



The
FANGIRL
and the

GRUMP



PIPER JAMES

The Fangirl and the Grump

FANGIRLS OF EVENING SHADE

BOOK ONE

PIPER JAMES

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 Created with Vellum

*For Heather Renee, whose love of all things Forks inspired
this one. Thanks for always being there when I need your
insight.*

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Chapter
One

Keegan

“**K**eegan, stop hanging your head out the window like a dog.”

“Ahh-wooo!” I howl, a laugh bursting out of me when the innocent pedestrian we’re passing jumps, both feet losing contact with the pavement as her hand flies to her chest.

“Jesus,” Madison huffs under her breath.

I turn toward her and blow a kiss, noting the tightness of her jaw and her white-knuckled grip on the steering wheel. I let out an exaggerated groan and flop back into my seat.

“Come on, Mads,” I plead. “We’re in *Evening Shade*. Can you at least try to have a little fun?”

She doesn’t respond, and I twist around to face the two in the back. Sloan is taking selfies with a stern, badass expression, and Pressley has her nose buried in the pamphlet she grabbed at the gas station where we stopped to fill up on the edge of town.

“The bus leaves at nine a.m. That should give us time to grab some coffees and pastries at Moonstone Mystic before we

board,” she says, the only one of my friends attempting to enjoy this trip.

They only came here for me. I know that. I’m the one who’s a certified member of the Cursed fan club...a bona fide, wolf-obsessed CursedCub. A Lucas and Aria-loving, moon howling, fan letter-writing, these-movies-defined-my-teen-years super fan. #TeamLAria for life!

And I’m also the only one of us who’s life just took a shit into a raging dumpster fire.

So, yeah, the girls planned this trip to cheer me up. Losing myself in the world of Lucas and Aria’s love story, seeing the landmarks that made Evening Shade famous was a surefire way to peel me off the couch and make me shower the dried, dribbled ice cream splotches caked in potato chip crumbs off my chest and arms.

I appreciate the effort, I just wish Madison and Sloan would get into the spirit. Be more like Pressley. At least she’s *trying*.

During the four-and-a-half hour drive from Seattle, Madison has worn a perpetual frown while Sloan has barely spoken two words. In her usual fashion, Pressley has kept up a steady stream of chatter in an attempt to ease the uncomfortable silence and keep my spirits high.

“Oh, look. It’s Wolfsbane Tavern,” I say as we slowly make our way through town. “That’s where Aria and Lucas met for the first time. She spilled soda all over his lap.”

“We know,” Madison sighs. “You’ve only made us watch the movies a million times.”

I grind my molars together and don’t respond. Her tone sucks, but it’s not surprising. Madison was never into Cursed,

even as a teenager, and she's always been openly disdainful of the fandom. But she *is* one of my best friends. She offered to let me move in when I needed a place to stay after, well, *after*, saving me from having to leave Seattle. She's always had my back, and she planned this trip despite her abhorrence for the franchise *and* all things having to do with the great outdoors.

She introduced me to Sloan and Pressley, both of whom she's known since high school. We all just kind of fell into our roles, and I like to think we compliment each other. Pressley is the exuberant one, Sloan is the kickass one, Madison brings culture and sophistication to the group, and me?

Well, I'm the funny one. At least, I like to think I am, anyway.

"God, could this place be any more of a cliché?" Sloan grumbles from her seat in the back.

"Shut up, Sloan. This is for Keegs," Madison says, her tone turning sympathetic with those last few words as she shoots me a small smile.

Did I mention Madison's mood swings are legendary?

I return her smile with a small nod of thanks, then straighten when I look back at the road.

"There," I say, pointing to the dirt drive on the left. "That's it!"

Madison slows the car and signals before turning onto the drive. A large cabin looms before us as the car rolls to a stop, and I have my seatbelt off and my door open before Madison can even shift the transmission into park.

"Lycan Lodge," I say as the others climb from the car. "Isn't it gorgeous?"

“It looks nice,” Pressley says as she steps up next to me.

The other two don’t respond as they heft our bags out of the trunk. I can’t wait another second to see the inside, so I tell them I’ll grab my stuff later and rush up the porch steps. Pulling out my phone, I find the code for the digital lock in my confirmation email and press the numbered buttons to disengage it. Swinging open the door, I step inside.

Rustic, with lots of raw wood trim and plaid furniture, it’s quaint perfection. There’s a decent-sized living room that connects to an eat-in kitchen. Wandering through, I run my fingers over the back of the overstuffed couch and breathe in the pungent pine scent of the place.

A hallway to the left leads to four bedrooms and a communal bathroom. After peeking through each door and finding each room to be charmingly decorated, I head back out into the main space. Sloan and Madison are in the living room, eyeing the place with critical expressions. Before I can ask them what they think, Pressley huffs through the door, rolling both our suitcases behind her.

“You didn’t have to do that,” I say, rushing over to relieve her of my bag. “Thank you.”

“This place is...” Madison says, her words trailing off like she can’t find a suitable descriptor.

“It’s great, right?” I cut in before she can say something negative. “Cozy and comfortable.”

“It’s just for two nights,” Sloan says, nudging Madison with her elbow. “I’m sure the *common* won’t rub off on you in one short weekend.”

“I like it,” Pressley says in her chipper voice, making the other two roll their eyes.

I take a deep breath and let it out slowly. Madison and Sloan thrive on being bitchy, but it's part of their charm. At least, that's what I tell myself. Pressley is the polar opposite of them, and I do love her eternal optimism, but sometimes her incessant people-pleasing gets on my nerves. I just wish she'd stand up to Mads and Sloan every once in a while. They treat her like an annoying little puppy who won't leave despite being kicked in the head repeatedly.

Okay, that was dark. Another cleansing breath.

No one is perfect, and these three are the only real friends I have. Madison opened her home to me. Sloan introduced me to—

Nope. Not going there. It still fucking hurts.

And Pressley can't help that she thrives on the approval of others. It's who she is. It's in her DNA. Taking that out of the equation, you're left with a sweet, thoughtful friend who's funnier than she thinks she is, smarter than anyone gives her credit for, and kinder than most adults would ever strive to be.

And they're *here*. For me. That's what matters.

"Let's get cleaned up and head to the tavern for drinks. I want to get fucked up tonight," I say, dancing around a little with that last part.

That seems to light a fire under them all, and they follow me down the hall with their bags so we can choose our rooms. We all agree to give Madison the main bedroom—she has the most luggage and needs the biggest closet, after all—and we split up into the leftover rooms as Sloan calls dibs on being the first to shower.

Four women sharing one bathroom is going to be tricky, but like Sloan said, it's only for two nights. I'm sure we'll

manage.

It takes a full two-and-a-half hours, but by the time the antique grandfather clock in the living room strikes eight, we're all dolled up and ready for a night on the town. At least, the others are dolled up in tube dresses and high heels with smoky eyes and red lips.

I, on the other hand, read the room...so to speak. This is a small, rustic town hidden in the forests of the Pacific Northwest. Sure, it's a tourist destination because of the Cursed movies, but that doesn't change who the locals are at their core.

I packed accordingly, so tonight I'm wearing a pair of tight jeans that hug my curves, black ankle boots, and a black tank top beneath a red and black plaid button-down. The others eye me when I meet them in the living room, but somehow manage to refrain from making any caustic remarks on my attire.

Yes, I look like Lumberjack Barbie...if Barbie was five-four with wide hips, thick thighs, a bubble butt, and lots of jiggly cleavage.

Sometimes, I feel out of place next to the rest of these willowy goddesses, but I don't like to dwell on it. I'm short and curvy, and most of the time, I own it. I fell down the rabbit hole after the whole messy debacle with he-who-shall-not-be-named, but now I'm finally feeling like myself again.

And I have a feeling that tonight, the girls will end up wishing they'd dressed like lumberjacks, themselves. I've looked at photos of Wolfsbane Tavern on its website, and it's no Seattle nightclub. Does it make me petty that I don't mention this to my friends?

Maybe.

But the entertainment of seeing them walk into this small town bar dressed to the nines and realizing their mistake is too promising to give up. Besides, they deserve it after all the bitching and moaning they've done since we got here.

Before I can speak, Pressley rushes past me down the hall to her room. When she emerges, she's wearing a jean jacket over her dress, and she's changed out of her heels into some patent leather combat-style boots. She looks hot, and I give her a nod and a smile for her choice. Madison whispers something to Sloan, who chuckles in response, and I feel my blood heat.

"Let's go," I say before I lose what little control I'm still holding onto.

We decide to walk so no one has to be a designated driver and the bar is only a half mile down the road. I get a little sick satisfaction watching Sloan and Madison try to navigate the rocky shoulder in their heels and quickly reprimand myself for being bitchy. Pleasure in the pain of others is *their* thing, not mine.

By the time we get to the bar, I'm more than ready for something sweet, fruity, and filled with alcohol. Pushing ahead of the others, I lead the way to the bar where a fine hunk of man meat gives me a smile as he sets a cocktail napkin in front of me.

"What's your poison?" he asks as my friends crowd around me.

"I'll have a tequila sunrise," I say, "and two shots of Patron."

The hunky bartender raises his brows and laughs. "Go big or go home, huh?"

“I need it,” I say with a shrug.

“I’ll have a cosmo,” Madison says, pushing up to the bar beside me.

She hunches her shoulders a bit to make her cleavage pop and licks her lips seductively, and the bartender earns my everlasting respect by simply nodding and moving his gaze from her face to Pressley’s.

“What about you, beautiful?”

Pressley lets out a nervous giggle before ordering her usual—a strawberry daiquiri—and Sloan asks for a whiskey-soda. We turn to survey the rest of the place while we wait for our drinks. Much like the online photos, it’s rustic and quaint with wooden dining tables on one side and smaller cocktail tables closer to the bar. It’s not overly crowded, but there are enough people filling the tables to make the place lively and energetic. A guy in ripped jeans and a t-shirt is setting up a guitar on the small stage in the corner, promising a night of live music for our entertainment.

“One tequila sunrise and two shots.”

I spin around and eye the drinks with a grin before meeting the bartender’s eyes. “Thanks, uh, what’s your name?”

“Bram,” he says with a smile.

“Thanks, Bram,” I say, digging through the pocket wallet attached to my phone case for my credit card.

“It’s on me,” Madison says, handing over her own card with a sultry smile. “Why don’t you start a tab for us, handsome?”

Bram nods and turns to put her card by the register before placing a martini glass in front of her. She makes a show of

enjoying her first sip, but his attention has already reverted to Pressley as a second mixologist hands him a tall daiquiri topped with a paper umbrella.

“One strawberry daiquiri for the lady,” he says, shooting Pressley a wink.

