

a sweet romantic comedy

MATCHMAKING

&

Mixtapes



MARIE LANDRY

MATCHMAKING & MIXTAPES

by Marie Landry

Copyright Marie Landry 2023

All rights reserved

This ebook is licensed for your personal enjoyment only. This ebook may not be re-sold or given away to other people. If you would like to share this book with another person, please purchase an additional copy for each recipient. If you're reading this book and did not purchase it, or it was not purchased for your use only, please purchase your own copy. Thank you for respecting the hard work of this author.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to any actual people, places, or events, living or dead, is coincidental.

Character illustration by Qamber Emporium

Cover designed by Marie Landry

Content warnings: Mild language, alcohol consumption. In regards to side characters: brief mentions of parental death, parental abandonment, car accident that resulted in serious but non-life-threatening injuries.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

[Also by Marie Landry](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Coming Soon](#)

[Letter to the reader](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[About the Author](#)

ALSO BY MARIE LANDRY

*Blue Sky Days

*The Most Wonderful Time of the Year

*Waiting for the Storm (Angel Island #1)

*After the Storm (Angel Island #2)

*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

Coming Autumn 2023:

*Reunions & Ruses

*Do-Overs & Mixed Signals

*Bucket Lists & Midnight Kisses

*Silver Bells & Serendipity

DEDICATION

To Mum, Maddison, and Jaimie. My girls. My three constants in the two chaotic years it took me to write this series. You are three of my greatest blessings in life, and I love you to the next galaxy and back, forever.

CHAPTER ONE

“We need a catchy saying about turning thirty-five.”

The fluorescent lights of B&H Diner suddenly feel like a spotlight as three sets of eyes turn to focus on me. My friends seem confused by my non-sequitur, which I suppose makes sense considering we were just talking about autumn decor not two minutes ago.

I wave a hand as if inviting them to hop aboard my train of thought. “You know, similar to ‘thirty and flirty’ or ‘forty and fabulous’.”

“Evie, I’ve never been flirty,” Louisa says, picking up her cup of tea and making a face before taking a sip. “‘Thirty, anxious, and socially awkward’ doesn’t quite have the same ring to it, though, does it?”

I nearly choke on a bite of toast. “No, Lulu, it doesn’t.”

Lips twitching, Hollie rests a hand briefly on Louisa’s shoulder. “Well, we’re already fabulous, so I guess we’re five years ahead of the curve.”

“Hear, hear.” I toast her with my coffee cup and glance beside me at Stella, who’s been strangely quiet for the last few minutes. I quickly discover her silence is a result of her scarfing down her scrambled eggs with one hand while spreading raspberry jam on a piece of toast with the other. Huh. That’s some impressive dexterity.

“How about...thirty-five and feelin’ alive,” Hollie suggests.

“Thirty-five and I will thrive,” Louisa says.

Hollie and I nod enthusiastically.

Beside me, Stella hunches further over her plate and mutters, “Thirty-five and takin’ a dive.”

“A dive into what?” I ask, shifting to face her as much as I can in the tight diner booth.

The way she freezes makes me think she didn’t mean to say that out loud. As if simultaneously realizing she’s been doing a stellar impression of a starving gremlin, she sets down her utensils and sits up straight. “A dive into...bottomless glasses of prosecco at your birthday party?”

I narrow my eyes, silently communicating that, despite the nice save, we’ll be having a conversation about her weird behavior later. After all, we live together, so she can’t avoid me. Her wry grin and one-shouldered shrug tell me she understands and isn’t put off by my flinty-eyed look.

“Speaking of the upcoming party,” Hollie says. “Are we ready for Birthday Palooza?”

“I thought we agreed Birthday Palooza doesn’t officially begin until *after* the party my mom throws for me,” I remind her.

“I move to change those rules,” Hollie says, her brown eyes gleaming. “I know your mom’s Emily Gilmore-esque gatherings aren’t your ideal birthday celebration, but you can’t deny Eleanor Hathaway knows how to throw a party. I think we should consider it the official kick-off of our birthday season this year.”

Stella, Hollie, Louisa, and I were born between October and the end of December of the same year. Our moms were friends, which means we’ve known each other practically since birth. We may be approaching our mid-thirties, but we still love celebrating each other and the fact we’ve remained lifelong friends.

“I second that,” Stella says around another bite of food. “We’ll have plenty of chances to celebrate our birthdays how *we* want, but Evie, your mom’s parties are one of the few

times a year the rest of us get to eat fancy food and drink prosecco that costs more than twelve dollars a bottle.”

She has a point. Fancy parties have lost the appeal they once had for me, between my mom trotting me out at various fundraisers and dinner parties, plus the events I attend as one of Bellevue’s highest-ranking real estate agents. It doesn’t help that my mom uses any excuse to play matchmaker, which means I spend the majority of time at her parties avoiding her by ducking into other rooms, striking up conversations with random people, or pretending I’m getting an important work-related call.

With me turning thirty-five next weekend, I have a feeling Mom’s efforts will double. Despite the very thought of it exhausting me, I know my friends enjoy the parties, so I can suck it up for one night.

“We’ll take you out later that weekend for dinner somewhere you can wear jeans and flat shoes,” Louisa promises.

“Or do pizza, wine, and movies at home,” Stella says. “Whatever you want.”

“You guys are the best,” I say. “I don’t care what we do, as long as we’re together.”

We finish our breakfasts, and then it’s time for Hollie and Louisa to leave for the animal shelter, where they’re volunteering at a Thanksgiving weekend adoption drive.

“I have an idea,” Hollie says to me as she climbs from the booth and wraps a lightweight scarf around her neck. “Have you met Fergus MacKinnon?”

“No...” I’m always wary when someone starts a sentence that way since it’s often followed by a matchmaking attempt. “Is he related to Hugh MacKinnon?”

Hollie snaps her fingers. “Yes! How could I forget you know Hugh?”

At this point, I think most of Bellevue knows about my connection to Hugh, or more accurately, to the MacKinnon Group. Hugh is a well-known businessman and philanthropist, and the owner of Bellevue Village, the city's enormous amusement park. The MacKinnon Group recently bought a Victorian mansion and its vast grounds in the center of town, and it made the news for several reasons. The property, which was used as a funeral home since the mid-1800s, had been on the market for over three years with little to no interest. The MacKinnon Group purchased it for a whopping two million dollars, a figure that's almost unheard of in this area. And since *I* was the realtor who facilitated the deal, I made the news too.

"Anyway," Hollie continues, "Hugh and Fergus are distant cousins, and Fergus recently moved here from Scotland to work for the MacKinnon Group. The Group is one of the food bank's biggest sponsors, so we've been working together the last couple of months. He's great—nice, funny, handsome. Single."

I'm almost afraid to ask: "Where are you going with this, Hollie Anne?"

She titters. "This isn't an actual set up if that's what you're thinking. It's more like a pre-emptive strike against your *mom's* matchmaking attempts. I could talk to Fergus about being your date at the party, with the caveat that he's just an escort and it's only for the night. Unless you two hit it off, of course."

"Hmm." A pre-emptive strike isn't a bad idea. At my mom's most recent dinner party, she introduced me to no fewer than four 'eligible bachelors'. One of them was nearly my dad's age, which makes me think Mom is getting desperate. I'm perfectly content being single, but to Eleanor Hathaway, approaching thirty-five while unattached clearly means I'm heading for spinsterhood, and we can't have that.

"Go ahead and mention it to him," I tell Hollie. "If he's not comfortable with the ruse, he's welcome to come to the party

regardless. Since he's new in town, he might like to mingle and make connections."

"You're not interested in him yourself, Hols?" Stella asks.

Hollie suddenly becomes absorbed in fastening the buttons of her jacket. "Nope. He's great, like I said, but we're just friends."

I expect there's more to it—like perhaps the fact Hollie has met someone on the dating site we both joined recently—but now isn't the time to press for details. "Well, we'll look forward to meeting him," I say before Stella can speak again. "You two have fun with the animals at the shelter. Snuggle some puppies for me and send us pics."

When the others are gone, I move to the opposite side of the booth so I'm facing Stella. "Okay, what's up with you? Where did you go this morning?" I woke up to a note on the fridge saying she had something to do and would meet us at the diner for our weekly breakfast.

Stella slumps in her seat and releases a sigh that turns into a groan. "I went to meet Tannis," she mutters, referring to the woman she's been dating off and on since she returned to town. When I don't respond, she peeks up at me. "It was her idea to meet early this morning, but she didn't show. Again. Which makes me an idiot. *Again.*"

"You're not an idiot, Stella."

"A failure then," she says. "Failed marriage. No job. Dating losers, even though I *know* better. Squatting at your condo."

"You're *not* a failure." My voice is more forceful than I intended, but at least Stella is looking at me now. I hate seeing her like this: lost, uncertain, feeling like she's messed up her life. I've seen her slip into depression enough times over the years to spot the warning signs. "Your marriage not working out is a hard pill to swallow, but we both know you're better off away from Lars. It took real courage to move back here and be willing to start over, and you'll be happier and healthier

in the long run. As for this so-called ‘*squatting*’...” I can’t help but laugh as I say it, and I’m pleased when Stella’s lips give the slightest twitch in response. “I invited you to live with me, and I’ve loved every minute of it. We always said we’d live together someday and now we are, even if it’s temporary.”

A genuine smile blooms on her face, although it withers quickly. “But all the money I owe you, Evie—”

I hold up a hand to cut her off. “You know that doesn’t matter to me. I don’t want your money.” Saying that comes from a place of extreme privilege, and I know it; I’ve been making good money for years, and I also have wealthy parents to come to my aid if I ever need it. My friends and I have always taken care of each other, and this is no different. “I meant it when I told you to take all the time you need while you figure things out. There’s no need to rush this fresh start.”

Stella nods as she blinks away tears. I’m sure she’s as relieved as I am when our favorite waitress—and the co-owner of B&H Diner, our home away from home—comes to refill our coffees. Bea is usually quick with a joke or a comment since she’s known the four of us for most of our lives, but she remains silent as she pours. She briefly touches Stella’s shoulder before moving on to the next table.

Stella blows out a shaky breath as she adds milk and sugar to her coffee. I observe the way she straightens in her seat, knowing she’s mentally collecting herself. A change of topic is coming in three, two, one... “Now that the others are gone, I have to ask: on a scale of one to five, how much are you dreading your mom’s party?”

I laugh under my breath at the question. Nothing ever gets by Stella. As much as I adore Hollie and Louisa and consider them an extension of myself, I try to limit how much I complain about my mom in front of them because it makes me feel like a whiny, ungrateful child. Louisa’s mom died when we were fourteen, and shortly after that, Hollie’s mom took off for a ‘short break’ and never returned. Both events set off a

terrible chain reaction in Louisa's and Hollie's lives, and things were never the same for them again.

I feel comfortable commiserating with Stella, though. She knows my mom well, having lived next door to us for most of our childhood. My mom can be pretentious and over the top, and we're not as close as we were when I was younger, but she's a good person. And considering Hollie's and Louisa's moms are both gone, I'm lucky to have my mother here and driving me nuts rather than not having her at all.

"Honestly, it's fine," I tell Stella. "It's one evening, and it makes Mom happy, so..." My phone, which is facedown on the table, lets out a series of short buzzing sounds. Without looking, I know it's the reminder I set before coming to the diner this morning. "Speak of the devil. That's my alarm to tell me it's time to go. Mom summoned me last night for some sort of party prep today, and I need to run a couple of errands first."

"Don't want to leave Mama Hathaway waiting. I shudder to think of the consequences." Stella's playful tone eases the lingering worry niggling at the back of my mind. She's going to be fine; my friends are made of tough stuff.

And, as I leave the diner a few minutes later, wondering what awaits me at my parents' house, I remind myself I'm made of tough stuff too.

CHAPTER TWO

I park in the circular driveway of my parents' place. As I often do when I arrive, I mentally prepare myself by sitting in the silence of my car and staring at the enormous house with its elaborate gardens. When we moved in nearly twenty years ago, my mom nicknamed the place Hathaway Manor. It didn't occur to me at the time, but that should have been my first inkling that our new-found wealth was beginning to change Eleanor Hathaway.

I didn't grow up with this kind of affluence. For the first fifteen years of my life, my parents and I lived in a modest three-bedroom house in a quiet, family-friendly neighborhood. Around the time I hit my teens, my dad was promoted to partner at the law firm where he worked, and we suddenly had a lot more money. The changes weren't noticeable at first, at least not to a self-centered thirteen-year-old.

It wasn't until a year later when my great uncle died and left a surprisingly large inheritance to my dad that things *really* changed. My mom immediately began house hunting in neighborhoods we'd only ever driven past, and the clothes in our closets went from department store labels to luxury brands. Within the year, my parents had sold my childhood home, moved us into Hathaway Manor, and put me in private school for the last two years of high school.

My phone chimes. I lift it from the center console and swallow a disbelieving laugh when I see the text from my mom: *Are you going to sit there all day or are you coming in?* I peek up at the house, searching for her in the many front-facing windows. There's no sign of her, which makes me

picture her hovering just out of sight behind the curtains, her phone clutched in her hand.

“Here we go,” I murmur, giving myself one final glance in the rearview mirror. Even though it’ll only be the two of us, I’ll be sure to hear about it if I have so much as a hair out of place or a tiny smudge in my lipstick. Eleanor Hathaway doesn’t only expect perfection, she demands it at all times. ‘It’s for your own good’ is her standard line any time I call her on her ridiculous penchant for flawlessness.

“Evelyn, so nice of you to join us,” Mom says as she opens the giant, intricately carved front door. The door I had to *knock* on and *wait* for her to answer, even though she knew I was here. When I was little, in what I now refer to as the Before We Became Rich Times, or Before Times for short, I rarely made it to the door before she’d have it flung open, her arms spread wide to welcome me with a hug, no matter how long I’d been gone.

That’s one of countless things that have changed over the last two decades. There was a time I would have attempted to get a rise out of her by pointing out *she* summoned *me* without giving me any choice in the matter, but I’m past that. Just like I’m past asking who ‘us’ is when I know she uses the term the way a sovereign uses the Royal We.

“You’re looking well, Mother.” I grip her upper arms lightly and lean in to press a kiss to each of her smooth cheeks. The scent of her most recent designer perfume tickles my nose. It’s more pleasant than the last one, which was so overpowering it made my eyes water. I still fondly remember the days when her signature scent was Calgon’s Hawaiian Ginger body spray. I still have a bottle tucked away in my medicine cabinet at home, and I spritz some in my bedroom whenever I’m feeling nostalgic.

Mom’s designer tastes don’t end with her scent; she’s wearing tailored black trousers paired with a gauzy rust-colored blouse. Gold jewelry, tastefully done make-up, perfectly coiffed hair, and a pair of shiny black heels pull the

look together and make her appear as if she's heading to a sophisticated luncheon rather than simply spending the day at home.

"And you look...*comfortable*, dear." Her smile is more of a grimace as her gaze sweeps over my ensemble: black leggings, a form-fitting yellow t-shirt, and a jean jacket. My friends call it my 'autumn uniform' because I wear some variation of this outfit all season long when I'm not on the job.

I let out a quiet snort, drawing another wince from my mother. "We've been over this, Mom. I'm happy to dress up for work and special occasions, but otherwise I prefer to be casual. You should try it sometime. Seriously. Bust out those fuzzy socks I gave you last Christmas. They'll change your life." I slip off my Converse and line them up neatly by the door.

"Listen to you! A pair of socks having the ability to change my life. Honestly." Mom gives an exaggerated eye roll, but the lines around her mouth tell me she's suppressing a smile. "I'm meeting with the Ladies' Auxiliary after we finish up here, so I figured it was easier to be ready early."

"Very sensible." As I follow her through the cavernous foyer and up the stairs, I stop myself from adding 'unlike your shoes', which are higher than anything I'd even *consider* wearing—especially around the house—and create an echoing *click clack* against the hardwood floor with each step. "Hey, Mom?"

"Yes, Evelyn?"

"The fuzzy socks are still in their original packaging, aren't they?"

She stops at the top of the stairs with her back to me. When she carries on after only a short pause, I take that as a yes. Guess I can scratch a new pair of socks off my Christmas list. Or maybe I should get her nothing *but* fuzzy socks this year.

Mom enters my old bedroom and goes straight to the queen-size bed, where an array of garment bags are neatly laid

out. She makes a sweeping motion with her arm like an assistant on a gameshow. “Do you need me to supervise?”

I give her my best sardonic side-eye. “I’ve been dressing myself since I was three, but thanks.”

“Oh, it was earlier than that. You came out of the womb large and in charge, exceeding all those baby milestones by leaps and bounds.”

This is something I’ve heard my whole life, especially the ‘large and in charge’ bit since I tipped the scales at just over ten pounds. “Why don’t you give me a few minutes and then I’ll start modeling the dresses for you?”

“Sounds good. I know you hate doing this, so shall we make it fun and open some prosecco?”

I peer at my watch. “It’s barely one o’clock.” At Mom’s ‘*so what?*’ expression, I shrug and say, “What the hell, why not.”

“Language, dear,” Mom says mildly over her shoulder as she heads for the door.

I clear a spot on the bed so I can sit among the dresses. While this massive bedroom with its giant bed, walk-in closet, and small seating area would have been many a teenage girl’s dream, it wasn’t mine. In the three years I lived here with my parents before moving to Kingston for university, I never stopped missing my childhood home, especially my bedroom. I missed the posters tacked crookedly to the walls and the shabby chic furniture. I missed the nail polish stains on the rug and the memories of countless sleepovers with my friends, all of us crammed into sleeping bags on my floor, talking about crushes and movies, and sharing dreams for the future. A future which always included the four of us being best friends forever. At least that never changed, even when everything else seemed to.

I shake myself from my walk down memory lane and hop up to open the first garment bag. A sound of distress leaves me the second I spy the shiny beige fabric. Mom usually has

excellent taste, which is the only reason I allow her to choose dresses for me, but I don't do beige. I rezip the garment bag without inspecting the dress further, and toss it aside in what will be the 'Hell No' pile.

"You're still dressed!"

I whip around at the sound of Mom's voice. She's standing in the doorway, holding two glasses and an ice bucket with a bottle of prosecco. I expected her to bring two filled glasses, but apparently we're getting serious here.

"Sorry, I got...sidetracked." It's best not to tell her I was daydreaming rather than getting straight to the business at hand. "The first dress isn't something I'd wear, so I already put it in the discard pile."

Mom sets her armload of boozy goodness on the desk and strides across the room to inspect the rejected dress. "Oh, you're right, that's awful." She wrinkles her nose as if she caught a whiff of something foul. "I usually hand select the dresses myself, but I didn't have time this year. I've been working with Katrina at the dress shop for long enough that I trusted her to choose an appropriate assortment."

"Well, hopefully the next one will be more my style," I say in a placating tone.

"It had better be, otherwise Katrina will be receiving a very disgruntled phone call."

I can't help but laugh under my breath as she returns to the desk. There was a time when my mom was the most easy-going person I knew. She hated confrontation or upsetting anyone. She wouldn't even send back food in a restaurant if they got the order wrong. Now she has impossibly high standards and isn't afraid to make sure people know it.

She plucks the bottle of prosecco from the ice bucket and releases the cork with a few expert twists and a quiet *pop*. She pours two glasses of the golden fizz and hands one to me. "I can't believe my little girl is about to turn thirty-five. You know, you really should let me—" Her words are cut off by

the chiming of the doorbell, which is wired so it's audible in surround-sound levels no matter where you are in the house. I always thought it was a good thing we didn't have a dog, or the poor creature would have gone into a tizzy every time someone rang the bell.

Mom sighs. "I'll be right back. Cheers, dear." She clinks her glass against mine before scurrying from the room.

My intended dainty sip of wine turns into a large gulp. I cough, eyes watering as bubbles fly up my nose. Thank goodness Mom's not here to see; I can imagine the lecture I'd get on being more ladylike. As I take another sip, I wonder what she was about to say before the doorbell rang. I really should let her...what? Recommend a good night cream to combat the fine lines around my eyes? Send me to her hairstylist, who's been giving her the same cut and color for the last decade? Set me up with yet another stuffed shirt coworker of Dad's?

I set my glass aside and unzip the next garment bag. My eyes go wide when they land on the silky red material of the dress. Mom has never chosen red for me, claiming it's 'not my color'. I don't agree with her, but I've learned to choose my battles...and secretly wear red when she's not around to criticize. The only red dress I ever had was—

"Sorry about that." Mom bustles back into the room, wine glass still in hand, although it's mostly empty now. "Your father ordered a case of wine for Thanksgiving and neglected to tell me it was being delivered today."

"A *case* of wine? That's a bit much for the three of us, isn't it?"

She frowns at me as if I've somehow disappointed her, but it quickly turns to a look of contrition. It's not an expression I'm accustomed to seeing from her. "Here I am talking about your father neglecting to tell me about the delivery when *I've* neglected to tell *you* about our change of plans for Thanksgiving."

My stomach drops. I have a feeling I'm going to need another glass of prosecco. "Change of plans?"

"Yes, we're going to be hosting dinner for your dad's coworkers who don't have family or friends to spend the holiday with. The Greens usually host it, but Mr. Green suddenly took ill and is in the hospital, so I offered to take over hosting duties."

"How awful," I say faintly. I'm referring to Mr. Green's poor health, of course, but I'd be lying if I said this wasn't awful for other reasons too. Thanksgiving is typically the one holiday when it's just the three of us. It's as close to the Before Times as we ever get. Mom doesn't cook the meal like she used to when I was little—that's Chef Fleur's job—but it's rare to get both of my parents to myself these days, so I look forward to our quiet Thanksgiving dinner every year.

"Yes, dreadful," Mom says. "I know it's last minute and the girls likely have plans already, but feel free to invite them. And if you'd like to bring a date, he'd be most welcome too. You know what I always say, the more the merrier."

This is her not-so-subtle way of fishing for information on my love life. I side-step the topic by thanking her and telling her I'll pass along the invitation to my friends. I might have to see if Hollie's friend Fergus is available earlier than anticipated.

"Now, where were we?" Mom sets her empty wine glass down and joins me near the bed. As soon as she spots the red dress, I know poor Katrina is going to get an earful.

"It's fine, Mom." I zip the bag back up and add it to the reject pile. I don't need to see the whole thing to know it's not worth the fight. "This is only the second dress. I'm sure there's something in here that's suitable."

She mutters something under her breath as she scoops up my glass and goes to refill it. Before I can unzip the next bag, she whirls around with an excited exclamation that startles me.

“I almost forgot to tell you,” she says, her eyes alight with pleasure. “You’ll never guess who sent an RSVP to your party.”

Since the only friends of mine who ever get invited to ‘*my*’ party are Stella, Hollie, and Louisa, I fight the urge to roll my eyes. “The mayor? The managing partner at Dad’s law firm? The prime minister himself?”

Mom’s eyes narrow. “Have I ever told you how unbecoming sarcasm is for a young lady?”

“Only several times a week for the last thirty or so years.”

“And yet...” She looks at me pointedly and I laugh, waving a hand for her to continue. She draws in a deep breath, straightening her spine, and appearing *way* too pleased with herself when she says, “Wesley.”

I nearly drop the wine glass she just handed me. “W-Wesley? Wesley McGrath?”

“Of course, Wesley McGrath. Do you know any other Wesleys?”

“That’s impossible, though. Stella would have told me if he was coming to town. He’s not going to come all the way from Ottawa just for my birthday party.”

Mom lets out a non-committal sound as she shrugs one shoulder. “He told me he was coming.”

“He *told* you? You *talked* to him?”

“Yes, I spoke with him on the phone yesterday. I was quite surprised when I received the notification saying he planned to attend, so I called him to make sure he hadn’t checked the wrong box by mistake. He was in a rush, so we only spoke for a minute, but he told me he’ll definitely be here.”

A lifetime of images flash through my mind like a movie on fast-forward. Wesley is Stella’s older brother. Of all the things I missed when we moved here, living next door to the McGrath family was at the top of the list. Having known Stella and Wesley my entire life, our families had a strange and

wonderful blended quality; Suzanne and Warren McGrath were like a second set of parents to me, and Stella and Wesley were like the siblings I never had. The seven of us took vacations and spent holidays together, and it was rare to see me around the neighborhood without at least one McGrath sibling by my side.

My mind returns to the one red dress I ever owned: a costume dress like Buttercup's from *The Princess Bride*. When Stella and I were eight, she became enamored with figure skating and begged her parents to let her take skating lessons. They supported her, as they did with everything, and soon she was spending hours every week at the rink where her lessons were. That left Wesley and me to our own devices.

We discovered *The Princess Bride* when I was nine and Wesley was ten, and we became *obsessed* with it. We would play Buttercup and the Dread Pirate Roberts, except I was no damsel in distress, I was a sword-wielding princess who could save herself, thank you very much. The forest behind our houses turned into the Fire Swamp, where we had adventures and ran away from imaginary foes. We choreographed sword fights with long, sturdy sticks, and I'd sometimes take up the role of Inigo Montoya instead of Buttercup.

