lot so people don’t have to walk through the entire Village if their destination is on the far side.”

“I never realized how huge this place really is,” she says, readjusting her duffle bag on her shoulder. I offered to carry it when we got out of the car, but she assured me it doesn’t weigh much.

“It’s quite the enterprise. Hugh and Ivy have turned it into a must-see attraction.”

“Sylvie told me they had a record-breaking number of visitors this holiday season, and that people came from all over the country and even around the world.” Her eyes are bright as she looks around at the darkened shops and eateries. “If I get a job here, I know it won’t be in the hustle and bustle of the Village itself, but the prospect of getting to be part of this in some way is exciting.”

“I know what you mean. I’m part of community relations for the MacKinnon Group, so I work directly with a lot of different people. It’s amazing to see the reach the group has and how many lives are touched by the work we do.”

We veer off one of the main streets of the Village to a short path that leads to the events center. I use the excuse of our close proximity to rest my hand on the small of Louisa’s back. She peers up at me with a shy smile that nearly turns me inside out.

“Here we are,” I say, guiding us around to the side of the building. I use the keys Meredith gave me to unlock the door and let us inside. When I was here earlier to set up, I left a battery-powered camping lantern turned on in the main room as a guide so I wouldn’t have to turn on all the overhead lights.



“You’re quiet,” I say as we make our way down the hall.  
“What are you thinking?”

“Well, Evie has been really into true crime stuff lately and she’s always got some podcast or other going whenever we’re in the car together. Not gonna lie, I’m kinda wondering if you’ve brought me here to murder me or...or, I don’t know, harvest my organs for black market purposes or something.”

“Hmm. I suppose I *did* just tell you how well-connected Hugh is...” I say slowly, as if I’m mulling it over. The way her head snaps in my direction dissolves any chance I had of keeping a straight face.

She laughs along with me. “So I don’t need to be on the lookout for sharp objects or bathtubs full of ice?”

“Consider yourself safe with me, internal organs and all.”

I expect her to laugh again, but she just smiles softly, her gaze lingering on my face before turning forward once more as we enter the main room of the event hall.

“What are you thinking now?” I ask, watching her face as she takes in the cozy arrangement of blankets and pillows, and the cooler in the middle of the room. “Any guesses about why we’re here?”

“When you said we’d be out all night and to pack a bag, I wondered if we were going to cross off ‘sleep under the stars’ from my list. Now that we’re here, I have no clue what you’re up to.”

I didn’t expect her to figure it out and I’m pleased she hasn’t. I take her hand and lead her to the pile of blankets in the center of the room. “All will be revealed shortly. Why don’t you make yourself comfortable in our little nest here, and I’ll be right back.”

I flick on one of the other nearby camping lanterns and then slip into a back room to make sure everything is set up. When I return, Louisa has kicked off her shoes and is sitting with one cushion propped behind her back and another in her lap.

“This is surprisingly comfortable,” she says.

“There are mats under the blankets,” I explain. “I also brought camp chairs we can set up if we get tired of sitting on the floor.”

“Wow, you thought of everything, Fergus. *Again.*”

“And the night’s just getting started.”

For some reason, my words make her blush. Maybe it’s sinking in that we’re alone and I’ve asked her to put her trust in me and spend the night with me without sharing any details up front. I’m aware of what a big deal that is for Louisa, and I’m determined to make this a night she’ll never forget.

## CHAPTER EIGHT ~ LOUISA

As Fergus pours two glasses of sparkling wine, Meredith's words from earlier ring in my head: '*A third wheel would definitely spoil the romance*'. I had brushed it off, assuming she misunderstood whatever Fergus had planned for us tonight, but now I can't help wondering if this *is* meant to be a romantic evening. It feels pretty romantic so far.

"You were on the right track," he says, handing me a glass. "I did bring you here to check off 'spend a night under the stars'."

I glance up at the dark blue ceiling. "Hidden skylights? Retractable roof? Or are you going to bust out a tent and some sleeping bags and drag me outside? If that's the case, I hope you packed a portable heater."

He chuckles. "None of the above. Ready?" He pulls a remote control out of his pocket. At my eager nod, he tilts his chin toward the ceiling, and I look in that direction. Nothing happens for a beat. I'm about to glance at Fergus when hundreds of tiny bluish-white lights flicker to life across the ceiling, creating a blanket of stars.

I stifle a gasp by clapping a hand over my mouth. Without taking my eyes off the ceiling, I set my drink aside and flop onto my back so I can see the entire ceiling. Off to the side, amidst the stars, is a glowing full moon. If I didn't know any better, I'd swear we were really out under the night sky.

"What do you think?" Fergus asks, lying down beside me.

"How...how is this real?" *How are you real?*

"Hugh got the idea earlier this year when he took Ivy camping in Scotland. He had it installed while the center was closed over Christmas, and they're going to officially unveil it

at the Village's New Year's Eve party. He agreed to let us take it for a test run first."

"It's incredible." My throat is thick with emotion, causing my voice to come out sounding slightly choked. "Are we really spending the whole night?"

"Aye, if you want to. I brought sleeping bags. I couldn't get a projector and screen to watch movies, but I have my laptop and every streaming service you can imagine. I have music too. I even made a playlist."

"How about some music and then a movie? Can I see your playlist? Did you get DJ Wes to help you?"

He laughs under his breath as he pulls out his phone. "This was all me, but I have to admit I was inspired by some of Wesley's recent mixes."

I sit up and accept the phone from him. The playlist is titled *A Night Under the Stars With Lulu*. My heart suddenly feels like it's too big for my chest. I skim the list, smiling to myself at the obvious theme of the songs:

"Dancing in the Moonlight" by Toploader

"A Sky Full of Stars" by Coldplay

"Starlight" by Muse

"Talking to the Moon" by Bruno Mars

"All of the Stars" by Ed Sheeran

"Harvest Moon" by Neil Young

"Counting Stars" by OneRepublic

Before I get any further, Fergus reaches over me and taps a song seemingly at random. The opening notes come from a speaker somewhere nearby.

"Bluetooth," Fergus explains, taking the phone from me and setting it aside. "I know you love this song. Care to dance under the stars with me?"

The song is “When the Stars Go Blue” by Bono and The Corrs. He’s right about me loving it, although as I take the hand he offers and get to my feet, I can’t figure out *how* he knows. When did we listen to it together? It’s not a song you’d hear on the radio since it was recorded during a VH1 Presents in the early 2000s and was never released as a single.

“You hum this song a lot,” Fergus says as he pulls me into his arms and starts swaying us back and forth. “I didn’t know what it was at first, so I asked Wesley.”

“Mister Music Trivia himself.” My voice shakes slightly. Humming is a nervous habit I developed in my teens; Dr. Woo refers to it as self-soothing. I don’t even realize I’m doing it most of the time. Over the last few months, I’ve caught myself humming a lot more often, although now it seems to be when I’m happy rather than when I’m anxious.

It boggles my mind how much Fergus pays attention. Like, *really* pays attention—to the things I say and do, the things I like, my behaviors and quirks. It’s natural for friends to pay close attention, though, right? Mine do, but then again, we’ve known each other our entire lives.

One song transitions into another and Fergus and I continue dancing. Neither of us says a word, which I don’t mind one bit. If only the gremlins in my head would shut up and let me enjoy this moment in peace. They sing the same refrain on repeat: *Friends or more? Friends or more? Does Fergus see you as a friend or something more? Is he incredibly observant or are you special in some way? You’re not special, so it can’t be that. What is it?*

The stars blur and blend and swirl overhead as Fergus pulls me closer. After a moment of being cheek to cheek, with his beard tickling my skin, he shifts until his face is pressed against my neck. I let out an involuntary sound somewhere between a sigh and a moan that makes me want to crawl into a hole. Fergus’s grip tightens, his lips brushing my neck almost imperceptibly, and then he releases me suddenly.

He puts just enough distance between us so our eyes can meet, which gives me a clear view of his pained expression. “I can’t go on like this.”

“I’m sorry,” I say quickly, taking a jerky step back.

Fergus grips my hips to hold me in place. “No, no, not the dancing, love. *This* as in...” He rakes a hand through his hair, sending it in every direction. His hand lands on my shoulder and he inhales deeply, his chest expanding. As he releases the breath, his hand moves to cup my face. “*This* as in pretending my feelings for you don’t run deeper than friendship. *Much* deeper.”

His words don’t compute. I feel like I did when we first met and it took me a while to adjust to his Scottish accent. At the time, I thought it was my imagination that he started speaking the tiniest bit slower whenever he was around me, but then as I got to know him better, I was certain that was exactly what he’d done.

“Lulu?”

“I’m sorry, I don’t...can you repeat what you just said?”

I expect exasperation, but I should know better by now. One side of Fergus’s mouth curves as he inches closer to me, lowering his head so he’s looking directly into my eyes. “I like you, Louisa. As a friend, yes, but deeper than that too.”

“Oh.” The word comes out on a gusty breath. “Are you sure?”

Fergus lets out a bewildered laugh. “Aye, quite sure. And if I’m not mistaken, you have feelings for me too.”

“I do,” I say automatically. There’s no use denying it or dancing around it. I’ve never had the courage to broach this subject myself, and now that the opportunity has fallen into my lap, I’m terrified I’ll screw it up...like by blurting, “I’m not sure what to do about the feelings, though.”

His thumb sweeps over my cheek, coming to rest on my jaw. “What do you mean?”

I swallow a sigh. “Can we sit?” My legs are shaking, but I don’t tell him that.

“Of course, love, here.” He leads me back to our nest of blankets. While I sit, he rummages through the cooler. I’m about to tell him I don’t think more alcohol is a good idea when he pulls out a bottle of water and hands it to me. That’s Fergus: always anticipating my needs. How could I *not* be head over heels for him?

He settles onto the blankets, facing me. “What do you mean you’re not sure what to do with your feelings?”