She blushes prettily, and I bump my hip against hers. “Want one of these?”

She looks at the two shot glasses I motion toward with a scrunched nose and narrowed eyes. “No way. That’s all you.”

Shrugging, I pick up a shot and toss it back. Ignoring the gag reflex the alcohol triggers, I chug the second one before biting the lime Bram offers me on a napkin. The citrus cuts the burn, and I pick up my cocktail, lift it toward him in thanks, and hook my arm through Pressley’s before dragging her toward an empty table.

Sloan and Madison follow, and the latter wipes the chair down with her cocktail napkin before sitting. Sloan leans back and watches the condensation drip down her glass with a frown. Pressley drinks her daiquiri while shooting covert looks at Bram the bartender. And Madison makes snide comments about every local and obvious tourist in the place while I drain my drink in one long pull on the straw.

Fun, right? Yeah. Sure.

If I’m going to survive this night without exploding, I’m going to need another drink. Maybe two. Or three.

Maybe then, I’ll forget what a shit show my life has become.

Chapter
Two

Trace

I find an empty stool at the bar and slide onto it, a tired sigh blowing through my lips. The tourists are always out in full-force on Friday nights, and tonight is no exception. I hate it, what this town has become, even though I know the tourism keeps Evening Shade's economy afloat as well as lining my own pockets.

It's not real. None of it. And I really miss the life I had before this town went werewolf crazy.

"Trace. Good to see you, man. What are you having?"

"Hey, Bram," I say, reaching across the bar to pound fists with the one real friend I have left in this town. "I'll take a bottle of the pale ale."

Bram nods and turns to pull a bottle from the small ice chest built into the shelf behind him. Twisting off the top, he sets it in front of me before holding up a finger to signal he'll be right back. He moves down to help a pretty blonde who blushes as she orders a strawberry daiquiri, and I notice he's turning on the charm with her.

He was the same in high school, his classic, jock-like good looks and charisma doing him all kinds of favors when it came to hooking up with girls. I was always more reserved—almost introverted—and we were drawn to each other like opposite ends of a magnet in tenth grade. We’ve been tight ever since, especially once our other friends slowly trickled out of town to make new homes in other parts of the country.

Small town life isn’t for everyone, I guess.

“She’s cute,” I say with a smirk after Bram hands her the drink and moves back toward me, “for a CursedCub, anyway.”

My smirk falls into a frown with the moniker. Ever since those damn movies hit the big screen, Evening Shade has been inundated with fans clamoring to see the place, imagining hot guys shifting into wolves and finding soulmates.

Blech. So cheesy. And ridiculous.

“Nah,” Bram says. “She’s not a Cub. Her friend is, though, and this is a post-break-up trip to cheer the woman up.”

“You got all of that out of her that quickly?” I ask, and Bram shoots me a wink.

“I’m a bartender. Trade secrets and all.” Then he sobers. “What’s wrong with you, tonight? You seem crankier than usual, which is saying a lot.”

“Fuck you,” I say, but there’s no bite in the words. “I got stopped outside by a gaggle of twenty-somethings. They insisted I take selfies with them. That’s the third time this week.”

A laugh barks out of him before he can stop it, and he tries—and fails—to curb his amusement at my expense.

“Maybe you should shave the beard. Then you won’t look so much like *Wolf Daddy*.”

“Don’t.”

“What?” he asks with a laugh. “You know it’s true.”

It is true. With dark hair sprinkled with a few silvers at the temples and a full beard, I bear a strong resemblance to the hero’s father in the Cursed movies. The character’s female fans dubbed him “Wolf Daddy,” and the term gets yelled at me in random public places more often than I’d like.

I’d prefer *never*.

I’m thirty-nine years old, for Christ’s sake. All these twenty-something women who were teenagers when the movie came out should not be hitting on me and calling me anything that includes the term “daddy.”

Another woman edges up to the bar next to me, and Bram turns his attention to her with a smile that doesn’t quite reach his eyes. I let my gaze roam over her as she orders a cosmo and a whiskey-soda. She’s beautiful in the classical sense with long, dark hair, perky tits, and a slender build squeezed into a scrap of material posing as a dress. Not my type, but I can see the appeal.

That is, until she speaks.

“Please make sure the glasses are clean. This bar is disgusting.”

Bram just continues to smile, letting the insult roll off his back. My blood boils as I open my mouth to come to his defense, but a shout from a few tables away cuts off whatever I was going to say.

“Hurry up, Mads! I want to make a toast!”

I look toward the voice and the first thing I notice is the eyes. They're bright blue with long, curling lashes. A pert little nose and pouty lips are set between full, vibrant cheeks. She stands to wave her friend over, and I see she's a tiny little thing, not even five and a half feet.

But the rest of her...*Jesus*. Those tight jeans don't hide a thing, and her curves are making my mouth water. I look back up at her face and cringe inwardly. She's *young*. Maybe mid-twenties.

And probably a fucking CursedCub.

Suddenly, her eyes snap to mine and widen.

Fuck me.

"Oh, my God, it's Joseph Lumin!" she shouts, the slurred words making me grit my teeth and look away. "Wolf Daddy! Ahh-ahh-ahh-wooo!"

I spit out a curse before spinning back around and hunching over the bar. Every muscle in my body clenches as several other patrons howl in response, the sound grating on my eardrums and making my blood boil. Looking up at Bram from beneath my furrowed brow, I shake my head.

"I'm out of here."

"Sorry, man," he says, for once, not laughing at my frustration. "The beer's on me."

"Thanks," I say, then I slide off the stool.

Keeping my gaze straight ahead so as not to accidentally make eye contact with anyone, I stride toward the exit and slam through the door. The cool night air brushes against my skin and fills my lungs as I take a deep breath. It helps to

alleviate some of my irritation, and I take a moment to exhale completely before taking another.

It's fine. I'm fine. Everything is fine.

No reason to be angry.

No need to punch or break something.

They're just a bunch of superfans who love what they love.

And they're my bread and butter. As the owner of the only inn in Evening Shade as well as several rental properties, the success of those movies and the mania it resulted in have made me a wealthy man. I shouldn't be complaining. I *know* that.

But the "Wolf Daddy" shit needs to *stop*.

I start walking before anyone can follow me out and ask for a picture. Crossing the street, I head down a block until I reach home.

The Quarter Moon Inn, a retro, single-story motel that used to be called The Evening Shade Motel, has been fully renovated, the rooms now sporting high-end carpeting, comfortable beds, and flat screen televisions. The bathrooms have all been updated and each room sports a microwave, a coffee maker, and a mini-fridge. After a few successful years that brought the place back into the black, we built five tiny houses on the property out back featuring a living room-kitchen combo and king-sized loft beds. Those are fully booked every weekend, and the inn hits capacity most times, too.

As I walk into the building, I wave at my night manager before heading up the stairs to the only second-level addition to the property—my personal apartment. It's a small loft and sparse, but it's all I really need.

Unlocking the door and letting myself inside, I turn on the light and flip the deadbolt. Stripping out of my shirt, I walk into the bathroom to use the toilet and wash my hands and face. I showered before I went out tonight, and as I was only at the tavern for a few minutes, I decide to just go to bed and shower again in the morning.

Unfastening my jeans, I let them drop to the bathroom floor. Flicking off that light as well as the one in the main area, I climb into bed and flop onto my back. Bending an arm, I push it beneath my head while my other hand rests on my chest, my fingertips drumming out a steady beat.

This isn't how I imagined my life would turn out. I'm almost forty, alone, and most days, grumpy as fuck. And it's all because of those God damn movies.

I never wanted to leave Evening Shade. I wasn't one of those teenagers that dreamed of striking out and seeing the world. I just wanted to live out my days in peace in the town where I grew up. Maybe get married and raise a family in the tightknit community we'd always been.

Then the mayor and the town council gave the producers permission to film Curse here, as well as the sequels, Phase and Wane. They'd hoped to put our little town on the map and maybe bolster our declining economy with some increased tourism.

I'm sure they had no idea the Pandora's box they opened when they signed that deal. Werewolf mania ensued, and within weeks of the first movie's release, Evening Shade was overrun with fans who had no concern for privacy laws or personal space. They tramped over the yards of private citizens to take pictures, littered all over our forests, and polluted our serenity with their incessant howling.

When the town council bought the bus and trolley car for guided tours, everything calmed down a bit, but things haven't been the same and never will be again.

I could leave. I could sell the properties I own, lining my already-deep pockets, and take off for parts unknown. I could start a new life where no one would associate me with that godforsaken Joseph Lumin and *never* get howled at again.

I close my eyes and sigh.

No, I can't do that.

My sister needs me, whether she'll admit it, or not. She's twenty-seven and doing well on her own. I can admit that, but I've been taking care of her for so long, it's become an integral part of who I am. Plus, she's the only family I have left.

No, I won't leave Evening Shade unless she does. Which will *never* happen. She loves this place, and all the chaos has only made her love it more.

I'm stuck.

And I'm just going to have to deal with it. Indefinitely.

Chapter
Three

Keegan

My mouth tastes like an alien took a piss in it.

Wait...what?

Oh, God. I'm dying. This is it. The aneurism is real.

Goodbye, world. Nice knowing you.

"Fuck," I mutter, pressing my palms to the sides of my skull to keep it from exploding.

Every beat of my heart—apparently, I'm not dead yet—sends pain ricocheting through my head, making me pray to the sleep gods, asking them to send me back under until the agony is gone.

As I lay here breathing through the pain, I slowly become cognizant of the rest of my body and my surroundings. I'm in a bed, and through one cracked-open eye, I see the room I picked at Lycan Lodge with blurred vision. Good. I'm in familiar territory, not some rando's bedroom I met at the bar last night. I'm also on top of the covers and fully clothed, boots included.

How did I even get here?

Taking a long, deep breath, I hold it in while pushing myself up into a seated position. A groan slips through my lips as fresh pain blooms in my head, but I just breathe through it and kick the shoes off my feet.

Gritting my teeth, I stand and stumble out to the hall and into the bathroom. Thankfully, it's unoccupied, because *fuck*, I have to pee. Once my bladder is empty, I flush and wash my hands before sticking my face in the basin and drinking straight from the tap.

Once my thirst is sated, I stare at my sallow complexion in the mirror and try to remember what happened last night. I can recall leaving here and walking to Wolfsbane Tavern. There was tequila. Lots and lots of tequila. The girls were driving me crazy with constant bickering and sniping, so I just kept drinking. I vaguely remember the cute bartender sending over a pitcher of margies, but I'm not sure how much of it I drank. I was already shitfaced by that point.

I'm fairly positive there was some howling at the moon as we stumbled through the dark on our way back to the house. Was it me? Or one of the others?