One Halloween, Mrs. McGrath made me a red dress similar to Buttercup's, and Wesley planned to dress up as the Dread Pirate Roberts. Unfortunately, the family ended up going out of town over Halloween for one of Stella's skating competitions. I couldn't bring myself to wear the costume without Wesley, so I ended up going as Posh Spice to Hollie and Louisa's Ginger and Baby. Even though it wasn't his fault, Wesley felt so bad about missing Halloween, he bought us a pair of matching plastic swords with his paper route money so we wouldn't have to suffer through splinters from our makeshift swords anymore.

"Evelyn Hathaway, are you listening to me?"

My mother's voice is like a wave of cold water, washing away the vivid memories playing in my mind's eye. I take

several small sips of prosecco to buy myself another moment before I speak.

“Aren’t you happy Wesley is coming?” Mom asks. “Should I not have invited him?”

“No!” I say, startling us both with the force of the word. “No, I’m glad you invited him. I’m just surprised, that’s all. *Good* surprised. I’ve hardly seen him over the last few years. It’ll be amazing to have everyone back together again.”

“I was thinking of finding an old picture of the five of you and having you recreate it,” Mom says. “I keep seeing people doing that online and the results are often hilarious.”

I nod along, but my thoughts are traveling to the past once more. For a long time, Wesley was as much my best friend as Stella, Hollie, and Louisa were. As far as Mom knew, I only ever saw him as a close friend. A brother-type figure. What she doesn’t know—what few people knew—is that I eventually developed a crush on Wesley. That crush deepened into full-blown love as we got older, and I continued to pine for him even after he moved away and we grew apart. If I’m being completely honest, in some secret, long-buried part of my heart, I still love him.

Mom takes my empty glass from my limp fingers and sets it on the table beside my bed. “Now, let’s see if there are any wearable dresses among this lot or if Katrina will be getting a piece of my mind!”

CHAPTER THREE

Luckily for Katrina, option number four—a forest green cocktail dress with a sweetheart neckline and lace cap sleeves—is the one. And luckily for *me*, I have shoes at home that will go with it so I don't have to go through this whole process again with footwear.

After three glasses of prosecco—and the shock of finding out about our new Thanksgiving plans and the fact Wesley will be attending my birthday party—I stuck around my parents' place for a few hours. Mom offered to bail on her meeting, but I told her to go ahead. I was happy for an excuse to watch a movie in the 'media room', with its reclining chairs and obscenely large TV.

The movie? *The Princess Bride*, of course, although I only half paid attention while my brain replayed scenes from my childhood. I also took the opportunity to text my friends and invite them to Thanksgiving dinner at Hathaway Manor on Monday...and asked Hollie to pass the invitation along to Fergus MacKinnon.

Now I'm back downtown, this time with the intention of picking up a treat of some sort for Stella after her difficult morning. Sunset is in less than an hour and, between the golden hour light and the fiery leaves of the trees lining the streets, everything is cast in a beautiful, burnished glow. Leafy garlands, hay bales, pumpkins, and a variety of Halloween decorations adorn the windows and storefronts all along the street. Even though it's been like this since late September and I've seen it countless times, there's something about the quality of light that makes me stop and whip out my phone to snap some pictures.

When I take a few steps back to get more of the decor in the shot, my shoulder knocks against something solid. The force of it sends me spinning around to face a man my age. An apology dies on my lips when my gaze meets a pair of sparkling blue eyes that are as familiar to me as my own reflection.

“Wesley.”

His hands dart out to grip my shoulders in an effort to steady me. For one bizarre second, I wonder if I fell asleep in my parents’ media room and I’m dreaming. No dream has ever been this good, though: Wesley McGrath standing in front of me, his hands gripping my shoulders as he smiles that familiar heartstopping smile of his.

“Hey, Buttercup.”

The next thing I know, he’s wrapping his arms around me and pulling me close. My senses go haywire as they absorb the warmth of his body and the scent of his skin. It’s both shocking and comforting to discover he still wears the same cologne he has since we were teens; I never knew what it was, but the warm, citrusy scent of it always made me want to bury my face in his neck and breathe him in. I resist the urge to do exactly that as I return his embrace, gripping the back of his leather jacket as if it’s a lifeline.

When Wesley releases me, we simply stand and stare at each other. He’s wearing an almost goofy grin; if the ache in my cheeks is any indication, the expression is mirrored on my own face. A torrent of questions rushes through my mind, but he speaks before I can voice a single one.

“Do you want to go for...” He glances at his watch and wrinkles his nose. “I was going to say coffee, but I’ve reached the *delightful* stage in life where I can’t have caffeine past three if I want to sleep that night. My mom warned me it would happen someday, but I didn’t think it would be *quite* this soon.”

“I bet that was a real blow for a coffee lover like you.”

“It was. It really was.” He bobs his head with mock solemnity. “Now I have to cram all my caffeine consumption into the earlier part of the day.” He imitates raising a cup to this mouth, his hand shaking wildly. “The caffeine high comes in handy on nights when I’m DJing, though.”

“You’re still doing that?”

His lips curve at the high pitch of my voice. Even after all this time apart, I bet he knows me well enough to detect the mixture of surprise, excitement, and curiosity. “Looks like we have a lot to catch up on, Buttercup. It’s a bit early for cocktails, so how about tea? Or hot chocolate?”

“I never turn down hot chocolate.”

His small smile grows, causing the dimple in his left cheek to wink to life. I was already feeling a bit shaky from simply seeing Wesley so unexpectedly, but that smile. That dimple. Heaven help me.

“Do you and the girls still hang out at the diner?” he asks.

“All the time. We were there for breakfast this morning, in fact.”

“Nice to know some things never change.” Between his tone and the twinkle in his eyes, I’m certain his words hold a double meaning, although I can’t figure out what it might be.

Before I can give it much thought, Wesley holds out one arm with his elbow bent. It takes me a minute to catch on, and then I slowly slide my arm through his. He pulls me closer, and I give in to the urge to snuggle against him, clutching his arm to my side, and resting my cheek on his shoulder.

“You have no idea how happy I am to see you, Evie,” he says softly, his breath ghosting over my face.

If he keeps this up, he’ll have to scrape me off the sidewalk.

“Does Stella know you’re home? When did you get into town? How long are you here for?”

Wesley shakes his head, chuckling softly at my rapid-fire questions. To be fair, at least I waited until we were seated at a booth inside B&H Diner before I let the questions fly. By some miracle, we managed to get one of the best and most private booths in the place. Neither of us considered the fact it’s dinnertime for many people, and the diner is bustling with couples and families enjoying their evening meal.

Bea comes into view, balancing a trio of plates in her hands. She sets them at a nearby table and chats with the people for a minute before straightening and glancing around. Her eyes brighten when she sees me, and she strides toward our table while pulling her order pad and pen from her apron.

“Well, hey there, honey. This is a nice surprise, seeing you twice in one day.”

“If you think *that’s* a nice surprise...” I motion toward the other side of the booth, where Wesley is tucked back in the seat, out of her line of sight.

Bea’s eyes go comically wide when they land on Wesley. “Boy, you’d better get out here and give me a hug!”

Wesley slides from the booth and wraps Bea in a tight embrace. I’m sure he comes here whenever he’s in town, so it likely hasn’t been that long since these two saw each other, but that’s how Bea has always been with the five of us. She and her husband Horatio never had kids of their own, but they treated us like we were part of their family. Over the years, she’s joked that we’re her little ducklings, sometimes straying from the flock, but always returning.

Bea pushes Wesley away to hold him at arm’s length. As she gives him a head-to-toe perusal, I take the opportunity to do the same now that my shock over seeing him has mostly worn off. His dark-blond hair is longer than usual, and the slightly windswept look of it suits him. He’s rocking a couple

days' worth of pale stubble, making his youthful face appear more mature. It's a look I can definitely get behind, especially when paired with a black t-shirt, snug-fitting jeans, and a leather jacket.

Bea releases Wesley and shoos him back into his seat. Her gaze darts between the two of us, her eyes shining. "I feel like I just stepped back in time to when the two of you used to come in here when Stella was off at her skating lessons." She lets out a sigh that's as wistful as her tone. "You were like peas in a pod, always with your heads bent together, sharing a set of those earbud things. You know I always thought you two were together? Or at least that things were heading that way."

A stilted laugh escapes me. Despite feeling Wesley's eyes on me and even seeing in my periphery that his head is turned my way, I keep my gaze on Bea. I'm not sure I want to know what Wesley's expression is.

"Common mistake," he says after several long beats.

"Right," I say. "We were just friends."

"Really good friends."

Something in Wes's voice makes me look at him. He's smiling softly at me, his expression open and full of fondness. It causes a tight pinch in my chest. While I'd go so far as to say he's gazing at me lovingly, it's not the type of love I wish he felt.

"What can I get you two?" Bea asks.

"Are you hungry?" Wesley asks me.

"No, I had something to eat at my mom's not long ago. You go ahead and order dinner if you're hungry."

He shakes his head and turns to Bea. "Will you be mad at us for taking up a booth at dinnertime if we only order hot chocolate?"

"If it were anyone else..." She shoots him a wink and spins on her heel, calling over her shoulder, "Two hot chocolates, coming right up."

“She hasn’t changed a bit.” Wesley leans his elbows on the table, clasping his hands in front of him and glancing around us. “And neither has this place.”

“You know what Horatio always says—”

“If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it’,” we say at the same time, then dissolve into laughter.

Our gazes remain locked as our amusement fades. I’ve known Wesley my whole life and we have so much to catch up on, but I have no idea what to say. The truth is, I’d be perfectly happy to sit and stare at him all night. I might be reading too much into it, but I don’t think he minds. Dare I say he even has an appreciative, almost hungry glint in his eyes as they survey my face.

Bea sets our drinks on the table, interrupting our impromptu staring contest. My cup is piled high with mini marshmallows, while Wesley’s has a swirl of whipped cream on top.

“You remembered,” he says.

“Oh, honey, I remember everything,” Bea says. “*Everything*. Like the time the two of you came in here, ordered a platter of pancakes to share, and then realized you didn’t have enough money, so you scrounged up enough loose change to pay. Or the time—” She doubles over laughing before she can get the words out. The sight makes me giggle along without even knowing what memory is playing through her mind.

She straightens, wiping her eyes on a napkin she pulls from the pocket of her apron. “Whew, lordy. Or the time you decided to start a dog-walking business and your first client dragged Evie through every mud puddle in a half-mile radius. Do you remember that?” The question aimed at Wesley, likely because there’s no chance *I’d* ever forget that particular experience.

“How could I forget?” Wesley’s voice shakes with suppressed laughter. “It was quite the image.”

Bea's face softens as she studies Wesley. "But what really stuck with me was the fact *you* ended that walk by jumping in the biggest puddle you could find so Evie wouldn't be embarrassed to be the only one covered in mud. Why the pair of you decided to come *here* instead of going home to get cleaned up first, I'll never understand. That image has lived rent free in my mind for nearly two decades, though, so I guess I should be thanking you." She pauses, her sharp eyes shifting from Wesley to me and back again. "You sure you two were never an item? Even secretly?"

"Really good friends," Wesley repeats. The way his dimple flashes makes me certain he's suppressing another laugh.

"If you say so. Enjoy your hot chocolate, kids. I'll be back later."

As she walks away, I pull my drink toward me and examine the marshmallows as if they hold the secrets of the universe. A tense silence hangs over the table now, and I can't decide whether to address what Bea said or not. Do I laugh it off and make a comment about her being as much of a meddler as my mother is? Do I gather up every last ounce of courage and attack the subject head on by asking Wesley if he ever had even the tiniest non-friend-like feelings for me? Or do I stick with self-preservation and attempt to change the subject?

Growing up, I was never uncomfortable around Wesley. All our silences were companionable unless we were mad at each other, and even those times were rare and didn't last long. It wasn't until I was in my early teens and my feelings for Wesley started to evolve into something new and confusing that I began occasionally feeling awkward and tongue-tied around him. I know he noticed, yet he never said anything, which made me love him even more.

Wesley saves me from myself by asking, "Which of your questions from earlier would you like me to answer first?"

Relief makes the frantic fluttering in my chest stop, which tells me it's better to stay on safe, solid, familiar ground. At least for now. "Stella. Does she know you're home?"

“She knows I was *planning* to come home, but not that I’m already here. I wanted to surprise her too.”

“The McGrath siblings back in town at the same time. Bellevue won’t know what hit it.”

Wesley’s mouth quirks up on one side as he lifts his hot chocolate to take a sip. I don’t realize I’m watching him—his mouth specifically—until his eyes flick up from the mound of whipped cream and lock on mine. “You’re waiting for me to get a faceful of this, aren’t you?”

“Or a mustache at the very least.”

He takes a sip and grins at me over the rim of his cup, revealing a thick, foamy mustache. “As you wish, Buttercup.”

There’s that fluttering in my chest again, although this time it’s for a different reason. In *The Princess Bride*, every time Westley says ‘as you wish’ to Buttercup, it’s his way of telling her he loves her. Even at a young age, I thought it was incredibly romantic, but Wesley declared it wouldn’t mean that for us, and we both began using the phrase as often as we quoted other lines from the movie.

Still, hearing it now for the first time in years, especially paired with my old nickname, it does funny things to my insides. As does the way Wesley runs his tongue over his upper lip to clear off his faux ‘stache before wiping the rest off with a napkin.

I shake my thoughts off the path they’re taking. “Wait, do it again so I can take a picture.”

“No way, you had your chance. Besides, you have plenty of moustachioed pictures of me from back in the day.”

I try—and fail—to stifle a giggle at the image his words evoke. We took our imaginary worlds very seriously as children, which meant Wesley often drew on a thin mustache when he assumed the role of the Dread Pirate Roberts. “Remember the time you used your mom’s heavy-duty eyeliner and it wouldn’t come off?”

He ducks his head, chuckling softly. “How could I forget? I begged her to let me stay home from school the next day. I think she wanted to teach me a lesson about taking things without asking.”

“No doubt. And while that was funny, my personal favorite —”

“Don’t,” Wesley says quickly, his voice shaking with laughter. “Don’t say it. Don’t remind me. Please, Ev.”

“My *personal favorite*,” I repeat, louder this time, “was when you decided it would be a good idea to grow your own mustache in high school.”

“You just can’t help yourself, can you?”

“Never could,” I say, and he makes a sarcastic sound of agreement. “Your friends teased you mercilessly while you attempted to let that thing grow in.”

“Hey, I was excited to finally be growing facial hair,” he says. “It wasn’t my fault it was so pale you could barely see it. And I’ll have you know, out of the so-called ‘friends who teased me mercilessly’, no one was as bad as you and Stella.”

“As your little sister and her best friend, it was our duty to keep your ego in check,” I say with a one-shouldered shrug.

The indulgent, amused look on his face eases some of the lingering tension inside me. That tension ramps back up when he leans across the table and lays his warm hand over mine. “*You* were my best friend too, you know.”

“I thought Leland was your best friend,” I say quietly.

His fingers tighten around mine. “He was, but so were you. When it came right down to it, I think you knew me better than anyone else did.”

I stare into his familiar blue eyes. Eyes I’ve looked into my whole life, eyes I dreamed about for years in my teens and twenties. Eyes I still dream about, if I’m being completely honest. “You were my best friend too, Wes.” For some reason I’m not willing to examine too closely, the words come out in

a choked whisper. Wesley shifts his hand so he can lift my fingers, holding them lightly in his.

“Don’t tell Stella,” we say at the same time, and then we’re both laughing again. Wesley releases my hand and flops back in his seat. I’m equal parts relieved and sad that the moment of physical closeness has slipped away.

Despite all the emotions seeing Wesley has stirred up, it’s good to laugh with him again. To reminisce about our shared past instead of the secret off-shoot of our history that involved a lot of fantasizing and pining on my part.

“What about this?” he asks, running the backs of his fingers over the light stubble on his cheeks and chin.

“Much better than the high school mustache attempt.”

“*Anything* would be better than the high school mustache attempt,” Wesley says dryly. “I’m trying to decide whether to shave it or keep growing it. I’ve always been curious to know what I’d look like with a beard.”

I want to tell him he’s too pretty to hide his face behind a beard. Or that he should consider maintaining the stubble instead of growing a full beard because the stubble gives him the slightest edge that makes him incredibly sexy, especially when paired with the leather jacket. Instead, I say, “I’m sure your mom and sister will have something to say about it.”

“They always do.”

“Speaking of your mom and sister, where are you staying? And for how long?”

“I’m staying with my parents,” he says, his gaze dipping down to the table. He swirls his mug, watching the whipped cream mix with the dark liquid. The way his eyes linger on his drink makes me think he’s avoiding looking at me. “And I’m not exactly sure how long I’m staying. Until next weekend at least. Maybe longer.”

“Longer? What about your job and...” I can’t say her name. It’s ridiculous to be jealous of a woman I hardly know.

“And your girlfriend?”

Wesley shifts in his seat, his gaze flicking from his drink to my face and back again before finally meeting and holding my eyes. “They’ll still be there. Between getting your mom’s invitation to your party and Stella moving back to town, I decided it was time to come home for a bit.”

His gaze drops to my mouth. My cheeks flare with heat as I realize I just mouthed the word ‘home’. Before I can quiz him on how long ‘a bit’ is, he says, “Stella has told me how much she loves living with you.”

I should call him out for changing the subject, but I don’t. Wesley is one of the most forthright people I know, so if he’s not giving me the whole story, there must be a good reason. “It’s been great,” I say. “Fantasy fulfillment at its finest. We always dreamed of living together, but it never worked out. Who knew it would happen at this stage of our lives?”

We talk more about Stella and the rest of his family. Wesley tells me about his sporadic DJing gigs in Ottawa and continues to evade questions about work and his girlfriend. I’m in the middle of answering a string of questions about my own job when Bea appears to check on us.

“I wouldn’t mind something to eat,” Wesley says, shooting me a questioning look.

As if on cue, my stomach rumbles. Bea looks between us, a knowing smile twitching at the corners of her lips. “Burger and fries?” she asks, and I nod.

“You really do remember everything,” Wesley says, and Bea shoots him a wink over her shoulder as she takes off toward the kitchen. He watches her for a second, then says to me, “Although you *did* say you still come here all the time, so that would explain her knowing your favorite.”

“I haven’t ordered a burger and fries in years,” I tell him. “Probably not since the last time you and I had dinner together here. Horatio slowly and somewhat begrudgingly added a few healthier options to the menu when his doctor told him he

needed to be eating healthier himself. I usually order one of the all-day breakfast specials or soup and a salad. Sometimes the girls and I split a bunch of appetizers.”

“Huh.” Wesley’s eyebrows are high on his forehead, as if I just told him some huge, life changing secret.

“Burgers and fries were always our thing,” I say, probably unnecessarily.

“Yeah. Yeah, they were.” A smile starts at one corner of his mouth and spreads slowly. “We had a lot of *‘things’*, you and I, didn’t we, Buttercup?”

He sounds almost flirty, but that can’t be right. Wesley and I were many things growing up, but we were never flirty with each other, as much as I wished we were. That, paired with the way he keeps calling me Buttercup—a nickname he hasn’t used in years—is sending the butterflies in my stomach into a frenzy.

CHAPTER FOUR

Wesley gets sidetracked from his maybe-flirting when he sees someone he knows walk by outside, and he starts telling me a story about something the pair of them did in high school. Bea swings by a few minutes later and deposits drinks on the table—Sprite for both of us, something else I haven't had since the last time I had dinner with Wesley—and returns again shortly with our food.

I'm dousing my fries in vinegar when I realize Bea is still standing there, hands on hips, her gaze swiveling back and forth between Wesley and me. Her misty eyes match her wistful smile, causing an unexpected lump of emotion to form in my throat. I'm about to ask if she's okay when she gives a full-body shake, releases a loud sigh, and walks away.

Wesley's soft laughter draws my attention across the table. He plucks the bottle of vinegar from my limp fingers and sprinkles some over his fries before reaching for the ketchup.

"What do you think that was about?" I ask, plucking the piece of lettuce from my bun and sliding it onto Wesley's burger. He lifts both pieces of lettuce and points at the glistening, ruby red slice of tomato underneath. I stab it with my fork and stack it on top of my tomato. This is how it's always been—I like lettuce, but not on burgers or sandwiches, and Wesley doesn't like tomatoes on burgers because he says they make the bun soggy. The whole exchange is over in a matter of seconds, with neither of us saying a word.

I look up as I lift the burger to my mouth. Wesley is watching me with an unreadable smile. "What?"

He shakes his head and lifts his own burger, taking a big bite. He chews for what seems like forever and then finally

swallows. “I just love how we fall back into our old rhythms, no matter how much time we’ve spent apart.” He sets down his burger and wipes his fingers on a napkin. “As for Bea, I think she’s happiest when all her ducklings return to the nest.”

“Can’t disagree with that. When Stella moved back, Bea had Horatio make her a special cake. She even offered to let Stella have the apartment over the diner and a job here if she wanted it until she found something else.”

“Stella told me. She joked about taking the apartment if she overstayed her welcome at your place.”

“That would never happen. Having her back in Bellevue feels like a dream come true, and I love living with her. I already know I’ll be sad when she finds a place of her own and moves out.”

“Maybe you can switch one McGrath sibling for the other and I’ll take over her room when she moves out.”

“*You*, living back in Bellevue? Don’t tease me, Wesley.” I laugh as I say it, assuming he’s joking. He doesn’t laugh with me, though, and that tiny, indecipherable smile is twitching away at the corners of his mouth again.

In a completely uncharacteristic move, I decide to let it drop. Wesley has been evading certain topics and making cryptic comments all evening. Something is clearly up, but if I know Wesley as well as I think as I do—as well as I have since birth—he’ll tell me when he’s ready. And if he doesn’t, we both know I’m not above hounding him until he gives in. Or calling in his little sister as reinforcement.

Instead, I focus on my burger. I wasn’t kidding when I said I hadn’t had one since the last time Wesley and I ate here together. If Wesley’s blissed-out expression is any indication, he’s having a moment too.

It doesn’t take long for us to slip back into casual conversation. Bea comes to check on us several times, with that same wistful expression gracing her features. When we finish eating, Wesley excuses himself to use the bathroom and

I sit back in the booth, glancing around and blinking as if I'm coming out of a deep, dream-filled sleep. There are only a few people left in the diner; an elderly couple across the room is sharing a giant slice of cheesecake, and a teen a few tables over is chewing on the straw of her milkshake while staring at the phone in her hand.

I'm about to pull out my own phone to see if I've missed anything when a flash of green catches my eye. My gaze locks with a guy I went on a date with a month or so ago, and I cringe inwardly when he pivots to approach the table.

"Hey, Evelyn," he says, wrapping an impossibly long, bright green scarf around his neck multiple times.

"Hey, Bart." I hope my voice sounds less surprised—and confused—than I feel, considering the one date we had wasn't what any human being would ever consider a success.

"You didn't see me come in earlier, but I got up to leave right after your date went to the bathroom, so I thought I'd say hi." The words come out in a rush and he punctuates them with a little wave followed by a wince. "Wow, that was awkward. And *this* is awkward. I'm sorry."

I can't help but chuckle at his honesty. Even though our date wasn't great, I remember finding his self-deprecating nature charming. "It's fine. I'm glad you came to say hi."

His face relaxes into a more natural smile. "Good. I went on one more date after ours and then deleted the app. I was fooling myself to think I was ready to start dating again so soon after my last relationship ended. I'm glad you kept at it, though. You and your date look really comfortable and happy together."

"Oh..." I consider correcting him, but it doesn't make any difference if he thinks Wesley and I are together. "Thanks, Bart."

He glances up as Wesley slowly approaches the table. "Anyway, take care, Evelyn. Maybe I'll see you around." He

nods at me, then does the same in Wesley's direction as he passes him on his way to the door.

"Who was that?" Wesley asks as he slides back into his seat.

I let out a small, involuntary groan. "Okay, don't make fun of me, but Hollie and I joined a dating site a couple months ago."

Wesley is quiet for a minute, as if he's processing this tidbit of information. Finally, he asks, "Why would I make fun of you for that? Plenty of people use dating apps these days."

"I know, I know. I just...didn't want to be one of them? You hear as many horror stories as you do success stories, and I always thought...*hoped*..."

"Thought-slash-hoped what?"

I sigh, deciding to say it quickly and get it over with. "I always thought I'd be married by now, or at least on my way. Hollie and Louisa feel that way too, probably because of societal expectations, blah blah." I wave a hand around and Wesley presses his lips together to hold back a smile, although he nods to show he understands. "I thought at the very least, I'd like to meet someone the old-fashioned way, but it just wasn't happening. Or, to be fair, I was meeting guys, mostly through my mother's matchmaking attempts, but none of them were the right fit for me."