I take a sip of water, buying myself time to think. “Can we forget I said that?”

“We can, sure,” he says slowly. “But I think it’d be best to get things out in the open, don’t you?”

At my groan, his lips twitch briefly before he purses them to hide his smile. “This is so embarrassing,” I mutter.

The mirth in Fergus’s eyes is immediately replaced by concern. “You never need to be embarrassed around me, Louisa. You can tell me anything.”

Since I’ve known Fergus, I’ve felt my confidence growing. I’m not as easily embarrassed—even though my cheeks like to betray me by blushing at every opportunity—and I feel better equipped to handle things that once scared me. Except for right now. Right now, I’d like to hop up and run out of here rather than saying the words that are forming on my tongue.

“I do like you, Fergus,” I say. “I’ve liked you since Thanksgiving night when we met. Being around you feels... *different* from anything I’ve ever experienced. It feels good. *Better* than good.”

The light returns to his eyes a second before he smiles broadly. “Better than good,” he echoes. “I feel the same way.”

I let out a giddy little laugh that makes him chuckle. He inches closer and takes my free hand, clasping my fingers loosely in his. As I muster up more courage, I stare at his

hand, suddenly unable to meet his eyes. “You’re wonderful, Fergus. Kind and funny and thoughtful. *So* patient. But...and this is where it gets embarrassing...I’m not sure what I have to offer you.”

He’s quiet for a moment, likely expecting me to meet his eyes. I can’t. “What do you mean?”

I blow out a noisy breath. “I’m almost completely inexperienced when it comes to...to...men. To dating and relationships and...and the other stuff that comes with dating and relationships.” My cheeks feel like they’re on fire. Maybe if I blush hard enough, I’ll spontaneously combust and this conversation will be over. “I’m sure it’s not a stretch for you to figure out what I mean.”

I jump when Fergus’s free hand touches my cheek. He traces a finger along my jaw and then gently tilts my face up until I meet his eyes. “You’ve no need to be embarrassed by those things,” he says. “When you say you’re not sure what you have to offer me, I take it you’re referring to the physical side of a relationship?” At my jerky nod, he says, “Unless that’s not something you’re interested in—”

“I’m interested,” I say quickly. That whole spontaneous combustion thing would *really* come in handy right about now.

“All right, well, there’s nothing shameful about being ‘inexperienced’, as you say. Everyone is different, and there’s no rush. Other than that, as for what you have to offer me...” He shakes his head, dropping his hand from my face to clasp my hand in both of his. “I enjoy your company immensely. You make me laugh, you make me think. I love that we can talk about everything and nothing, that we can just be together comfortably in silence. I’m not sure what more there is than that.”

What he says makes sense and I feel the same way, yet I can’t help worrying he’ll grow tired of me. That my nervousness or fears will grate on him as time goes on. It’s happened before. I know he’s dated and been in a few serious



relationships and, regardless of what he says, there are certain expectations in most relationships.

“We don’t have to decide anything tonight,” Fergus says. “It’s out in the open now. Take as much time as you need to think it over and I’ll be here when you’re ready.”

Is this man for real? Books, television, and even songs have led me to believe there’s little in-between when it comes to these things. People expect answers and grand gestures and commitments. Agreeing to date someone you’ve admitted you have feelings for *should* be an easy thing. If only I wasn’t the queen of analysis paralysis, frozen by indecision and my own fears and self-doubts.

Thankfully, I don’t have long to dwell on my thoughts before Fergus speaks again. “How about something to eat?” he asks as he rummages in the cooler. “I got those wraps you like from Cravings and a few different kinds of salads. I also have popcorn and candy for later if we watch movies. Assuming you still want to stay, that is.”

“I do,” I say emphatically. “This whole thing is incredible, Fergus. I still can’t believe you went to all this trouble for me.”

Fergus sets down a container and sits on his knees, facing me. “I wish you could see yourself the way I do, Lulu. If you could, you’d see that I do things for you because I want to make you happy. When you’re happy, you positively light up. It’s the most beautiful sight. In fact, doing these things for you is likely self-serving because making you happy makes *me* happy, and I’ve never been as happy as I’ve been these last few months.”

Fergus’s words, paired with the way he’s looking at me, his expression akin to wonder—it *can’t* be wonder, surely?—causes that heart-too-big sensation in my chest once more. This time it’s paired with my esophagus feeling too tight.

“Fergus, I—” *Can’t breathe. Can’t swallow. Can’t think. Love you so much.* I don’t think it’s my imagination that he’s inching closer, that his full, beautiful lips are moving closer to

mine. I suck in a breath and let my eyes fall closed. The moment, along with my nerves, is shattered by a ringing sound coming from the pocket of Fergus's jeans.

He sighs. "I'm sorry." The ringing gets louder, and I realize my eyes are still closed in anticipation. They pop open to see Fergus's gaze bouncing between me and the phone in his hand. "I normally shut this off, but I was waiting for an important call. Do you mind?"

"No, go ahead."

Fergus squeezes my shoulder as he gets to his feet and leaves the room. I stay where I am, rooted to the spot, contemplating sticking my head in the cooler as a way to shock my nervous system back into functioning properly.

"You all right, love?" Fergus asks when he returns a moment later. My vigorous, wordless nod leaves him looking unconvinced, but he doesn't pursue it. "I brought the camp chairs with me and a box to prop the laptop on," he says, shifting things around to set up. He waits for me to sit and then hands me my drink and one of the wraps he pulled from the cooler a few minutes ago.

He glances at his phone as he settles into his chair. "I know our evening's only just begun, but are you free tomorrow too?"

"Other than needing to shop for a few last-minute party things, yes."

"I'd be happy to accompany you if you like," he says. "And then I have one final pre-birthday surprise if you're up for it."

Part of me is shocked that Fergus still wants to spend time with me, despite all the lovely things he's said tonight. The gremlins in my head would have me believe my hesitance would put him off and cause him to distance himself. Take *that*, gremlins. "That sounds good to me if you're sure. I don't want to take up all your time."

Fergus leans back in his seat, crossing his outstretched legs at the ankle. "I'm quite content to have you fill my days,

Louisa. And in the case of today, my nights too.”

His easy smile matches his loose posture. He’s the picture of relaxed tranquility. I attempt to mimic his body language despite the fact my thoughts and heart seem to be competing in a race to nowhere.

Could it really be this easy? Being with someone like Fergus? Trusting him enough to let down my guard? Dare I say...even falling in love?

## CHAPTER NINE ~ LOUISA

Things are going well until it comes time to go to sleep. Fergus and I have spent the last few hours watching movies and chatting in between, keeping to lighter topics after our heavier conversation from earlier.

Fergus is already in his sleeping bag when I return from getting ready for bed. Despite wearing flannel pajamas that cover nearly every inch of me, I feel exposed as I flop down next to him and climb into my own sleeping bag. I swear I feel Fergus's eyes on me, but every time I glance at him, his gaze is trained on the ceiling.

Fergus managed to make the enormous room feel cozy all night with our nest of blankets surrounded by lanterns. Now it suddenly feels cavernous. I snuggle into my sleeping bag and attempt to block out my surroundings, but doing so makes me hyper aware of the man lying a few feet away. I've never slept next to a man before...other than Wesley, who doesn't count since I've known him my entire life and he's like a brother to me. Lying next to Fergus in the darkened room with nothing but the faux moon and stars above and a few lanterns still glowing feels intimate somehow.

"I can practically hear your brain working, love." Fergus's low voice startles me. "Do you want to share any of your spinning thoughts?"

"Not particularly."

He chuckles. "Didn't think so." A few beats pass and then he says, "You can, you know. I'm happy to listen. But if you simply want to lie there or go to sleep, that's fine too."

My heart is racing. I can feel it pulsing throughout my body, and it's causing a whooshing sound in my ears. I take a few deep breaths and focus my attention on the starry sky

above us. I had no intention of making more confessions tonight, but just like this setting feels intimate, it also feels safe. I know I can tell Fergus anything. “I was thinking of what we talked about earlier...about me being... inexperienced.”

Fergus makes a humming sound to let me know he’s listening.

“You already know most of the details about my teen years and how controlling my dad became after my mom died. When Dad pulled me out of school to homeschool me, my world became so small. Other than my dad and grandmother, the only people I saw were my friends and their families.”

“You must have felt so isolated,” Fergus says softly.

“I did. I hated it, but it was easier to go along with it than to fight my dad. Anyway, barely ever leaving the house left me with zero opportunity to date. When I finally went to college part-time, I felt like a fish out of water, and my whole world came down to managing my anxiety and passing my classes. I barely socialized with other students and didn’t make any new friends, let alone date. Then I started working from home, and well...”

Over the years, Dr. Woo has gently pointed out that she thinks I use working from home as a crutch. I can’t really argue with her. I love setting my own hours and being able to go at my own pace, but it keeps me secluded from the outside world, from harm and danger, heartache and uncertainty. All of those things are a natural part of life, but sometimes that traumatized teenager who still resides in me takes over and convinces me it’s safer and easier to live this way.

“So you’ve truly never dated?” Fergus asks, sounding tentative as if maybe he’s worried he’ll somehow offend me.

My body goes hot and prickly all over. I hate talking about this, even though I was the one who brought it up. But...if there’s a chance something romantic might happen between Fergus and me, I need to lay it all out for him.

“I was honestly never interested,” I tell him. “Even before I was homeschooled, I was never boy crazy like some of my friends were. I didn’t have crushes. I...I wondered if...” My cheeks feel like they’re on fire again. I can’t bring myself to look at Fergus, but from the corner of my eye, I can see he’s watching me. “I wondered if there was something wrong with me,” I blurt. “Something broken inside me. And then when Stella came out as bisexual and I started learning more terminology, I wondered if I was somewhere on the asexual spectrum, like maybe demisexual. I still don’t know, to be honest, but there was one guy...”