Yeah. It was definitely me.

God, my head hurts.

That's it. Never again. I am very firmly *on* the wagon, and that's where I'll be staying.

I make my way into the kitchen where Pressley sits, looking the picture of perfection in her white sundress with her long blonde hair in a smooth high ponytail. I snarl at her on principal, alone, and she chuckles.

"Hair of the dog? I have the stuff out for mimosas," she says as I plop into the chair across from her.

“Yes. Please.”

Oh, well. The wagon will still be here tomorrow. I can hop back on it then.

The mix of crisp champagne and tart orange juice bursts on my tongue, making me feel a little less like a rotting zombie. I chug it down a little faster than I should, then push myself to my feet while mumbling the word “shower.”

Once I’m clean and wearing fresh clothes, I walk back out into the kitchen with a towel wrapped around my still-damp hair. Pressley is still there, and still alone, which means the other two are still asleep. The mimosa makings are gone, and this time she has her hands wrapped around a steaming mug.

“The coffee pods are in the drawer beneath the machine, and I left a bottle of aspirin for you there next to it.”

“Bless you, beautiful,” I say. “You’re a saint.”

Pressley’s tinkling laughter follows me as I shuffle toward the coffee machine and start a cup. Grabbing the aspirin, I pop two in my mouth before grabbing what I hope is a clean glass and filling it at the sink. Swallowing the pills, I chug down the rest of the glass before setting it aside and pulling open the fridge. Taking out the vanilla creamer, I doctor up my coffee and take it to the table.

Once I’ve had a couple of sips, I meet Pressley’s eyes. “So, last night was crazy, huh?”

She smiles. “You were having fun. That’s what matters. This trip is all about you.”

I cock my head. “I vaguely recall *you* having fun, too. There were a lot of flirty looks tossed back and forth between you and a certain hottie behind the bar.”

“You really *were* drunk,” she scoffs, but there’s a fresh bloom of color in her cheeks.

“Okay. Whatever you say,” I sing-song, then flinch as pain streaks through my skull.

“Do you remember howling at that guy at the bar?”

“What? No. What did I do?”

“You stood up and shouted that you found Joseph Lumin before calling him *Wolf Daddy* and howling. Very loudly.”

“Seriously?” I ask with a laugh. “Did he even look like him?”

“Actually? Yes. He really did. But it was obvious he didn’t appreciate the comparison. Or the howling. He got all pissy and stomped out of the bar.”

Before I can respond, there’s a loud groan as Madison shuffles into the room. Sloan wanders in behind her, and they both move toward the coffee maker.

“This place is so fucking loud at night,” Madison grumbles. “I barely slept.”

“I didn’t hear anything,” I say. “Was there a lot of traffic on the road or something?”

“Fucking crickets and frogs,” Sloan clarifies.

“There was an owl hooting right outside my window all night,” Madison adds in a sour voice.

“I slept okay,” Pressley says.

“Well, fucking good for you,” Madison snaps.

God, Madison is even bitchier than usual. She’s never been a morning person, but this is extreme, even for her. Hopefully, she’ll tone down the nastiness once she has some coffee in her.

“What are we supposed to do today?” she asks as she slides into the chair next to mine. “I need to find a store to buy some disinfectant spray. I definitely felt bedbugs crawling on me last night.”

“We can stop on our way to the tour bus,” Pressley offers, but Sloan is already talking over her.

“Madison, there are no bedbugs. And even if there were, you wouldn’t feel them crawling on you. You’d just wake up to bite marks on your ass.”

Like Sloan didn’t even speak, Madison stares at Pressley in horror. “Tour bus?”

“That’s why we’re here, Mads,” I say gently, hoping to diffuse the situation. “To take the tours and explore the locations of our favorite movies?”

Madison levels a glare at me over the rim of her mug. “*Your* favorite movies, you mean. I’ve always thought they’re ridiculously corny.”

I know that. But, Jesus, couldn’t she even pretend? For my sake?

“Then why did you even come?” Sloan snaps as she takes the last empty chair at the table.

“I came to support my *friend* who lost her job *and* her boyfriend on the same day.”

I flinch at the blatant and crass reminder. Carter Hawthorne was my boyfriend for three years. In the beginning, things were great. He was affectionate and loving. He wanted to take care of me, and even convinced his brother, Parker, to hire me as an executive assistant at their family’s PR firm. The job was entry level with the opportunity to eventually move up the ranks.

I should've known something was off when I was passed over every time there was an opening to help come up with pitches for new clients, but Carter and Parker always assured me I just wasn't quite ready yet. That I'd get to help with the next one.

I pretended like it didn't hurt. I also pretended everything was fine when I could feel Carter drifting away from me.

Coming home late with no call, text, or explanation. When we stopped having sex, I told myself he was tired from all the long hours. When he quit kissing me goodbye, I decided perfunctory kisses were stupid, anyway.

The last straw was when he stayed out all night and came home smelling like stale booze and weed. I demanded he tell me where he'd been all night, and he told me to fuck off.

I waited for hours for him to sleep it off so we could talk it out, but when he finally emerged from the bedroom, nothing had changed. He had this dead look in his gray eyes I'll never forget.

He told me it was over and had been for a long time. That he had never really been physically attracted to me, and he'd settled because he thought having a steady relationship would look good to the firm's clients. He was able to fake it, for a while, but grew to despise my fat ass and chunky thighs. And now that he's a full partner and going places in the world, he has better options.

Oh, and by the way, I cleaned out your desk at the office and threw everything away. Your services are no longer needed, in any capacity.

His tired voice still rings in my ears, the hurtful words making my eyes sting.

Pushing all of it aside, I clear my throat and refocus on the conversation around me. Madison must've made some kind of smartass remark, because Sloan is rolling her eyes and Pressley looks like she's about to cry.

As I watch them, I realize something. Even though the friendship between us has always been all snark and sass and prickly crabgrass, things have never been *this* contentious. Sure we have strong opinions and even stronger disagreements. Some might even call us frenemies. But at the very core, we love each other. We take care of each other.

Something strange is going on here. Something under the surface I'm not aware of. There has to be.

Madison and Sloan are acting out with extreme bitchiness, especially toward each other. And Pressley looks like she might throw up at any given moment. And though they planned this whole trip to cheer me up, it seems like Pressley is the only one actually doing the cheering. The other two seem resentful of even being here.

Madison grumbles as she stands, announcing that she's headed into the shower. The tense moment ends, and Pressley starts chattering about the bus tour and all the stops we'll hit today. Sloan sits in silence, sipping her coffee before getting up without a word and leaving the room.

"Pressley," I say cutting off her stream of words, "what's going on with them?"

"What do you mean?"

"Don't you think they seem a little off?" I ask, sure she's noticed it.

"Um, I don't know. Maybe," she says, obviously nervous, then pushes out of her chair. "I'm going to go finish getting

ready. We need to leave in an hour to catch the tour bus, forty-five minutes if we're going to stop for bug spray."

Then she's gone, and I'm left feeling a bit bereft and alone. If something is going on between the three of them, why won't they let me in?

I blow out a sigh. I'm sure they'll tell me, eventually. Maybe they're just being good friends, keeping their own problems at bay so they can focus on me and mine.

That could be it, right?

Yeah.

Definitely.

Chapter
Four

Trace

The bell over the door jingles as I step into Moonstone Mystic. Willow looks up, and her ready smile widens when she sees it's me.

“Good morning, Big Brother,” she says as I step up to the counter. “Your usual plain bean water with nothing added to make it pleasing to the taste buds?”

“Good morning, Willow,” I grunt, ignoring her jab at my preference of plain, black, drip coffee.

“I'm just saying,” she goes on like I actually responded to her joke, “why order regular coffee you could brew at home when there are such delicious and magnificent options to delight your senses?”

“You're certainly chipper this morning,” I murmur as she turns to pour some black gold from the pot into a disposable paper cup.

“And you're grumpier than usual,” she says as she turns back to face me with critical eyes. “My witchy senses are telling me something's off this morning. What happened?”

“You don’t have any witchy senses,” I grumble, my eyes scanning the rest of the shop as I take a sip of my drink.

While one half of Moonstone Mystic looks like a hipster java shop, the other half is filled with racks and shelves of crystals, divining rods, incense sticks, and other woo-woo items I don’t have the first clue what they are. Willow presents herself as some kind of spiritual creature to the tourists, but it’s all smoke and mirrors meant to help her turn a larger profit.

“Watch your words, Brother. I might put a hex on you,” she replies, wiggling her fingers in my direction. When I roll my eyes, she huffs. “Jesus, you really are in a bad mood today. What happened?”

“Nothing,” I say, my jaw tightening with anger.

“Are you constipated? I have some Senna tea that’ll clean you right out.”

“Christ, Willow,” I hiss, my eyes darting over to the couple sitting at a nearby table sipping lattes. “I’m not constipated.”

“Then tell me what’s wrong.”

I huff out a long breath and lean over the counter so I can speak low enough that only she’ll hear the words. “It’s the weekend madness. I keep getting stopped for pictures, and last night at the tavern, a drunk girl howled at me after shouting that fucking nickname.”

Her chin quivers as she tries to hold back a grin, and I straighten with a sigh. I knew I’d get exactly zero sympathy from her. Holding up a palm in the universal signal for “stop,” I turn to go without another word.

“Oh, come on, Trace,” she calls out to my retreating back. “There are worse things than being likened to a sexy alpha wolf daddy.”

I stop, my back going ramrod straight with those last two words. As her tinkling laughter follows, I heave a sigh and pull the door open, stalking out without even looking back at her. I love my sister more than anything on this planet, but sometimes, I want to throttle the shit out of her.

When I make it back to the inn after waiting for that infernal tour bus to pass, I blow out a breath of relief and walk into the main office. Moving behind the large desk to sit, I sip my coffee before setting it down and waking up the computer. Opening my bookkeeping software, I'm pleased to see the profits from the inn and my rental properties are on a trajectory to be higher than last month.

Pulling up the booking server I use, I go over the reservations. The inn is booked to capacity every weekend for the next seven weeks, then every single day the following week and the week after that. My lips tighten into a thin line, my pleasure tinged with irritation.

The reason we're booked solid for those two weeks is because the town is holding a Cursed convention-slash-reunion celebration. This place is going to be crawling with even more tourists than usual.

Great.

Refocusing, I check my other rental properties. Lycan Lodge is completely wide open after the current renters leave tomorrow, but I don't anticipate that lasting long. My smaller properties have reservations booked for every weekend up until the convention.

It's going to be a good month.

Leaning back in my chair, I drain the rest of my coffee before looking at the framed photo hanging on the wall to my

left. My ten-year-old self stares back at me with a big, snaggle-toothed grin. Next to me in the photo is my grandfather.