Wesley picks up his glass and swirls it around, making the remnants of ice clink against the sides. "And why do you think that is?"

Because the right guy is already taken and lives three hours away. Oh, and he sees me as a little sister rather than someone he could fall in love with.

I pick up my own glass and down the last few mouthfuls of pop. "I feel weird saying this, like I'm conceited or something, but it seems as if guys are often intimidated once they find out how successful I am. Things will be going great, they seem interested and engaged, and then as soon as they learn what I

do for a living—*bam*—they get this *look*. Like they can't fathom being with someone who might be more successful than they are or who's confident and owns who she is."

I recognize Wesley's scrunched-nose expression: he's affronted on my behalf. "Well." He clears his throat and leans back in his seat, crossing his arms over his chest. "This is going to sound trite, but it's *their* loss. You're strong and smart and self-assured. I've always loved that about you, you know. How you know your own mind and what you want, and you never back down."

Wesley's sincerity and the conviction in his voice make a lump of emotion form in my throat. He's mostly right about me never backing down, although I can think of one glaring example where he's wrong. I backed down all those years ago when it came to my feelings for him. More accurately, I chickened out, telling myself it was easier to keep my feelings to myself and not upset the balance of our friendship.

I swallow hard and hope my tone sounds light when I say, "Wanna hang around Bellevue for a while and be my personal cheerleader?"

"I'll always be your cheerleader, Ev. Always." A moment of silence passes and then he drops his arms and leans against the table. "So, what was the deal with Mr. Green Scarf?"

"Oh, Bart? He was...nice."

Wesley's eyebrows shoot up. "*Nice?* Wow, kiss of death."

I snort. "We met for coffee and he was polite and friendly, even kind of funny, but he spent most of the date talking about himself. He also kept mentioning his ex-girlfriend, so I don't think he was ready to date anyway, which he actually admitted to me just now. At the end of the night, we shook hands and that was it."

Wesley nods slowly. "Any other dates lined up?"

I lean forward, prompting Wesley to do the same. "Don't tell Hollie, but I put my account on hold a few weeks ago."

Something akin to relief flashes over Wesley's face, but it's there and gone so quickly I'm sure I imagined it. "What about Hollie, has she had any dating success stories?"

"She hasn't been on any dates at all yet," I tell him. "She's been chatting with a couple of guys, and there's one she really likes, but their schedules haven't lined up or something. I think she's just being cautious, not that I blame her."

"That's smart. And you? Are you going to go back to searching the old-fashioned way?"

I wrinkle my nose. "I think I'll stop searching, period, at least for a while." I push my glass away and pick up a napkin to wipe the condensation from my hands. With Wesley's gaze steady on mine, something possesses me to add, "Or who knows, maybe whatever guy my mom tries to set me up with at my birthday party this year will finally be a winner."

Wesley stares at me for a few beats before his lips move in what I think is supposed to be a smile. "Mama Hathaway is still doing that, huh?"

"Does the sun still rise in the east?" I ask, drawing a more genuine smile from him. Not wanting to talk about my pathetic excuse for a love life, I say, "I guess we'd better flag down Bea and get the check."

"Oh, I already paid," Wesley says casually, avoiding my gaze as he puts on his jacket.

"Wesley!"

He slides out of the booth and offers me a hand. "I wanted to avoid the awkward back and forth of who got to pay, so I made an executive decision."

A laugh tumbles out of me as his warm fingers close around mine and I climb from the booth. "That's really sweet, thank you."

"My pleasure. I should be thanking *you*. This is the most enjoyable evening I've had in quite awhile."

Before I can question that, Bea rushes over to say good night to us. She envelopes Wesley in a tight hug, making him promise to come back soon. She hugs me next and then ushers us toward the exit.

There's a chill in the air when Wesley and I step outside. Without a word, we both turn to the left and saunter down the sidewalk, silently admiring the autumn decorations lining the street and adorning the fronts of shops. I've just pulled my jean jacket around me tighter when Wesley slings his arm across my back, drawing me closer to him. I'm sure he's completely clueless to the fact his grin and the way he rubs my arm for warmth are sending my brain into a tailspin.

"Where are you parked?" he asks.

"Down by the copy place. You?"

He hooks a thumb over his shoulder to indicate the opposite direction. "Near the market."

I come to an abrupt stop, causing him to do the same since his arm is still around me. "Have you been away from Bellevue so long you've forgotten your directions? You're going to have to backtrack to get to your car if you go this way."

He shrugs, tightening his arm around me and gently urging me to start walking again. "You're worth backtracking for."

I consider telling him he doesn't have to walk me to my car, but I keep my mouth closed and lean into him instead. If Wesley is only here for a few days, I want to spend every possible second with him. Even if it means having to stitch my heart back together when he leaves again. I've done it before; in fact, I don't think the tiny tear his absence created has ever truly healed.

At my car, Wesley releases me and reaches inside his jacket, producing a CD in a shiny red jewel case. He opens his mouth to speak, but I sputter out a laugh before he can get any words out. "*Wow*. Haven't seen one of those in a few years."

“Tell me you still have a CD player,” he says, tapping the case against his palm.

“Of course I do! There’s no way I’d ever part with my CD collection, especially since half of them were given to me by you. And at least half of *those* are CDs just like that one... which I assume is for me?”

Without a word, he holds it out and I pluck it from his fingers. *‘For Buttercup on her thirty-fifth birthday, with love from Wesley’* is written in neat block letters on the front of the case.

“You can expect a few more of those leading up to your birthday,” Wesley says, tucking his hands into his jacket pockets and rocking back and forth on his heels. “I contemplated doing a hit song from every year of your life, but decided to make a mix of old favorites and some songs that make me think of you.”

Despite the levity of his words, there’s something in the earnestness of his expression that makes my throat tighten. I try to cover it by saying, “If memory serves, thirty-five songs wouldn’t fit on one CD anyway.”

He smirks. “I wasn’t going to mention that, but since you brought it up...”

I go to shove him, but he catches my hand and uses the momentum of my body to pull me against him. There was a time when I would have playfully fought back and tried to get away. Not tonight, though. Tonight, I sink against his body, wrapping my arms around him as his arms encircle me and hold on tight. I can feel the strong, steady beat of his heart, and it makes me wonder if he can feel the way mine flutters like hummingbird wings.

Wesley doesn’t seem in any hurry to pull away, so I hang on, fisting my hands in the back of his jacket. The only other time we hugged for this long was the day he left for university; I tried so hard to keep it together that day, but ended up bursting into tears as Wesley went to get into his car. He held

me close as I clung to him and sobbed all over the brand-new University of Ottawa shirt Stella and I bought him when he got his acceptance letter.

When we eventually release each other, I'm certain I'm not the only one doing so reluctantly. The air between us feels charged, and the street seems to have fallen silent even though I remember hearing people talking and cars passing only a moment ago. A breeze sends a few strands of hair whipping into my face, and Wesley tucks them behind my ear, his fingers lingering on my cheek.

I'm just about to turn my face into his palm when he drops his hand and stuffs it into his pocket once more. "I'd better let you get home," he says, taking a step back. "I have some things I need to deal with while I'm in town, but hopefully I can see you again before your party. If not, I'll see you on Saturday?"

"Mmhmm." I'm dazed from our prolonged hug and the way Wesley touched my cheek. I feel like a teenager again, desperate for every little scrap of affection—affection that Wesley always gave freely and easily because we were so close—and then analyzing it to death and hoping it meant something more than it did. "Since Monday is a holiday, I took the rest of the week off as my birthday gift to myself. Call me anytime if you're free to hang out."

"I will." He brushes a kiss on my cheek before leaning past me to open the driver's side door. "Drive safe, Ev."

Once I'm in my car, I watch Wesley in the rearview mirror until he disappears around the corner. Before starting the engine, I fish around in my purse for my phone to check for missed calls or texts. It's not there, nor is it in my jacket pockets. I have a sudden vision of it sitting facedown on the table inside the diner. With a grumble, I start the car and drive in the direction of B&H, pulling into the lot and snagging a spot near the front door.

I've just stepped inside when Bea bustles over, pulling my phone from her apron pocket. "Forget something?"

“You’re a lifesaver, Bea. Thank you.” I take the phone and tuck it in my pocket.

“No problem, honey. Gotta tell you, it did my heart a lot of good to see you and Wesley together tonight, just like old times.” Her pleased smile takes on a hint of mischief. From the way her eyes gleam, I know what she’s going to say before the words even form on her lips. “Any chance of you two—”

“No” I say firmly, cutting her off. “Like Wesley said, we’re just really good friends. Always have been, always will be.”

“Really good friends,” Bea says slowly, nodding her head with exaggerated understanding. “Okay, honey. It’s just...*I* never looked at *my* friends the way you two look at each other.”

Before I can say anything, Horatio calls to Bea from the back. He waves when he sees me, blowing me a kiss I pretend to catch and hold to my chest. I call good night to him and promise Bea I’ll see her soon as she hurries away toward the kitchen.

Back outside, I pause and close my eyes, breathing in the crisp air and reveling in the way it caresses my warm cheeks. My eyes pop open as something Bea said hits me. I have no trouble believing I might not be able to hide my feelings for Wesley, especially from someone like Bea, who’s known me most of my life. But she said ‘the way you two look at *each other*’.

Which begs the question: how does Wesley look at me?

CHAPTER FIVE

“You were out late last night.”

At the sound of my voice, Stella blinks at me from across the room where she’s just emerged from her bedroom. She looks adorable and sleep-rumpled, her dark-blond hair with its fading blue streaks a mass of tangled knots, and her Mandalorian pajama pants twisted around her legs.

She holds up a finger for me to wait as she trudges to the kitchen and pours herself a glass of water and a cup of coffee. She brings both to the living room and sets them on the coffee table before flopping onto the couch across from me.

She glances at me sleepily as she reaches for the glass of water. Her hand freezes halfway as she takes in the ear buds connected to my ancient Discman. A low laugh starts in her chest and spills from her mouth, making my lips twitch.

“Where did *that* come from? And what are you listening to?”

“I found this in a box in my closet,” I tell her, lifting the shiny silver portable CD player. I don’t add that the box is full of every CD and cassette tape Wesley ever gave to or made for me. “I had an old Walkman in there too. And my very first flip phone.”

Stella throws her head back and laughs. My heart feels light and fizzy at the sight. It’s so good to see her having moments of lighthearted happiness again. “That’s amazing. What are you listening to? And what brought on the sudden need for a nostalgic walk down memory lane?”

I set the Discman aside and reach for my own coffee. I’ve been awake for over an hour, curled up in my favorite

armchair with Wesley's birthday mix playing quietly in my ears. When I got home last night and discovered Stella was out, I poured myself a glass of wine, turned the lights down low, and put the CD in the stereo. I listened to it all the way through, grinning like an idiot and tearing up on several occasions as the songs brought up countless memories, some of which were so powerful I felt like I'd been transported through time.

Before going to bed, I went in search of my old mixes from Wesley and discovered the Discman. It felt fitting to listen to his newest mix again on this old relic, since most of the songs are from the '90s and early 2000s, when I rarely left home without my Discman and a sleeve of CDs.

"The answer to both of those questions involves your brother," I say.

Stella's eyes brighten. "Is he back in town already? Have you spoken to him?"

"I ran into him yesterday after I left Mom's, and we hung out at the diner for a few hours. He gave me this CD before we parted ways last night."

"How was it? Seeing him, I mean?" Stella reaches for the jewel case and scans the list of songs. "You look kinda moony. Moony and swoony."

"Moony and swoony," I mutter. I suck in a breath and let it out on a long, slow exhale. "Seeing Wesley was...wonderful. It stirred up a lot of old stuff, though."

Stella makes a sympathetic face, her eyes flicking from the song list in her hands to me. Whatever my expression is, it catches her attention because she lifts her head and holds my gaze. Stella knows about my feelings for Wesley; in fact, she knew I was falling for him before I even realized it. She wasn't one of those friends who proclaimed her brother off limits or warned me to stay away from him. Quite the opposite, actually. Since our families were already so

connected, she hoped Wesley and I would get together someday and cement the familial bonds.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Stella asks.

“Not really?” It comes out sounding more like a question than a statement. “What is there to say? He lives in Ottawa and has a serious girlfriend.”

“Ugh, the *girlfriend*.”

I hold in a laugh at the way she rolls her eyes and wrinkles her nose. Stella has never made her dislike of Wesley’s girlfriend a secret, even though she’s only met her a few times. Wesley wasn’t fond of Stella’s ex-husband either, which drove a bit of a wedge between the siblings over the last few years. Since Stella moved back to town, she and Wesley have been communicating more, so I’m hoping they’re on their way to regaining the close bond they once had.

“Anyway,” I say pointedly. “What were you up to last night?”

The way she appears to gather herself and straighten her spine tells me I’m not going to like the answer. “I was out with Tannis.”

I press my lips together to prevent myself from saying ‘ugh, Tannis’. After a beat, during which Stella starts to squirm, I force myself to unclench my jaw. “Did you have a good time?”

“That’s it? That’s all you’re going to say?”

I lift one shoulder. “What else is there to say, Stels? You know I don’t like her. You know I don’t think she’s a good fit for you.”

I have to stop myself from saying a million other things. Like the fact it feels as if history is repeating itself since Stella dated Tannis off and on before she met her now-ex-husband, Lars, and she always treated Stella like her dirty little secret. Or reminding her about the pact we made after she divorced Lars, where we promised to always be honest with each other

about the people we date, and if we spotted any red flags the other was too blinded by love—or lust—to see.

Stella slumps forward like a balloon that's had all the air let out of it. Her chin wobbles as she says, "Sometimes I wonder if I'll ever stop making bad decisions."

I jump up from my chair and practically leap across the coffee table in my hurry to sit beside her and take her hand.

"Ever since my accident, I feel like all I've done is screw up." Her eyes are misty, but she's blinking furiously in an attempt to keep the tears in. "I had my whole life planned out and it was all ripped away in a matter of minutes."

When Stella started her skating lessons all those years ago, I figured it would be a passing interest. Her parents had already enrolled her in gymnastics and karate, neither of which lasted long before Stella begged them to let her quit. It became evident early on that skating would be different, though. Stella had finally found something she loved. She was also good enough to catch the eye of a well-known local trainer who encouraged the McGraths to pursue professional training.

The same year my family made our big move across town, Stella was in a horrible car accident on her way to a skating competition with another competitor and his mother. Thankfully, they only suffered minor cuts and scrapes, but Stella was left battered and bruised, with injuries ranging from broken bones in her left leg to a severe concussion. She spent weeks in the hospital and months after that convalescing at home. Despite eventually making a full recovery physically—with the exception of a slight limp from her leg not healing quite right—Stella was never the same after the accident. All her hopes and plans for a future as a professional skater were crushed, and it took her a long time and a lot of therapy to come to terms with it.

"My whole adult life has been so aimless," Stella says, her voice wavering. "I'm almost thirty-five and what do I have to show for it? What have I accomplished?"

“You’re working on that, though,” I say. “You’re *trying*, and that counts for something. That counts for a *lot*. You’re back home where you belong, and you know I’ll help you in any way I can.”

“You’ve already done so much for me,” she says, sniffing pathetically.

“Because you’re my very best friend in the whole world, Stella. And I’ll continue to do everything I can for you until you have the life you want. The life you *deserve*.”

“What if that never happens?” Her voice is barely above a whisper, and it makes my heart squeeze painfully. “What if I never find a career I love or a person to share my life with? What if I just keep going from job to job and person to person? Or get to a point where I decide I’ve had enough of dating and I end up alone?”

What do I say to that? I’m aware of how fortunate I am to have a career I not only enjoy but that I’m also good at. I understand her other fears, though; I’m proud of the life I’ve built and I enjoy my independence, but I’d be lying if I said I didn’t have the same fear of ending up alone. Of never finding someone to share my life with, someone who loves me fiercely and unconditionally.

I shift on the couch to face Stella. “I wish I had the answers for you. I thought by the time we got to this age, we’d have everything figured out, but that’s a joke, isn’t it?” I pause, relieved to see her lips curving slightly as she nods. “I don’t know many things for certain, but I do know you’ll never be alone. You’ll always have me. I know it’s not the same as being in love and having a partner, but—”

Stella cuts me off with a quick shake of her head. “Having you in my life is more than enough, Evie. Our friendship, the love we share...” She trails off, her throat working as she swallows several times. She clears her throat and continues. “The love we share is more than some people ever get in a lifetime.”

“Well damn, now you’re going to make *me* cry.” Blinking back tears, I pull my hand from hers to wave it in front of my face. We spend a minute or two unsuccessfully attempting to stop our laugh-crying, and then I shift to face Stella again. “Can I just say one thing? And have you understand that it comes from a place of loving you and wanting the best for you?”

“Okay...” she says warily.

“Stop settling. For some unfathomable reason, you seem to think you don’t deserve good things, even though you deserve the very best. So stop settling for jobs you hate, stop settling for people you don’t even really like and who don’t treat you right. You know you can stay here for as long as you want, so consider this in-between time a gift. A chance to dig deep, figure out what you really want, and find the courage to go for it. And...” I gather my own courage, remembering our pact. “In that same vein, stop dating people like Tannis because you think you don’t deserve better.”

Stella’s face is blank by the time I finish speaking. She’s nodding her head slowly, though, which tells me she’s processing everything I said.

The alarm on my phone goes off, startling us both. Stella raises her eyebrows at my good-natured eye roll as I grab my phone and swipe to snooze the alarm. “Mom called first thing this morning to ask me to pick up a few things for Thanksgiving tomorrow. She’d normally have her worker bees doing all the prep, but she gave most of them the weekend off since she thought it would be just the three of us for the holiday. It can wait until we finish this conversation, though.”

“No, no, you go ahead,” Stella says quickly. “I need some time to process. And just so you know, you’re right. As always. Which is *supremely* annoying.”

I laugh, relieved she’s not upset. “We’ll talk more later, yeah? Maybe work on a plan?”

“You and your plans.” She picks up Wesley’s CD from where she set it on the arm of the couch and goes back to scanning the list of songs. “Always with the lists and plans. I guess I shouldn’t make fun since you’re so successful. Hey, remember when we decided to form our own Baby-Sitters Club and you took on the role of President because you were so clearly the Kristy of the group? You had the visor and everything. You had notebooks full of ideas and lists and plans and—” Her words cut off abruptly, her eyes going wide as she flips the little CD booklet open. “Did you look at this? The insert?”

I shake my head at the sudden change of topic. I was ready for another stroll down memory lane with talk of our short-lived yet successful Baby-Sitters Club. “No. I wanted to go in without knowing what songs were on it and be surprised.”

“Mm, that’s a nice idea,” she says, her tone far too casual. “You might want to have a look at it, though.”

The snoozed alarm on my phone goes off, and I silence it. “Okay, just leave it there and I’ll have a look when I get home.”

Stella appears as if she wants to argue, but she simply presses her lips together and nods. Wanting to see her smile again, I lean over and plant a noisy kiss on her cheek.

Her face relaxes into a grin. “Love you, Ev.”

“Love you too. Give your parents my love when you head over for dinner later.” Stella’s parents are having their Thanksgiving dinner today because they’re going out of town tomorrow.

“Will do.” She taps her rainbow-colored nails on the CD case, her expression morphing into the picture of innocence. “Should I pass your love along to Wesley too?”

Right, Wesley. Even though I knew he was back in town, I didn’t think about him being at Thanksgiving for some reason. The last twenty-four hours have left my head spinning.

“Of course,” I say, aiming for a tone as guileless as her expression. “Feel free to invite him to tomorrow’s Thanksgiving too. I know my parents would love to see him.”

CHAPTER SIX

“Oh, Evelyn, there you are.”

Damn. I plaster on a smile and turn to face my mom, relieved to see she’s alone. In the hour since guests have been arriving for Thanksgiving dinner, Mom has forced me into conversations with two single thirty-something men, extolled my virtues to a man who was recently divorced and is apparently ready to start dating again, and promised a fourth man I’d sit next to him at dinner. Needing a break from my mother, her string of potential ‘suitors’, and the noise of more attendees than I’d expected, I managed to escape and slip into the back hall. I should have known Mom would find me within minutes.

“Why are you hiding out back here when you should be mingling with guests?” she asks. “Ned Goldberg was telling me how much he enjoyed talking to you and that he’d like to get to know you better.”

“Oh joy,” I mutter.

“What’s that?”

My phone buzzes in my hand with the text I’ve been impatiently waiting for. My salvation has arrived. “I said ‘oh joy’, the girls are here. I’ll go meet them at the door. Excuse me, Mom. Don’t hide out back here for too long.”

The sound of her sputtering follows me down the hall. At events like this, where I have to be ‘on’ nearly every second, forced into conversation with people I rarely have anything in common with, and feeling like I’m about to be auctioned off to the highest bidder, I take my kicks where I can get them. Immature? Probably. And yet, occasionally needling my mom

seems like a better alternative to exploding at her and demanding she back off.

I hurry to the door and throw it open as the girls approach. Like the amazing friends they are, they offered to be here from the beginning, but I wanted to spare them as much boredom as possible, so I suggested they arrive closer to dinnertime. They'll do their share of chatting with strangers in less than a week at my birthday party anyway.

I'm about to usher them inside when I notice the handsome man standing behind Hollie. The old-fashioned lamps above the door shine on his dark auburn hair, making me think of the beautiful autumnal floral arrangements Mom had me pick up yesterday.

"Evie, this is Fergus MacKinnon," Hollie says. "Fergus, this is Evie Hathaway."

Fergus steps forward with a smile and shakes my hand. "Pleasure to meet you, Evie." Despite knowing he was Scottish, I'm delighted to hear his accent. "Hollie speaks of you often, and you made quite an impression on my cousin Hugh when you worked together recently."

"Well, that's nice to hear. I'm glad you could come tonight. Any friend of Hollie's is a friend of ours."

He leans in, his voice dropping to a conspiratorial level as he says, "I hear you might need me to be a buffer of sorts between your mum and her matchmaking attempts. I'm happy to be of service." It's only when he squeezes my fingers that I realize our hands are still clasped. And am I...*blushing?*

The rapid click-clack of approaching high heels brings me back to the present a second before my mom says, "Evelyn, don't leave our guests standing on the doorstep! Oh, hello there." Without looking, I know her gaze has settled on Fergus. Looks like I'm not the only one who's affected by the handsome Scot. Wait 'til she hears him speak.

Fergus winks at me as he moves past me to introduce himself to my mom, giving her a warm handshake and

offering her a gift bag I hadn't noticed before. "I figured a woman such as yourself would be well stocked with wine, so I brought a bottle of Drambuie for you and Mr. Hathaway. It was always a favorite of my mum's."

While Mom gushes over Fergus's thoughtfulness, I turn to Hollie and grip her shoulders, planting a kiss on her cheek. "You're a genius and I owe you."

I hug Stella and Louisa next. Louisa looks pale, despite the small smile she gives me; parties like this have always set off her anxiety, although she's come a long way over the years. She used to avoid large gatherings altogether because they distressed her so much she'd become physically ill.

I linger over our hug as the others greet my mom with embraces of their own. "If you need to escape at any point, we'll all understand," I say quietly into her ear. "You can head up to my bedroom or into the media room. Both places will be quiet and no one will disturb you there. Feel free to grab one of us for company if you want. Actually, feel free to grab *me*, whether you want company or not."

I barely hear Louisa's answering laugh as a shadow moves outside the still-open front door. A second later, Wesley steps into the light, looking like a dream come true in dark trousers and an eggplant-colored dress shirt that's open at the collar.

"Buttercup," he says. "Sorry I'm late."

I blink and realize Louisa is no longer in my arms, and I'm somehow standing in front of Wesley. I didn't know if he was coming; Stella told me earlier that he was non-committal about attending. I can't help the wild grin that overtakes my face at the sight of him.

Despite having feelings for Wesley for more years than I can count, I don't remember ever being this affected by him. I haven't been able to get him off my mind since the other night when we ran into each other downtown. Seeing him again has reminded me of all the things I forced myself to forget, like how heart-stoppingly beautiful his smile is, how sexy his voice

is, how his hands look strong and capable and...gah, I need to stop.

I grab his hand and pull him inside. It's something I've done a million times before, so I'm sure he'd never guess it's because I'm desperate to touch him, even if it's as innocent as holding his hand for the briefest of moments. "You're right on time. Welcome back to Hathaway Manor, Wesley. It's been way too long."

Mom was so taken with Fergus, she arranged for us to sit next to each other at dinner. When Ned Goldberg attempted to slide into the seat on my other side, Wesley headed him off with a request to sit beside his 'long lost best friend' so we could catch up. Apparently even Ned wasn't immune to Wesley's puppy dog eyes, which means I ended up feeling like the very lucky filling in an unlikely Thanksgiving sandwich between a hot Scot and my first love.