A beat of silence passes before Fergus says, “Oh?”

I peek in his direction to see him studying me intently. His expression smooths when our eyes meet.

“It was about five years ago,” I say, returning my gaze to the ceiling, wishing I could launch myself into the stars rather than talk about this. I know I could stop talking right now and Fergus wouldn’t question it, but it doesn’t help keeping it all bottled up inside. “When Stella got married, she asked Evie, Hollie, and me to be her bridesmaids. Her now-ex-husband had three groomsmen so the numbers would be even. One of them was really flirty with me, and I liked the attention. We hung out a lot leading up to the wedding, but it was usually in a group setting. He asked me out a few times, and I eventually said yes. I didn’t tell him much about my past, but I was honest with him about my anxiety, and he was really sweet and understanding...at first.”

I blow out a slow breath before continuing. “Long story short, his patience soon wore thin. I think intellectually he understood, but he’d never dealt with anyone with my level of anxiety before, and he thought I should just be able to do things or get over my fears. He also wanted more physical intimacy than I was comfortable with. He was cajoling at first, telling me to relax, take it easy, sex was no big deal, but after a while, it felt like he was mocking me. He asked me more than once how I could be nearly thirty and still be a virgin. I blocked his number and avoided him as much as possible after

that, which wasn't easy since we kept being thrown together for wedding stuff."

Fergus makes a choked noise that almost sounds like a soft growl. "Would you think less of me if I said I'd like to resort to physical violence where this lad is concerned?"

I laugh weakly. His words cause some of the tightness in my muscles to relax. "The girls threatened the same thing when they found out. I didn't tell them until after the wedding because I didn't want to create a bunch of drama and ruin Stella's big day."

"Louisa." Fergus sits up, shifting so he's facing me. "You kept all that to yourself?"

I push myself into a seated position so he's not looking down at me, although I have trouble meeting his eyes. "I felt like I had to at the time. *Now* I know I should have told them, but..." I give a helpless shrug. I finally meet Fergus's eyes, not sure what to expect there. Judgment, maybe? Pity? His beautiful moss-colored eyes are full of sympathy and understanding, though. I have a sudden urge to crawl into his lap and ask him to hold me.

"Anyway, pair that experience with my previous disinterest in dating, and I decided it was better to just be on my own for a while. I didn't think 'a while' would turn into another five years, but here we are."

"Here we are," Fergus echoes. "I'm sorry you went through that. All of it."

"You don't think I'm ridiculous?" The question is barely audible. I don't even know where it came from; it just slipped out. If I'm not mistaken, Fergus looks affronted by the query. Without giving him a chance to respond, I forge on. "As a kid, I was always told I was too sensitive. I'd often hear things like 'you feel too much', 'you have too many emotions', 'you're too soft'. And then when my mom died..." My voice wavers, but I force back the tears that sting my eyes. "When my mom

died, I felt *everything*. Sometimes I felt like I was going to be crushed under the weight of it.”

I meet Fergus’s eyes again and nearly do a double take when I see they’re swimming with unshed tears. My heart gives a painful squeeze and then begins racing once more. “Maybe we should talk about something else—”

He shakes his head, blinking hard. “No, no, I think it’s important to talk about this. For both of us. What you’re saying reminds me of myself, and I don’t want to turn things around and make it about me.”

“Tell me what you’re thinking. I want to know.”

Fergus sucks in a deep breath and blows it out slowly. “You know my dad left when I was young and my mum struggled with mental health issues for years before she died. Something in me changed after my dad left. Like you said, I often heard the refrain of ‘too soft, too sensitive’. I even heard a lot of ‘too nice’ as if that’s somehow a bad thing?” That baffled expression is back, and he shakes his head.

“I had to be the man of the house from age ten onward,” he continues. “I took care of my mum and the house when she was in her low periods, which became more frequent as the years passed. It was a struggle, but it made me a compassionate, patient person. Sure, sometimes feeling so much meant I suffered more than others, but I’d rather feel too much than nothing at all. I never wanted to end up like my dad, who could walk away from his family and never look back, you know?”

Words won’t come past the lump in my throat, so all I can do is nod.

Fergus shifts closer to me, taking one of my hands in both of his like he did earlier. He ducks his head so we’re eye to eye. I’ve never known anyone whose emotions are painted so plainly across their face for the world to see. I’ve always done my best to hide my feelings, but Fergus isn’t ashamed, and I love that about him.



“If you ask me, your softness is your superpower,” he says. “It makes you an incredible friend. It means you do things like volunteer at the animal shelter and smuggle cats into your flat so they won’t be lonely. You have a big, beautiful heart, Louisa, and that’s a *good* thing.”

As warmth spreads through my body, I think of what Fergus said about feeling everything being better than feeling nothing at all. I’ve gone through periods where I’ve felt completely numb, so I know he’s right, even when all those feelings have left a deep ache inside. With Fergus holding my hand and gazing into my eyes, I’m feeling everything now and that ache is a sweet one, one that fills me with sensations I’ve never experienced before.

“Thank you, Fergus,” I whisper. The words aren’t nearly enough, but he seems to understand.

“Are you ready to sleep now?” he asks.

I nod. At the same moment I notice how heavy my body feels from exhaustion, I also realize my heart is no longer pounding. We settle back into our sleeping bags, both of us automatically turning onto our sides so we’re facing each other.

“Thank you for arranging all these magical experiences for me, Fergus,” I say, my voice slow and sleepy.

He touches my face gently, and my eyes slip closed. “Go to sleep, love.”

Behind my closed eyes, I see a swirl of bright stars and Fergus’s moss-colored eyes. His hand remains warm on my cheek, and the word ‘love’ echoes in my mind as I fade into sleep.

## CHAPTER TEN ~ FERGUS

Tomorrow is New Year's Eve and, more importantly, Louisa's thirty-fifth birthday. Lulu and I have spent a lot of time together over the last couple of months, but our time together this week has felt different. Perhaps it's because it's been just the two of us for the most part. Despite my best efforts to orchestrate time alone with her—giving her a lift somewhere, stopping by her apartment with something, that sort of thing—we rarely get time alone without the rest of our friends.

Her birthday bucket list has united us and given me the perfect excuse to spend as much time with her as possible and make her see how much I care for her. I had no intention of revealing my feelings for her last night, but I couldn't hold my tongue any longer. I was afraid she'd feel trapped with me or it would make things awkward between us, especially if I'd been reading her wrong all these weeks and she didn't return my feelings.

She does, though. And that conversation led to her opening up in ways I never expected. Now I just need to be patient. Luckily, that's one of my strong suits. I remind myself of that fact as I think of how badly I wanted to kiss Louisa last night while we were dancing under a blanket of makeshift stars. Or how it felt to fall asleep next to her and wake up in our side-by-side sleeping bags and see the soft, sleepy smile on her face when our eyes locked. Or the long, tight embrace we shared when I dropped her off this morning.

Today I plan to help Louisa accomplish one more thing from her list. My desire to help her was never really about ticking items off a list, although I've enjoyed the light in her eyes with each surprise and each item she crosses off. It's about so much more than that, though. Louisa thinks her

anxiety paired with her lack of relationship experience are impediments, but they're just small parts of a beautiful whole. She's capable of so much more than she realizes, and if she needs a bit of help once in a while, well, who doesn't? There's no shame in that.

"Two Scots in an Irish pub," Hugh says, clapping me on the back as we leave the back room of Connelly's Pub. "I feel like there's a joke in there somewhere."

Hugh and I have just spent the last hour setting everything up for Louisa's final pre-birthday surprise. As with the other items on the list, I've had to get creative for this one, and I think Lulu will appreciate it. I might not be able to help her cross off every item before midnight tomorrow, but after tonight, I hope Louisa will truly believe I'm willing to do whatever it takes to help make her dreams come true, now and in the future.

"I don't know any jokes, but how about you let me buy you lunch as thanks for your help?"

"I'm not one to turn down a free lunch," Hugh says, which makes me laugh since the man is easily a multi-millionaire.

"How about time with your favorite cousin?"

"Aye, I guess that's all right too," he says, chuckling when I jam my elbow into his side.

We sit and order two of the fish and chips lunch special, along with two pints of beer. When our drinks arrive, Hugh clinks his glass against mine.

"To spending time with my favorite cousin," he says, then takes a long drink. "I'm glad I convinced you to move to Bellevue. I knew you'd be an asset to the MacKinnon Group and that you were wasting your talent at that agency back home."

When I left Edinburgh and moved back to Callander to take care of my mum, I also left a good job at an advertising agency. I found a part-time office job in Callander that allowed me to spend the bulk of my time at home with my mother

while still bringing in an income. I stuck with the job for a few months after my mum died because I didn't know what else to do, nor did I particularly care. Since moving to Bellevue, I've excelled in my job in fundraising and community relations. I get to work with people directly rather than spending my days in a stuffy office, and it feels good to know I'm part of an enterprise that truly cares about and helps people.

"I owe you a debt of gratitude for pulling me out of the muck of my own grief and bringing me over here," I tell Hugh.

"You owe me nothing, Fergus." He sits back in his seat and thanks the waitress who drops off our food. When she's gone, he leans forward and repeats, "*Nothing*. That's what we do for the ones we love. I've been there, I know that muck well. You're here now and you seem to be thriving in more ways than one."

A brief silence falls as we pass the vinegar and ketchup back and forth and then tuck into our food. "We need to do this more often," Hugh says. "Just the two of us, but the four of us as well. Ivy would love another couple to double date with."

"Louisa and I aren't a couple yet," I point out.

"*Yet* being the key word, my friend," Hugh says confidently. "I saw the way she looked at you in the café the other day. Just from those few minutes with her, I could tell she's special. You wouldn't be pulling all these rabbits out of your hat if she wasn't."