God, I miss him.

He raised my sister and me. Willow was only three-and-a-half when our parents took off for a *quick getaway* and never came back. I was only sixteen, so Grandpa took over and loved us like a parent is *supposed* to love his children. A couple of years later, we found out our mother and father died in an accident after driving away from a bar where they'd spent all day drinking and gambling their welfare checks away in Las Vegas.

Willow was far better off being raised by Grandpa. She doesn't remember our parents, at all, but I do. I remember the shouted slurs and ringing slaps. I know Grandpa loved his daughter, but when she married my dad, she turned into someone Grandpa didn't recognize. And when she took off with my father, he stepped in and made sure Willow and I had a good life.

I miss him desperately. He died a few years ago, leaving me the inn, the rentals, and our family home in his will. He also owned the building that houses Moonstone Mystic, and he left only that to Willow so she could live out her dream as an independent business owner without the weight of other investments on her shoulders. He knew I'd never leave her or let her want for anything. He trusted me to carry on the family legacy.

Which is, in addition to not wanting to leave Willow, the reason I can never leave Evening Shade. I've had a few investors sniffing around, feeling me out to see if I'd be willing to sell.

And if I was, I would stand to make a fortune. The offers I've received are fucking outrageous.

I've seen the books from before the movie-mania and before this place became The Quarter Moon Inn. The motel was barely staying afloat. Grandpa was smart, leaning into the wolf theme when tourism picked up. He used his savings to buy a few properties before the market got out of control, and they quickly started paying off.

Grandpa made it very clear to me that he did all of it for Willow and me, and for the future generations of Bardins. His dream was that I pass his properties to my kids someday, the way he did for me.

I close my eyes and tilt my head back as I take a deep breath. I know I'm letting him down in that respect.

I'm thirty-nine, single, and have exactly zero intentions of ever getting married and starting a family. My parents' desertion left me with deep-rooted trust issues. If the two people who are supposed to love me the most can just drive away and never look back, how can I expect anyone else to stick around?

Plus, I'm not exactly approachable or, for that matter, *likable*. I know this about myself, and I fully admit it. I'm set in my ways, cranky most of the time, and overwhelmingly introverted. It would take a strong-willed woman to crack my shell, and she'd have to be some kind of miracle worker to earn my trust completely enough for me to be willing to make a commitment.

No, the properties won't be going to my own offspring. When Willow settles down and starts a family, I'll either sign them over to her or keep them, leaving them to *her* kids in my estate. That's the only way to keep Grandpa's dream alive.

And, fuck, I think that coffee gave me heartburn. Why else would my chest suddenly ache like this?

Pulling open the middle desk drawer, I pull out the roll of antacids I keep stashed there and pop two of the chalky tablets into my mouth. As I chew, I look back over at the photo.

Grandpa always shot down my insistence that I'd never get married. He was sure the right woman would come along eventually and would, in his words, knock my pecker off.

A chuckle bursts out of me as I remember the first time he said that. My horrified expression made him cackle with glee as he slapped a hand against his knee.

Just you wait, son. One day you'll meet Ms. Right, and you'll never know what hit ya. It was that way with your grandma and me. Knocked my pecker right off, that one. Married her up as soon as I could and never regretted it for a second.

I shake my head and smile at the memory, and the burning in my chest eases.

I knew it was the coffee. Those antacids certainly did the trick.

Chapter
Five

Keegan

Despite the grouchy company, I had so much fun on the tour. We got to see all the buildings featured in the movies, and though we couldn't actually go inside, I got pictures in front of all of them. We got off the bus twice for hikes into the woods—one to find the infamous cemetery location and once to hike the trail Lucas ran the first time he shifted into a wolf. It ended at a gorgeous lake, and most of us took our shoes and socks off to wade into the cool water.

And by most of us, I mean everyone but Madison.

Even Sloan participated, even though she complained the whole time about the squishy mud on the lake's floor.

I even saw the infamous "Wolf Daddy" from the tavern after we loaded onto the bus this morning. Pressley pointed him out with a laugh, noting how he was walking all stiff and angry just like Joseph Lumin did in the movie when he found out Lucas was spending time with a human.

I have to admit, he really does look like the actor who played Joseph, from the stocky, muscular build to the dark hair

and beard. Some of the women on the tour bus even gasped and took pictures of him through the windows.

God, that must be annoying for him. Even I can see that. I feel kind of bad for calling him out last night, even if I don't really remember it.

We're all exhausted from the hiking today, so we decide to stay in, order pizzas, and watch all three movies back to back.

Well, I suggest it, Pressley seconds the motion, and the other two grudgingly agree. But whatever.

I'm sandwiched between Pressley and Sloan on the couch, and Madison is in the overstuffed chair, using its ottoman as a table. The pizza is hot and cheesy, and we're washing it down with canned spiked seltzers.

About halfway through *Curse*, we pause the movie to clean up the pizza boxes, paper plates, and grease-stained napkins. Pressley runs to the bathroom, and Madison comes out of the kitchen with a bottle of vodka.

"We should make this a little more interesting," she says. "Every time Lucas talks about Aria being his fated mate, or Aria mentions how stupid she must be for ignoring the danger of his true nature, we take a shot."

"I'm in," Sloan says.

"Count me out," I say. "I'm still recovering from last night."

"Oh, come on, Keegs. Don't be such a party pooper," Madison whines, jiggling the bottle in my direction. "It'll be fun. I promise."

"What'll be fun?" Pressley asks as she walks back into the living room. After Madison explains her drinking game idea,

Pressley looks at me. “Are you good with it?”

I shrug and sigh. Giving in is better than fighting. I just don’t have the energy. “Why not? I’m in.”

“Yay,” Madison says, setting the bottle and four shot glasses she must’ve procured from the kitchen on the coffee table.

Instead of retaking her seat in the chair, she plops down onto the floor in a very un-Madison-like move, criss-crossing her legs before screwing the top off of the bottle and filling each glass. Pressley grabs the remote and restarts the movie, and within two minutes, we’re drinking.

Every time Lucas or Aria mention the clichés Madison outlined, she cheers and yells at us to drink. And every time, my mood plummets a little further. This is not fun. At all.

By the time we start the third movie, *Wane*, we’re all pretty tipsy. We’ve had at least seven shots each over the course of three or so hours, and I can’t stomach another. The booze and grease from the pizza is *not* mixing well in my stomach.

“Okay, I think I’m done with the game,” I say when Pressley pauses the movie to use the bathroom again.

That girl has a bladder the size of a chickpea, I swear.

“Boo!” Madison shouts obnoxiously. “You suck.”

“Stop harassing her, Madison. If she doesn’t want to play, she doesn’t want to play. Get over it,” Sloan snaps. “It’s a stupid game, anyway.”

“Don’t be such a bitch, Sloan,” Madison sneers. “At least I’m trying to have a *little* fun on this lame ass vacation.”

I rear back as if she's physically slapped me. I mean, it's no surprise she hasn't been having fun, but at least she's tried to pretend up until this point, insisting she's here for me and my happiness is all that matters.

"What's going on?" Pressley asks when she walks back in and notices the tension.

"Your girl Madison is being an asshole," Sloan murmurs, then throws back another shot before adding, "*Shocker.*"

"Fuck you, Sloan," Madison growls, pushing herself clumsily to her feet.

"Come on, guys," I start, but Sloan cuts me off, addressing Madison's remark.

"No, thanks, Skank. I don't want Carter's sloppy seconds."

Pressley gasps, then silence.

A silence so thick and deadly, it's sucked all the oxygen from the room.

"Wh-what?" I stutter, my eyes darting between the three of them.

"Keegan," Pressley whispers, her eyes filling with tears that quickly spill over.

I watch one trail down her cheek before spinning to face Madison while throwing up a hand to point at Sloan. "What the fuck is she talking about?"

"Tell her Mads," Sloan says with a derisive, drunken laugh. "Tell her all the dirty things you've been doing with Carter Hawthorne. For *months.*"

My heart pounds against my ribs as I watch Madison shoot a death glare in Sloan's direction. My breaths are coming

faster and faster, the fight for oxygen real as the walls close in on me.

“Madison?” I huff out.

She won’t even look at me. She continues to snarl at Sloan like *she’s* the one in the wrong, here. I look over at Sloan, who’s staring right back at Madison with a sadistic smile, then at Pressley, who’s shoulders are shaking as she cries in earnest.

“You both knew?” I ask when I finally find my voice again.

“Madison brags about it all the time. How she keeps him satisfied now that he no longer wants to fuck you,” Sloan says cruelly.

I’ve talked to them—my *friends*—many times about my fears and insecurities. That Carter was losing interest in me. That we never had sex anymore, and I feared it was all my fault. Then when he dumped me, I cried on Madison’s mother fucking shoulder about how right I was the whole time.

“Sloan. Stop,” Pressley chokes out.

“Why should I?” Sloan shouts back. “Madison dragged us on this idiotic mission to cheer up Keegan when she’s been fucking her man behind her back for months.”

“You both knew,” I repeat, this time a statement of fact instead of a question.

“Keegan,” Pressley begs, but I hold up a hand to cut her off.

“Get out.”

“Keegan, please,” she tries again.

“Get out!” I scream, stabbing a finger toward the door. “Get your shit and get the fuck out of here. Now.”

Sloan sighs and stands, heading back to her bedroom without a word. Madison stalks out next, still without a single glance in my direction. Pressley hovers, but I give her my back. After several tense beats, she snuffles before I hear her footsteps retreat.

Left alone while they pack, I move on numb feet to the couch and perch on the edge. Staring down at a puddle of spilled vodka on the coffee table, I try to make sense of my chaotic thoughts.

Madison has been sleeping with Carter for months, since long before we broke up. When? Where? In the bed we shared? In *her* bed at the apartment I now share with her?

It doesn't matter. What matters is that she did it and is obviously not even the slightest bit remorseful. She's pissed at Sloan for ratting her out, but that's the only emotion she showed during that whole scene.

And Sloan? She didn't give two fucks about how badly the news would hurt me. She just wanted to hurt Madison, and I was collateral damage. Unimportant. Insignificant.

She and Pressley knew what was going on the whole time, and they never said a word to me. They protected Madison. Their reasons for doing so don't matter.

They betrayed me almost as badly as *she* did. I'm through with them. All of them.

I'm not sure how much time passes before they file out of the hallway. I refuse to look up or acknowledge them in any way as they walk past. Madison and Sloan don't say a word as they drag their suitcases through the front door.

Pressley stops, and when I don't look up, she whispers, "I'm so sorry, Keegan," before she, too, walks out, closing the door softly behind her.