Dinner has been over for an hour and the party's still going strong. I had hoped guests wouldn't linger too long after the meal, but no such luck. Blame it on the free-flowing alcohol and the fact there are servers circulating with trays of tiny, delicious desserts.

My friends stick together, moving around the room like an inseparable flock of beautiful birds. Any time I'm with them for too long, my mom ushers me away to speak to someone else. While I knew there was no point in asking her not to play matchmaker, I *did* make one request before the evening began. It seemed like a simple enough request: no work talk. And yet, time and time again, Mom introduces me to people who are in the market for real estate, and I end up talking about houses on the market, good investment properties, rental opportunities, and, of course, my recent news-making deal with the MacKinnon Group.

“Hugh MacKinnon is my cousin, you know,” Fergus says, appearing out of nowhere and addressing the elderly white-haired man I’ve been speaking to. “He asked me to move into the caretaker’s apartment in the old funeral home after he bought it to keep vandals and such away while they organize a team to do renovations.”

The old man’s bushy eyebrows skyrocket. He fires off a series of questions at Fergus, who slips in front of me and makes a subtle shooing motion with his hand. Irritation surges through me until I realize his intention is to save me, not snub me.

Making a mental note to thank Fergus later, I dash away. Unfortunately, I don’t get far before I run into Ned. I swallow the groan that rises in my throat, covering it with a delicate cough.

“You seem to be in a hurry to get somewhere, Evelyn.”

And yet he makes no effort to get out of my way and let me pass. My mom sure knows how to pick ’em. “I was just looking for my friends.” I make a show of peering around the room. The show becomes real when I don’t spot the girls anywhere.

“They were all clustered around your mom with Wesley a few minutes ago,” Ned says. “Wesley was doing all the talking and then the four of them disappeared.”

“Oh.” I continue searching the room. There’s no way they’d leave without telling me.

“I’m more than happy to keep you company.” He doesn’t give me a chance to speak before he launches into details about a case he’s working on. Since my mother drilled good manners into me from a young age—and forced me to take *actual etiquette lessons* after she started hosting events for my dad’s coworkers and clients—I try my best to pay attention to what Ned is saying. It quickly becomes evident he’s one of those people who talks *at* you rather than *to* you, so my efforts

turn to hiding the disinterest from my expression while I cast surreptitious glances around the room in search of escape.

I'm half listening to Ned, my eyes nearly crossing from boredom, when my gaze lands on my dad across the room. I send him a beseeching look, giving him my best 'please get me out of this conversation' eyes. Amusement plays across his face as he takes a few steps forward. My relief is short-lived as someone intercepts him. Dad shoots me an apologetic look over the man's shoulder. If I'm not mistaken, he's now giving off his own 'someone save me' vibes.

I've always considered my dad an extroverted introvert, or at least an introvert who's good at putting on an act. When I was little, he seemed to thrive at the casual parties my mom hosted, and he was the grill master at our many summer barbecues. That continued for a while after we moved here, and our barbecues included pool parties in the Olympic-size pool out back. Things soon changed, though; those relaxed gatherings became fancy cocktail and dinner parties, charity events, and fundraisers.

Dad always appeared at ease as he circulated, but at nearly every event, there was a point when he'd slip away for a short period of time. Eventually, I realized he was going up to his office, and I assumed Mr. Workaholic was handling business. My curiosity got the best of me one night about ten years ago, and I followed him. Instead of taking a call or banging away at his computer like I expected, I found him sitting in the dark save for the glow of his Tiffany lamp, feet propped on the corner of his desk, and whiskey tumbler in hand.

He invited me in, poured me a glass of the Jameson whiskey he apparently kept hidden in a drawer in his desk, and we sat in silence. Since that night, it's been our secret ritual at nearly every event my mom hosts. Sometimes we sit quietly, and other times we talk about work and life, books we've read, or places we've discovered around town. I cherish those times, and I was looking forward to our getaway tonight, but it appears it might not happen.

A throat clears beside me. *Oops*. I haven't even been pretending to listen to Ned. He wasn't the one trying to get my attention, though, which I realize as I glance up into Fergus's moss-colored eyes. Disappointment rushes through me at the sight of his coat draped over one arm, until I notice my coat is tucked underneath it. "Sorry to interrupt, but I've been sent to collect Evie."

Ned is surprisingly gracious about the interruption. Fergus places his hand on the small of my back as he leads me across the room.

"Where are we going?" I ask, and then in the same breath, add, "Actually, you know what, I don't even care. I know we only met tonight, but you're officially my new favorite person."

Fergus chuckles. "I'm honored."

We make our way through the house to the kitchen, which is still bustling with staff. At the French doors that lead to the backyard, Fergus dons his coat and then holds out mine for me to slip my arms into. The moment he opens the door, I catch the scent of woodsmoke in the air. Like countless other times in the past few days, I'm transported back to my childhood: cookouts, bonfires, camping in the backyard of my childhood home.

It's a perfect autumn evening, with a slight chill in the air, and a full moon illuminating the yard. The moon isn't the only bright spot out here; flames dance in the firepit past the pool. In the glow of the blaze, I can see my friends sitting on the padded benches surrounding the pit.

Fergus grins down at me as he offers me his arm. I hook my arm through his, and we set off across the perfectly-manicured lawn.

Wesley is the first one on his feet. He thanks Fergus for getting me out here, and Fergus squeezes my arm before moving to take the empty seat between Hollie and Louisa.

"How on earth did you manage this?" I ask.

“I used my powers of persuasion on your mom,” Wesley says, taking my hand and leading me to the bench where he was sitting. “I told her being back in town was making me nostalgic and I wanted to recreate a moment from our childhood.”

I glance around at my friends’ smiling faces. “And she actually went for it?”

“She made me promise to save her a s’more.”

“There are *s’mores*?” My ears perk up at the mention of the treat I haven’t had in years. Even though I’m stuffed full of turkey, half a dozen side dishes, and a giant slice of pumpkin pie, I can always make room for s’mores.

Stella holds up a bag of jumbo marshmallows, while Hollie brandishes a box of graham crackers and a giant chocolate bar.

“I also swiped a couple bottles of wine for us to pass around,” Wesley says.

“That was never part of our childhood bonfires.” My voice wobbles slightly as an expected wave of emotion washes over me.

Wesley’s hand tightens where it grips my arm, as if he’s trying to convey his understanding. “Perks of being an adult, Buttercup. Here, sit down. It’s time to get the *real* Thanksgiving party started.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

I expect to stay outside only long enough to eat a few s'mores and pass around the wine. Before long, it's evident Wesley meant what he said: the real party is now out here. I know it's serious when he goes to his car to get a wireless speaker to connect to his phone.

"DJ Wes in the house," I say in my best announcer voice as he cues up a playlist. To Stella, I add, "How often do you get a private show from an actual DJ?"

Stella makes a non-committal sound, her narrowed gaze trained on her brother across the firepit. Throughout the evening, the two of them have been giving each other the stink eye and having conversations in heated whispers. It reminds me of how they used to fight over the most trivial, juvenile things when we were younger. Nobody knew how to push each other's buttons quite like the McGrath siblings did. I rarely fought with either of them and ordered them to leave me out of their spats since being friends with both of them made it uncomfortable for me.

I cast a glance around our little circle. My gaze snags on Louisa and Fergus, and I smile at the sound of Lulu's laughter. I can hear the low rumble of Fergus's voice, although not what he's saying as he appears to tell Louisa a story, his hands gesticulating as he speaks. He leans closer to Louisa, lowering his voice, and she laughs again, tilting her head back in delight. The sight warms me from head to toe.

Louisa hasn't had an easy life; events in her teen years left her with severe anxiety that she still struggles with to this day. She's usually painfully shy around new people, especially men. She seems mostly at ease with Fergus, though. Not

completely—her hands are clasped tightly in her lap, which is one of her tells to the people who know her well—but her smile and eyes are bright, and her laughter is genuine.

A cool gust of wind makes the flames in the firepit dance. Louisa shivers noticeably, and Fergus offers her his jacket. Is it possible I'm watching a blossoming romance right before my eyes?

I pull my own jacket around me tighter and hop up from my seat. "I'll run inside and grab the blankets my mom keeps for outdoor use."

"I'll go with you," Wesley offers.

Beside me, Stella jumps to her feet. "Actually, Wes, can I talk to you for a minute?"

I witness a brief staredown between the siblings before Wesley sighs and nods his head once.

"It's fine, I can manage." Part of me wants to ask if I should stick around to referee whatever's going on between them, but I didn't want that role as a kid and I certainly don't want it now. I head inside to the laundry room where Mom keeps the blankets in one of many neatly organized and labeled totes. The house is quieter than it was when we went outside, which must mean guests have started leaving. I keep expecting Mom to appear in the backyard and insist I return inside to say goodbye to people or stand by as she continues to play matchmaker.

With that thought in mind, I pick up my pace. The kitchen is now empty of staff, and the surfaces have been returned to their former gleaming spotlessness. Talk about efficient. I'm contemplating asking Mom for a referral when someone steps into the room, making me jump and clutch the stack of blankets to my chest.

"Only me," my dad says with a chuckle. "You look like I caught you doing something you shouldn't be."

I give him a wry smile. "I was afraid if Mom saw me she'd redouble her matchmaking efforts. Is Ned still here?"

“He is. He asked me a few minutes ago if I knew where you’d run off to.”

“Welp, that’s my cue to leave.” I inch toward the door, making Dad laugh quietly again.

He crosses the room, stopping in front of me. Up close, I can see the weariness in his eyes and the slightly hunched set of his shoulders. He’s used to late nights with his job—Mom has often told me how many nights he spends tucked away in his office, working on a case—but for him, socializing is draining in its own way. “Do you ever get tired of all this, Dad? The parties, the schmoozing...the excess.”

He ponders my question for longer than I expected. Finally, he says, “More than you know, Evie.” He looks guilty as soon as the words are out, as if he somehow betrayed Mom with his admission. “It makes your mom happy, so it’s worth it. Did you know she makes a large, anonymous donation to the food bank where Hollie works every Thanksgiving and again at Christmas?”

“I didn’t. She does it anonymously?”

Dad nods. “You should give her more credit, Ev. Not everything she does is for show or recognition. She’s always believed in the importance of us sharing our wealth. It’s something I’m glad to see you’ve inherited from her.”

I’m not sure how to respond to that. Dad seems to understand because he simply nods again and goes to open a cupboard near the fridge. He returns a second later with a bottle of Jameson, which he carefully lies on its side on top of my pile of blankets.

“You’d better hurry, kiddo. Mom was on her way in here when I last saw her.” He opens the back door for me. “There’s no time to get you as many glasses as you’d need, so don’t let her see you drinking from the bottle.”

I kiss his cheek as I slip past him. “Thanks, Dad.”

Back outside, I only make it a few steps before I hear voices coming from the side of the house. I squint toward the

firepit; the only people missing are Wesley and Stella. They must still be arguing about whatever it is that's had them giving each other dirty looks all night.

I take another step, pausing when Stella's voice lifts and she says, "Stay away from her, Wes."

I should keep walking. This is none of my business, and I've already promised myself I wouldn't get involved. But... my curiosity is piqued. Which 'her' is Stella referring to?

"That's kind of hard to do, considering we're at her parents' house. Oh, and she's one of my best friends." Wesley's tone is casual, borderline flippant. The fact they're talking about me has my feet rooted to the ground, even though I *know* I should keep walking.

"You know what I mean. If you hurt her, I'll...I'll..."

"You'll what?" Wesley's voice is amused now, with a hint of the good-natured taunting I remember from our childhood.

"I'll hunt you down and hurt *you*."

Wesley's burst of laughter startles me. He laughs and laughs, and I wish I could peek around the side of the house to see him. I imagine him with his head thrown back and his hands clutching his belly, while Stella silently seethes.

"Oh, Little Star, I've missed you," Wesley says, his tone full of affection now.

"Don't you 'Little Star' me," Stella says, although the heat is gone from her voice. "I mean it, Wesley."

"I know you do. I can't stay away from her, though, Stels. I've stayed away long enough. From *all* of you."

Guilt finally propels my feet forward, and I hurry away from my hiding spot. When I reach the firepit, I set the whiskey on the ground and hand out the blankets. "I ran into my dad inside and he sent me out with this," I tell the others, brandishing the bottle. "Sorry it's not Scottish, Fergus."

“No worries. My grandad was Irish, so I’m an equal opportunity whiskey drinker.”

I open the bottle and hand it to Hollie, who says, “I feel like a college kid, swigging from bottles of wine and now whiskey. I hope we’re all prepared to have hangovers tomorrow. Should make work extra fun.” She wrinkles her nose at me since I have the week off, then takes a swig from the bottle. She passes it to Louisa, who holds it for a moment, her expression uncertain, then hands it to Fergus without taking a drink.

Fergus accepts the bottle without question. I joked with him earlier that he was my new favorite person, and I think I now officially love him, even though we only met tonight. A lot of people would ask Louisa why she didn’t drink or tell her there was no harm in taking a sip. Someone’s choice to drink or not is nobody’s business, but that doesn’t stop some people from prying. Not Fergus, though. After taking a healthy pull, he releases a satisfied sigh and returns the bottle to me, murmuring, “Cheers, Evie.”

I salute him with the bottle and take a drink. A second after I’ve lowered it to my side, warm fingers brush mine as they remove the bottle from my hand. Wesley and I lock eyes as he takes a drink of whiskey.

“Where’s Stella?” I ask.

“She went inside to use the bathroom.”

He takes another sip and then hands the bottle to Hollie. To me, he says, “Can I pull you away for a sec?”

Without a word, I follow him back across the yard. We stop just outside the pool of light cast by the lamps over the back door. “Dare I ask what’s going on with you and Stella?”

“Oh, it’s...” He trails off, shaking his head and running a hand through his hair. It looks like inky liquid in the dark, soft and touchable. “It’s nothing. I just wanted to see how you’re doing. We haven’t had a moment alone yet tonight.”

“Oh. I’m good. Dinner was a lot more tolerable than I expected after you finagled a spot beside me.”

He laughs under his breath. “I do what I can. This is fun too, right?” He waves a hand to indicate the surprise bonfire.

“So fun. If you’ll allow me a moment to be sappy—”

“Well, it *is* Thanksgiving,” he says, grinning when I give him a narrow-eyed look for interrupting me. “Go on.”

“That’s actually connected to what I was going to say. Thanksgiving is all about being grateful and counting your blessings, and I...well, I have a lot to be thankful for. This year more than ever. Having us all back together like this makes me happy beyond words.”

“I’m glad.” His voice is whisper soft. It feels like an intimate caress in the dark, cool night. I realize I’m staring at him a second before he clears his throat and averts his gaze while he digs his phone from his jacket pocket. “I made you another playlist, this time online. I’m going to send you the link so you can listen to it later.”

“Okay, thanks.” My phone pings in my pocket. I leave it there, knowing I wouldn’t be able to resist immediately opening the link.

“Remember when you first moved and you were determined to spend as little time here as possible?” Wesley asks. “You said this house was too big and didn’t feel like home, but my place still felt like home, so you’d come over every day after school and most weekends.”

How could I forget? The McGrath house had always been my second home, and it became a haven the year my family moved. It was a strange, difficult year, full of more changes and challenges than I’d ever experienced in my fifteen years. Stella’s accident happened that year, and her recovery was slow and painful. She became quiet and withdrawn, angry at the world. She insisted I hang out with Wesley since she didn’t feel like talking and couldn’t do much. I was too young to fully understand why she was pushing me away and, because

it hurt to see her in so much pain—the emotional kind as much as the physical—I would stop by her room for a quick visit after school and then leave without argument when she told me to.

Too old to play the make-believe games of our childhood, Wesley and I often spent our time together watching movies and listening to music. There were entire afternoons when we barely spoke a word to each other, but it felt different from the despondent, often hostile silence from Stella.

Eventually, my parents insisted I join extracurricular activities similar to my new, wealthy private school classmates. I chose horseback riding and fencing. The riding was partially for Louisa's benefit; her mom had passed away by then and her dad became extra strict and protective, barely letting her leave the house. He allowed her to accompany me to my lessons since she loved animals and being around the horses soothed her. The fencing reminded me of the elaborately choreographed sword fights Wesley and I had as kids. I even taught him some moves, although he said he preferred the routines we came up with as children. I agreed.

"Feels like a different lifetime, doesn't it?" I ask.

Wesley nods, but doesn't say anything. Silence stretches for so long, it begins to feel awkward. I'm about to suggest we rejoin the others when the yard suddenly becomes darker. We look up at the sky in unison to see clouds scuttling across the moon, obstructing its bright glow.

"I have the perfect song for this moment." Wesley swipes around on his phone, and the song that's been playing on the portable speaker near the firepit cuts off abruptly. The soft, familiar guitar melody of "Harvest Moon" by Neil Young starts, filling me with a warm flood of memories.

"Still love this song?" Wes asks.

"So much." It's been one of my favorites for as long as I can remember. It was often on the radio during my childhood, so it became one of those songs that attached itself to countless

memories; nothing monumental or life changing, but it evokes feelings of joy and comfort when I hear it now.

Wesley tucks his phone back in his pocket and holds out a hand. “Dance with me, Evie.”

A small, bewildered laugh spills from my lips. “Here? Now?”

“Why not?”

Why not indeed. Hollie, Louisa, and Fergus are engaged in conversation and don’t seem to notice or mind that we’ve separated ourselves from them. Stella hasn’t returned from the bathroom yet, which likely means she got caught up talking to someone inside. I think about the hushed conversation between her and Wesley just minutes ago: ‘*Stay away from her, Wes.*’ Why were they arguing about me?

Wesley raises his eyebrows expectantly and wiggles the fingers of his outstretched hand. I force the questions from my mind and take Wesley’s hand, letting him pull me close.

With one hand tucked in Wesley’s and the other clutching the back of his jacket, I close my eyes and sink into his embrace. His familiar smell mixes with my favorite seasonal perfume: the sweet, sharp scent of dying leaves, crisp air, and the underlying aroma of woodsmoke. Without a doubt, this moment will be added to the bank of sense memories evoked by this song. In fact, I’ll likely never be able to hear “Harvest Moon” again without thinking of slow dancing with Wesley on a perfect autumn evening with the full moon shining on us like our own personal spotlight.

“You didn’t want to spend the holiday with Ashleigh?” The question spills out, unbidden. Her name tastes like dirt in my mouth. I’ve met Wesley’s girlfriend a couple of times, and she seemed nice enough, but it always bugged me that she never made an effort to get to know Stella or the rest of the McGrath family.

The last notes of the song fade out and are replaced by another tune. Wesley releases me slowly, almost hesitantly,

keeping my hand in his. He blows out a long breath, drawing my attention to his lips. A thought as unbidden as my words from a moment ago enters my head: I bet his lips taste like whiskey and the sweetness of s'mores.

Wesley doesn't get any further than, "About that..." before Stella appears. He drops my hand as if it burned him, and takes a step back. Between the sudden distance and the chilly look Stella is shooting at her brother, the air around us feels cooler.

Wes shivers, making me think the frigid air isn't only my imagination. "We should get back to the fire," he says. "I could use another s'more, how 'bout you two?" Without waiting for a response, he heads off across the yard.

Before Stella can move to join him, I grip her arm, keeping her in place. "*What* is going on with you two?"

With her gaze trained across the yard, her mouth twists from side to side as if she's chewing over what to say. "Did he tell you he and Ashleigh broke up?"

The unexpected question makes my heart surge so hard and fast, it leaves me lightheaded. My grip tightens on Stella's arm, causing her head to snap in my direction. Her hard expression softens into one of understanding and concern. "No, he didn't," I say faintly. "I...I thought you'd be happy about that?"

"I *am*. It's just..." She sighs, her gaze swinging back toward the firepit, where the volume of the music has risen and Wesley is attempting to coax a giggling Hollie out of her seat to dance with him. "It's not important, Ev. Let's go enjoy the rest of the night, okay?"

"Right, yes, of course. You go ahead and I'll be right there, okay?"

Despite looking like she wants to argue, Stella sets off across the yard. I could understand Wesley not bringing up the end of his relationship tonight, but we spent hours together at the diner the other day and he never said a word. Pieces of a

mental puzzle slowly fall into place, although they're jagged and don't quite fit right.

Wesley is now single for the first time in years. When we were younger, Stella rooted for her brother and me to get together, which always gave me a glimmer of hope that she knew something I didn't, like perhaps Wesley returned my feelings after all. But if that was the case—is somehow still the case all these years later—why is Stella so angry at Wes and demanding that he stay away from me? Am I misreading this whole thing and it actually has nothing to do with me?

I pull my phone from my pocket to check the time. The link to the playlist Wesley sent me earlier sits at the top of my list of notifications. With the others preoccupied, I click the link. The playlist is titled “BFFs” and, as I scroll through the list of songs, I see they're all about friendship: “Friendship Never Ends” by Spice Girls, “Best Friends” by S Club 7, “I'll Be There for You” by The Rembrandts, “Count on Me” by Bruno Mars, and on and on.

Single or not, it doesn't matter. Wesley is likely only staying in Bellevue until after my party this weekend, and he still lives three hours away. There's also the not-so-small fact my feelings for Wesley are, in fact, one-sided, as proven by this incredibly thoughtful—yet soul crushing—playlist.

I tuck my phone away and straighten my shoulders, then head back toward the firepit, my best friends...and the bottle of whiskey.

CHAPTER EIGHT

It's Wednesday morning, and I'm back at my parents' house. I got a text late last night from my mom requesting that I come over. She thinks because I'm off work this week, I'm at her disposal, but Stella and I had plans. Sure, those plans involved lounging around in our PJs, but I've earned the right to be lazy if I want to. Despite that, Eleanor Hathaway's 'requests' are actually demands in disguise, so it wasn't worth the fight.

I begged Stella to come with me and even attempted to bribe her with the promise of lunch at her favorite restaurant. She claimed she needed to continue her job search. I may or may not have called her a coward. Lovingly, of course.

After nearly two hours at my parents' place, I wish I'd thought to feign an illness or injury this morning. Mom and I have been sitting at her enormous dining room table while she goes over what seems like six thousand lists related to my party this weekend. It's not like I have any say whatsoever in any of it, so I'm not sure why I have to hear about the food, decor, guest list, and the multitude of vendors she's working with in excruciating detail.

In order to survive this tedious task, I've been sending regular texts to Stella while Mom is distracted. The latest is a two-part photo series: first, a shot of Mom with her phone pressed to her ear, brows drawn together in a scowl as she scribbles something on one of her many pads of paper. The second is a selfie where I've got my eyes crossed and my tongue poking out. Stella replies with a string of laugh-crying emojis.

“Who are you texting there that you think I can’t see?” Mom asks.

Busted. “It’s Stella.”

I expect her to make a comment about us texting each other even though we now live together. When we were little, we’d spend an entire day together, either at school or playing at one of our houses, and then we’d often spend half the evening on the phone with each other. Our moms always thought it was hilarious and bizarre for two kids to have *that* much to talk about.

Mom sets her pen down and gives me her full attention. “How is my darling girl doing? I didn’t get much of a chance to speak to her on Thanksgiving.”

I smile at the term of endearment, even though I’m unsure how to answer. Stella wouldn’t mind if I told Mom any of the things she’s confided in me recently. Mom would be sympathetic, but also concerned because she genuinely loves Stella and considers her family. I’m not sure I want to get into it right now, so I finally settle on, “She’s figuring things out. I’ve told her she doesn’t need to rush or feel pressured into anything.”

Mom nods, seemingly pleased with that answer. “You’re a good friend, Evelyn. You two are lucky to have each other. Speaking of which, are you enjoying living together? I worried it might not be the wonderful fantasy you always dreamed of.”

“I think it’s safe to say we both worried a bit about that too, but it’s been great. We genuinely enjoy each other’s company, and we’ve fallen into a routine that works for us. I think it helps that I’m gone most of the day and we’re not together all the time. I’m honestly in no hurry for her to move out.”

“I’m both glad and relieved to hear that,” Mom says. “What the two of you have is something truly special. Or, rather, the *four* of you. My four girls.” She says the last part wistfully, her eyes misting over. With a few rapid blinks, the moisture disappears, making me wonder if I imagined the

beginning of tears. “Anyway, I wondered from the smile on your face if you’d been texting Wesley.”

“*Wes?* Why would I be texting him?” And what kind of smile was I wearing for her to assume that?

She shrugs casually. *Too* casually. “You two looked cozy on Thanksgiving, that’s all. Will you be seeing him again before your party?”

“I’d like to, but he said he’ll be busy dealing with some stuff while he’s in town.” He’s told me that twice now: Saturday night after our time together at the diner, and again on Thanksgiving night before we parted ways. Stella spoke to him on the phone yesterday and seemed less irritated with him afterward, but I was afraid to press her for details about what was going on with the two of them.