"Louisa certainly is special." That's an understatement. When I first met her, I wondered if I was drawn to her because of some misguided savior complex. I couldn't reach my mum in a lot of ways, couldn't help her, couldn't *save* her. It didn't take long for me to understand it was different with Louisa. She doesn't want or need to be fixed or saved. I do my best to be there for her, support her, and bolster her, but she was strong on her own before I even came into the picture, and she's grown stronger before my eyes over the last couple of months.

So yes, 'special' is an understatement. Louisa Henshaw is incredible.

After lunch, Hugh and I walk out to the parking lot of Connelly's together. "You and Ivy will drop by tonight for a bit, right?" I ask.

"Wouldn't miss it." Hugh grips my shoulder and pulls me in for a hug. "Ivy can barely contain her excitement. She said it's something she needs to see to believe."

I laugh, holding on an extra beat. Hugh doesn't seem to mind; he even pats me on the back as if he understands. When I moved to Bellevue, I never imagined I'd walk into a ready-made family of sorts: my cousin and his wife, and, thanks to Hollie, her group of friends, including Louisa. Moving here changed my life for the better. And if I'm lucky, tonight will bring even more change.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN ~ LOUISA

Fergus: *I'll pick you up at six. Bring your appetite. xx*

I've read Fergus's last text at least a dozen times since he sent it a few hours ago, but that doesn't stop me from reading it again. He helped me run my errands this morning before dropping me off at home with a promise to text when he knew what time he'd pick me up tonight. It's five o'clock now, and I'm ready to go. One of the super fun things about my anxiety is that I'm always ready for things way ahead of time. My brain comes up with a million and one things that could happen to delay me: I could get a phone call, I could slip in the shower, the jeans I chose might suddenly not fit even though they fit perfectly last week. Welcome to Anxietyville, population: Me. Even when I'm fully aware of the fact I'm being irrational, I can't control it.

I turn my phone over and over in my hand. All I want is to call one of my friends and have them give me a pep talk. Evie and Stella are out on dates tonight, though, and Hollie is thousands of kilometers away, not to mention it's 10 p.m. in London and she's likely either out with Spencer or maybe even in bed for the night since she mentioned the jet lag was hitting her hard.

My phone buzzes in my hand, startling me. I let out a sound somewhere between a laugh and a sob when I see Hollie's message on the screen.

*My Spidey senses are tingling. Is everything okay?*

The four of us have often joked about being telepathically linked. I suppose it's only natural since we've known each other our whole lives. We've even experienced that strange phenomenon of synced periods over the years.

*Me: I feel like Stella would make a Star Wars joke right now, something about the Force being strong with this one. Your Best Friend Powers still work from almost six thousand kilometers away.*

Seconds after the little Read check mark appears, my phone rings with a video chat request.

“You *must* have something better to do than talk to me at ten o’clock on a Friday night while you’re in London with your hot new boyfriend,” I say.

“What can I say, I’m needy and I missed your face.” Hollie squints at the screen. “Your face looks extra good tonight. What’s the occasion?”

I laugh. Hollie hasn’t even been gone for a week, but seeing her and hearing her voice makes me realize how much I miss her. How much I depend on her, how often we talk throughout a normal day. “Fergus has one last surprise for me to help with my birthday bucket list.”

“Ahh, and you’re nervous.” She phrases it as a statement rather than a question. “Hang on.” I have a sudden view of the ceiling in whatever room Hollie is in as she speaks to Spencer. I hear him murmur, “Of course; give Louisa my love,” and then Hollie is on the move, the camera jostling all over the place. A door closes and a second later, she flops onto a bed and pops back on screen. “Okay. How can I help put you at ease?”

“Can we...can we talk about sex?”

From the way Hollie bites her lip, I can tell she’s trying not to laugh. I can’t say I blame her.

“Sex,” she says. “Yes, of course we can talk about that. *What about it?*”

The air rushes out of me. My cheeks are hot, even though I know I don’t need to be embarrassed with Hollie. “Okay, so you know how years ago I told you how I wondered if I was demisexual because I never really had crushes and didn’t feel physically attracted to people? Well...that changed when I met

Fergus, and my feelings for him run the gamut from emotional to physical.”

“And I’m guessing that scares you,” Hollie says.

“*Terrifies* me. I have no idea what to do with all these feelings.” I think back to Fergus saying my softness was my superpower, but there’s nothing soft about the way I’m feeling now. It’s all jumbled and confusing and foreign. “Fergus and I actually talked about a lot of things last night, things I’ve only ever shared with you and Dr. Woo. He knows I’m inexperienced when it comes to dating and...and sex.”

Hollie nods her head slowly. I know her well enough to know she’s choosing her next words carefully. Her eyes light up suddenly and she makes a small humming sound. “Remember how we used to sneak some of your parents’ old records, and Meatloaf’s *Bat Out of Hell* was one of our favorites? We were obsessed with ‘Paradise by the Dashboard Light’, do you remember that?”

I sputter out a laugh. Of all the things I imagined Hollie saying, that was not among them. “My dad was so mad when he heard us singing that song. We had no clue what the lyrics meant, but he didn’t care. He locked that record away, and I never saw it again.”

“I still feel all tingly and nostalgic when I hear that song. Still know all the lyrics too, just like I’m sure you do.” We both dissolve into laughter, which feels so good. Hollie is the first to sober. “Anyway, I’m sure you’re wondering what my point is.”

I make a quiet hum of ascent, and she gives me a wry smile.

“Sex is so prevalent in society—we see it from the time we’re old enough to turn on the TV, and before we’re old enough to understand the lyrics of songs. We have ideas about it drilled into us, like that you’re a prude if you don’t have sex and you’re promiscuous if you do. People will always have opinions, but they don’t matter. Nobody has lived your life,



nobody has experienced the things you have. You have to do what works for you. What feels right. It doesn't matter what other people think, and it's none of their business anyway."

I'm silent for a moment as I mull over her words. Before I can say anything, she speaks again. "Let me ask you this: sex aside, do you want to be with Fergus? Can you see yourself having a relationship with him?"

"Yes." The word comes out on a rush of air.

"Then you need to open your heart and let love in. I know it's scary, but I promise you it's worth it. I wouldn't be sitting in this apartment in London right now if I hadn't followed my heart. I know it's not exactly the same for you, and the sex stuff adds an extra layer of anxiety, but Louisa...Fergus is head over heels for you. You've been avoiding that fact and your own feelings for weeks, but you can't deny it anymore. I think it's time you face your feelings head on."

"Have I told you lately how much I love you?" I ask.

Hollie's earnest expression is replaced by a bright smile. "Every day, but I never get tired of hearing it. I love you too, Lulu. Go have an amazing night. Feel the fear and do it anyway."

She's right. I *know* she is, and yet that doesn't stop my heart from racing or my stomach from rolling. Or those niggly little gremlins in my brain. But it's time to face those things head on too. To feel the fear and do it anyway.

## CHAPTER TWELVE ~ LOUISA

As I unbuckle my seatbelt and step out of Fergus's car, I rack my brain trying to figure out why we're at Connelly's Pub. We've been here before—in fact, we were here exactly two weeks ago tonight for Hollie's birthday celebration—but I can't imagine what we're doing here tonight.

"We're upstairs," Fergus says when we enter the restaurant section downstairs. We climb the stairs and Fergus guides me toward the back room where we had Hollie's party.

My steps slow as we approach the door, and my heart knocks around painfully in my chest. I have sudden visions of people popping out and yelling 'Surprise!' when we enter. Surely Fergus knows me better than that.

Fergus grips my hand, stopping me before we reach the door. "I was able to arrange something special that I had in mind, but I couldn't book the room for a private party on such short notice. I've invited a few people, but other patrons will likely come and go throughout the evening. I know you're not a fan of crowds or too much noise, so if it ever becomes too much and you need a moment alone or even want to leave, you can tell me, okay?"

God, this man. This incredible, thoughtful man. How did I get so lucky to have him in my life? Gestures like that make me feel as if some of the long-broken pieces inside me are stitching themselves back together. I press my lips together and nod, afraid to speak and risk blurting out something like 'I love you'.

Fergus squeezes my hand and then laces his fingers with mine before leading me into the back room. I don't recognize the few people milling around the dart board, drinking pints of beer. My heart surges when Fergus points to the other side of

the room, where Evie, Stella, Wesley, and Leland are crowded around a large table. They stand when they see us, and I take in what they're wearing: a variety of 'I Heart New York' merch, from hats to t-shirts to pins.

"What—" I sputter around a laugh.

"I know New Year's Eve isn't technically 'til tomorrow, but since you can't be in New York City, I thought I'd bring NYC to you," Fergus says. "I got the idea from the British-themed tea party the girls organized for Hollie last month."

Evie reaches us first. "Happy almost birthday and almost New Year!" she says, giving me a tight one-armed hug. When she releases me, she hands me a red t-shirt and places a Statue of Liberty crown on my head. The others greet Fergus and me with hugs, and then I pull the t-shirt on over my long-sleeved top. It features a pattern with iconic New York City landmarks, food, and more.

"A few other people will be coming in a bit," Fergus says, handing me a large, thick card. "Your friends can only stay for an hour or so, so I thought we'd start with dinner and then go from there."

The card in my hand is a hand-written menu in what I recognize as Fergus's neat handwriting. Scrawled across the top is: *Lulu and Fergus's New Year's Eve in New York City*, and underneath is a list of food including Waldorf salad, thin crust pizza, jumbo hot dogs, cheesecake, and frozen hot chocolate.

"I know it's a bit strange and eclectic, but—"

Before Fergus can get the rest of the sentence out, I throw my arms around him. He stumbles back, chuckling against my ear as he wraps his arms around me so tightly my feet nearly leave the floor. I close my eyes and enjoy the light, airy feeling overtaking my body. When I open my eyes, I catch Evie's gleeful gaze over Fergus's shoulder, and notice Stella taking a surreptitious picture of us on her phone.