I listen as doors slam and an engine starts. Tires squeal as it roars away, then I'm left in complete, solitary silence. My shoulders hunch and shake as the tears start. Within seconds, I'm sobbing. I let myself feel all the heartbreak and betrayal for about five minutes, then I force myself to calm.

What I had with Carter is over and has been for a long time. I refuse to shed another tear over that asshole. Madison and Sloan put on a show of friendship, but I think I knew deep down it was never real or true. Madison let me move in with her out of pity and maybe a little guilt, not because she loves me and wanted me there. Sloan has always held a wall between us, keeping her friendship with all of us superficial, at best. Like she had no one better to hang out with, so we'd do.

Pressley is the ultimate people-pleaser, fearful of anyone being upset or angry with her for any reason. If she's regretting her decision to keep Madison's secret now, it's because she hates that I'm angry, not because she shouldn't have kept it to begin with.

"Fuck them," I mutter, grabbing a leftover napkin from the table to blow the snot from my nose. "I don't need them. Any of them."

But what am I going to do now? I don't have anywhere to go. I moved in with Madison because I couldn't afford a place in Seattle on my own, even before I got fired. And I can't go back there for obvious reasons.

No home. No job. No friends. No family.

What the fuck am I going to do?

Lifting my gaze, I look around the room. The cozy accoutrements ease my troubled heart and mind, giving me an idea. Pulling my phone from my pocket, I pull up my banking app and check my account. I have some savings. Not a lot, but maybe *enough*.

Exiting out of the app, I search up the rental property site that lists Lycan Lodge and click on the listing. As I tap the calendar icon, my heart starts racing when I see the house is available for the next several weeks. Checking the weekly rates, I do a little quick math in my head.

My teeth tug at my lower lip as I weigh the pros and cons. I can afford to rent this place for eight weeks and stay in Evening Shade for the rest of the summer. I could be in a place I love, heal from my wounds, and come up with a solid plan for when it's time to get back to real life.

But if I do this, I won't have much money left when my stay is over. I'll definitely have to leave Seattle. Start over somewhere new.

Which means, this might be my last chance to do something crazy like this.

Tightening my jaw, I take a deep breath. This feels right. I need it. To be anonymous and alone in this charming little town for a while until I get my head on straight.

Making the decision, I tap the screen and fill out the form to secure the rental. Looking at the dates again, I realize I'll still be here when the Cursed convention and cast reunion comes to town at the end of August.

That little bonus almost puts a smile on my face. Almost.

When I finish typing in my payment information and hit submit, I breathe a sigh of relief. This is the right decision for

me. I know it is.

And the rest? Well, I'll figure it all out later.

Chapter

Six

Trace

As I make my usual Sunday afternoon rounds, I'm pleased to find each of my rental properties in good shape. The cleaning service I use will be out to each location in the morning, as they do every time guests check out, but I like to inspect each property to make sure there's no damage that needs to be addressed.

As I pull into the drive at Lycan Lodge and park, I grab my phone and recheck its status. Sure enough, the reservation extension remains. The four guests staying here were supposed to check out and leave this morning, but one of them, Keegan Carpenter, extended her stay...for *eight* weeks.

When I first saw the reservation request, I stared at it for several minutes, expecting it to be some kind of error that needed to be corrected. I mean, who would rent a house in Evening Shade for two months? And why?

I finally decided her reasons are really none of my business and to take it as a win. Not only will I be earning money from her stay, I'll also be *saving* money. I won't have to pay to have it cleaned every weekend, and as the largest of my rental properties, it's the most expensive to take care of.

Since this Keegan woman is staying alone, I would offer to move her to a smaller, less expensive location, but my other properties and the tiny houses at the inn are all booked for every weekend leading up to the Cursed convention. So, I figured the least I could do was introduce myself and give her my number so she can contact me directly if she needs anything. Guests usually message me through a contact form on the rental site, and sometimes those messages are delayed or I just don't see them for a few hours. Texting is much simpler.

Climbing down from my truck, I push the door closed and walk across the gravel toward the porch steps. My brow furrows when it dawns on me that there's no car here. So, she's either gone out, or she came here with her friends who left and is stranded without transportation.

I pull my wallet from my back pocket and extract one of my business cards as I spin and head back to the truck. Opening the door, I lean inside and grab a pen from the center console. Flipping the card over, I print out a note with my cell number and instructions to text me directly if she needs anything during her stay. Tossing the pen back into the cubby, I push the door closed and head back toward the house. She's probably not here. There's no way her friends would just leave her stranded with no transportation. I'll just tuck the card in the seam between the door and the jamb and be on my way.

As I climb the stairs and approach the door, though, I hear sounds coming from inside. The television is on, the sound drifting through an open window to the left of the door. Someone inside coughs, making me frown.

She *is* here.

Which means her friends did leave her car-less and stranded. Why would they do that? Why did she stay? Her reservation showed her home address as being in Seattle. She's a long way from home, by herself, with no way of getting back.

I shake my head. It's none of my damn business. I'm probably overreacting anyway. I'm sure she has someone coming to pick her up at the end of her stay, and town is close enough that she can reach most places she'd need to go by foot.

And again, it's none of my business.

Lifting a hand, I rap my knuckles against the door in a quick rhythm. The television mutes, and I hear soft footsteps creep toward the door. One corner of my mouth lifts. If she's trying to be sneaky and mask her presence, she's doing a shit job of it. Besides, the old, squeaky floorboards make sneaking anywhere inside the lodge damn-near impossible.

"Miss Carpenter?" I call out when she doesn't open the door. "I'm Trace Bardin, the owner of the property. I just stopped by to introduce myself and give you my direct number in case there's anything you need during your stay."

"How do I know you're not lying? You could be here to kidnap me and hold me for ransom," she calls out. Then she mumbles, "Who am I kidding? There's no one who'd pay to get me back."

"I assure you, I'm not a kidnapper," I call back, pretending I didn't hear that last bit. "Just a landlord."

"Prove it," she calls back.

I roll my eyes. "I can show you my identification, but that would mean opening the door to see it."

“That’s what a real kidnapper would say,” she calls back, her tone oddly triumphant.

This is ridiculous. “Why would I want to kidnap you? Are you some kind of heiress, or something?”

“If I were, I wouldn’t tell a kidnapper, now would I?”

“I’m not a kidnapper,” I say, losing patience.

“Again, exactly what a kidnapper would say.”

“Do you want the card, or not? You’re staying here for two months, and the contact form on the site can be buggy.”

She doesn’t respond, and I wait several beats for her to make up her mind.

“You know, I could prove I own this place by entering the lock code and opening the door myself,” I add when she still doesn’t respond.

When she remains quiet, I shake my head and tuck the card into the door jamb like I’d intended to do in the first place. There’s no way I’m going to do what I threatened and unlock the door, myself. I start to turn, then pause when the deadbolt lock disengages. The door swings open, and the card falls to the porch before I can grab it.

Bending over, I pluck it from the welcome mat and straighten, my mouth opening to greet her properly. But the words get stuck in my throat as I get my first look at her.

Well, actually, my *second*.

It’s that woman, the one from the tavern. But unlike that night, she looks like hell warmed over. Her blonde hair is a mess, her makeup-free face is blotchy with swollen eyes and a red nose, and she’s wearing baggy sweats and a loose t-shirt

that hide all those glorious curves I noticed before she called me—

“Wolf Daddy?” she whispers.

Fuck.

This.

Shit.

“Here,” I growl, shoving the card toward her.

As soon as she takes the card, I spin and stomp away without another word. My sudden departure must shock her, because she doesn’t speak as I jog down the steps and stalk to my truck. Climbing inside, I slam the door behind me and start the engine before jerking the shifter into reverse.

My traitorous eyes move back to the doorway, and I see her staring at me, her mouth open and her eyes wide, like she has no idea why I’d act this way. *Fuck.* She doesn’t know. How would she know I hate all that “Wolf Daddy” bullshit if I don’t tell her?

Maybe I should go back. Explain. Start over.

I start to push the lever to put the truck back into park, but before I can, her face screws up into an angry frown. Lifting both hands, she flips me off before stepping backward and slamming the door closed.

My shoulders drop as I heave a sigh.

“Great,” I murmur. “Just fucking great.”

Chapter
Seven

Keegan

I walk out of the bedroom, freshly showered and feeling moderately human. After wallowing in my pity party all day yesterday, interrupted only by that unanticipated visit from my landlord—that one is a real piece of work—I managed to get some sleep and woke up this morning feeling restless.

What am I supposed to do now? Staying here seemed like the perfect idea when I came up with it, but I'm not sure I really thought it through. I can't just sit in this house all alone for the next two months. I'll go insane. I can see myself now, looking like some kind of wild animal in dirty, stained pajamas with tangled hair as I snack on junk food that makes my ass grow even bigger than it already is.

I shake my head to clear the image. That's not going to happen. I won't let myself wallow for another minute. I'm worth more than that.

And Madison, Sloan, and Pressley don't deserve my heartache. They're dead to me.

While kicking those backstabbing bitches out of here felt satisfying in the moment, I didn't take into account that my

actions left me stranded here with no car and no way to get home when my little sabbatical is over. I suppose I could take the bus, if there even is a bus stop in Evening Shade. But if there's not, I don't know what I'll do.

I suppose I could call my parents...

No.

I heave out a sigh. That's a problem for another day. For now, I need to get out of this house. Some fresh air will do me good, as will exploring town without all the negative and snarky comments from my so-called friends.

The thought leaves me feeling energized. Experiencing this place and the magic it holds on my own without worrying about how miserable everyone else is sounds amazing. My shift in mindset feels healing, and I suddenly realize I'm starving.

Pulling on my tennis shoes, I grab my phone and tiny backpack purse before heading outside. Closing the door, I type the code into the keypad to lock it. I stare at it for a moment, remembering Trace Bardin's visit yesterday and his threat to unlock the door, himself. He didn't follow through with it, of course.

And I knew I was being a bit psychotic, accusing him of being some kind of kidnapper and refusing to open the door. But I had an excuse. I was alone and out of my mind with grief and anger.

What was his excuse for being such a dick when I finally opened up for him?

My lips tilt up when I remember flipping him the double-bird salute and how satisfying it felt to slam the door while he

watched. Was it childish? Definitely. Do I give a fuck? Hell, no. He deserved it.

Giving myself a firm nod to drive the point home, I spin and jog down the steps. The walk to town is a short one, and I head straight for Moonstone Mystic for some coffee and pastries. The bells over the door jingle as I walk inside, and a gorgeous brunette behind the counter looks over at me with a wide smile.

“Welcome and good morning,” she calls out as I approach. “What can I get you?”

“Hm,” I say, reading the options scrawled across the chalkboard behind her. “I’ll have a large iced caramel macchiato and a...uh...ooh. A ham and cheese croissant, please.”