Other than a soft hum of acknowledgment, Mom doesn’t say anything else, which is surprising. She returns her attention to the list in front of her, although I can tell she’s looking at it without really *seeing* it. The wheels in her brain are turning so hard, I can practically hear them.

“Such a sweet boy, our Wesley,” she says faintly, as if she’s lost in thought. “*Man*, I should say. Even after all these years, it’s hard for me not to picture him as that fair-haired little boy who never strayed far from your side.”

Unsure where she’s going with this but suspecting she *is* going somewhere, I remain silent.

“Wouldn’t it be nice if he moved back to town? I’m sure Suzanne and Warren would be over the moon to have both of their children back. And you would too, I imagine.”

“I would,” I say steadily. “Stella and Wesley are two of the people I love most in the world.”

For a moment, I fear I’ve said the wrong thing. Mom’s eyes brighten and she straightens almost imperceptibly in her seat. She reminds me of a well-trained pet who’s just heard the familiar crinkle of a treat bag and is waiting patiently for a

reward. I almost laugh to myself when I think how offended she would be at that comparison.

The sound of the doorbell interrupts whatever she's about to say. I don't even have a chance to feel relieved before she says, "That'll be the hairdresser for the test run of your hairdo for the party."

I jump up from the table. "The who for the *what?*"

"I've arranged for you and the girls to have your hair and makeup done before the party," Mom says, sweeping from the room with me hot on her heels. "I was going to surprise you on Saturday, but after the fiasco with the dresses last weekend, I thought a trial run would be a smart idea so there are no unpleasant surprises the day of the party. Someone will be coming in an hour or so to do your makeup."

There's no time to express my dismay before Mom reaches the door and throws it open. Looks like I'm not getting out of here any time soon.

Having a team of professionals do my hair and makeup for my birthday seems completely over the top, and yet I can't deny the results are incredible. So incredible, in fact, I can't stop staring at myself in the mirror after the makeup artist has packed up and left. I twist and turn, admiring my glowing skin and the soft curls that frame my face.

It doesn't escape me how lucky I am to have my own 'Glam Squad' as Mom called them; a lot of people dream of things like this. And in the spirit of looking for the positives, I know Stella, Hollie, and Louisa will enjoy the pre-party pampering on Saturday.

Mom's click-clacking heels announce her arrival a moment before she enters my bedroom. When her eyes meet mine in the mirror, she comes to an abrupt halt. "Oh, Evie, you look

stunning. You always look lovely, of course, but hiring professionals was a brainwave on my part.” She strides further into the room and comes to stand behind me where I’m still sitting at the vanity table. “I sent your dress in for a few minor adjustments, otherwise I’d have you try it on so we could get the full effect.”

I can’t imagine what ‘minor adjustments’ the dress needed since it fit perfectly, but it’s best not to ask.

“You’re going to make some man very lucky someday, you know,” Mom says.

I groan. “Mom, please—”

She waves off my protest. “Are you bringing a date to the party?”

“You know I’m not.”

“I know no such thing.” She’s still standing behind me. Something about her body language tells me she wants to touch my hair. Not in a loving, motherly way, but in a way that says she wants to adjust something. “You don’t keep me abreast of your dating life.”

“That’s because there’s nothing to tell.” The minute the words are out, I know they’re a mistake. Mom’s wide-eyed curiosity has a voice in my head screeching, ‘*Abort, abort!*’ I spring to my feet and pace across the floor. What I’d really like to do is flee the room entirely, but she’d only follow me. “Well, not *nothing*. I’ve been dating on and off, and Fergus will be coming to my party on Saturday. You said yourself how great he is.”

“So it’s okay when Hollie plays matchmaker, but not me?”

“I’d prefer if *nobody* played matchmaker, but Hollie...” I stop short of saying ‘Hollie at least knows my type’. It’s not that Fergus is necessarily my type, but that’s not the point. Hollie only suggested inviting him as a buffer, and he was happy to oblige. He did his best on Monday, but even with him here, it didn’t stop Mom from thrusting every eligible man in my direction.

“Fergus is more than welcome here anytime, but unless you’re actually dating him, I have someone I’d like you to meet at the party,” Mom says, apparently not noticing how I trailed off mid-sentence. Or choosing to ignore it, which is the more likely scenario. “His name is Jonathan and he works with your father. He was here one night for a business dinner I was hosting for Dad, and he saw your picture and seemed *quite* interested. He’d be perfect for you, Evelyn. He’s handsome and smart and—”

“*Enough*, Mom!”

I’m not sure which of us is more startled by my outburst. We stare at each other in stunned silence for several beats. There’s no going back now, so I suck in a deep breath and straighten my spine.

“It’s not that I don’t appreciate everything you’ve done for me, Mom. Everything you do for me. But I’m about to be thirty-five, and I’ve been a successful, independent woman for a long time now, which means I don’t need you telling me how to live my life or what I should or shouldn’t do. I also don’t need you setting me up with random guys.”

“They’re hardly ‘*random guys*’, Evelyn, they’re—”

“Mom.” I say it more gently this time, and she clamps her mouth shut. “I know you mean well. I really do. And I don’t ever want you to think I’m ungrateful for a single thing you and Dad have done for me my whole life. But it *is* my life, and you need to let me live it the way I see fit. Which also means...” I suck in another deep breath because I’m on a roll and I might as well say it all now that I’ve started. “Which *also* means I’d like for this weekend’s party to be my last big birthday party.”

Mom’s eyes go wide. I can practically see the thoughts floating over her head like cartoon speech bubbles. *But I thought you loved these parties. What will our friends think? How can I make up for this yearly party with another big, showy event that reminds people how successful and influential we are?*

Okay, that last bit was all me, but still.

“Do you remember the parties you threw for me as a kid?” I ask.

She nods slowly. “I always wished I could do more. Take you places or throw extravagant parties. It was always just the four of you and a few of your school friends at the house.”

“You say ‘at the house’ like it’s a bad thing. Where *you* remember a small party with a few of my friends, *I* remember sparkly decorations, a themed cake, and my closest friends by my side. I remember trips to Blockbuster to pick out movies, followed by epic slumber parties where we stayed up half the night watching movies, doing at-home spa treatments, and eating unlimited junk food. I was surrounded by people I loved, doing things I loved. Some of my best childhood memories are from those parties, Mom.”

By the time I finish speaking, her eyes are glistening with tears. She doesn’t blink them away like she did earlier. The sight makes my own eyes tingle and my throat grow thick.

“I only ever wanted you to have the best of everything,” she says quietly. “My own upbringing was...well, you know...” She waves a hand as if batting away unpleasant memories. In the rare instances she’s spoken to me about her childhood, I’ve developed a sense of unhappy, strict parents who never had enough money and expected near-perfection from their only daughter.

I take her hand and grip it tightly, relieved at the small, affectionate smile that blossoms on her face as she clasps my hand in both of hers.

“I’d like to say I did all of this for you, but I suppose that’s only partly true,” she says. “I wanted you to have everything I didn’t have growing up, and...and *maybe* I wanted to show off. Just a smidge.”

“*You?*” I say, injecting the word with as much playful sarcasm as I can muster past the emotion still clogging my throat. “Never.”

With a laugh, she frees one of her hands to swat at my arm. She sobers quickly. “I just want you to be happy, Evie.”

“I know you do, Mom. I don’t need fancy parties or a man in my life to be happy, though.”

Her eyes dart away from mine as she shifts her weight from one foot to the other. “I know I’m probably not supposed to ask this since it’s old fashioned, but don’t you want to get married? And maybe have children someday?”

Mom has asked me this a few times over the years. It’s irritated me every time, probably because it pokes at a hidden sore spot. I always thought I’d have that life by this age. Now I’m not so sure it’s even what I want. My thoughts drift to Wesley and the little box of Complicated Feelings stashed away in a secret corner of my heart. The lid popped off the moment I saw him again and heard my old nickname spill from his lips. Having Wesley around has shown me I have some work to do to cram all those feelings back in and pack them up for good.

“I honestly don’t know about marriage and kids. I know I’d like to find love, but I’m willing to wait for the right person, even if that takes a while.”

She ponders over this for a long moment and then gives a decisive nod. “I never meant to pressure you. You and your father have always been the greatest blessings in my life, and I want that for you too, but only if it’s what *you* want. I can see I’ve done a poor job of letting you know how proud I am of you and how much I admire and respect you. You’re so much smarter and braver than I ever was.”

“I appreciate the sentiment, Mom, but you should give yourself more credit. I learned a lot from you about being brave and smart, and going for the things I want.”

Despite the non-committal sound she makes, she’s smiling again, and a touch of pink has flushed her cheeks. “Thank you, sweetheart. I’m afraid it’s too late to cancel your party for this

year, but next year we'll do something different. Something *you* want to do."

Even though I have a whole year to think about it, an idea pops into my head immediately. "You know how I said I loved the parties I had as a kid? One of the things I remember is how Suzanne would come over and the two of you would have a little celebration of your own. You'd peek in on us every once in a while, and then you'd hang out in the den with wine and fancy finger foods."

"I'd forgotten that." Mom's eyes haze over slightly, as if she's mentally going back in time. "Suzanne always said we deserved to celebrate on our kids' birthdays since we brought you into the world. As you girls got older, we were tempted to crash your parties and hang out with you, but we knew you'd all freak out."

I laugh. "Good call. But how about next year, we have a nice dinner—the girls love getting dressed up, so I don't want to take that away from them completely—and then follow it up with a slumber party. We can't make a trip to Blockbuster, but we can surf Netflix and eat junk food and do some spa treatments. You'll get to experience the fun we always had at sleepovers, and we'll get to drink wine *with* you this time."

Mom lets out a delighted giggle. "That sounds perfect."

"Good, then it's a date."

CHAPTER NINE

Riding high on feelings of good will toward my mom, I accept her invitation to stay for lunch. It only takes a few minutes of coaxing for her to agree to let me order from my favorite Japanese place. She disappears after watching me order from an app on my phone. I have this ridiculous image of her scurrying to the kitchen and scarfing down whatever she'd planned to have for lunch and then claiming a lack of appetite once the food arrives. At least I hope it's ridiculous.

Instead, she returns wearing a more casual pair of slacks and a dark pink sweater set. It's still fancier than anything I'd personally wear around the house, but it's progress. I have a moment to notice she looks shorter than usual before she rounds the couch and lifts one leg, wiggling her foot in my direction. In place of her usual ankle-breaking heels are the slipper socks I got her last Christmas.

"Triumph!" I cry, clapping my hands.

She gives me an indulgent smile. From the twinkle in her eyes, I know she's trying not to laugh. I saw that look a lot as a kid, especially when I'd come home from playing with Wesley and would be covered in scratches, with muddy knees, and bits of leaves and grass in my hair. I've missed that look.

"I dug out the hand-painted chopsticks the Rutherfords brought your dad and me from their last trip to Japan," she says. "We've never used them, so I thought this was the perfect opportunity."

I don't tell her the restaurant will send chopsticks. At this point, if she suggested we eat with utensils made from solid gold, I'd go along with it. "Sounds good. Do you want me to set places at the dining room table?"

I can't deny this is a bit of a test. Not the kind she can pass or fail, but the kind my curiosity can't help but issue. I'm hoping she'll suggest we eat at the breakfast nook in the kitchen rather than in the cavernous dining room.

Without missing a beat, she says, "Actually, I was thinking we could eat in the media room and watch a movie. Does that suit you, honey?"

A rush of affection warms me from head to toe. "That suits me just fine, Mom."

When I leave my parents' place a few hours later, I decide to run a few errands so I can sleep in tomorrow. In the grocery store, I catch several people staring at me, and wonder if my good mood has elevated my vibration to magnetic levels... until I remember I'm wearing a full face of makeup, with a hairdo worthy of a black tie event. I pick up the pace after that, opting to forgo the rest of my errands in favor of going home to shower.

I text Stella while I'm waiting in the check-out line. *Heading home in a few. Need anything while I'm out? Want me to pick up something for dinner?*

She answers almost immediately: *Actually, yes. If I place an order at Angelo's, can you pick it up?*

Of course. Send me the pick up time when you have it.

Stella texts me the time a few minutes later, and I head straight to the pizza place. When the twenty-something guy behind the counter comes out with two large pizzas, an order of cheesy bread, and a variety of dips, I question if it's the correct order.

"Evie Hathaway, right? You placed the order online?" He rattles off Stella's email address as the contact, so I accept the armload of food, along with his offer to help me to my car.

Unfortunately, there are no cute young guys to help me when I get home, so I struggle into my condo building and take the elevator up to my floor. Thankfully, Stella flings the door open as I approach it.

“Hey.” The word comes out on a gasp. I should have sucked it up and made a second trip to get my groceries, but my stubborn side had me shouldering my cloth bags along with everything from the pizza place. “What’s with all the food?”

Stella surges forward to lighten my load. When she steps back, she bumps the door wider with her hip to reveal Hollie and Louisa standing in the living room wearing matching grins.

“Surprise,” Hollie says. “We thought we’d kick off your birthday celebrations early.”

“We thought you might need it after spending the day doing party prep,” Louisa says. “Stella kept sending us screencaps of your texts.”

Before I can react, movement across the room catches my eye, and Wesley steps out of the kitchen holding a bottle of wine. “They also thought you might need this. I brought several bottles in the hopes you’d let me crash this impromptu girls’ night.”

With Stella now holding the food and Hollie and Louisa freeing me of my grocery bags, all I want is to fly into Wesley’s arms. He grins at me like he knows exactly what I’m thinking.

“Go pour that wine and we’ll think about letting you stay,” Stella tells her brother, elbowing him as she passes him on her way to the kitchen.

Wesley keeps his gaze on me as he gives Stella a playful shove. Looks like the McGrath siblings are on their way to patching things up after their mysterious spat. “What do you think, Buttercup? Is it okay if I stay?”

I lift one shoulder in a casual shrug even though my heart is attempting to break free from my ribcage. “I mean, I guess,” I say, loving the way his eyes flash with mirth.

Stella calls Wes’s name from the kitchen and he replies that he’s coming. He doesn’t move, though. From the way his eyes move over my face and hair, I know he’s taking in the results of Mom’s Glam Squad. I expect a quippy comment; maybe something about him feeling underdressed or how my leggings, plaid shirt, and denim jacket are at odds with everything that’s happening from the neck up. Instead, he smiles softly and pivots on his socked feet to head for the kitchen.

Sucking in a shaky breath, I dash down the hall to my bedroom. In my ensuite, I scrub my face clean and pull the pins free from my partial updo. My hands move on autopilot to toss my hair into a bun, but I stop, letting the waves fall around my shoulders. Back in my bedroom, my gaze goes to the Discman and red jewel case sitting on my bedside table. I haven’t had a chance to listen to the CD again since Sunday morning, but I finally read the insert. It simply said ‘*I hope you enjoy this blast from the past. All my love, always, Wesley*’, with a few lopsided hearts drawn around it. It filled me with warmth, and yet I’m not sure why Stella thought the missive was so noteworthy.

A tapping sound makes me whirl around to face the door. Wesley is there, holding two glasses of wine.

“I figured we wouldn’t get much time alone tonight, so I used the wine as an excuse to slip away.” He hovers in the doorway as if waiting for permission to enter, so I wave him in. My heart rate accelerates with each step he takes toward me while my brain screams ‘*why does he want to be alone with you?*’

Our fingers brush as he hands me the glass of wine. His smile wavers slightly when he sees the CD case in my other hand.

“This is such a great mix,” I say quickly in case he thought I hadn’t played it yet. “As you can see, I even busted out the old Discman to listen to it.”

He huffs out a laugh and shifts from one foot to the other, his gaze still trained on the shiny red case. “Impressive. I’m glad you’re enjoying it. Have you...umm...did you have a chance to read the insert?”

“I did, and it was very sweet. I didn’t look at it the other night because I didn’t want to know the songs ahead of time. Sometimes it feels like there are so few surprises in life, you know? Good ones, anyway. You can look up spoilers online for TV shows and movies, know a band’s set list before you attend a concert...”

Wesley lifts his head to look at me, his lips curving in a soft smile. “That sounds like you.” With his eyes locked on mine, he takes the case from my fingers and leans past me to set it on the bedside table. The way he brushes against me as he pulls away feels purposeful.

“I’m thrilled to see you, so don’t take this the wrong way, but I thought you were busy? You said you had some stuff to deal with while you’re in town.”

“Thrilled to see me, huh?” He wiggles his eyebrows as he backs away, breaking eye contact so he can look around the room. As he moves through the space, picking up framed pictures and checking out the books in my bookcase, it dawns on me that he hasn’t been here before.

After moving back to Bellevue post-university, I lived in a tiny apartment, then moved to a bigger one a few years later when I was making better money. Around the time I turned thirty, my parents started pressuring me to buy a house, claiming I was wasting money on rent and should own my own home. I wasn’t ready for the commitment of a house, but I didn’t like the slim pickings of apartments for sale in the area. That same year, a property development company began construction on a series of condo buildings with some to rent

and some to buy. I bought this apartment and moved in three years ago.

“This place is great, Ev,” Wesley says, brushing the backs of his fingers over the fluffy decorative pillow on the chair under the window. “It’s very...*you*.”

“And you’re being very un-*you* by avoiding my question.”

I almost don’t hear Wesley’s sigh over the sudden surge of laughter from the living room. I’m surprised the girls haven’t come looking for us yet.

Wesley returns to perusing my bookshelves. Even in profile, I can see the soft smile that overtakes his face, and I know exactly what he’s looking at. “I love that these have a place of honor on your shelves.”

My bookcase has a mix of long shelves and little nooks. One of the nooks holds a signed copy of Cary Elwes’s memoir, *As You Wish: Inconceivable Tales from the Making of The Princess Bride*. Wesley met Cary during his book tour and got him to sign a copy for me. He also asked Cary to pose with him for a picture while the two of them held a photograph between them of me at age twelve wearing my red Buttercup dress. I cried like a baby when Wesley presented me with the book and framed photo at Christmas that year.

“They’re among my most prized possessions,” I tell him. “I still can’t believe you took a picture of me with you to the signing and asked Cary to pose with it.”

His smile wavers as he turns to face me fully. He takes a sip of his wine, followed by another, larger drink. “I *am* dealing with some stuff while I’m here, but it can wait for a few hours,” he says, picking up our original conversation as if we hadn’t just detoured. “Getting a chance to spend time with you is more important.”

His words wash over me like warm water. I’m sure he means ‘you’ in the plural sense to include Stella, Hollie, and Louisa, but still. “Is everything okay? You’d tell me if something was wrong, wouldn’t you?”

“Yeah, of course. I don’t mean to be secretive or evasive. It’s kind of complicated, and I’d like a break from all of it. Can we just enjoy tonight and forget about everything else if I promise to tell you what’s going on once it’s all sorted?”

Now it’s my turn to sigh. As much as I hate not knowing what’s going on, I need to trust that if Wesley is keeping something from me, there’s a good reason, and he’ll tell me when he’s ready.

Wanting to see him smile again, I narrow my eyes and ask, “Does Stella know?”

Bingo. His lips twitch for a second before spreading into that crooked smile. “If I say yes will you rescind your invitation for me to stay?”

“Maybe.”

“Then no, Stella doesn’t know.”

“And here I was just thinking you’re one of the most honest people I know,” I say, shaking my head in mock disappointment. “Fine. Keep your secrets for now. And you can stay, but you’re on wine top-up duty tonight, and I plan to drink at least a whole bottle since I don’t have to work tomorrow.”

Wesley chuckles as he crosses the room once more. He stops in front of me, resting his hands on my shoulders. For a brief, wonderful moment, I think he’s going to kiss me. I suck in a breath as he leans in and presses his lips to my cheek. The kiss is friendly. Brotherly, even. The kind of kiss he’s given me a million times since we reached adulthood. The “BFFs” playlist he sent me on Thanksgiving night flashes into my mind, and I have to fight to keep the smile on my face.

“Let’s get some food in you then, eh?” He shifts to stand behind me so he can gently push me toward the door. I guess I should be grateful he doesn’t frog-march me from the room the way he did when we were kids.

After dinner, a movie, and a bit of light conversation that includes me telling my friends about my talk with Mom this morning, Hollie and Louisa call it a night and head home.

Wesley lingers near the front door after the girls leave. “I guess I should get going too.” The hesitation in his words makes me want to invite him to stick around for a while longer. He and Stella seem to have patched things up, but I don’t want to appear too eager or upset the balance again.

“You should stay,” Stella says. She looks to me for confirmation, and I nod silently, pressing my lips together to hold back a delighted grin. “It’ll be like old times, just the three of us.”

“Thanks, Little Star.” Wesley grips his sister’s shoulder and yanks her in for a tight, one-armed hug while messing up her hair with his free hand. Yep, just like old times.

“Is it too late to start another movie?” I ask after Stella has freed herself and shoved Wesley a few steps back for good measure.

“None of us have to get up early in the morning, right?” Wesley asks.

“Nope.” With her back to us now, Stella gathers some of the dirty dishes scattered across the coffee table. “You two have the week off, and it’s not like I have a job to get up early for.”

Wesley’s smile fades. His gaze darts to me, and I give a helpless little shrug. He follows Stella to the kitchen and, this time when he hugs her, there’s no playfulness to it, only brotherly love and concern. Stella remains rigid for a few beats. I’m not sure whether she’s going to turn thorny, push him away, and tell him not to pity her, or accept the silent comfort Wesley is offering.

Thankfully, it's the latter. I'm overtaken by a case of the warm fuzzies as I watch the siblings embrace. To give them some privacy, I sit on the couch and scroll through one of my streaming services. The low rumble of Wesley's voice reaches my ears, although I can't hear what he's saying. Knowing Wes, I imagine it's something to bolster Stella's confidence, and perhaps a reminder of how strong she is and how much she's loved.

Wesley returns to the living room first, taking one of the armchairs beside the couch where I'm sitting. I can hear Stella moving around in the kitchen and then the sound of the microwave door opening and closing. The scent of buttery popcorn fills the air a second before the telltale series of pops sound from the microwave.

"She'll be okay," Wesley says quietly. "Right now and in general."

I nod wordlessly. She will, I have no doubt about that.

Stella flops down on the couch beside me a few minutes later with a giant bowl of popcorn in her hands. She gives it to me while she scoots to the center cushion and takes the blanket from the back of the couch. After arranging the blanket over our laps, she holds up the end on her other side. "Get over here," she says to Wesley.

He obeys without question. Stella requests an autumn romcom, so I choose a mutual favorite, *Runaway Bride*, and hit play. The three of us pick at the bowl of popcorn, our hands brushing regularly.

My eyes grow heavy partway through the movie. I let my eyes close for just a minute—I've seen this movie countless times anyway—and the next thing I know, I'm waking up to a dark room. Movement catches my eye as Wesley, who's now standing, sets the remote on the coffee table.

"You both fell asleep, so I was going to slip out," he whispers. "Go back to sleep."

I shake my head, disentangling myself from the blanket, and getting to my feet. I follow Wesley to the door, suppressing a series of yawns as I watch him don his jacket and shoes.

“Tonight was fun,” I say when he straightens.

“It was.” His smile is soft and affectionate as he brushes a strand of hair away from my face. His hand lingers for a moment before dropping to my shoulder. “Go to bed, Ev.”

“Will you call me if you have some free time to hang out before Saturday?”

“Of course.” He gathers me in for what I expect will be a quick hug. Blame it on my sleepy brain, but I lean into him and he takes my weight, holding on tight. I fight the urge to ask him to stay. To come to bed with me, even if it’s just to sleep. We’ve slept in the same bed—or couch or tent—countless times, and there was a time when I would have suggested it without hesitation. We’re not kids anymore, though, so those days are long gone.

Maybe it’s a good thing he’ll likely be too busy to hang out until Saturday. At least at the party there will be buffers and distractions, and we won’t be alone. There’ll be no moonlight dancing in the backyard. My mom let us leave the party on Thanksgiving, but there’s no way she’d allow that at a party where I’m the guest of honor.

Wesley breaks into my thoughts by kissing my cheek. “I’ll see you soon. Love you, Buttercup.”

My heart knocks hard against my chest, and my breath catches in my throat. Wesley has said those words to me countless times over the years, but I haven’t heard them in so long. I’m not sure what my expression is, but it has Wesley’s eyes growing wide for the briefest of moments before he recovers.

“What’s with the face?” he asks.

“Nothing, nothing. I love you too, Wes.”

We say good night and he leaves. I close the door and slump against it. Stella is awake now, her sleepy gaze trained on me.

“You okay?” she asks.

I tilt my head back and forth. What can I say? *No, I'm not okay, I'm in love with your brother. Yes, I'm fine, or at least I will be once Wesley leaves town again.* “It depends. Was that as painful to watch as it was to experience firsthand?”

Stella laughs quietly. “Do you want an honest answer?”

“Always.”

“You're so screwed.”

Don't I know it.