I release Fergus and step back, straightening my crown. “I feel like I’ve been thanking you non-stop all week and here I am thanking you again. This is amazing, Fergus.”

The six of us crowd around the table, and two servers bring out the salads. The bartender comes over with two pitchers of Big Apple Martinis—one alcoholic and one not.

Fergus leans in close to me, his breath warm on my face. “I asked them to do a mocktail version in case you’d prefer that.”

Once again, Fergus’s thoughtfulness astounds me. I only drink alcohol occasionally, and rarely in public. I don’t mind the faintest hint of a pleasant buzz if I’m somewhere safe with people I trust, but anything more than that feels too out of control, which means the gremlins take over.

Hugh and Ivy arrive as we’re about to have dessert. Fergus goes to get extra chairs so they can join us, and Ivy says hello to everyone before slipping into Fergus’s vacated seat beside me. At Fergus’s mock glare, Ivy simply grins at him and shrugs, so he drops into a chair between Hugh and Wesley.

“This is so great,” Ivy says, glancing at my t-shirt and crown before scanning the menu that’s propped in the center of the table. “The MacKinnon men were certainly born with a strong romance gene.”

One of the servers arrives with dessert at that moment, saving me from having to formulate a response. There’s a hush of appreciation as we all dig into our cheesecake, and then conversation starts up again and Ivy leans in to speak to me.

“I hope you don’t mind, but Fergus told me about your predicament with needing to move. Hugh and I have worked with Evie, so I know she’s a top-notch realtor, but I got thinking about some of the investment properties Hugh and I own. Fergus said you’re not interested in buying, but we have a few places with rental options or even rent to own. Maybe when you come in to chat with us about the new job, we could show you the properties and see if anything strikes your fancy.”

“Oh, I couldn’t let you give me a job *and* help me find a place to live,” I say, squirming in discomfort at the thought.

Ivy cocks her head to the side, studying my face. “Why not?”

A simple question, spoken with curiosity rather than judgment. *Why not?* Why do I always automatically want to crawl out of my own skin and deflect when people offer to help me? Why am I so worried about putting people out even when they’re the ones who *offer* help?

“That would be great, actually,” I say. “Evie said she’d be happy to help me, but she’s been doing huge property deals lately and isn’t familiar with what’s available for rent right now.”

“Great! I’ll put together the options and we’ll talk about it in a week or two. Or I can email them to you so there’s less pressure to look at them, and *then* we can talk about them.” She takes a huge bite of her cheesecake and shimmies her shoulders, making little hums of pleasure. “This cheesecake is amazing. Have you had the cheesecake cups Willow makes at Cravings? The pumpkin ones she had this fall were out of this world. And then she had a bunch of different flavors for Christmas...”

As Ivy waxes poetic about Willow’s cheesecake, I glance up to find Fergus watching me from across the table. My cheeks were already warm from the pleasure of Ivy’s easy kindness, but they heat further under Fergus’s affectionate expression. I lift my Big Apple Martini—or ‘fauxtini’ as Stella dubbed it—and salute him with it. He lifts his own drink and does the same, shooting me a wink that makes my body tingle from head to toe.

Shortly after we finish with dessert, Meredith shows up, along with Willow and her fiancé Jasper, plus Sylvie and Cole. We pull another table over and manage to cram everyone in. Fergus ends up back beside me, pressed close with his arm around me. The traditional Irish music that had been playing

softly in the background changed to dance music and grew in volume as more people filtered into the room.

When someone suggests we head for the dance floor, Evie and Stella pull me aside to tell me they need to leave to get to the party they were invited to at a local art gallery.

“I feel so bad,” Stella says, gripping my hand tightly. She looks longingly toward the dance floor. “I hate to leave. Tonight has been a blast.”

“I’m glad you could be here for as long as you were,” I tell them. “And we’ll be together again tomorrow.”

Evie’s gaze sweeps over the dance floor before locking on mine. “Fergus has really pulled out all the stops, hasn’t he?”

“He has. This whole week.” I catch his eye where he’s standing with Hugh on the outskirts of the dance floor. We share what feels like a secret smile and then, with butterflies taking flight in my stomach, I turn back to my friends. “We’ve spent so much time together this week and really opened up to each other. I’m just...working on getting out of my own way.”

“Oh, Lulu.” Evie moves first and in the next second, I’m the filling in a hug sandwich between her and Stella. “You’re strong, you can do it. You deserve to be happy.”

“Fergus is a rare and wonderful find,” Stella says. “Don’t let him get away.”

Fergus *is* a rare and wonderful find. And if I can do what I said and get out of my own way, he could be *my* rare and wonderful find.

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“You all right?” Fergus asks, his lips brushing my ear and making me shiver.

The dance floor is getting crowded. I hadn’t minded much since Ivy, Hugh, Sylvie, and Cole had been dancing with us,

which mostly blocked out the rest of the crowd. Ivy and Hugh left a while ago, though, and Sylvie and Cole have just gone to sit down and have a drink.

“I’m fine, thanks.” At least I am as long as I’m looking into Fergus’s beautiful moss-colored eyes.

Fergus takes my hand and guides me to a less crowded section of the dance floor. “Dancing is better in a group, don’t you think? I suppose it’s too much to expect a party like this to play a slow song or two. If Wesley were DJing, I’d put in a request.”

“Oh? What song would you request?” I ask.

Fergus tilts his head to the side as he thinks. We’re still on the dance floor, although we’ve stopped moving. We’re already standing close, but Fergus gently grips my shoulders and pulls me closer. “‘Perfect’ by Ed Sheeran.”

There’s no mistaking the love in Fergus’s steady gaze. It steals my breath and, for one shining moment, fills me to the brim with joy. And then that familiar uncertainty takes over, turning quickly to something akin to terror. Why, why, *why* am I like this?

A cheer goes up around the room, startling me so badly I jump and knock into Fergus. He puts his arm around my shoulder and turns me toward the small stage, where a beautiful redheaded woman is approaching the mic and waving at people.

“Good evening, everyone. We hope many of you will join us for our New Year’s Eve festivities tomorrow night, but we’re going to be ringing in the new year a bit early too. If I could direct your attention to the screen on the wall here, we’ll be starting the countdown in just a few seconds. Grab your partner, a friend, a drink, a noisemaker, or all of the above, and prepare for an early midnight!”

The screen flickers to life, showing the iconic multicolored Waterford crystal ball in Times Square. The countdown on the screen starts at sixty, and people around us call out the seconds

as they decrease. A whole minute seems excessive when ten or even twenty seconds would suffice. But as I stare at the screen, I realize the images are changing to show a compilation of clips from different years in Times Square.

I turn to Fergus, who's watching me with a small smile. "Did you do this?" I ask, and he nods. I'm vaguely aware of the volume around us increasing as people shout out the countdown numbers. The noise has drawn even more people into the room from the main part of the pub.

When the countdown hits one, people cheer and clap, yelling "Happy New Year!" as a shower of confetti rains down on us. Over Fergus's shoulder, I see people hugging and kissing, while others belt out the lyrics to "Auld Lang Syne", which is now blasting from the speakers.

A giddy laugh spills from my lips as I focus back on Fergus. He's standing closer than he was before, and he flashes me a breathtaking smile. Someone knocks into him from behind, pushing him even closer. He grips my hips as he steadies us, and I brace myself with my hands flat on his chest. We're jostled again by a passing couple, and this time I use the forward momentum to close the distance between us and plant my lips on Fergus's.

My brain malfunctions the second our lips meet. I freeze in place, aware only of my fingers now clutching the front of Fergus's shirt, his lips against mine...and the fact he also seems to be frozen. Embarrassment rushes through me, but my legs won't listen to my brain's signal to take a step back. It doesn't matter anyway because in the next second, Fergus's hands leave my hips to cup my face, and his lips move against mine.

The commotion of the room fades away, leaving the rest of my senses heightened. Fergus tastes like the whisky he was drinking, sweet and spicy with a hint of vanilla. His lips are soft and the pads of his thumbs are rough as they sweep over my cheeks. His scent wraps around me, familiar and comforting, yet exhilarating.



Loud music infiltrates my consciousness. I'm suddenly aware of everything around me all at once: the room full of people standing in clusters, laughing and talking and dancing; "New York, New York" by Frank Sinatra blaring from the speakers; and Fergus, who releases me slowly, almost hesitantly, his fingers trailing down my cheeks and jaw before dropping to my shoulders.

He looks as stunned as I feel. I imagine us as mirror images with wide eyes and kiss-reddened lips. If the familiar prickling heat in my cheeks is any indication, my lips aren't the only things that are red.

Fergus opens his mouth to speak, but I beat him to it, blurting, "I have to go. I'm sorry. The crowd is becoming too much for me, and I really should get a few things ready for tomorrow night." I move back, needing to put distance between us. A lot of distance. Several blocks would be good.

Fergus looks as if he's going to attempt to speak again, but I don't give him a chance before I continue babbling. "This has been the most incredible night, Fergus. It's so much better than actually going to New York City because, let's face it, if the crowd in here is getting to me, I'd be a nervous wreck in Times Square. You're so thoughtful and wonderful and...and this has been so perfect. I can't thank you enough."

"Louisa." Fergus's voice is calm and quiet with a hint of concern. He reaches for me, but I pretend not to see him as I shift to adjust my Statue of Liberty crown, putting a bit more space between us. Somehow, I hear his quiet sigh, despite the noise in the room. "At least let me take you home."

The words are barely out before a man approaches Fergus and claps him on the shoulder. He's got a lopsided smile, slightly glassy eyes, and lipstick marks on his cheeks and neck. "Heyyy, I hear you're the one we have to thank for the early New Year's celebration. That was epic, man."

With Fergus's attention on the drunk guy, my gaze frantically sweeps the room. When it lands on Sylvie and Cole, who are getting up from their table and collecting their

jackets, I know I have my out. Fergus has been flicking glances my way as the guy talks to him—or rather, *at* him, since Fergus hasn't managed to get a word in—and he must see I'm waiting to speak because he asks the man to hold on a second.