“Good choice,” the woman says. “Do you want some sautéed mushrooms added to it?”

“Yes, please,” I say, my stomach grumbling loudly.

“I’m Willow,” she says with a laugh as she stretches out a hand for me to shake.

“Keegan,” I say as I take it. Releasing her, I wave my hand around. “This is a great place.”

“Thank you,” she says with a smile as she moves to make my drink. “It’s my baby.”

“You own it?” I ask, looking around with new eyes as she nods. “That’s so cool.”

Popping a lid on my cup, she sets it on the counter and says, “Breakfast is on me this morning.”

“Oh, I couldn’t,” I say, swinging my backpack off my shoulder to dig inside for my wallet.

“You can, and you will,” she says, holding up a palm. “Now, go find a table. I’ll bring your croissant out to you when it’s ready.”

“Thanks, Willow,” I say as emotion wells up inside me.

There really are nice people left in this world.

I find a table near the bar and sit down after hanging my purse on the back of the chair. Pulling my phone from my pocket, I start to open my favorite social media site. Pausing with my thumb over the screen, I change my mind and set the device down on the table. I don’t want to see any updates from my life back in Seattle. I don’t want to know what my ex-best friends are up to, if they’re moving on with their lives like they didn’t just blow mine up.

I startle as Willow slides into the chair across from me. Setting a delicious-looking sandwich in front of me, she places a matching one on the table in front of herself as well as a steaming mug filled with something the color of melted dark chocolate.

“Mind if I join you?” she asks with a grin. “Your order made me hungry, and I haven’t had a break yet this morning.”

“Of course,” I say, but she’s already picking up her sandwich and taking a big bite.

A mushroom coated in melted cheese drops to her plate, and she plucks it up with her fingertips before popping it into her mouth with a satisfied moan.

“So, what’s your story?” she asks once she swallows the bite and takes a sip of her coffee.

I hum as I chew my own first, orgasmic bite, and she smiles patiently until I wash it down with my own drink.

“My story?” I ask.

“Where are you from? What brings you to Evening Shade? How long are you staying?” she clarifies.

“Seattle. I’m a Cursed fan. Eight weeks,” I answer each question in order.

She’s taking a bite and nearly chokes during that last bit. Coughing to clear her throat, she stares at me with wide eyes. “Eight weeks?”

“It’s a long, complicated story,” I say on a sigh.

“I’ve got time,” she quips, wagging her eyebrows as she takes another bite.

Setting my sandwich back down on its plate, I grab a napkin from the dispenser in the center of the table and wipe the greasy butter from my hands. Biting my lip, I stare at her for a long moment. She just watches me right back, patiently waiting for me to spill my guts.

“What the hell,” I mumble.

I’ve got nothing to lose by telling her, and it might actually make me feel better to talk to someone about it. Someone neutral who’ll just listen.

“I came here with my friends,” I say frowning on that last word. Clearing my throat, I go on. “They know how much I love the Cursed movies, and thought a weekend here would cheer me up after my life went to shit.”

“What happened?” she asks before biting into her sandwich.

“I got dumped,” I explain. “And since his brother was my boss and my ex got me the job at the firm, I got fired, too. All in the same day.”

“Shit,” she says, drawing out the word into two distinct syllables.

“Exactly,” I say. “Anyway, my friends aren’t into the movies like I am, but they sucked it up for me. Well, sort of. Madison and Sloan were kind of bitchy about it the whole time. Pressley was okay about it, I guess.”

“Those are your friends?” she asks when my words trail off.

“They were. At least, I thought they were.”

“Uh-oh,” she says, leaning forward and propping her elbows on the table. “What happened?”

“Long story short,” I say, “we got drunk Saturday night at the lodge, and they accidentally let it slip that Madison has been sleeping with my ex...for *months*.”

I’m actually not so certain it was an accidental slip, but I don’t feel like taking a deep dive into that viper pit just yet.

“You’re fucking kidding me, right?” Willow snaps, anger evident in her expression.

“I wish I were,” I say softly. “But do you want to know the worst part?”

“It gets worse?”

“They *knew*,” I say, and my eyes start to sting. “Sloan and Pressley knew the whole time it was going on, and they didn’t tell me. They kept Madison’s dirty little secret for her and let it go on for months while I was blissfully unaware.”

“Fuck, Keegan. I’m so sorry. That’s really shitty.”

“Thanks,” I say, sniffing loudly before taking another bite of my croissant sandwich. “Fuck, that’s good.”

I say those words with the food still in my mouth, and Willow laughs.

“Glad you like it,” she says, then straightens. “Subject change. Where are you staying? I know it’s hard to find a place that’s not booked for two months straight.”

“Lycan Lodge,” I answer after washing the bite down with some coffee.

Willow tilts her head and smiles. “That’s my brother’s place.”

I freeze, my eyes wide. “Wolf Daddy is your brother?”

Bright laughter peals out of her, then she shakes her head. “Please don’t let him hear you call him that. He hates it.”

“Too late,” I murmur, ducking my head as my cheeks heat.

“Oh, no,” she says on a laugh. “What happened?”

“I may have seen him at the tavern while I was a bit... inebriated Friday night.”

“That was you?” she blurts, laughing. “Trace was grumpier than usual Saturday morning. I had to drag the story out of him.”

“And again yesterday,” I admit, and her eyes widen.

“Yesterday?”

I shake my head. “He came by to give me his direct number since I’ll be staying for a while. I kind of freaked out since I was all alone and accused him of being a kidnapper. He finally convinced me he was who he said he was, and I opened the door only to be shocked it was *him*.”

“Oh, Keegan,” she chuckles. “I wish I could’ve been there. What did he do?”

I cross my arms over my chest and huff. “He turned and stomped away like a toddler after shoving his card at me. Didn’t say a single word.”

“What did you do?” she asks, unabashedly enthralled.

I shrug. “Gave him the double bird salute.”

Willow goes still for a moment, her eyes unfocused like she’s picturing the whole scene. Then her gaze snaps to mine, her eyes fill with tears, and she throws her head back and laughs. I try to hold onto the anger I felt in the moment, but seeing myself through a stranger’s eyes, realizing I’d acted just as childish as her brother did, I can’t hold it in.

I laugh right along with her at the ridiculousness of it all.

“Oh, God,” she breathes, her voice an octave higher than before as she wipes the tears from her cheek. “What I wouldn’t give to have been a fly on a wall for that.”

We change the subject after that, and she tells me about the witchy side of the store, promising to give me a crystal that promotes clear thinking and another for good luck. As we finish up with our food and coffee, I realize she’s been sitting here with me for more than a half-hour.

“Thanks for listening,” I say. “I know you must be busy.”

She waves the words off. “Eh. What’s the point of being the boss if you can’t do what you want, when you want?”

“Good point,” I say with a chuckle, then sober. “Hey, I need to pick up some food for the house, and maybe some more clothes and toiletries for my stay. I only packed for two days. Is there somewhere close I can get stuff like that?”

She nods. “There’s a big box store out on the edge of town off Route 12. It’s maybe five miles from here? You should be

able to get whatever you need there.”

“Oh. Okay. Thanks.”

“What’s wrong?” she asks when my expression falls.

“Nothing.”

“Keegan.”

My shoulders droop as I sigh. “I don’t have a vehicle. We all rode together in Madison’s car.”

“They just left you here with no way to get home?” she asks, looking appalled.

I shrug. “I did scream at them to pack their shit and get the fuck out.”

“Still,” she says, frowning, then shakes her head. “Wait right here.”

I watch as she rushes around the counter and disappears through an open door in the back. Picking up our plates, I set them on the counter with Willow’s mug before slurping up the last of my iced coffee and tossing the disposable cup into the trash. As I’m pulling my purse onto my shoulders, Willow reappears.

“Here,” she says, stretching out her hand.

I stare at the set of keys resting in her palm, then raise my gaze to hers. “What is this?”

“My keys,” she says with an inferred *duh*. “Borrow my car. Go shopping. Then you can bring it back when you’re done.”

“But...you don’t even *know* me.”

Willow rolls her eyes before reaching down to grab my wrist. Lifting my hand, she slaps her keys into it, saying, “I’m pretty good at reading people, and I can tell you’re a good

person, Keegan. I know I can trust you. Just have the car back by closing. Eight o'clock."

When I close my fingers around the keys and nod, she releases me with a smile.

"Thanks, Willow," I murmur, my voice filled with emotion, and she nods.

"It's the green hatchback outside. Can't miss it."

With that, she moves behind the counter, grabs our dirty dishes, and carries them through that same door she went through before. I look down at the keys in my hand and blink a few times.

Is this what real friendship feels like? I knew Madison for *years*, and she'd never even consider loaning me a purse, much less her car. Hell, I'm surprised she trusted me with a key to the apartment after she let me move in.

My throat tightens. She probably invited me to move in out of guilt, not friendship.

If she can even *feel* guilt. I'm not so sure.

Shaking off the thoughts, I grip the keys tighter and head out. Willow's car is clean and cute, and I make it to the store she mentioned in mere minutes. The store is much like the ones we have back home, except the people I see in the aisles smile and nod instead of pretending I'm not there. The cashier is sweet and talkative, and as I roll my cart through the parking lot, I can't help but smile.

That smile drops, though, when I see a police cruiser parked behind Willow's car, blocking it in the spot. I hurry my steps, and as I approach, a cute guy in a policeman's uniform climbs from the car and moves in to intercept me.

“Can I help you, officer?” I ask, pulling Willow’s keys from my pocket.

“This is Willow Bardin’s car,” he says, his face blank. “And as I just saw her working at Moonstone Mystic, I know she’s not here.”

“Oh. Yeah,” I say with an uneasy laugh as my skin tingles with nervous energy. “We met this morning, and when she found out I don’t have a car here, she lent me hers so I could do some shopping.”

I hear the words as they leave my lips, and I know they sound crazy. I’m about to get arrested for grand theft auto. Isn’t that the piss-covered cherry on the shit sundae this trip has become?

But the officer only watches me for a moment before his stance relaxes and a smile lights up his face. “Yep. Sounds like Willow.”

Relief floods through me as he grins, then holds out a hand for the keys. I hand them over, and he unlocks the back of the car, pushing the hatchback up before proceeding to place my bags in the trunk.

“Oh, you don’t have to do that,” I say, but he waves me off.

“My pleasure, Miss...?”

“Carpenter. I mean, Keegan. Call me Keegan.”

“Well, it’s my pleasure, Keegan,” he says.

I nod and watch him as he empties my cart. He’s really quite handsome, with all-American, clean-cut good looks, dirty blond hair, and blue eyes. And the way he fills out that uniform? *Yum.*

“How long are you staying in town?” he asks.