CHAPTER TEN

On Thursday morning, my mother summons me to Hathaway Manor once again. This is becoming a habit. Despite our positive conversation and her more relaxed demeanor yesterday afternoon, I dread to think what she's going to make me do today.

"Oh, good, you're here," Mom says absently as she opens the front door. I didn't linger in the car like I usually do, and I also didn't see her hovering behind any curtains, watching for my arrival. A glance at my watch shows I'm five minutes early. I suppose it's unrealistic to expect my mom to change completely overnight.

"Hello to you too, Mother." I kiss her cheek as I close the front door behind me.

Mom gives me a frazzled smile. "Hello, sweetheart." She shoves her cell phone into the pocket of her perfectly tailored trousers and surprises me by pulling me into a quick, tight hug. "Thanks for coming. Don't bother taking off your shoes, he should be here any minute."

I groan. "He who? Please don't tell me it's Ned. I thought you were done with the matchmaking attempts. And why do I need my shoes on for whatever's about to happen?"

The doorbell rings as I'm asking the last question. Mom holds up a finger as she reaches past me to open the door. She doesn't wait for me to move, which means I'm wedged behind it, unable to see who it is.

"Twice in one week," she says. "How did I get so lucky? Get in here and give your second mother a hug."

I peer around the door, where I'm met with a pair of laughing blue eyes. Wesley shoots me a wink over Mom's shoulder as he wraps his arms around her. "I'm so glad you called, Eleanor."

Mom releases Wesley to hold him at arm's length, looking him over from head to toe. With his eyes on her, I take a moment to shamelessly check him out. He's freshly shaved today, and my hands itch to touch his smooth cheeks. I feel a surge of something akin to jealousy as Mom does exactly that before patting Wesley's cheek fondly.

"And *I'm* glad you could come. You're a lifesaver, truly. I hate putting you to work, but I don't feel too bad since it means you'll get to spend some time with Evelyn."

At the sound of my name, my gaze snaps up from where it was admiring Wesley's sturdy, denim-clad thighs.

"Buttercup," Wesley says, the word somehow full of both affection and amusement.

Mom lets out a delighted laugh. "I'd forgotten that was your nickname for Evie! You two were obsessed with that movie. Suzanne and I were always so certain we'd end up taking one or both of you to the hospital one day with an injury either from your sword fighting or from traipsing through the forest."

Wesley ducks his head as he chuckles, causing a lock of dark-blond hair to fall across his forehead. My fingers itch at my sides once again. "Let's just say Evie and I went through a lot of Band-aids and got good at hiding bruises."

I snicker at the way Mom's mouth falls open, followed by another tinkling laugh. I've been overwhelmed with sense memories the last few days, and that laugh—so common at one time, yet not heard for ages—brings back countless memories from my childhood. Mom used to laugh like that all the time before we became rich and she cultivated a persona she somehow thought matched her new status.

"Are you ready to go?" Wesley asks me.

“Go where? Unlike you, I have no idea why I was summoned here.”

Mom reaches into the same pocket where she stashed her phone and produces a hand-written list on her personal stationery. “I spoke to Wesley early this morning and happened to mention how swamped I am with preparations for your birthday party, Evelyn. When I told him I was desperate for someone to run a few party-related errands for me, he was nice enough to volunteer. Since you’re off for the week, I thought you could accompany him. It’d be *such* a big help.”

I take the list from her and give it a quick once-over. Her idea of ‘a few errands’ will take us across the entire city and will likely take half the day.

“Everything is already paid for, so you don’t have to worry about any of that,” Mom says. “If you need to stop to eat at any point, it’s my treat.” She fishes something else out of her pocket, but instead of handing it to me, she slides it into the outside pocket of my purse. I catch a quick glimpse of red, which tells me she just forked over a fifty-dollar bill. I’m not sure where she thinks we’d get something to eat that would cost *that* much. Then again, she is part of the Ladies Who Lunch crowd, and I’m sure an average meal for them costs at least that much, if not more.

Before I can say anything, Mom claps her hands and ushers me toward the door. Wesley’s eyes go wide as I practically fly in his direction, and he steps outside so I don’t mow him down.

“You two are the best and I’m so grateful for your help!” Mom trills, gripping the edge of the door and inching it closed the second we’re outside. “Wesley, I hope you’ll join us for dinner once the two of you have completed everything on the list. Call if you need anything! *Byyyyye!*”

And with that, she gives a little wave and closes the door in our faces.

Wesley is practically vibrating with silent laughter beside me. “What was *that*? She couldn’t get us out the door fast enough.”

I shake my head and follow him to his car. “There’s some sort of method in her madness. I wouldn’t expect her to do any of this stuff herself, but she has ‘*people*’ for everything—a team who are literally paid to do her bidding—so I’m not sure why she’d send us, especially with the party being the day after tomorrow.”

Wesley veers around to the passenger side of the car to open my door. Before I climb in, he stops me with a gentle hand on my shoulder. “Whatever her reasons, nefarious or not, I’m glad to have an excuse to hang out with you for a day. Even if it *is* while running errands.”

He’s right, of course. I tossed and turned after going to bed last night, thinking about the old feelings that have resurfaced this week, and Wesley’s soft ‘love you’ last night. An inner debate ensued between my mind and my heart. One said to let him slip back out of my life when he returns to Ottawa. The other reasoned there was no way I could do that; as painful as unrequited love is, only having Wesley in my life sporadically these last few years has been far worse. I can’t go back to weeks without speaking to him or months without seeing him, even if that means reburying my feelings. I’m still not sure which voice was my heart and which was my head.

“You’re right,” I say, sliding into the passenger seat. “Who cares what Mom’s reasons are? I should be thanking her.”

A grin flashes across Wesley’s face, lighting his eyes. “That’s the spirit.”

After our third stop, Wesley and I realize none of the items on Mom’s list are actually for the party, although they’re all for me.

At the bakery, I assumed we'd be picking up my cake, but Mrs. Romano said it would be delivered to my parents' house on Saturday. Instead, she led us to a cozy bistro table and informed us we'd be having an autumn cake tasting. As we stuffed ourselves on carrot cake with cream cheese frosting, pumpkin spice cake, and apple cinnamon cake, I told Wesley any of these would be my choice for my party, but Mom always orders half-chocolate, half-vanilla because they're 'classic' flavors that appeal to most people. I've never said anything because Mrs. Romano's cakes are a work of art regardless of the flavor, and my friends always get me a fall-themed cake at some point around my birthday. When we left the bakery, Mrs. Romano handed me a box of macarons in beautiful rainbow pastels, and wished me a happy birthday.

At the stationery shop, I assumed we'd be picking up thank-you cards. Even though the party isn't my idea and I'd prefer not to have one, Mom makes me write thank-you cards to everyone who brings a gift or gives me money. But no, we weren't picking up thank-you cards. Yasmine, the calligrapher, had pulled out a shoebox-sized keepsake box topped with a red bow, and gushed about how much fun it was putting together my mom's order. Inside the box was a variety of notecards with different hand-painted designs and my name written in swirly calligraphy.

Wesley and I have just emerged from the florist, where I've officially been struck speechless. After the ease of the first two stops, I wondered if this was where things would get tricky and we'd be leaving here with a car full of flower arrangements for the party. I used to get annoyed at how Mom overdid it with the flowers—especially since I would have preferred autumnal arrangements instead of her classic-looking ones—but then I convinced her to donate most of them to nearby nursing homes after the party.

When I gave Mom's name, the florist had assured me everything was set for the delivery tomorrow. She then disappeared into the back and emerged with a huge bouquet of

autumn blossoms and a small, clear container with a corsage that matches my dress for the party.

“Your mom is certainly full of surprises,” Wesley says, peering at me from behind the bouquet, which he offered to carry.

“That she is.” My mind wanders as we set off down the sidewalk. I have no idea where we’re going. I don’t even realize I’ve stopped walking until Wesley steps in front of me.

“You okay?”

The question, asked in a soft voice laced with concern, makes my eyes prickle. I blink rapidly, flapping a hand in front of my eyes in an attempt to stop the tears. “Gah, what is wrong with me?”

Wesley catches my flailing hand and holds it in his. “Your eyes are leaking.”

I give a watery laugh. The first time I ever saw Wesley cry was while we were watching the movie *My Girl*. A quiet sniffle from his end of the couch had drawn my attention, and it took me a minute to realize my thirteen-year-old companion’s eyes were glistening with tears. I’d whipped my attention back to the screen, but the movement had caught his notice.

“What?” he’d asked, somewhat defensively. “My eyes are leaking.”

He’d seen me cry plenty of times—I was one of those people who got teary during movies, whether they were sad, sappy, or romantic—and he never commented on it or made me feel weird about it. I’d wordlessly handed him a tissue, expecting him to covertly dab at his eyes, but he’d swiped at them before blowing his nose loudly. “Man, that was sad,” he’d said, shooting me a rueful smile. “Let’s watch something funny next, ’kay?”

I fell a little more in love with Wesley that day.

“Unfortunately, I don’t have any tissues to offer you,” Wesley says now.

My shaky chuckle eases the furrow of worry between his brows. “I have some in my purse.”

Wesley releases my hand and takes the container with the corsage so I can dig around in my purse. “I can’t believe I’m getting so emotional over this.”

“What is *‘this’* exactly?”

“I can’t remember the last time my mom did something like this.” My eyes have stopped ‘leaking’ now that I’ve finally found a tissue, of course. “You remember how she used to be, right? Our families used to have so much fun together, and Mom was often the ringleader of our adventures. Having money changed her. She became this...*caricature* of who she thought the wife of a wealthy, powerful businessman *should* be, you know?”

Wesley nods, his expression full of sympathy. I’m not telling him anything he doesn’t already know. He lived through it with me, listened to me lament about the changes in my mom and my life after we moved out of my childhood home.

“I expected us to be running errands and hauling home packages of stuff for a birthday party I didn’t want in the first place,” I say. “But this is almost like a scavenger hunt, and it feels like something she would have done when we were kids.”

One side of Wesley’s mouth tips up in a wistful smile. “Yeah, it does.” He hands me back the container with the corsage, and I admire it again through the clear plastic top. “Do you remember the corsage you had for prom?” he asks suddenly.

“I do,” I say slowly. “I’m surprised *you* do.”

Wesley had finished his first year of university and was back home in Bellevue for the summer when the girls and I graduated from high school. By the time we graduated, all of

our lives looked completely different than they had four years prior: I was attending private school; Stella and Hollie were still at our original school, but each bore scars that would change them forever; and Louisa was being homeschooled by her strict and overprotective dad. Since we missed out on a lot of high school experiences as a group, we decided to attend prom together, and Stella and Hollie got tickets for all of us. My mom went all out for us with a pre-party at Hathaway Manor and a limo. Since the four of us were going as each other's dates, we decided to do a corsage exchange, where each of us pulled a name from a hat and bought a corsage for whoever we selected.

"Hollie asked me to take her to the florist to pick out your corsage," he says.

"I remember her telling me that." I also remember her telling me on prom night that she understood why I had a crush on Wesley. We'd been swept into posing for pictures right after that, and it never came up again. I'd forgotten about it until this very moment. "I'm guessing something happened that day for you to be bringing it up all these years later?"

There's that lopsided smile again and, unless I'm mistaken, there's a hint of pink coloring Wesley's cheeks. "Do you think there's a statute of limitations on secrets from your teenage years?"

"If it's something you promised you'd never tell? No. But if it's something minor..." I trail off. Wesley looks uncertain, so I add, "Would almost-thirty-five-year-old Hollie be mad at you for telling me now?"

He chuckles. "I doubt it. She's pretty chill." I make a 'go on then' gesture and he says, "Okay. Hols spent ages that day looking at corsages. I could tell when she found 'the one' because her smile lit up her whole face, but after a few seconds, her shoulders kinda slumped and she went back to looking. When I asked her about it, she said she'd found the perfect corsage that matched your dress, but it was out of her

price range. She got really flustered when I offered to make up the difference, so I told her it would be our little secret.”

Great, my eyes are stinging again. “I loved that corsage.” I cringe inwardly at the wobble in my voice. “It really *was* perfect and it matched my dress exactly. My mom showed me how to dry it properly so I could keep it. I still have it in a shadow box in my room with some other keepsakes from high school.”

With a mortifying little snivel that makes me want to hide behind the nearest decorative hay bale, I frantically dig in my purse once more for tissues. “Don’t look at me, my eyes are leaking again.”

“And not looking at you will make it stop?”

“No, but it’ll be a lot less embarrassing. I’m sure you’ll recall I’m not a pretty crier.”

“I don’t know about that,” he says softly, but he averts his gaze anyway. I watch him as he checks out our surroundings, his eyes lingering on the café sign a few feet away. “How would you feel about getting a coffee? I could take the flowers to the car and give you a minute to deal with your leaky eyes in private.” He grins when I let out another watery laugh. “It’s nice out, so we could walk for a bit or find somewhere to sit.”

“Don’t you have other stuff to do?” I ask. “Things that need to be taken care of while you’re home?”

“Nothing that’s more important than spending time with you.” The way he says it leaves no doubt in my mind he means it. It also causes a small pang of longing in my heart. I wish I could always be one of Wesley’s top priorities, but I’ll take every second I can get with him while he’s home.

I tell him I’ll order for us and meet him back here in a few minutes. I don’t even realize I’ve been watching him walk away until he turns a corner and disappears from sight. Giving myself a mental shake, I head into the café, breathing in the delicious scents of coffee, chocolate, cinnamon, and baked goods. I contemplate getting us something to eat to go with

our drinks, but we probably don't need anything after all the cake we ate at the bakery. By the time I make it back outside after waiting in line for several minutes, Wesley has already returned.

"I smell pumpkin," he says by way of greeting.

I hold up both cups. "I took a chance and got pumpkin spice lattes. I can go back and get you a plain coffee if you prefer."

Wesley takes one of the cups from me and pops the lid, inhaling the scented steam. "Last year, this café I often go to in Ottawa got my order mixed up and gave me pumpkin spice instead of my usual latte. I decided to try it and I became an instant convert."

I tap my cup against his and then make a motion for us to start walking. "I swear for the months of September, October, and part of November, I have pumpkin spice running through my veins."

He chuckles. "Let me guess, for the rest of November and December, it's hot chocolate? No, wait, *peppermint* hot chocolate."

I haven't even taken a sip of my latte yet, and warmth spreads through me. "You know me so well, Wesley McGrath." I bump his shoulder with mine. He nudges me back, his body remaining close as we meander down the street.

After the third time our hands brush, Wesley wordlessly links his fingers through mine. We've held hands before—Wesley has always been openly affectionate, which was a blessing and a curse after I developed feelings for him—but it feels different now somehow. The warmth that spread through me a few minutes ago turns to heat that could melt me into a puddle right here on the sidewalk.

We mosey on, neither of us saying anything. We're approaching the convenience store and I'm about to ask Wesley if he remembers the summer we drank so many banana slushies the clerk told us we were going to turn yellow, when

Bea comes zipping around the corner. She's dressed in her diner uniform, checkered apron and all, and she comes to an abrupt halt when she sees us. The smile spreading across her face turns positively gleeful as her gaze falls to our joined hands.

"Well, I'll be damned," she says, shaking her head. "Horatio owes me ten bucks. I *knew* you two would get here eventually. 'Really good friends' my behind!" Before Wesley or I can utter a word, Bea swoops in and throws her arms around both of us in a brief, bone-crushing hug. She places noisy kisses on both of our cheeks, then backs up, shaking her head once more. "I gotta run, but you two better come into the diner soon and give me all the details." She claps her hands and makes an excited squealing noise as she scurries away, disappearing as quickly as she appeared.

My hand goes limp in Wesley's. He gently eases his fingers from mine. I'm afraid to look at him for two reasons: my cheeks are on fire and, since Wesley knows me better than almost anyone, I'm certain he'll see all my thoughts and feelings spelled out across my face.

Just as the silence becomes almost unbearable, Wesley says, "Well. That was...I..."

"Yeah. That about sums up my thoughts too."

Wesley makes a soft snorting sound that finally draws my gaze to his. He's laughing quietly, shoulders shaking. When he lets out another little snort, my embarrassment eases, and I can't help giggling along with him.

He rests his hand on the small of my back and applies light pressure until I start walking again. "I never told you this because I didn't want to make things weird between us, but when we were teens, Bea was always asking me when you and I were going to get together."

"You're kidding!" My high-pitched tone makes Wesley laugh again. "What did you tell her?"

“Same thing I told her the other night: that we were just really good friends.” His tone is casual. Almost *too* casual. He takes a sip of his drink before adding, “And I told her you didn’t see me that way.”

“*You* didn’t see *me* that way either,” I say, instantly horrified by the defensiveness in my voice.

Wesley slows his stride and angles his head to lock eyes with me. I wait for him to laugh it off or say of course he didn’t, but he doesn’t say anything. In fact, he just makes a non-committal sound and looks forward again.

“Wesley James McGrath,” I say in my sternest voice.

He gives an exaggerated wince. “Oof, you full-named me.”

“Well, you can’t just say something like that and then suddenly drop it.”

He smirks as he lifts his cup to his lips again. “I just did.”

“Um, hi, have you met me? When have I ever let you drop a conversation without giving me all the details?” As the words come out, it hits me that I’ve done exactly that more than once since Wesley returned home, but there’s no turning back now.

“Never,” he says. “You, Evelyn Simone Hathaway, have never let me get away with anything, ever.” He grips my arm and eases me to a stop.

I cock one eyebrow, waiting.

He sighs. “Okay. There may have been a point when I developed distinctly *non-friendship* type feelings for you as a teenager.”

“No you didn’t.” Damn it, there’s that defensive tone again. Wesley’s lips twitch. “No, I would have known if you’d had feelings for me, Wesley. I remember when you had a crush on Priti Sharma and it was all over your face every time you talked about her or saw her.”

“What can I say, I learned to school my face around you.” He scratches at his short sideburns and lowers his head, suddenly seeming to find his cardboard cup fascinating.

“Okay, if it’s true, why didn’t you ever tell me?”

With his head still bowed slightly, he lifts his eyes to meet mine. “Probably for the same reasons you never told me you had feelings for me.”

My mouth works wordlessly before I manage to sputter, “I—how—? *Ugh*, it was Stella, wasn’t it? Remind me to strangle her when I get home.”

Wesley laughs under his breath. “No strangling necessary; Stella never said anything. I didn’t even realize it myself until years later. I assumed there was no way you’d ever see me as anything other than a friend and maybe even a brother figure. But after I moved away and had some time and space from our relationship, I saw things more clearly, and it hit me that you might have felt the same way I did.”

My initial reaction is to deny it, but what’s the point? I always wondered if he suspected. I was never great at hiding my emotions from him, after all. “Well,” I say, at a loss for words. Actually, that’s not true, there are too many words in my brain and I’m having difficulty sifting through them.

“Yeah. And by the time it fully hit me, we were both so busy—you with your first year at Queen’s and me with school and working part-time. I thought I might try to tell you when I came home for Christmas that year, but you were already seeing that Pete guy, and I knew it wouldn’t be right to tell you.”

I wish he had. I sort of fell into dating Pete because we had a bunch of the same classes and extracurriculars at Queen’s. I liked him, but I was missing Wesley something fierce, and that kept me from ever really opening up to Pete or letting him get close. Also, I think he got tired of hearing about Wesley. I didn’t mean to talk about him so much, but when you spend

your entire life being close friends with someone, they tend to come up often in conversation.

“Can we put a pin in this conversation for now?” Wesley asks. “It’s been so great to be with you again like old times, and I’ve loved seeing you laugh and smile today. I know we need to talk about this at some point, but...” He reaches up and uses the pad of his thumb to smooth the space between my eyebrows. “For now, I want to see you laugh and smile again instead of this frowny crease thing happening between your brows.”

“Frowny crease thing,” I mutter, batting his hand away. “Fine, we can put a pin in it for now, but we’re talking about this before you go back to Ottawa. Promise me.”

He holds up his hand and wiggles his pinky finger at me. “Promise.”

After hooking my pinky through his, our hands drop to our sides. We start walking again and I attempt to send him telepathic messages to slip his hand into mine once more. He doesn’t. I peek at him from the corner of my eye to see he’s the one with a crease between his brows now. He seems lost in thought, and I’m unsure what to say to break the silence.

He comes to an abrupt stop and turns to me. “Hey, do you want to go—” His words cut off as suddenly as they started when a chiming sound comes from inside his jacket. “My phone. I’d ignore it, but it might be your mom with another errand.” He grins at me as he locates his phone in an inner pocket and fishes it out. I wasn’t even aware I was leaning in until I see the name Ashleigh flash across the screen.

I take a step back and avert my eyes quickly, although not fast enough to miss the way Wesley’s smile wavers. The sight of Ashleigh’s name on his phone has turned my stomach sour. Wesley still hasn’t mentioned a word about their break-up. Maybe Stella somehow got it wrong and they’re still together? Or Ashleigh is calling Wesley because she wants to get back together with him?

Wes silences the phone and returns it to his pocket without a word. I glance at him in time to see his mouth open, but he doesn't manage to say anything before the phone starts chiming again. With a sigh and an apologetic look in my direction, he pulls out the phone once more.

"I can give you some privacy," I tell him, moving another few steps away.

"No, no it's okay." He hits the Ignore button and then swipes around and starts typing a message. "I'll call her back when we're finished."

"I think we *are* finished." I wave my now-empty cup for emphasis and search our surroundings for a trash can. "We did everything on Mom's list and have been sufficiently caffeinated."

Despite Wesley's smile, I can't help but think he looks as disappointed as I feel. "Yeah, I guess you're right. I should probably take you back to your mom's. Or your place if you prefer."

"My car is at Hathaway Manor, so you can take me there. I'd like to thank my mom for this unexpected outing today anyway."

We're quiet on the drive to my parents' place. As Wesley pulls into the driveway and parks behind my car, he says, "Looks like rain."

I peer out the windshield, only now noticing the dark clouds forming in the sky. The wind has also picked up in the few minutes it took us to drive from downtown.

Wesley hops out of the car and opens the back to collect my things. I'm still climbing out of the passenger seat when the front door opens and a man I don't recognize comes out and strides purposefully in our direction.

"Good afternoon, Miss Hathaway, we haven't yet met." With his formal manner, slim-fitting dark suit, and hint of a British accent, I half expect him to bow to me. "My name is Elliot, and I'm one of your mother's assistants. Mrs. Hathaway

asked me to collect the items you acquired today and put them in your car for you. She also asked me to issue an invitation to both you and Mr. McGrath to come in for cocktails and dinner.”

Wesley approaches from the other side of the car, his arms laden with boxes. His gaze meets mine only briefly before flicking away; the way his eyes glitter with mirth tells me he’s afraid prolonged eye contact between us will set us both off laughing. He wouldn’t be wrong.

“Would you mind telling Mrs. Hathaway I have a previous engagement and I send my regrets?” Wesley says, handing the boxes to Elliot.

“Of course,” Elliot says. “Is this everything?”

“There’s a bouquet of flowers in the back seat still, but I can grab it.”

“Not necessary, I’ll look after it.” Elliot scurries toward my car and I fumble my keys from my purse to pop the trunk for him.

Wesley leans in close, making my breath catch in surprise. “*One* of your mother’s assistants?” he says quietly, his voice conspiratorial. “Why does she need an assistant, let alone a team of them?”

“She’s a very busy and important woman, Wesley,” I say earnestly. “A house like this doesn’t run itself, you know. Where would someone like Eleanor Hathaway be without a crew of minions to do her bidding?”

“Of course, silly me. I bet a job like that pays well. If I ever need employment, I know where to come.”

“You and me both.”

His serious expression cracks, replaced by a grin that makes my knees wobble. “Well. You’d better get inside before it starts to rain.”

“You’re just in a hurry to get out of here before Mom comes out and convinces you to stay for dinner,” I say, poking

him in the chest.

He catches my hand, looping his fingers around mine and holding on. “I promise I’d stay if I could. I just need to—”

“Take care of some stuff,” I interrupt, trying to keep the disappointment from my voice. “Yeah, I get it. You *are* going to tell me what’s going on soon, right?”

Wesley releases my fingers and shoves both his hands in the pockets of his jacket. “As soon as it’s all sorted. Promise.”

“Okay. Well.” I take a step backward, wincing when an icy drop of rain hits me in the middle of the forehead. “I’ll see you at the party on Saturday?” He nods wordlessly and I nod in return. “Thanks for today, Wesley.”

“It was my pleasure, Buttercup. These last few days have been great. It’s been way too long since we made new memories together.”

I make a small noise in the back of my throat that I quickly cover with a cough. Why does he have to say stuff like that? It’s something any good friend might say to another, and yet my stupid, hopeful, traitorous heart practically leaps from my chest.

Normally, I’d hug Wesley goodbye, but I’m not sure I could handle being in his arms right now. The next drop of rain that plops on my cheek is the perfect excuse to give him a quick wave and spin on my heel toward the house.

“Hey, Evie?”