“Why don't you stay and enjoy the festivities,” I say. “Sylvie and Cole are leaving and Sylvie lives near me, so I could get them to drop me at home.”

Fergus's eyes narrow slightly, his brows drawing together in a deep V. He knows as well as I do that I'm trying to bolt right now. Part of me hopes he'll let me, while the other part hopes he'll ask me to stay or insist on taking me home himself. That twisted thinking alone is proof I need to get out of here.

Finally, he gives his head an almost imperceptible shake. “Whatever you want,” he says, his tone resigned. “We do need to talk, though, Lulu.”

“Of course,” I say quickly. Relief rushes through me when I realize Sylvie and Cole are walking this way. I had visions of chasing them out of the room and begging them to drive me home. When my gaze swings back to Fergus, my heart drops at the varied emotions swirling in his eyes. I don't think I'm imagining the disappointment, but there's affection there too and maybe even longing. It makes my heart lodge in my throat and nerves flare in my belly. “I'm sorry,” I say. “I need some time to think. Are you upset?”

“No, no, 'course not, love. I understand.” His warm hand settles once more on my shoulder. “Will you text me when you get home so I know you got there all right?”

“I will. Thanks again, Fergus. I had a blast tonight.”

His grip on my shoulder tightens and he pulls me forward, enveloping me in a tight hug. I close my eyes and press my face into his shoulder, wishing the world would fade away the way it did when we kissed. No such luck.

The next few minutes are a blur. Sylvie and Cole are hovering nearby when Fergus releases me. They thank him for

inviting them and tell him what a great time they had tonight. I ask if they'd mind giving me a ride home, and then before I know it, we're in the parking lot of Connelly's and I'm sucking in giant gulps of frosty air.

Cole goes ahead to start the car while Sylvie and I trail behind. She links her arm through mine and bumps me with her shoulder.

"I can't believe Fergus arranged all that for you tonight. How utterly romantic." She lets out an exaggerated sigh, her breath misting in the air in front of us. "Between this and Hollie going off to London with Spencer, I think it's got Cole's mental cogs churning."

"Are you expecting a grand romantic gesture in your near future?"

Sylvie grins, tightening her hold on me. "Cole's always talking about the trips he's taken to Europe, and how he wants to show me this place or that. When Hollie took off with Spencer, I *may* have dropped a hint or five about how I think we should take a trip together in the spring."

"They were *very* subtle hints, as I'm sure you can imagine," Cole says as we approach the car. He opens the passenger side door for Sylvie, kissing her as she shifts past him to climb in. He opens my door next. "Maybe I should pick Fergus's brain about Scotland. I hear it's beautiful in the spring."

"Maybe you two could come with us!" Sylvie says, twisting around to look at me as I drop like a stone into the backseat.

"Heh. Maybe." The thought has my heart squeezing its way into my windpipe again. I wish I were as brave as my friends have been, leaping head first into relationships. I've watched every single one of my closest friends fall in love over the last few months. I'm genuinely happy for them—they've each found a partner who suits them perfectly—but there's an underlying current of envy too. I want what they have and I

feel ridiculous because I know I could have it if I stopped being so afraid.

I could call Fergus when I get home and tell him I'm ready to see where things might go between us. He'd likely show up at my doorstep and sweep me off my feet, literally and metaphorically. It should be so easy...*'should'* being the operative word. My anxiety makes me fearful and indecisive; it's what I hate most about the persistent little gremlins in my head.

I listen to Sylvie and Cole's comfortable, jokey chatter on the short drive home. Sylvie hops out when we arrive, hugging me goodbye and telling me how much they're looking forward to the party tomorrow night. I text Fergus on my way up to the apartment to let him know I got home safely and thank him again for tonight.

He doesn't reply immediately like I expect him to, so I go to my room to change my clothes. Hijinx lifts his head and meows at me from where he's curled up on my bed. Once I've got my pajamas on, I scoop him up and take him with me to the living room. I settle on the couch and he snuggles against my chest with his head tucked under my chin. His rumbling purr starts up and within minutes I can feel my heart rate slow for the first time all night.

Fergus still hasn't replied to my text. Needing a distraction, I turn on the TV and choose a movie at random. I'm only half paying attention to what's happening on screen because I keep glancing at my phone. What if tonight showed Fergus the very thing I've been worried about all along: that being with me is too difficult, too much work. That I'll likely always have complicated emotions and fears that hold me back. Can I even have a healthy relationship with those things standing in my way?

Hijinx lifts his head and meets my eyes. He meows at me, and it sounds like a question. He's probably wondering the same thing I am: *what is wrong with you, lady?*

I glance at my phone again just as the digital clock clicks over to midnight. I think that's my sign that it's time to call it a day. I'm reaching for the phone when it rings, startling me. I expect it to finally be Fergus replying to me, but Hollie's name and picture flash across the screen instead, so I swipe to answer immediately.

Hollie's smiling face fills the screen. "Happy birthday, my beautiful best friend!"

The wave of emotion that's been building since Fergus and I kissed reaches a crest, causing my eyes to fill with tears. I let out a shaky laugh and squint at the screen, recognizing the living room of Spencer's apartment in the background. "Isn't it, like, five in the morning there?"

"It is. Remember I told you I'd call you at midnight on your birthday, and I always keep my promises. Spencer wasn't thrilled when my alarm went off, but when he woke up enough to remember why I'd set it in the first place, he said to wish you a happy birthday and give you his love."

"Aww, tell him thanks. And thank *you*. You're the best." My voice wavers.

"Is everything okay? How did tonight go?"

I blow out a noisy breath. "Tonight was wonderful. But I'm afraid I might have colossally messed things up with Fergus." I tell Hollie all about Fergus bringing me a New York City New Year's Eve, and how I ran away after our kiss. "What do I do now? What if I messed everything up tonight by running out?"

"You didn't," Hollie says firmly. "Trust me. Fergus knows how your anxiety can take over, plus he likes you way too much to let something like that faze him. You'll see him tomorrow and sort things out."

"That's assuming I can work up the courage to be alone with him again," I say. "And to not only find the right words, but actually say them without chickening out."

Hollie shakes her head. “Fergus *gets* you, Lulu. He likes you for you, without wanting to change you or expecting more than you can give.”

“How can you be sure? How can *I* be sure? What if—”

“No,” Hollie says, her tone firm once more. “We’re not playing the what if game. That’s a gremlin game and you don’t play gremlin games, remember?”

“You’re right. No gremlin games.”

“Just be honest with him, *always*,” Hollie says. “Tell him how you feel, tell him when you’re nervous, tell him when you need to take things slow. Like I said earlier tonight, I know how scary it can be to open your heart and let someone new in, but I also know it’s worth it when it’s the right person.”

“And you think Fergus is the right person for me?”

“Louisa. Do you really need me to answer that?”

I laugh under my breath. “I guess not. Thank you for calling, Hols. You’re still having fun in London?”

“We’re having the best time,” she says, glancing off to the side, where I imagine Spencer is waiting for her. “I wish I could be there for your birthday and the party, though.”

“Don’t worry about that. You two enjoy every moment of your adventure. We’ll celebrate when you get back.”

“Count on it. I just have one question before I go.”

“Shoot.”

“Is that a cat on your chest or is my sleep-fuzzed brain making me imagine things?”

I burst out laughing, causing Hijinx to startle and let out an indignant squawk. He gives me what I can only describe as a dirty look before shifting to curl up in my lap with his back to me. “Hollie, meet Hijinx. It’s a long story.”

Hollie laughs and shakes her head. “One I can’t wait to hear.”

We say a drawn-out goodbye with lots of air kisses and ‘I love yous’. When we finally hang up, there’s a text from Fergus; the time stamp is from 12:01, likely seconds after Hollie called.

*Happy birthday, my darling Louisa. I hope all your dreams come true this year, and I hope I get to be part of them in some way. xx*

I read the text over and over, thinking about what Hollie said: *be honest, always*. There are no lines to read between or subtext in Fergus’s message. It’s all right there in a few short sentences, plain as day.

I grab my purse and pull out my birthday bucket list. I cross off the one about celebrating New Year’s Eve in New York City. I scan all the crossed-off items, plus the two that are yet to be completed. My eyes linger on ‘Do something brave’. Despite the vague nature of that one, I was being honest when I told Fergus my goal was to get a job outside the house. We crossed that one off after we met with Hugh and Ivy. Even though we’ve gotten creative with the other things on the list, if I’m honest, crossing that one off felt like cheating. I didn’t take the initiative to meet with Hugh, apply for a job, or have an interview. Thanks to Fergus, the opportunity fell into my lap. I’m grateful and I still have to follow up on my own in a few weeks, but it doesn’t feel like I did anything particularly brave.

I still have one more day to cross items off the list. Despite having a job in mind when I added ‘Do something brave’, I left it vague because I was certain I’d know when I did something that was worthy of that sense of accomplishment. It could be something heroic or it could be quiet bravery, the kind required nearly every day when you live with anxiety.

I place the paper and my trusty red pen on the coffee table, ready and determined to cross off the remaining items before midnight tomorrow.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN ~ LOUISA

On the morning of my thirty-fifth birthday and the last day of 2022, Hijinx and I take a taxi to Hollie's house to get ready for the party. Even though I've dropped in a few times to check on things since she's been away, it's weird being in Hollie's house without her. I watch Hijinx as he slinks around the house, checking out every nook and cranny before curling up on the velvety tree skirt under Hollie's Christmas tree.

Evie and Stella show up at lunchtime with takeout from B&H and a lemon birthday cake that Horatio made especially for me. We spread out the food on the coffee table and eat picnic-style so we can enjoy Hollie's Christmas decorations.