“A couple of months,” I admit, and he looks as surprised as Willow did.

Closing the hatchback, he hands over the keys, saying, “Well, in that case, I’d love to take you out sometime. Maybe dinner?”

My head jerks back in surprise. “Really?”

“Really,” he says with a smile, his eyes roving down my body before snapping back up to meet mine. “Sometime this week?”

“Sh-sure,” I stutter.

“Good,” he says, pulling a card from the front pocket of his shirt. “My number is on there. Text me.”

I take the card from him, and with one last smile, he takes my cart and rolls it toward the corral. I climb behind the wheel of the small hatchback, watching through the rearview mirror as he climbs back into his patrol car, gives me a little wave, and drives off.

That was...weird. And exhilarating.

Having someone attracted to me, feeling desired after all that shit that went down with Carter and finding out he was fucking my best friend...it feels good.

Really fucking good.

Chapter
Eight

Trace

For our weekly Thursday night dinner, Willow and I decide to stay local and meet at the tavern. Sometimes we go elsewhere for variety, but Wolfsbane is our favorite place to meet. It's comfortable. Familiar. And the food is delicious.

I wave at Bram behind the bar as I head for our usual table. Willow's already there waiting for me, perusing a menu like she might *not* order the bacon cheeseburger and onion rings. Yeah. That's likely.

"Hey," I say as I slide into the booth across from her. "Sorry I'm late. The alarm at the house went off, *again*. Some tourists tried to get inside through the upstairs bedroom window. *Again*."

She doesn't ask me to clarify because she knows exactly what I'm talking about. She just shakes her head as she continues to read the menu. Our waiter, looks like it's Steven tonight, approaches with two glasses of beer, setting them on the table before us. Stepping back, he smiles.

"Hey, Trace. Willow. Bacon cheeseburger, medium-well with onion rings, and the steak sandwich with fries?"

“You know me so well, Stevie-Poo,” Willow says in a baby voice as she sets her menu aside, making Steven laugh.

He looks at me, and I nod. Grabbing the menus, he spins and walks away as I pick up my beer and take a long sip. It’s cold and crisp and hits the spot after a long day. Hell. A long *week*.

“How are things at the shop?” I ask Willow.

“Good,” she says. “Ooh, you should come by tomorrow. I added a few things to the menu I want you to taste-test for me.”

“I could be convinced,” I say with a grin.

“You love my food, and you know it,” she says, smiling back at me.

“I...” I start, and the words trail off as my eye catches a flash of blonde walking through the front door.

It’s her. Keegan.

She looks over her shoulder and smiles, and my gaze moves to the man behind her. He reaches out and presses a palm to her lower back, and my lips curl into a snarl without my permission. Willow notices, and follows the direction of my gaze with curious eyes.

“Keegan,” she calls out, and my eyes snap to my sister, widening with shock as she lifts a hand and waves.

I see the blonde in question wave back from the corner of my eye, but thankfully, she doesn’t come over. When Willow looks back at me, her eyebrows pull down.

“What? Why are you frowning at me like that?”

“You know her?” I ask.

“Yeah. She came into the shop Monday morning, and we chatted for a while. Did you know she got left here with no car? I let her borrow mine to go shopping, and that’s where she met Jacob.”

She pauses to nod toward the couple, and I look over to see Jacob Stillman, out of uniform, pushing in Keegan’s chair before moving to sit across from her. Ignoring the unfamiliar feeling inside me, I turn my gaze back to my sister.

“You lent your car to a stranger?”

“I trusted her. And she proved me right by bringing back my car right after. But not before Jacob questioned her to make sure she didn’t steal it.” She chuckles. “And, apparently, gave her his number and asked her out. She told me all about it afterward. He was quite charming, according to Keegan.”

I hum with disapproval as my gaze moves back to the tiny blonde. She looks gorgeous, nothing like the mess she was on Sunday. And she’s smiling too widely. What could fucking Jacob Stillman be saying to put that look on her face? I remember when he puked vodka underneath the football stadium stands when he and Willow were freshmen in high school. He may be a grown man now, but he’s still an idiot.

“What’s that look for?” Willow asks, and my gaze snaps back to her.

“What look?” I ask, grabbing my glass and taking a drink to cover my frown.

“Oh, my God,” Willow says a little too loudly, then leans forward to hiss, “You *like* her.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” I scoff.

“Why is it ridiculous?” she needles. “She’s gorgeous and funny. And exactly your type with all those curves. Don’t even

try to tell me you haven't noticed her ass."

I have, indeed, noticed her ass. Not that I'd ever admit it.

"Willow. She's the one."

"That's what I'm saying," she says with a satisfied grin.

"No," I grumble. "I mean she's the one who catcalled me in front of this whole bar Friday night."

"Oh," she says, her smile turning devilish, "I know."

"What do you mean, you know?"

She shrugs. "She told me all about it when we talked. She didn't know how much you hate it, obviously. But now she does. Don't worry, brother, I set her straight."

"She talked about me?"

"Oh, yeah," she says. "I also know about the whole kidnapping scene at the lodge. Did you really huff and stomp away like a toddler when she called you—*you know what*—again?"

"She said that? That *I* was the one acting like a toddler?"

"Oh, she admitted her own immaturity and looked properly embarrassed by it," Willow says, then lowers her voice again. "But, Trace, she's really going through some shit. You should cut her some slack."

I remember the way she looked that day, her eyes swollen and red like she'd been crying. A lot. Annoyed by the slight sense of compassion trickling through me, I stiffen my spine.

"Regardless of what she's going through, acting like a lunatic and calling people stupid nicknames they hate is uncalled for," I say stiffly.

“Oh, you really do like her,” Willow teases. “You should go for it.”

“Willow,” I say firmly, losing patience.

“Come on, Trace. I haven’t seen you this riled up over a woman in like...*ever*. Is it the age thing? I know she’s my age, but age gap romances are all the rage now.”

“Age gap...what in the hell are you talking about?”

“I’m just saying. Women like older men. She probably finds that silver at your temples *sexy*.”

“Stop,” I say, not wanting to hear my little sister use that word. Ever.

“Don’t be such a prude, brother,” she huffs. “Besides, you might like it if she called you *Daddy* under different circumstances.”

My eyes fall closed, and Willow’s laughter bounces off the walls around us. She’s trying to get under my skin, and it’s working.

Really well.

“Okay, okay. I’ll stop,” she says as her laughter dies down. “But I still think you should ask her out. I think she might surprise you.”

I shake my head and meet her gaze. “Willow, she’s a *CursedCub*.”

She rolls her eyes and blows out an annoyed breath. “So, she’s a fan of the movies. What’s wrong with that?”

Everything, little sister. *Everything*.

Chapter
Nine

Keegan

I stare into my coffee cup, watching the steam rise and swirl as I contemplate my life. Of course, it only takes me a few seconds to sum it up—no friends, no real family, no job, no home. No one who loves me. No one I love.

Why is this happening to me? Did I do something to fuck up my karma?

Maybe I should ask Willow to use her crystals to cleanse my chi, or something.

Thinking of the quirky brunette, I smile. When I ran into her at the tavern last night, she seemed genuinely pleased to see me. My chest clenched in response, and I realized in that moment that I couldn't remember the last time someone was honestly happy to see me like that. Not my ex. Certainly not my so-called friends.

And, God, it felt nice.

Then I realized Willow was with her brother, and my mood shifted. In the moment, I assumed it was anger. He was so fucking rude when he stopped by on Sunday.

Yeah. *Fuck him.*

But as the evening wore on, and I tried to focus on my date, I couldn't relax. I felt it every time Trace Bardin's eyes landed on me, like my blood was too hot, burning through my veins every time my heart pounded against my ribs.

And poor Jacob. He did everything right. He was courteous and kind. Complimentary. He made jokes to put me at ease. He exuded chivalry.

He was the perfect date.

And I felt *nothing*.

I tried. I really did. I mean, God, he's hot as fuck. He looked good last night, obviously taking care in his appearance. He smelled good, too. I wanted to be attracted to him. To like him enough to take him back to the lodge and let him do wicked things to my body.

To make me forget, even for a little while, how truly shitty my life is right now.

But no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't find even the tiniest ember of desire for him.

When he took me back to the house after dinner, he got out and ran around to open my door for me. He held my hand and walked me to the front door. He told me what a great time he had with me, that he really likes me, and wants to go out again.

I used kind words, but at the same time, tried desperately not to lead him on.

And when he went in for a goodnight kiss, I panicked. I bobbed and weaved like a prize-fighter, went in for the world's most awkward hug, then darted inside with an abrupt "goodnight" before things got any more uncomfortable.

I drop my head with a loud groan. What is wrong with me? I had this great guy showing an interest, and I reacted like a cold, dead fish.

My thoughts turn back to Trace and how I felt when I spotted him with Willow at the tavern. The way my heart stuttered when we locked eyes. The way I had to squeeze my thighs together every time I felt his gaze on me during dinner.

Yeah. I admit it. Knowing that man was watching me on a date with someone else turned me on.

There's definitely something wrong with me.

Maybe I'm just attracted to assholes. Carter was one, for sure, even if I didn't notice it while we were together. Trace is just more honest and open about it.

As I lay in bed last night thinking of him—annoying, right? I mean...why?—I realized his gruffness with me is kind of my fault. *Kind of*. I called him a nickname he truly loathes, twice. Granted, the first time, I was drunk and had no idea the comparison was such a thorn in his side. He should give me a pass for that one, right? And the second time, too. I was distraught over my friends' betrayal and still didn't know Trace hated being called "Wolf Daddy."

But, hell, if he hates it so much, he shouldn't strut around town looking just as hot as Joseph Lumin with all those muscles and that sexy, silver-sprinkled beard. He can't really blame people for making the comparison. Not here, in this town, where the character was born and rose to stardom.

Yes, I do realize blaming Trace for being too sexy isn't the most solid of defenses, but it works for me. It keeps me from adding shame and guilt to all the other negative emotions flooding through me at the moment.

I will die on this fucking bridge if I have to.

Sighing, I pick up the coffee mug and drain it. Pushing myself up out of the chair, I put the mug in the sink and head to my bedroom to grab some clean clothes. Picking a cute sundress I bought at the store on Monday, a strapless bra, and some underwear, I head into the bathroom to shower.

I need to get this day started, and I need to get out of this house. Other than my outing on Monday and my dinner date last night, I've been bouncing off these walls all week, wallowing in my anger and despair. I've watched the Cursed movies three times already, and even I can't stomach the thought of watching them again to pass the time.

No more. I'm going to head to town and find something to do. Maybe there's some club I can join that'll give me something to look forward to while I'm here.