I stop and turn around, pulling my jacket around me tighter and crossing my arms over my chest.

Wesley stays where he is for a few seconds before closing the distance between us, standing close enough to touch. “This is...” He shakes his head, laughing softly as if to himself. “I found a shoebox of pictures in my old bedroom last night, and I came across one where I had the notorious mustache.”

I snort out a laugh. “Please tell me that’s your birthday gift to me.”

“No, I ripped it to shreds and threw the pieces in the fire.”

I gasp, dropping my arms so I can shove his shoulder. “Wesley!”

“I’m kidding, I’m kidding.” He catches my hand as I pull it back, gripping it lightly in his. “Seeing it evoked this flood of memories. I know I was the one who wanted to put a pin in our earlier conversation, but...do you want to know *why* I grew that horrendous mustache in high school?”

A string of sarcastic responses spring to my lips, but Wesley’s tone has me swallowing every one of them. “Why?”

“You were so infatuated with Westley from *The Princess Bride*, I thought maybe growing that silly little mustache would make you look at me that way too.”

While I open and close my mouth like a fish out of water, Wesley leans in and kisses my cheek. “I’ll see you at the party, Buttercup,” he says in my ear. His warm breath on my skin makes me shiver. “Go inside before it really starts to rain.”

My legs move of their own accord, taking a single step back. Before I can turn, Wesley catches my hand again. “Wait, one more thing.” He reaches into his jacket and struggles to pull something out of the inner pocket. It’s another CD jewel case, this one purple. He hesitates before handing it to me. “Don’t wait to read the insert this time, okay?” Without waiting for me to respond, he squeezes my hand and then jogs to his car.

I blink, and I’m somehow inside my parents’ house. I don’t remember walking up the front path or opening the door. I look down to see I’ve already taken off my shoes, although I’m still wearing my jacket.

I thought maybe growing that silly little mustache would make you look at me that way too.

Wesley’s words play on a loop in my mind. Earlier, when he said he wanted to put a pin in our conversation, I was imagining a pin cushion, the kind my grandmother had in her ancient sewing basket. Now I’m imagining a grenade—an

emotional grenade, which I know is ridiculous. Wesley's confession, on top of everything he revealed earlier, feels like he just pulled the pin and there's no going back. This has the potential to get very messy.

Adding to the mess? The fact Wesley lives three hours away. And, oh yeah, there's the minor detail of his maybe-girlfriend. Seeing Wesley again has been incredible, but I can't help feeling as if this walk down memory lane is littered with emotional grenades and *I'm* the one who's going to end up hurt.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

On Friday morning, I get sucked into work and it eats up most of my day. I was initially irritated, considering I was supposed to have the week off, but one of my real estate company's biggest clients specifically wanted *me* to work on a time-sensitive—and very lucrative—deal. Let's just say it was an offer I would have been a fool to refuse, whether I was on holiday or not.

When I arrive home Friday evening, Stella is on a video chat with a few of her online friends. I wave to her and head down the hall to my room, but she calls me back.

"Some guy named Elliot dropped this off," she says, brandishing a purple jewel case. It takes me a minute to put the pieces together; I was in such a daze yesterday afternoon after Wesley left my parents' place, I'd set the CD down somewhere and completely forgotten about it. I wonder if personal deliveries are usually part of Elliot's job description.

I thank Stella as I take the CD, and tell her I'll be in my room. After a quick shower, I don my pajamas, despite the relatively early hour, and climb into bed with my Discman. Even though Wesley told me to read the CD insert right away, I do what I did the other night: set the case aside, put my earbuds in, and hit play.

The first three songs surprise me: "I Try" by Macy Gray, "With or Without You" by U2, and "Nothing Compares 2 U" by Sinéad O'Connor. They're all songs I like, but I can't attach a special significance to them related to Wesley.

"Always" by Bon Jovi is next, and it has me sitting up straighter in bed. The next several songs have my mind spinning like a Tilt-a-Whirl. I grab the CD case and scan the

list of songs. Other than the first three songs, with their themes of longing and tortured feelings, the rest are undeniably love songs: “Truly Madly Deeply” by Savage Garden, “I Love You Always Forever” by Donna Lewis, “She’s the One” by Robbie Williams, “Inside Out” by Bryan Adams, and on and on.

When the final song ends, my heart is racing. There’s no real reason for it; I’m just sitting here in bed. I’ve barely moved a muscle in the last hour. My mind is still doing mental gymnastics, trying to rationalize Wesley’s song choices. It could be that they were mostly popular songs when we were growing up; that was the theme of the first CD he gave me, after all. It was full of Spice Girls, Savage Garden, S Club 7, TLC, Aqua, a variety of boy bands, and other singers I’d been obsessed with as a preteen and teen.

With shaking hands, I finally pry the insert out of the CD case and read Wesley’s note.

To my Buttercup on her thirty-fifth birthday.

I could make you a million CDs. Songs we listened to and loved growing up, songs that remind me of you, songs I think you’d like. It was nearly impossible to narrow it down to twenty-two, and I feel like I didn’t begin to do you justice. To do us justice. But here are twenty-two songs to celebrate thirty-five years of one of my favorite people on this big blue and green marble. Thirty-five years of laughter and tears, thirty-five years of ups and downs. Thirty-five years of loving you, Evelyn Simone Hathaway.

All my love, always,

Wesley xoxo

I’m reading it for the third time when there’s a knock on my bedroom door. I panic, not wanting Stella to see me like this. I snatch a tissue from my bedside table and swipe at my face, but there’s no use. I’m a teary, snotty mess.

“Come in,” I croak.

The door opens and Stella steps inside, her expression bemused when she sees me in bed. “I was worried you were

sick and had gone to bed ear—” Her eyes widen when she notices my futile attempt to stop the flow of tears. “What’s the matter? Are you okay?”

“I think your brother is in love with me?” The words come out squeaky and wobbly. In the next second, I’m laughing and sobbing at the same time, only vaguely aware of Stella dashing across the room to my bed. “Stella, I think your brother is in love with me.”

When she doesn’t speak, I blink the tears from my eyes so I can study her expression. “Why don’t you seem surprised? Say something!”

“I...I don’t...I can’t...” She groans, fisting her hands in my comforter until her knuckles turn white. “I promised him I wouldn’t say anything.”

“Does this have anything to do with why you two were arguing on Thanksgiving?”

She nods, her lips pressed tightly together. I squirm on the bed, impatient for an explanation. Finally, she sighs. “You need to talk to Wesley.” I start to protest, but she holds up a hand to cut me off. “This is something he needs to tell you himself, Evie. I’m sorry. Please understand.”

Her beseeching tone is the only thing stopping me from bombarding her with questions. I always told the McGrath siblings not to put me in the middle, so it would be unfair to put Stella in the middle now. Even though I really, *really* want to.

She must sense my capitulation because she picks up my phone from the nightstand and hands it to me. My heart is still pounding out an erratic beat, reverberating through my pulse points. With a shaky finger, I hit Wesley’s number and listen to it ring. And ring. When it goes to voicemail, I hang up and try again with the same results.

Without a word, Stella slides her phone from her pocket and calls Wesley herself. Unlike me, she leaves a message

when she reaches his voicemail. “Wesley James McGrath, stop ignoring my calls and texts. Call me back. *Now.*”

Her firm tone shocks me so much, it takes a few beats for me to realize what she said: ‘stop ignoring my calls and texts’. “When was the last time you spoke to him?”

She sighs. “Last night.”

We stare at each other in silence for a long moment. I expect she’s waiting for me to ask more questions. When I don’t, she waves a hand toward the Discman in my lap. “Can I listen to the CD? Is it weird that I want to live vicariously and try to forget my own love life is a disaster?”

I huff out a laugh as I peel back the sheets and pat the bed in invitation. Stella crawls in next to me, inching in close so our sides are pressed together from shoulder to hip. I hand her one of the earbuds, along with the insert from the CD.

I wouldn’t normally share something so private, but Wesley knows how close Stella and I are, and that we’re currently living together. I’m sure he knew it was inevitable that one or all of our friends would see the message he wrote.

Stella is silent for so long, I’m sure she’s reading it more than once. Finally, she whispers, “Wow.” Tears glimmer in her eyes, causing my own eyes to refill.

“Yeah. Wow.” Snippets of my life’s history with Wesley flash through my mind, from the time we were little through our teens and into adulthood. I replay various things he’s said and done, paired with the way I’ve caught him staring at me with what I convinced myself wasn’t longing. “I’m not... reading too much into this, right? Imagining it’s romantic when it’s really just Wesley expressing how much our friendship means to him?”

“Evie. This is not a ‘you are my best friend and I love you’ type of message,” she says, waving the insert around. “This is...it’s the kind of love a lot of people only ever dream about. The kind *you’ve* been dreaming about for as long as I can remember.”

Her words spur me to pick up my phone and dial Wesley's number again. Still no answer. If Stella's slightly terrifying voicemail didn't compel him to call her immediately, there's no sense in leaving a message of my own.

Instead, I settle back on my bed, nestling into the pillows and resting my head on Stella's shoulder. In unison, we insert our earbuds, and I hit play to restart the CD.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The morning of my birthday dawns bright and clear.

I'm thirty-five today. *Thirty-five*. My life hasn't been what I thought it would be in many ways, but it's better than I ever could have imagined in plenty of others.

There's a light knocking on my door, followed by Stella peeking her head into my room. I'm still half asleep, but seeing her makes the last couple of days come rushing back to me. Wesley. All the confusing, seemingly loaded things he said on Thursday. The love songs he curated and the things he wrote in the CD insert.

"Good morning, birthday girl!" Stella runs into my room and takes a flying leap onto my bed. I laugh as the bed shakes and bounces, and then flop back as she throws her arms around me and snuggles close.

"How are you feeling?" she asks, leaning her head against my shoulder.

"About turning thirty-five? Or about the fact I'm in love with your brother and just discovered he's had feelings for me for almost as long as I've loved him?"

Stella is silent for a moment. "All of the above?"

A slightly crazed-sounding giggle spills out of my mouth and ends on a sigh. "I'll let you know once I'm caffeinated."

"We can help with that." The bedroom door opens further and Hollie steps through, carrying a take-out tray of cardboard cups with a bakery bag on top. The heavenly scent of coffee and chocolate reaches my nose and makes my mouth water.

“Happy birthday, Evie,” Louisa says, squeezing past Hollie to enter the room. She grins when she sees Stella and me cuddled together in bed.

“Why didn’t you mention they were here?” I ask Stella.

She shrugs, pushing herself into a seated position. “I wanted birthday snuggles.”

“Are we camping out in here?” Hollie asks, lifting the tray in her hands.

“As tempting as that is, let me go brush my teeth so I don’t kill you all with my morning breath, and then I’ll meet you in the living room.”

While I’m in the bathroom, I make myself somewhat presentable since I’m sure at least one cell phone camera will be aimed at me this morning. We’re a group who like to document occasions, from the mundane to the monumental. The chatter in the living room dies as I approach, and Louisa nudges Hollie, who quickly fumbles with a lighter. The three of them rise as one, with Hollie in the middle holding a plate with a cupcake that has a candle in the center.

My eyes burn with tears as they sing ‘Happy Birthday’. When the song comes to an end, I hold up a finger for them to wait. Their laughter trails after me as I run to my bedroom to get my phone from the nightstand. The purple CD case is sitting beside it, so I grab that too.

“Hurry and blow out the candle before the wax mixes with the frosting,” Stella says as I dash back into the room.

“Just one sec. Smile!” I take a few quick pictures of them huddled together, their faces glowing in the flickering candle flame. My three best friends. Three pieces of my heart in human form. I spin around, flipping the camera into selfie mode and framing the girls over my shoulder so all four of us are in the shot. I’m sure we’ll take dozens of pictures today, and my mom will likely have a professional photographer discreetly snapping photos at the party tonight, but I already know these will be among my favorites of the day.

“Candle!” Louisa says, and I surge forward to blow it out, sending a quick wish into the universe that I’ll always feel this loved.

There’s a flurry of action as breakfast is laid out and seats are taken. I give my phone a quick glance as I move to set it aside. There’s a message from Wesley, sent at exactly midnight last night.

Happy birthday, Buttercup. I hope you have an amazing day and that thirty-five is your best year yet. I’m sorry for ghosting you, and I promise to explain everything at your party tonight.

It’s followed by a string of birthday-related emojis, with several colorful hearts and a few kissy faces sprinkled in.

“Okay, so, Wesley,” Hollie says, thrusting a cardboard cup into my hand. Pumpkin-scented steam rises to meet me. “Details.”

I set my phone aside and pick up the CD. I hold it against my chest for a moment as I survey Hollie and Louisa’s expectant faces. Even though I let Stella read it and listen to the CD with me last night, part of me feels strange sharing this with them, even though we’ve always shared everything. My inner voice of reason repeats what it said last night: Wesley would likely expect me to share it with my friends.

Still, I have difficulty relinquishing it into Hollie’s outstretched hand. She settles back on the couch and holds it so both she and Louisa can see it. I watch their faces as their eyes scan the insert. I read it so many times last night, I have it memorized.

“Wow,” Louisa whispers.

“That’s all I could say too,” Stella says, handing her a tissue.

Louisa dabs at her face; she and I have always been the criers in our group. “This is…”

“The most romantic thing I’ve ever read in my entire life,” Hollie finishes for her.

My gaze swings to Stella. After we listened to the CD last night, I continued to question Wesley’s true intentions. She claimed I was in denial and she was calling an emergency breakfast meeting for today so the four of us could dissect this together as a group the way we’ve always done with big things in life.

Stella smiles now, nodding her head slowly. She must see that I don’t need any more convincing. The knowing look in her eyes fills me with a hope I desperately try to tamp down.

“You need to get Wesley alone as soon as possible and talk to him,” Stella says.

“You know something we don’t,” Hollie says.

I should redirect the conversation and stick to the silent promise I made last night not to put Stella in the middle. But today is a new day and there’s a fire burning in my belly. “Something happened at your family Thanksgiving that ticked you off and made things weird between you and Wes. Then suddenly, things were fine again. I promised myself I’d mind my own business, but I know it had something to do with me.”

Stella twirls a strand of hair around her finger, winding it so tightly, the digit turns white. “I really think you should talk to Wes...”

“And I *will*,” I say. “But I need to know what I’m walking into. I heard you telling him to stay away from me on Thanksgiving night.”

“How did you—? You know what, nevermind.” She releases her hair and waves a dismissive hand. “Fine, I’ll give you the condensed version. Wesley told my parents and me that he and Ashleigh broke up a few weeks ago. He was sparse on the details, despite my parents’ prying. When we were alone later that night, he told me more details, including the fact he was applying for a job here in Bellevue.”

“*What?*” The word is a shocked chorus, spoken in unison by Hollie, Louisa, and me.

Seemingly feeding off the excitement of the moment, Stella’s eyes grow wide and she leans forward in her seat. “I don’t know the details or what happened, but apparently he had an interview with Hugh MacKinnon yesterday at Bellevue Village.”

“Okay, but that doesn’t explain why you told him to stay away from Evie,” Hollie says, taking the words right out of my mouth.

The way Stella’s gaze moves to the ceiling and her mouth twists to the side makes me think she’s choosing her words carefully. I squirm in my seat, nearly ready to burst when she finally speaks again.

“Wesley told me he’s always had feelings for you, Evie,” she says. “He said the timing was never right, but it *could* be if he moved back to Bellevue. He wanted to talk to you about it on Monday, but I nixed that idea. I told him he needed to be sure he was actually moving to Bellevue first so he wouldn’t get your hopes up for nothing. I also told him he needed to be one hundred percent sure of his feelings for you and that you wouldn’t be a rebound after Ashleigh.”

My pulse gallops in my ears, and the room spins before my eyes. Wesley really does have feelings for me, and he might be moving back to Bellevue. I might finally get the chance to be with him—something I’ve been waiting and wishing for the past twenty years. But wait... “You said he had an interview with Hugh MacKinnon *yesterday*?” I ask, and Stella nods. “And he didn’t tell you how it went?”

Stella’s expression turns rueful. “No. That was why I left him that angry message last night. He ignored all my calls and texts all day yesterday and so far this morning too.”

I jump up from my chair and grab my phone, jabbing at Wesley’s number. It rings and rings as I pace around the living room. Adrenaline surges through me when I hear a soft *click*,

but it's only the line switching over to voicemail. I end the call and send him a quick text that simply says: *Call me!*

Shoving my disappointment down along with the hope I attempted to quell a moment ago, I slide back into my seat. My friends are watching me with concerned expressions, so I give myself a mental shake and make myself smile. It's only forced for the span of a few seconds before the others' answering grins make me smile for real.

Today is my birthday. My three best girls are here, they brought me breakfast, and they'll be spending the entire day by my side. I've waited this long to figure things out with Wesley; I can handle waiting a bit longer, even though it makes me feel as if I'm crawling out of my own skin.

I reach for my cupcake and hold it up. "I love you all, and I'm so grateful you're here. Now, let's eat."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

It's after five o'clock, and the party is set to start in less than an hour. Stella, Hollie, Louisa, and I are in one of the spare bedrooms at Hathaway Manor, which has been transformed into a salon-like setup for the day. The four of us have been polished, painted, and primped, and are now sitting around, sipping prosecco.

"Oh, don't you four look beautiful!" Mom exclaims as she bustles into the room. None of us are dressed for the party yet, but we're all wearing the silky robes Mom had waiting for us when we arrived.

"Consider them party favors," she'd said when she led us into the room earlier. "You girls used to love the goodie bags I made for you, so this is like the adult version of those. Although I do still have goodie bags for you later."

My friends had giggled like excited children. Even before my family became wealthy, my mom was the queen of goodie bags at parties; I can only imagine what the adult versions will be like.

"Evelyn, honey, can I steal you away for a minute?" Mom asks now. She was already dressed when we arrived, claiming it was easier to be ready early since she had so many things to oversee. She looks beautiful in a plum-colored dress, with her short brown hair styled in loose waves and held back from her face with sparkly combs.

Before I leave the room, Stella slips my phone into my hand. She took it when we arrived because I kept checking it for a call or text from Wesley. Her expression tells me Wesley finally responded and I'm not going to like what I see.

I check the screen as I follow Mom from the room. There's a text from Wesley, time stamped nearly an hour ago: *I hope you're having a great day, Ev. I'm taking care of a few things and I might be a bit late to the party, but I promise I'll be there. xo*

"Where are you, Wesley?" I murmur to myself, rereading the message and hoping for some hidden subtext. Or better yet, a new message saying he's on his way.

"What was that, honey?" Mom asks.

"Oh, it's just..." I push my disappointment aside once again. Mom has put in a lot of effort and care these past few days to show me she heard what I said the other day. *That's* what I need to focus on right now. "I just wanted to thank you for all you've done so far today."

"Of course, sweetheart. The four of you work so hard, you deserve a bit of pampering once in a while." She ushers me into my old bedroom and closes the door behind us.

My dress is hanging on the back of the closet door. Mom gets it down and motions for me to take off my robe. As I step into the dress, I catch Mom wringing her hands.

"Everything okay?" I ask.

"Oh, yes, fine," she says quickly. "There's something minor I wanted to mention to you and I don't want you to be upset."

Having wriggled into my dress, I turn my back so Mom can zip it up. Maybe hearing what she has to say will be easier without looking at her. "Tell me."

"Do you remember the other day when I told you I'd invited one of your father's coworkers with the intention of setting you up?" She pauses long enough for me to make a wary sound of acknowledgement. I don't like where this is going. "Well, I couldn't exactly uninvite him, so he'll be here tonight. I'll obviously have to introduce the two of you since it's your party, but I promise I don't expect anything. Even if

Jonathan *is* a very nice, very handsome, very successful young man.”

I stifle a laugh. “Mom, it’s okay. Did you specifically tell Jonathan you were hoping to set us up?”

“Well, no...”

“Then it’s fine. He probably assumes you invited a bunch of Dad’s associates, especially since you said he’d been here for dinner not that long ago. I’ll meet him, we’ll chat, then I’ll direct him toward the bar or some food or...ooh, or maybe one of the other girls?”

With my dress zipped, Mom turns me around. Her eyes are bright with that familiar matchmaker glow. “I *could* see him with someone like our Hollie...”

We share a conspiratorial smile. Hollie won’t appreciate being set up any more than I do, but if she knew this was a strange sort of bonding moment between Mom and me, I’m certain she’d be willing to take one for the team.

After reminding me of her promise that this will be the last big birthday shindig for me, Mom asks for one last party-related favor: to continue the tradition of making a ‘grand entrance’. Despite it being one of my least favorite things—it’s so showy and pretentious—I agree to it for Mom’s sake.

As I stand at the top of the staircase, the party sounds like it’s in full swing downstairs. Voices and laughter mix with the sound of clinking glasses and soft music from the built-in speakers wired throughout the house.

I take a deep breath, plaster on a smile, and pray to whoever might be listening that I don’t tumble down the stairs. I scan the room for Wesley, but don’t see him. I don’t know if he’s called or texted because I relinquished my phone to Hollie, who put it in the drawer of my nightstand with the

promise that she and the others would capture the events of tonight on their phones and upload them to our shared group folder.

It's Hollie I focus on now. She's standing between Stella and Louisa, her phone aimed at me. Their smiling faces are filled with a blend of amusement and affection, drawing a genuine smile and even a small laugh from me.

My eyes land on my parents next as I reach the bottom step. Mom rushes forward and envelops me in a tight hug. Normally she'd simply take my hand while aiming an air-kiss in the direction of my cheek. Gotta keep up those pretenses of propriety, after all, and PDA—even aimed at your own child—isn't common in this crowd. Mom lingers now, though, so I close my eyes and squeeze her back.

My dad hovers nearby, waiting for his turn. He looks at me with wonder in his eyes, as if he hasn't seen me dressed to the nines a million times over the last twenty years. Not that I'm complaining; my dad is so busy, it's rare to get his full attention, and I feel the warmth of it wash over me like the sun on a perfect summer day. "You look beautiful, pumpkin."

I laugh at the old nickname as my dad wraps me in an embrace. He had a variety of nicknames for me growing up, but with my love of autumn, 'pumpkin' was one that stuck. I haven't heard it in years.

I'm soon swept up in a flurry of handshakes, awkward hugs, and air kisses from a variety of strangers and acquaintances. Louisa sneaks by and hands me a glass of prosecco while I'm speaking to one of my dad's oldest friends. A while later when I'm talking to someone else, I spot Stella motioning a waiter in my direction. He appears by my side a moment later to offer me the delicious-looking canapés on his tray.

Despite my best efforts, I can't stop my gaze from roaming the room in search of Wesley. He promised he'd be here, and he's never broken a promise to me. Still, I need to accept that when he does show up, I might not get the answers I'm hoping

for. He doesn't know I know about his breakup or the interview he had in town yesterday. If things didn't go well, he might be returning to his life in Ottawa after tonight. A life I always secretly longed to fit into as his partner and lover.

Tonight feels like my last chance with Wesley. If he doesn't move back to town, that's my sign it's finally time to move on. I'll always love Wesley, but I need to do everything I can to shift that love to the type I feel for Stella, Hollie, and Louisa. I've been blessed beyond measure to have the four of them as my lifelong companions and, while I may not get the type of forever I'd hoped for with Wesley, he and the others will be by my side for the rest of my life.

With those thoughts in the forefront of my mind, I don't feel the need to brace myself or grin and bear it when Mom comes over to tell me she'd like to introduce me to Jonathan.

"Lead the way, Mom." I suppress a smile at the way her eyes widen in surprise.

"You and Mr. Tall, Dark, and Handsome seemed to hit it off," Hollie says, sidling up beside me and handing me a fresh glass of prosecco.

I've just spent the last twenty minutes talking to Jonathan, who was so intimidatingly good-looking, I'd been tongue tied for a solid minute before I found my confidence and was able to carry on a conversation with him.

"We did," I agree. "He was charming, funny, and well-spoken. He seemed genuinely interested and impressed in my career. I almost always end up wondering what my mother was thinking with her intended set-ups, but Jonathan and I have a lot in common. He's actually the type of guy I could see myself with."

"But?" Hollie says.

“But what? There’s no but. Why would you think there’s a but?”

Despite the way Hollie presses her lips together, there’s no hiding the glimmer in her eyes. She plucks the glass from my fingers and lifts it to my eye level. It’s empty. I don’t even remember drinking it.

“Huh.”

“Yeah. Maybe we should get you some water.”

“Probably a good idea. I could use a little break from the crowd anyway.”

Hollie and I have only made it a few steps toward the kitchen when Louisa rushes over, eyes bright, and cheeks pink.

“Help! I think I’ve found the man of my dreams.” Lulu is the only person I know who would start a sentence like that with *‘help’*.

“Who is he?” I ask.

She points toward the bar, where Fergus is chatting with the bartender. The handsome Scot arrived shortly after the party began, hugging me as if we were old friends, and handing me a stunning bouquet of dahlias in an array of autumn colors.