"I probably shouldn't admit this, but a small, selfish part of me hoped Hollie would show up today," I confess to my friends over cake and tea.

"Don't feel bad," Stella says. "I would feel the same way. A lot has happened in the last few months and change has always been harder on you than the rest of us."

After Stella moved back to Bellevue this past summer, it was just the four of us, and it felt like it did when we were younger. We did so much together and I reveled in it, knowing how lucky I was to be in my mid-thirties and have three best friends who would do anything for me. Then Evie and Wesley got together, and shortly after that Stella and Leland, then Hollie and Spencer. So much changed so quickly, and now added to that is having to move out of my apartment. And Fergus. Sweet, wonderful Fergus.

My change-hating brain is still processing and adapting, but I've realized there's a part of me that's mourning my old life even as I attempt to embrace a new one.

"I'm really happy for all of you," I say.



“And *we’re* really happy for *you*,” Evie says. “We love Fergus.”

“Oh, it’s not...” I forcibly stop myself from denying or deflecting like I usually do. *Feel the fear and do it anyway*. It’s time I stop thinking about embracing a new life and actually do something about it. “I love him too.”

It takes a few seconds for Evie and Stella to react to my breathless admission. When they do, their cheers are so loud, they startle Hijinx, who’s been sniffing around our empty plates and now runs off to hide under the Christmas tree. Stella jumps up and pulls me to my feet, and just like last night, I become the filling in a hug sandwich.

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When the doorbell rings an hour later, I’m relieved to see Fergus’s car in the driveway as I dash past the front window to the door. He was supposed to be here over an hour ago.

I throw open the door but stop myself from immediately hugging Fergus when his tired eyes lock on mine. He’s freshly showered, although his damp hair is disheveled and he’s sporting a light layer of stubble.

“Happy birthday, Lulu.” His voice is sandpaper rough. He gives me a rueful look as he clears his throat. “I’m not contagious, just stupid.”

I swallow a burst of surprised laughter and usher him into the house. “What happened?”

“An old friend came into Connelly’s after you left last night and we had a few pints together. He convinced me to stop at a food truck downtown before heading home, and I think I ate something dodgy. My stomach hurt all night and I’ve had a raging headache all day. I called and texted to tell you I’d be late, but when you didn’t answer, I decided to just come over.”

I pat my pockets before remembering my phone is the one currently playing music in the living room while the girls and I set up. “I’m sorry I missed your calls and texts. If you want to go back home, I completely understand.”

“And miss your special day? Never. Maybe I could just make myself a cup of tea and wait for the latest painkillers to kick in...”

“I have a better idea. We’ll go to Hollie’s little sitting room upstairs and I’ll bring you tea and anything else you need. You can sit for a while, relax, have a nap if you want, and then we’ll assess if you feel well enough to stay. What do you say?”

“Other than the fact it’s your birthday and you shouldn’t be waiting on me, I like that plan a lot.”

I huff out a laugh. “Don’t worry about that. Come on.” I loop one arm around his waist, and he drapes an arm over my shoulders. His footfalls are heavy as we make our way upstairs. He mutters a joke about feeling like a bear staggering through the woods and, when I giggle, his arm tightens around me.

I get him settled on the couch and then return downstairs to make the tea. I find a can of ginger ale in the fridge and a box of saltine crackers in the cupboard, and decide to take those to him as well.

“Did I hear Fergus come in?” Stella asks from the kitchen doorway.

“Yeah, he’s not feeling great, so I suggested he sit upstairs for a bit. I’m going to take him this stuff and then I’ll come back down.”

“Why don’t you stay with him?” Stella suggests, coming further into the room. “I’m sure he’d appreciate your company. And you playing nurse.” She wiggles her eyebrows.

“I can’t just abandon party prep when I’m technically the hostess for tonight.”

“Pff, you’ll only be upstairs, not across town. We can handle all the rest of the stuff for tonight. You’ve done most of it anyway, and it *is* your birthday. Go be with Fergus.”

I pause on my way past Stella to plant a kiss on her cheek. She nudges me with her shoulder and whispers, “Go get your man.”

I laugh to myself as I climb the stairs. My smile grows when I round the landing and see Hijinx curled up in Fergus’s lap, with Fergus petting the cat in long, slow strokes.

“He really likes you.”

“Feeling’s mutual. You know, I’ve been thinking more about the offer I made you on Christmas Eve. I’d be happy to take him until you find a new place. You could go about the process of adopting him from the shelter as soon as possible so he’s officially yours, and then you can come visit him as often as you like until you’re able to take him to your new place, wherever that ends up being.”

“You’d really do that?”

“You really have to ask?”

I laugh under my breath as I set the tea, ginger ale, and crackers on the small table beside the couch.

Fergus smiles up at me. “You’re too good to me, love.”

“I could say the same about you,” I murmur. If I could purr like Hijinx, the sight of Fergus’s smile would set me off. I wouldn’t mind curling up in his lap like the cat either. “Can I get you anything else? A blanket? A book? There’s a TV in that cabinet over there if you want to watch something.”

“I’m fine. This tea and maybe some crackers should do the trick. The pills are starting to work, and...seeing you makes me feel better.”

My cheeks warm at his words. “Well, in that case, would you like some company?”

His eyebrows inch up, but he manages to hide his surprise quickly. “I’d love some.” As I sit, he gently shifts Hijinx aside so he can reach for the large bag he had when he arrived. He pulls out a small square box with the Cravings logo on it, along with a larger rectangular box that’s neatly wrapped in blue plaid paper. “Happy birthday again, love.”

He hands me the bakery box first. Inside is a single cupcake with swirly icing in varied shades of blue topped with glittering star-shaped sprinkles.

“In honor of our night under the stars,” he says. Words stick in my throat, so I don’t get a chance to thank him before he exchanges the bakery box for the wrapped one.

It’s heavy for such a small box. I unwrap it and gasp when I see the wooden jewelry box inside. The lid features a carving of Winnie the Pooh and Piglet with the words ‘You are braver than you believe, stronger than you seem, and smarter than you think’ carved underneath. On the front of the box, my name is carved in loopy script.

“Fergus,” I whisper, my bottom lip trembling. “This is... it’s gorgeous. Thank you.”

He reaches out to catch a tear as it slips down my cheek. “I noticed the little Pooh Bear and Piglet trinkets you have around your apartment. I got the idea for this when Hugh showed me the wood-working a friend of his does. The quote is from Pooh, as I’m sure you know, and it seemed fitting for you.”

My mom loved Winnie the Pooh and often called me Pooh when I was little. My grandma picked up the nickname too, but I asked her to stop using it after Mom died. It was too painful, and I often found myself thinking I was much more like Piglet anyway: timid, shy, fearful.

“What an incredibly thoughtful gift. I can’t thank you enough.” On impulse, I surge forward to kiss Fergus’s cheek. When I pull away, he’s smiling softly, and I can feel heat rushing to my cheeks.

Fergus reaches for his tea. Knowing him, it's his way of giving me a moment to collect myself. When he turns back, he says, "The headache is fading, but I've thought of something that would make me feel better."

"What's that?"

"A wee cuddle."

"Like...with Hijinx?"

"No, like, with you," he says, his lips twitching.

Without giving myself a chance to second-guess the decision, I lean against Fergus, snuggling into him when he puts his arm around me.

He releases a gusty sigh as he rests his chin on top of my head. "There, now, that's all I need."

I'm suddenly reminded of the day last month when Fergus stopped by my apartment to drop something off. I had the period from hell and felt awful, but tried to play it off as a bout with the flu because I was too embarrassed to admit what was really wrong, even though it's a completely natural thing. After Fergus felt my forehead for fever and asked about my symptoms, I told him the truth, which he took in stride, like he does with everything else. He left, promising to be back shortly; when he returned half an hour later, he was carrying a bag full of items, including a hot water bottle and some of my favorite snacks. We spent the next few hours lounging on the couch and watching movies.

That, and a million other little things have made it impossible not to fall for Fergus. He checks in with me, asks me to text him when I get home, offers me rides, brings me things he knows I like. He's patient and understanding, sympathetic and so very thoughtful. And he sees things in me that I never allowed myself to see before. He makes me want to be the best version of myself.

I think back to the final item on my bucket list, the one my grandma added: 'Fall in love with a wonderful man and let him take care of you'. I always thought it was a bit of a

backwards notion, but maybe it's not so bad to be taken care of and to take care of someone in return.

The next thing I know, I'm waking up with my cheek pressed against Fergus's shoulder. His slow, even breathing tells me he's asleep before I even look at his face. He's not quite as pale as he was before, which is a relief. Hijinx is still curled up on Fergus's lap and he gives me a slow blink, which I read somewhere is supposed to be cat speak for 'I love you'.

"I love you too, Jinxy," I whisper. Then looking at Fergus's peaceful face, I whisper even more softly, "And I love you, Fergus MacKinnon." No more denying it. No more running from it. If Fergus believes I'm braver, stronger, and smarter than I know, then I'm going to do my best to embody that, starting now.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN ~ FERGUS

I pause in the kitchen doorway to watch Louisa. A few people have already arrived—the sound of the doorbell is likely what woke me—and Louisa is humming as she arranges finger food on a platter. Her hips sway gently from side to side, making her blue dress swirl around her calves. The tune she’s humming is “Auld Lang Syne”.

“A Scot wrote that song, you know,” I say, stepping into the room.

She goes still for a moment before turning to face me. Her eyes go wide when she sees that I’ve changed from my jumper and jeans into a white dress shirt and kilt featuring the MacKinnon tartan. Her bright smile nearly knocks me back a step. “Robert Burns, right?”

“Aye, good ol’ Rabbie. He clearly knew a thing or two about friendship.”

“What do you mean?”

“That’s essentially what the poem is about. ‘Auld lang syne’ translates to ‘old times past’ and is about remembering past times with the people who are important to you. That’s why it’s sung at New Year’s, to honor and say goodbye to the year that’s passed while remembering what’s important enough to take forward with you.”

The sound of laughter drifts in from the living room. Louisa’s lips curve in a small smile. “Very fitting. This has been one heck of a year, hasn’t it? What are you hoping to take forward with you?”

I step further into the room. “You.” No ambiguity. No room for questions or uncertainty.

Her eyes go wide. I want to close the distance between us and reach for her, but I don't. Not yet.

Her lips move soundlessly. Just one word: 'me'. She clears her throat. "I wanted to thank you again for everything you've done for me this week. You've gone above and beyond, and I can't tell you how much it means to me."

"It's been my pleasure, love. I mean that. I know you said it didn't really matter, but I'm sorry I wasn't able to help you with the last two things on your list."

A myriad of emotions pass over her face, too quick for me to accurately pinpoint any one of them. She clears her throat again and opens her mouth, but no words come out.

Instinct propels me forward until I'm standing in front of her. I reach for her hands and grip them both in mine because I can't stand not touching her for a moment longer. "What is it, Lulu?"

"Actually...you *can* help me. In fact, the last two things on the list are kind of dependent on you."

Hope surges through me, nearly making me lightheaded. I swallow the questions on my tongue and keep my mouth shut, waiting for an explanation.

Her gaze drops from mine to focus on our joined hands. Or perhaps my kilt. I can tell her mind is racing, can practically hear the thoughts as they spin through that big, beautiful brain of hers.

"You could kiss me before midnight," she says.

"But the list says 'the man of your dreams'."

"I know." The words are quiet, but her expression speaks volumes. She stands up straighter and meets my eyes again, her gaze steady now.

Relief and affection and so many other things wash over me like a tidal wave, causing a surprised laugh to spill from my lips.



Louisa jumps slightly, her brows pulling together. “Why are you laughing?”

She looks ready to bolt like she did last night, so I tighten my grip on her hands. “Louisa Henshaw, are you saying *I’m* the man of your dreams?”

Her cheeks redden, but her gaze doesn’t waver. “I am.”

I exhale sharply. “You know, I was feeling a bit lost when I came to town,” I say. Understandably, she appears confused at the non-sequitur, so I barrel on. “The only person I knew was Hugh, and he’s been great, but he’s so busy. Then I met Hollie through work, and she introduced me to your group of friends. To you. And from that moment, everything changed. Bellevue started to feel like home. *You* started to feel like home. It didn’t take me long to realize you’re the woman of my dreams, Louisa. I’ve been falling for you since the night we met.”

Her hands are shaking in mine. I want to kiss her so badly, but I need to hold her first, reassure myself and possibly her that this is real, it’s not a dream, it’s truly happening. I wrap my arms around her and draw her close, and she melts against me. She says my name oh-so-softly a moment before she eases away from me and our lips meet. I thought last night’s kiss was incredible and it was, but this is even better because everything is out in the open now. I can pour all my love for Louisa into this kiss and hope she feels it.

I’m vaguely aware of the doorbell ringing and more voices joining the sounds of merriment in the living room. With great reluctance, I release her, placing small kisses on her lips and cheeks and forehead as she laughs breathlessly. I press my forehead to hers, and we let out twin sighs.

“Can I still kiss you at midnight?” I ask.

“You’d *better* kiss me at midnight, Fergus MacKinnon,” she says. “And every day and night after that too.” She pulls away from me and looks down at my kilt. “Also, can we talk about what you’re wearing? You look incredible. Would you

normally wear a kilt on New Year's Eve or is this part of my birthday gift?"

I chuckle. "A bit of both. My mum loved Hogmanay—New Year's—and we always dressed up and had a special meal or even a small party. I wouldn't be surprised if Hugh wears a kilt tonight too."

"Will you tell me more about Hogmanay traditions later?" she asks. "I'd like to hear what celebrating the new year in Scotland is like."

"I'd be happy to." I stop myself from telling her I'd like to show her firsthand next year. One thing at a time.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN ~ LOUISA

The party is in full swing. I'm happy to see that Fergus wasn't the only one who dressed up; everyone looks amazing, and Hugh *did* arrive in a kilt that matches his cousin's.

Fergus hasn't strayed far from my side in the last hour. He keeps holding my hand, kissing my cheek, and finding ways to touch me. The look on his face is almost disbelieving, as if he can't believe he gets to openly show affection and that I'm returning it. They're simple things, but they feel monumental.

Around seven thirty, Evie and Stella pull me aside near the makeshift bar.

"You're *glowing*," Evie says.

"Who needs the Times Square ball when we've got *you* here shining brighter than a million diamonds," Stella adds. "I feel like I can't look directly at you and Fergus because it's like looking into the sun."

Giddy laughter spills out of me. My cheeks are hot and my whole body is tingling, but for once it's from pleasure rather than discomfort or embarrassment.

Evie glances at her watch. "It's after midnight in London. Let's take a selfie to send to Hollie and wish her a happy New Year." She and Stella crowd in close on either side, smooshing me between them. Evie snaps several pictures and then picks what she deems the best one. She moves away from me and starts typing on her phone. A minute later, she holds out the phone with a wide grin on her face. It's ringing with an incoming video call from Hollie. "It's for you. Go take it somewhere private."

I grab the phone, pausing just long enough to kiss her cheek before running upstairs. The screen is dark when I

answer, and I'm afraid I missed the call until Hollie pops into view. The lighting on her end is low, but I can make out her sparkly turquoise dress and the party hat on her head. If *I'm* glowing, Hollie is positively luminescent.

"It's officially the new year here, but I had to call while it was still your birthday there," she says.

"You're the best. Are you...in a closet?"

She laughs. "I am. We're at a party at a friend of Spencer's. We were going to have a quiet night at Spencer's flat, but then we were out and I found this dress and Spencer asked if I'd like to go to a party."

"You look gorgeous, Hols."

"You do too! Do you have something you want to tell me, Lulu?"

Now it's my turn to laugh. "Fergus and I are officially together."

"Yes! I knew it!" The camera shakes wildly as she does a little happy dance. "Good for you. I'm so happy for you, Louisa."

"Thanks. I am too." For several beats, we just stare at each other, grinning. "So, it's already the new year there. What's it like in the future?"

"Oh, it's amazing, let me tell you. Beautiful and bright and *full* of possibilities. And since I've been imparted with the wisdom of the future, let me tell you something I'm completely certain of: this is going to be your best year yet. You'll see."

I blink back tears. They don't have a chance to fall before I'm distracted by Fergus poking his head into the room. "Sorry, love, didn't realize you were on the phone."

"Don't go," I tell him, waving him forward and reaching out for him to take my hand. "It's Hollie."

Fergus takes my hand and squeezes into the camera frame. “Hiya, Hollie. Happy New Year.”

“Happy New Year, Fergus! I should get out of this closet and return to the party, and you two better get back to *your* party. You have a lot to celebrate.”

“We do,” Fergus agrees, slinging his arm around my shoulders and pressing a kiss to the side of my head.

Hollie lets out a dreamy sigh. “Finally. Now go. Take lots of pictures and send them to me tomorrow, okay? I love you both. Give everyone else my love.”

After we’ve disconnected, I face Fergus, looping my arms around his neck. I get to do this now, any time I want. I also get to kiss him, but nerves have me hesitating as we release each other. Luckily, he seems to read my intentions because he cups my face, gliding the pads of his thumbs across my cheeks. He closes the small space between us and I tilt my face up for him to kiss me, but he doesn’t. His mouth hovers over mine, warm breath ghosting over my skin before his lips move back and forth, barely touching mine.

“What are you doing?” I whisper.

“Taking my time.” His voice is a low rumble that sends goosebumps skittering across my skin. He presses his lips briefly to mine. “Appreciating you. Savoring this moment.” And then his mouth finally covers mine in a kiss that rocks me to my very core.

When his lips leave mine again, he presses whisper-soft kisses on my cheeks and nose and forehead. In a breathless voice, I say, “Hollie thinks this is going to be the best year ever.”

“I believe it,” Fergus says. “I’ll do everything in my power to make it so.”

His words give me the confidence to initiate our next kiss. The fizzy excitement inside me drowns out the gremlins in my head that want to tell me this whole thing will take some getting used to. That it won’t always be easy. I *know* it won’t

always be easy, but I suddenly feel like anything is possible and that by getting out of my own way and accepting the love I deserve, I can handle anything life will throw my way.

“Hollie was right about something else,” I say. “We do have a lot to celebrate.”

“We do, love. Let’s go ring in the new year.”

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Dear reader,

Thank you for taking the time to read *Bucket Lists & Midnight Kisses*. If you enjoyed Louisa and Fergus's story, I'd love to hear from you. You can find all my contact information on my website: [www.marielandryauthor.com](http://www.marielandryauthor.com)

I'd be incredibly grateful if you would take the time to write a review on Goodreads, the ebook retailers of your choice, and/or your social media or blog. It doesn't have to be long—even just a few words describing your feelings about the story. Reviews are so important, especially for indie authors like me, because they help people decide whether to read a book or not. You have the power to influence other readers!

Thank you for your support. Every time I hear from a reader who was touched by my work, it confirms that I made the right decision to follow my dreams and become an author.

With love and gratitude,

Marie

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Marie Landry lives and writes in a cozy apartment in Ontario, Canada, surrounded by books and Funko Pops. An avid reader from a young age, she loves getting lost in characters' worlds, whether they're of her own making or someone else's. She particularly loves stories with as much of an emphasis on self-discovery and friendship as on romance... but don't leave out the romance!

When not doing bookish things, you can often find her taking pictures, cooking, scrolling Instagram (find her at [@marielandry.author](#)), daydreaming about frolicking through the Scottish Highlands, or listening to the same music she's loved since the '90s. She's an unapologetic nerd and fangirl, and that, along with her mental health advocacy, is often woven into her books.