“The bartender?” Hollie asks.

“Fergus!” Louisa whisper-yells.

Hollie and I exchange knowing glances. Looks like I wasn’t the only one who noticed the sparks between Lulu and Fergus on Thanksgiving night.

“Eleanor asked me to get her some napkins from the bar, and Fergus was there,” Louisa says. “He said something to me and I can’t even remember what it was now, but I know I laughed, and then I hurried away because I’m the world’s most awkward person.”

At Louisa’s little squeak of embarrassment, Hollie leans in to hug her while I place my hand on her back. Hollie meets my

eyes once more over Louisa's shoulder, and we share a smile; Louisa may be in distress now, but she'll be laughing about this later. Or maybe not later because she's already chuckling as she pulls away from Hollie.

"Why am I like this, you guys?" she asks with a gusty sigh. "I really liked Fergus the other night when we met, and I actually didn't have too much trouble talking to him. I don't know what happened just now."

"How about we all go talk to him, would that make it easier?" Hollie suggests.

I eye Louisa, who's now staring across the room at Fergus. If Stella were here, she'd probably say something about Lulu's face resembling a heart-eye emoji. Finally, she says, "Yes. Thank you."

"You two go ahead and I'll catch up with you in a bit," I say. "I need some water to counteract all the prosecco I've been drinking."

We part ways, agreeing to meet up again soon. The kitchen is bustling with catering staff, so I quickly get myself a glass of water and find a somewhat quiet spot out of the way on the far side of the enormous kitchen. I'm contemplating sneaking upstairs to check my phone when Wesley enters the kitchen.

The sight of him is more refreshing than the water I've been drinking. In the time it takes him to cast his gaze around the room, my eyes sweep over his perfectly tailored dark-blue suit and crimson paisley tie. And of course his beautiful face. There's a hint of dishevelment about him; his tie is slightly loose around his collar, and his hair is falling forward like he's been running his fingers through it.

His eyes finally land on me. If his appearance hadn't already sucked the air from my lungs, the relieved smile he gives me would take my breath away.

"Considering you're the guest of honor, you're a hard woman to track down." He crosses the room and gathers me into his arms, holding me close. I nearly experience sensory

overload—his warm body against mine, his hands on my back, the familiar scent of his cologne. “Happy birthday, Buttercup. Sorry I’m late.”

“I’m just glad you’re here.” After a final squeeze, I force myself to release him. “Where were you? Did you get your secret mission all taken care of?”

He lets out a brief laugh, his expression turning rueful. “I thought I could manage everything from here, but I had to go back to Ottawa last night.”

“*Ottawa?*”

“It’s all taken care of now,” he says, his words coming faster. “I have so much to tell you. Evie, I—”

“There you are!” Mom’s voice startles me so much, I jump away from Wesley. “Hello, Wesley dear. I was just talking to your mother and she told me what you’ve been up to this week. I’m so glad you made it back in time for the party.”

Wesley gives Mom a tight smile. “I wouldn’t miss it, Eleanor. I was actually just about to fill Evie in on where I was today.”

Mom looks between the two of us before her gaze settles on Wesley. Something incomprehensible passes between the two of them, and she nods. “Of course, dear. I’m afraid you’ll have to wait just a little while longer. I need our Evelyn for the cake cutting right now.”

Wesley opens his mouth as if to object, but snaps it shut again immediately. He knows better than to argue with Eleanor Hathaway.

Mom’s gaze swings to me. Her expression morphs into one I know all too well. It’s a look that tells me her habit of meddling and matchmaking is one that’s going to die a slow, drawn-out death.

“You know, I wish the two of you would get together already. Your mother agrees with me, Wesley; in fact, we were just talking about it before you arrived. It was clear from the

time you two were children that you were meant to be.” She makes a tutting noise as she shakes her head, looking for all the world like a mother who’s disappointed in her small children for being naughty. “Anyway, Evelyn, I really do need you for the cake cutting.”

She spins on her impossibly high heels without so much as a wobble, and heads for the door, beckoning for me to follow her.

I gather all my courage and look at Wesley. He appears as stunned as I feel. We’re both apparently rooted to the spot since neither of us has made any attempt to follow my mother.

“Wow,” he breathes. “Meant to be. That’s...”

“I’m so sorry,” I blurt. “She and I have talked about this, but, well, you’ve known her your whole life, you know what she’s like. She promised she’d stay out of my love life from now on, but I have a feeling if I’m not married in another few years, I’ll be dealing with an arranged marriage situation, giving new meaning to the term ‘shotgun wedding’.”

I expect Wesley to laugh. Maybe crack a joke of his own. What I *don’t* expect is the way he slowly turns to face me fully, taking both my hands in his. Or the way he gazes into my eyes in a way he never has before. A way that makes my breath catch as butterflies soar to life inside me and perform acrobatics in the vicinity of my heart.

“She may be meddling, but I can’t fault her for thinking we’re meant to be. I always thought that too.”

I gape at Wesley. Have the bubbles from the prosecco gone to my head or did I hear him correctly? I don’t have a chance to question it before Elliot bustles into the room and informs me my mother expects me to make an appearance within the next thirty seconds.

I swallow a string of frustrated curses. Wesley squeezes my hands and then gently lets them drop. My whole body has gone numb, so I’d forgotten he was even holding them.

“Go,” he says. “We have all night to talk. I’m not going anywhere.”

In the living room, Mom’s tense smile eases when she sees me, turning into one that shines with affection and pride. My dad stands next to her with his hand on the small of her back, his smile a mirror image of my mom’s. As the assembled crowd sings a rousing rendition of the birthday song, I glance around, my eyes catching on familiar faces before landing on a small grouping of easels holding framed poster boards with pictures of me throughout the years.

The song ends and Dad steps forward, kissing my cheek before handing me a knife. With the weight of dozens of eyes on me, a hint of embarrassment heats my cheeks as I cut into the cake and then hand the knife off to one of the catering staff, who begins cutting and plating slices of cake with impressive efficiency.

Reminding myself this will be my last big, impersonal birthday party, I take the glass of prosecco my dad offers me and hold it up, facing the crowd. Every year except for this one, Mom has asked me to make a speech, and every year I’ve refused. I’ve told her it’s bad enough that she trots me out like a trick pony, expecting me to make a grand entrance and cut the cake in front of everyone like a partnerless bride.

But this year feels different. Mom has made so much effort this week. Even though I’ve never felt like these parties are for *me*, she still puts a lot of work into them, and I know she’s always meant well even if she has a habit of going about things in the wrong way. When I think of Hollie, whose mother abandoned her nearly twenty years ago, or Lousia, whose sweet, beautiful mom died shortly before that, it reminds me just how lucky I am to have my mom, even if she *can* be overbearing and meddlesome. She’s always been here, and I’ve never doubted her love for me.

I clear my throat and swallow a wave of emotion. “Thank you all for being here tonight,” I say, projecting my voice so everyone can hear me. “It means so much that you’re all here

to celebrate my birthday with me. I'd especially like to thank my parents for hosting these parties each year." I turn to Mom and Dad, smiling at their beaming faces as they salute me with their glasses.

I seek out my friends next, my smile stretching when I see Wesley standing beside Stella with his arm around her shoulders. "And I'd like to thank my four dearest friends for... well, for a lifetime of loving me and being by my side." I quickly divert my gaze, afraid looking at them will make me cry. "I hope you all enjoy the rest of the party. Cheers."

The crowd echoes my 'cheers', throwing in a smattering of other well wishes. The voices fade into muddled sounds as my eyes lock on Wesley's. He lifts his glass in my direction, a smile flirting around the edges of his mouth. I only make it one step in his direction before a hand settles on my arm.

"You're just full of surprises today," Mom says.

"Guess I learned from the best." I clink my glass against hers and then point toward the framed poster boards. "Where did those come from?"

With her hand still on my arm, Mom skillfully weaves us through the crowd of people who are now enjoying slices of cake. We stop in front of the makeshift photo gallery, and I let out a delighted laugh as I examine the pictures.

"Wesley and the girls helped me put them together this week," Mom says.

The photos range from me as a roly-poly baby to shots with my parents and paternal grandparents to pictures of me and the girls—and Wesley—over the last three-plus decades. I remember Wesley mentioning looking through old photos the other day. I scan the boards until my gaze lands on a Polaroid of me leaning against a moustachioed Wesley, who has his arm locked tightly around my shoulders.

Mom taps the glass over the photo I'm looking at. "Have you always known?"

"Known what?"

“That he loves you?”

Her words cause a loud whooshing sound in my ears. I blow a shaky breath through pursed lips. “No. Just that I’ve always loved him.”

Someone comes along then to talk to Mom, and I get drawn into the conversation. This goes on for the next half hour or so—people who hadn’t spoken to me before come up to wish me a happy birthday, many of them handing me small wrapped gifts or envelopes I’m certain contain money. They ask how my job is, if I’m dating anyone, what I’ve been doing in my spare time.

I feel like a broken record repeating the same answers to different people and swallowing my shock and dismay over how forward some people are with their questions. It’s like they think they’re entitled to know everything about my personal life just because my parents invited them to this party. Mom’s the one who finally makes excuses on my behalf so I can break away from the steady stream of well-wishers to seek out my friends.

Except my friends are busy having conversations of their own. Stella is talking to a woman our age who I recognize as one of my dad’s coworkers; I’d join them, but Stella’s flirty body language makes me hesitant to interrupt. Hollie and Wesley appear to be listening intently to something a vaguely familiar older gentleman is saying. It takes me a minute to find Louisa in the crowd and, when I do, a smile breaks out across my face. She’s standing next to Fergus, her cheeks adorably pink and her head thrown back in a laugh as he tells her something. Louisa’s white-knuckled grip on her water glass is the only indication of her nerves, but she’s holding her own, and I couldn’t be prouder.

With my friends occupied and no one else vying for my attention, I sneak toward the front of the house and slip outside for some fresh air. A cool breeze hits me, making me instantly regret not grabbing a jacket on the way out. I’m about to return inside when the door opens.

Jonathan steps outside, pausing partway through buttoning his coat. “Oh, hi, Evelyn.”

“Hi. You heading out?”

He nods as he finishes fastening the buttons. “Now I know why I couldn’t find you in there when I sought you out to say good night. Are you hiding from the crowd? Can I bring you a coat?”

I wrap my arms around myself to ward off the chill. “I’m okay, thanks. Maybe I’ll just sneak upstairs for my moment of solitude; it’s warmer and I can kick off my shoes for a minute.”

He chuckles. “Good thinking. It was great meeting you tonight. Your mom sure knows how to throw a party, and I’m glad I was lucky enough to score an invite.”

“I’m glad too.” I’m surprised to discover I mean it. Jonathan really *is* my type. It sucks that my mom finally chose a guy I could actually picture myself dating right when my head and heart are tied in knots over Wesley.

“Well, I should let you get back inside before you freeze,” Jonathan says. “I hope to see you around. Maybe we could go out for coffee sometime, although...I’m guessing it could only be as friends?”

A small sigh escapes me. “Yeah. I hate to sound like a Facebook status, but it’s complicated.”

He laughs under his breath. “I had one of those situations recently myself. I haven’t been in town long and I could always use more friends, though.” He pulls a business card from his coat pocket and hands it to me. Our fingers brush, and he lingers for a moment before bending to place a light kiss on my cheek. “Happy birthday, Evelyn.”

I remain where I am, watching him make his way down the long driveway toward the street, where he must be parked.

“Am I too late?”

I spin around at the sound of Wesley's voice. He approaches me slowly, sliding his suit jacket off and draping it over my shoulders.

When I don't say anything, he jerks his chin toward the driveway. "That was Jonathan Kaminski, right? He and I had a few classes together in university, and I heard he'd moved to town recently. I'm assuming your mom tried to set you two up?" At my nod, he ducks his head, thrusting his hands into his trouser pockets. "You two would be great together."

I make a non-committal noise paired with a shrug. The movement sends a subtle wave of Wesley's cologne up from his jacket. With his attention still firmly on his feet, I close my eyes and breathe it in. When I open my eyes again, I say, "There's only one small problem."

Wesley lifts his head to meet my eyes. "Oh? What's that?"

"He's not you."

Wesley's eyebrows wing up in surprise. He opens and closes his mouth, but when no words come, he snaps it shut and presses his lips together.

I study his face. *Really* study it. It's as familiar to me as my own. Over the years, the sight of him has brought me comfort, made me laugh, made me cry with frustration, turned me on. There have been times when I've been hopeful Wesley would or someday *could* feel the same kind of love I feel for him, although I've been afraid to let myself hope too much.

The way his eyes and mouth soften as he observes me in return makes hope surge inside me now, despite my best efforts.

"Kiss me, Wesley."

He laughs lightly, stepping forward. "You always were so bossy." He leans in and presses a light kiss to my cheek like Jonathan did a few minutes ago. Before he can pull away, I grip his tie, holding him in place. "Kiss me for real. I want to see something."

The surprised amusement in his blue eyes is replaced by heat. He closes the small space between us and cups my face, tilting it up as his lips slowly descend. His eyes remain open and trained on me until a second before his lips ghost over mine. It's the barest touch, just a hint of contact, and it has me resisting the urge to haul him closer. Wesley's never been the type to rush, though. He's also never been the type to do anything by half measures.

His lips brush over mine a few more times, a slow back and forth sweep. When a soft sigh escapes me, he finally presses his mouth fully to mine. My knees wobble when I get my first taste of him: whiskey and a hint of the French vanilla cake I saw him eating earlier.

I release my stranglehold on his tie so I can grip his shoulders in an attempt to keep my balance. His hands remain on my face, gently holding me in place as he kisses me slowly and thoroughly.

When he pulls away, I'm dazed and breathless. I was definitely right about Wesley never doing anything by halves. When he laughs softly as he lowers his forehead to rest against mine, it dawns on me that I said the words out loud. I'd be embarrassed if I wasn't feeling a myriad of other emotions right now.

"Did you mean what you said before?" I whisper. "That you always thought we were meant to be?"

He presses his lips to my forehead before taking a step back. He maintains our connection by gripping the lapels of the suit jacket around my shoulders and pulling the material around me tighter. His tie and the shoulders of his white dress shirt are wrinkled from where my fingers gripped and tugged. The sight is way sexier than it should be.

"I always expected we'd get together as teens," Wesley says. "Even if it was just to hook up. I know that's the opposite of romantic, but when it first hit me that I liked you as more than a friend, I let my hormonal teenage brain convince me it was purely physical attraction. By the time I accepted it was

more than that, I was getting ready to head off to university, and I didn't want to start something with an expiration date. You meant way too much to me for that, plus I was terrified it would screw up our friendship. I couldn't risk that."

I nod slowly, processing his words. "And then you decided to stay in Ottawa instead of moving back to Bellevue."

"Right. Besides the fact I was offered an amazing job straight out of school, part of me thought it might be better to keep the physical distance between us. We were still good friends, we still talked often and saw each other occasionally, but it was...I can't say it was easier, because it hurt like hell to be away from you, but it was...*safer?*"

"I was always secretly mad at you for staying in Ottawa, but I think you're right about it being safer. I wanted to tell you about my feelings so many times, but I was scared of screwing up our friendship too. In hindsight, I can see I wasn't ready for anything serious in my teens or twenties anyway, and if things had ended badly between us, I would have been crushed."

"Same here." Wesley releases the front of his jacket and trails his hands down my arms until his fingers meet and lace with mine. "And now?"

"Now...I need to know what you've been keeping from me this week. Don't be mad at Stella, but she told me about your breakup and the job interview you had yesterday. If you're staying in Ottawa, I don't know how this could work. It may only be three hours away, but we're both busy people, and navigating a long-distance relationship from the beginning seems like a disaster waiting to happen."

"I agree," he says, causing both my heart and stomach to plummet in disappointment. "Which is why it's a good thing that as of today, I'm officially a Bellevue resident once more."

Confusion has me sputtering out a laugh. "Wh-what?"

The front door opens behind us and Wesley and I spring apart as an older couple step outside. They pause to shake my

hand and share their well wishes for a wonderful year ahead. My exasperation at being interrupted yet again wars with a giddiness that's making my body feel all shimmery and light. I'm starting to believe this really is going to be a wonderful year.

The whole exchange only lasts a couple of minutes, although it feels like an eternity until the couple say good night. The second they head down the stairs, I grab Wesley's hand and pull him into the house. With my head down so no one can catch my eye or distract me from my mission, I yank him along behind me to the staircase, where I practically break into a run and don't stop until we reach my old bedroom.

Wesley lets out a breathless laugh as I shove the door closed behind us. "That was impressive. You should join a sports team in a defensive position." When my only response is a wry smile paired with an eye roll, he says, "Do you want the long version or the short version?"

"Long version later, short version now. We likely have less than five minutes before someone tracks us down. If we're going to hide out in my room, I'd like to spend at least part of that time kissing you."

Wesley's eyes get a wicked gleam in them that causes a full-body shiver to roll through me. He advances toward me, hands reaching for my hips, but I plant my palm in the center of his chest, halting his progress.

"Right. Details now, kissing after," he says, and I nod, biting my lip to hold in a laugh. His eyes dip to my mouth, so I let my lip spring free from my teeth and attempt to keep a straight face.

Wesley takes a step back, sliding his hands into his trouser pockets. After the way he reached for me a second ago, I'd like to think it's his way of ensuring he keeps his hands to himself. I'm also hoping he won't keep them to himself later.

"Okay. The short version is this: for a long time, I tried hard not to get serious with anyone because I hoped the timing

would eventually be right for you and me. But then I met Ashleigh, and...well, we made each other happy. We built a life together, and I thought we were on the same page and wanted the same things.

“A little over a month ago, my boss came to me with a proposition. My company has been working with the MacKinnon Group this year, and an advanced position was about to open in Bellevue. She knew I was from here and still have family here, so she suggested I apply. When I told Ashleigh, I thought we would have a discussion, weigh our options, and see if it was even a possibility. Instead, she told me she wanted to break up.”

“What? *Why?*”

“I guess she’d been looking for an out for a while and this was it for her,” Wesley says, frown lines appearing between his brows. “I have a feeling there was someone else, but she’s never confirmed it. Anyway...” He shakes his head and makes a waving motion in front of his face as if he’s trying to bat away unwanted thoughts. “I still waffled about the job. I’ve lived in Ottawa for almost two decades now, and a move like that wasn’t something I could just decide on the spur of the moment. Or so I thought. Being back in Bellevue and seeing you again made all my questions and hesitations disappear. My boss arranged for me to meet with Hugh MacKinnon yesterday, and he offered me the job.”

I can’t breathe. Somehow I manage to ask, “So why did you go back to Ottawa last night?”

“My only lingering issue was the townhouse Ashleigh and I bought together last year. Right before I left Ottawa last week, she told me she’d buy me out if I could get my stuff out as quickly as possible. I spent half the week hashing out details with her over the phone, and then after my interview yesterday, I jumped in my car and drove to Ottawa. I spent the night at a friend’s place, then went to the house this morning to pack my things and sign the paperwork Ashleigh had left.”

I let out a breathless laugh. “Wow.”

“Yeah. I knew it was nuts to do it all so quickly, and on today of all days when it might mean missing your party. I didn’t want to move forward with you until I’d cut all ties and knew for sure I’d be moving back here.”

“So you’re moving back to Bellevue. And you’re single.”

“I am. And I promise you, this isn’t some rebound thing. Ashleigh and I ended things pretty amicably, even though she sprang the breakup on me. I probably shouldn’t admit this, but I kept waiting for heartache to settle in. I was disappointed and sad, but a bigger part of me was excited at the prospect of moving back to Bellevue and maybe *finally* having a chance with you. If...if that’s what you want?”

I’m not sure how he could even ask that. I intend for that to be my next question, but what comes out instead is, “Where will you be living?”

“Well, I was hoping I could move in with you.”

My mouth drops open. I’m stammering out sounds that aren’t actual words when I see the telltale twitching of Wesley’s lips. “You’re a jerk!” I shove him in the chest, although I can’t help the laughter that spills out of me.

“Sorry, I had to see your reaction.” He catches my hand and holds it against his chest. “I’m not gonna lie, I hope living together could be part of our not-too-distant future, but I think there should be a few other steps first. For now, I’ll be staying in the basement apartment at my parents’ place—the one Stella gave up in favor of living with you, which I can’t blame her for—while I get settled in at my new job.”

“Wow,” I say again. I’m struggling to process all of this. The multiple glasses of prosecco I’ve had throughout the night aren’t helping any.

“If you need time to think about this, that’s okay,” Wesley says quickly. “I know I just dumped a ton of information on you and it must be a shock. I just want you to know I care deeply about you and I’ll be here if and when you’re ready. And also, I’d really like to kiss you again.”

“I’d like that too.” I take a step closer to him. My lips have almost reached his when I come to an abrupt stop. “We both said part of our hesitation all these years was because we were afraid of ruining our friendship. Are you still worried about that?”

“Honestly? No. You’re my best friend, Evie. You know me better than anyone else, and I think I can confidently say the same about how well I know you.”

“Don’t ever let the girls hear you say that, but...yeah, it’s probably true.”

He chuckles. “I’m not saying it’ll always be easy. That’s not how life works. I’m willing to give it my all if you are, though. We have a lifetime of shared history, but we can still make each other laugh. Still surprise each other. I think tonight proved that.”

I let out a loud ‘ha!’ that makes Wesley laugh. “You can still surprise me, all right. Between everything you just told me and that kiss earlier...”

“Yeah, about that kiss...” Wesley is still holding my hand against his chest. His heart hammers beneath my fingers. My own erratic pulse is causing the blood to whoosh in my ears again and flutter at my pulse points.

“Just one more question,” I whisper. Wesley groans, but tilts his head in a ‘go ahead’ gesture. “Why the ‘BFFs’ playlist on Thanksgiving? I thought something was happening between us and then you sent me that and it confused the hell out of me.”

“Ahh, I can see how that would come across as a mixed signal,” he says. “Like I said, you *are* my best friend. But after hearing you talk about the girls and seeing how close you all still are, it inspired me.” When I simply nod in understanding, he grips my hip with his free hand and tugs me closer. “Is that it? Can I kiss you now?”

Instead of answering, I free my hand from his grip so I can loop my arms around his shoulders and pull his mouth down to

mine. When I graze his neck with my fingers before threading them into his hair, he makes a low growling sound that reverberates through me.

After several minutes and, with a great deal of effort, I pull my lips away from Wesley's. "We should rejoin the party before someone comes looking for us." My voice shakes as I struggle to catch my breath. "Just one thing first: what if I told you I didn't need time to figure things out? That all I want for my birthday—all I've ever *truly* wanted—is you?"

The quick flash of Wesley's smile makes me breathless all over again. It's all the answer I need, but I'm relieved when he says, "I'd tell you I've always been yours, you just didn't know it."

Gleeful laughter spills out of me as I pepper Wesley's face with kisses. "Okay. We're doing this then. I just need one thing from you."

"Anything, Buttercup."

I really do love it when he calls me that. I hope he never stops. "Don't tell my mother yet. Let me savor having you to myself for a while. I want to bask in the glow of us *finally* being together before dealing with her gloating."

Wesley presses his smiling lips against mine. "As you wish."

~*~*~*~

Want to see more of these characters?

Stella's story: *Reunions & Ruses*, coming September 28th, 2023

[**Pre-order now**](#)

Hollie's story: *Do-Overs & Mixed Signals*, coming October 12th, 2023

[**Pre-order now**](#)

Louisa's story: *Bucket Lists & Midnight Kisses*, coming October 26th, 2023

[**Pre-order now**](#)

Related spin-off, featuring a side character from Stella's book: *Silver Bells & Serendipity*, coming November 9th, 2023

[**Pre-order now**](#)

***Each of these books can be read as a standalone**

Dear reader,

Thank you for taking the time to read *Matchmaking & Mixtapes*. If you enjoyed Evie and Wesley's story, I'd love to hear from you. You can find all my contact information on [my website](#).

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

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Mum, thank you for your neverending support and unconditional love. When I say I couldn't do this without you, I mean that. You're my favorite person on the planet, and I love you more than anything.

Thank you to my best friend, Jaimie Admans. The world is a brighter place because of you, Jaimie. Your constant love, support, and encouragement are part of the reason I was able to write an entire series about a group of best friends who love each other so fiercely. Our Scottish castle is calling and someday soon, we will answer.

Thank you to my wonderful beta readers: Kaley Stewart, Tammy Bramley, and Brenda St John Brown. You're my dream team, and I'm so grateful for your feedback, support, and most importantly, your friendship.

And finally, thank *you*, dear reader, for taking a chance on Evie and Wesley. This story was so much fun to write, and I hope it was just as fun to read. And thank you, as always, to the bookish community, especially my friends on bookstagram, who are so supportive, passionate, and hardworking. I look forward to opening Instagram every day because of all of you.

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.