I dry off and unpin my hair from the bun I'd twisted it into to keep it dry in the shower. As I comb through the blonde lengths, an idea pops into my head.

Maybe I could get a job. Something easy and part-time, a temporary gig to keep me busy and help replenish the savings I've burned through since I've been here. It might be hard to convince someone to give me a position for just a few weeks, but I can at least try.

Someone might be willing to take pity on me, and with the Cursed convention coming up soon, I'm sure some businesses will need help preparing for the inevitable crowds that will flood Evening Shade come the end of August.

Feeling more hopeful than I have in weeks, I get dressed and strap some sandals to my feet. Grabbing my backpack purse, I shove my phone and some lip gloss inside before

pushing my arms through the straps. Heading out, I use the keypad to lock the door behind me and start the trek to town.

First order of business? Coffee. The stuff I brewed at the lodge just isn't the same as the sweet concoctions Moonstone Mystic offers. Plus, I might need another one of those croissant sandwiches.

When I walk into the shop, Willow is there with her usual ready smile.

“Keegan! I'm so happy you stopped by. What can I get you this morning?” she asks as I approach the bar.

“Hey, Willow. Same as last time?”

“You got it,” she says with a grin, then holds up her bare wrist as if she's checking an imaginary watch. “And would you look at that. Just in time for my break.”

I return her happy grin, then nod when she waves me over to the same table we shared last time. After taking a seat, I pull my phone out to scroll social media out of pure habit. I catch myself just before my thumb taps the app to open it and freeze.

No. I'm not ready yet. If I see posts from the girls living their best lives after they wrecked mine, I might lose my shit entirely. And if Madison has updated her relationship status...

I need to block her. Block all of them. I know I do. But blocking them would mean seeing their profiles and updates first, and I'm just not ready for that. Not yet.

Willow's sunshine vibe cuts right through the cloud of melancholy surrounding me as she slides into the empty chair and hands me an iced macchiato. I thank her with a smile, which she returns.

“Chuck will bring our food out when its ready,” she says.

“Chuck?”

She nods as she takes a sip from a mug that reads, “World’s Best Boss.” Swallowing, she says, “Morning shift cook. He preps everything in the morning to be heated up for customers throughout the day. He’s a godsend, really. It was *his* idea to add sautéed mushrooms to the ham and cheese.”

“Genius,” I say, nodding slowly.

“You’re telling me,” she says with a laugh, then sobers quickly to give me a narrow-eyed stare. “So...Jacob Stillman, huh?”

“Yeah. He’s nice,” I say, flinching internally at my own lackluster response.

“Did he pull out the handcuffs after dinner?” Willow stage-whispers, her dark eyebrows wagging.

An unexpected laugh barks out of me, and I shake my head with a sigh. “No. Unfortunately, there wasn’t a spark between us. At least, not on my end. Things got *real* awkward when he tried to kiss me goodnight.”

“Oh, no,” Willow says. “Too bad. He’s one of the good ones.”

“Maybe I’m just not ready,” I say, and whatever response Willow was going to give gets cut off as a man wearing a white apron approaches with two gooey, cheesy sandwiches.

“Thanks, Chuck,” she says as he sets the plates before us. “This is Keegan. Keegan, Chuck.”

“Nice to meet you,” I say. “This sandwich is to die for, so thank you.”

Chuck’s cheeks turn pink as he nods and backs away a few steps. Then he spins and speed-walks around the bar before

disappearing back into the kitchen.

“Not much of a conversationalist, that Chuck, but he’s one hell of a cook,” Willow says as she picks up her sandwich. After taking a giant bite, she eyes me while she chews, a thoughtful expression on her face. Swallowing, she says, “I don’t blame you for being skittish. Jumping back into the dating pool after getting hurt is hard. But you’re only here for a couple of months, right?”

“Right,” I say with a single nod.

“So, nothing serious could come from messing around with the local boys. You could have a little fun, blow off some steam, and maybe fuck that douchenozzle right out of your system.”

“Willow,” I gasp, my eyes wide as saucers as she smirks right back at me. Then I laugh. “I didn’t expect that from you.”

“Why?” she asks, cocking her head. “You think I’ve never had my heart broken? That I haven’t needed to get my groove back after said heartbreak?”

“Have you?” I ask in a challenging tone, one brow arched high.

“Nuh-uh. We’re talking about *you* right now.”

I stare at her for a moment, then nod slowly. “To be continued, then.”

“Fine. I’ll tell you someday. I promise. Now, back to you. Are you going to go out with Jacob again?”

“I don’t think so,” I answer, my voice dropping an octave. “Like I said, I didn’t really feel anything, not even a drop of sexual tension.”

“Too bad. He’s pretty hot,” Willow says.

“Right?” I shoot back, then slump in my seat. “There’s something wrong with me.”

“Well, have you felt any of those sparks you speak of for anyone else in town?” Willow asks.

Trace’s face pops into my head, and I choke on the sip of coffee I was in the middle of swallowing. Willow watches me with keen eyes as I cough to clear my airway, then take another long drink to soothe the sting in my throat.

No fucking way am I telling her the only *spark* I’ve felt is when her brother had his eyes on me last night.

While I was on a date with someone else.

“Nope,” I chirp when she continues to stare at me with suspicion.

“Mm-hmm,” she hums in response.

“Do you know of anyone who’s hiring?” I blurt, desperate to change the subject.

“Hiring?” she asks, taking the bait just as I’d hoped. “Are you planning on putting down some roots here after all?”

“No. Nothing like that. I just need a temporary, part-time gig to keep me busy while I’m here. Plus, having a little extra cash wouldn’t hurt so I don’t blow through my entire savings.”

Willow’s gaze pierces mine for several beats, then she nods. “You should work here.”

“What? Really? I mean, I wasn’t fishing for a pity job or anything, I swear. I just thought you might know—”

“Yes. I’m serious,” Willow says, cutting off my word vomit and reaching out to clutch my forearm. “I actually need help. With the Cursed convention coming up in a few weeks, I

need to order and stock some movie memorabilia, rearrange the store to make room for it, and maybe create some fun Cursed-themed drinks and snacks. You'll be here through the whole event, right?"

"I will," I say, excitement flashing through me. "And I'd love to work here with you."

"Perfect. It's settled, then. Can you start tomorrow?"

"Of course," I exclaim. "What time?"

"Six a.m.," she says.

"I'll be here," I promise, then twist my arm out of her grip to take her hand. "Thank you. Seriously."

"I should be thanking you," she says, squeezing my fingers. "Now, let's finish eating so we can fill out your new-hire paperwork. Welcome to the Moonstone Mystic family, Keegan."

"Thank you," I repeat, feeling gratitude for not just the job, but the real, pure compassion she's shown me since the moment we met.

This is what friendship should feel like. Honest. Unconditional. Generous.

And I swear, I'll be that kind of friend to Willow in return.

It's the least I can do to pay her back for all her kindness.

Chapter

Ten

Trace

The instant I walk into Moonstone Mystic, something feels off. Not in a bad way, necessarily. Just...different. Almost...electric.

I search the shop for the cause, then freeze when I meet the blue-eyed gaze of Keegan Carpenter. I blink a few times, but she doesn't vanish.

She's still there, looking right back at me from behind the counter.

Wait. What's she doing back there? I search the space for my sister, but she's nowhere to be seen.

"Good morning. What can I get you?" Keegan calls out, and I let my eyes fall closed for a moment as I take a deep, calming breath.

When I reopen them, she's watching me with a blank expression. There's no hint of the angry, hissing wildcat who flipped me off almost a week ago.

"Just a regular drip, black," I say as I approach the bar.

“You got it,” she says, moving to fill a paper cup for me without further comment.

When she hands me my order, I narrow my eyes at her. “You work here, now?”

“Yep,” she says, moving further down the counter to wipe it with a damp hand towel.

I feel summarily dismissed, and I don’t like it.

“Where’s Willow?” I ask, and Keegan jerks her head to the right without meeting my eyes.

“In her office.”

Spinning on a heel, I stalk around the counter like I own the place. Keegan still doesn’t look at me as I stride past her, and for some reason, her lack of reaction pisses me off. Gritting my teeth, I head straight for Willow’s office, barely sparing a quick wave for Chuck as I pass through the kitchen.

“What’s she doing here?” I ask without preamble the second I lay eyes on my sister.

“Well, good morning to you, too,” she replies, her tone flippant and slightly annoyed.

“Good morning,” I grit out as I grind my molars together. “Why is *she* behind the counter?”

“Jesus, Trace, what crawled up your ass and died this morning?” When I just stare at her without responding, she sighs. “I needed help. Keegan needed a temporary, part-time job. I like her, and we get along well. It’s a win-win for both of us, so don’t fuck it up for me. If you’re going to come here for coffee, you need to be nice to her.”

My expression turns incredulous as I absorb her words. Is she actually chastising *me*? I don’t like it, especially coming

from my baby sister.

She holds my gaze, though, not backing down even an inch. *Fuck. She's serious.* If I don't mind my manners, she'll fucking blackball me without hesitation. And she'll be pissed at me on a personal level, too.

"Fine," I grunt, then spin and leave the room without another word.

I don't even look in Keegan's direction as I head back out. I see her in my peripheral, though, watching me as I move around the counter and head toward the exit.

"Have a wonderful day. Come back and see us soon," she calls out as I reach for the door, and my back stiffens at the note of sarcasm I hear in her voice.

Fighting the urge to spin around and toss out some dickhead response, I keep moving forward until the door swings closed behind me, and I'm safely across the street. Only then do I slow my steps and try to analyze what just happened.

Why does seeing her affect me so...powerfully? It's like she's burrowed under my skin. I can ignore the feeling—mostly—until I lay eyes on her, and then something just breaks. My emotions are all over the place. I don't know what it means.

And I don't fucking like it.

When I get back to my office at the inn, I sit behind my desk and get to work. And by *get to work*, I mean *pretend to stay busy* because I can't concentrate on anything. After an hour of getting absolutely nothing done, I pull out my phone and shoot off a text to Bram.

Me: *What are you up to today?*

I don't have to wait long for his response.

Bram: *I have a shift at the tavern tonight, but I don't start until 8. Why? What's up?*

Me: *Want to hit the lake for a little fishing? I could use a break.*

Bram: *I'll meet you at our usual spot in an hour.*

Me: *Sounds good. Thanks, man.*

Shutting down my computer, I leave my office and stop by the front desk to let my weekend manager know I'll be out for the day. Then I head upstairs to my apartment and change into some old shorts with lots of cargo pockets and a tank top. I pack a cooler with some water bottles and a couple of beers, then head down to my truck.

I have to stop by the old house to grab my fishing gear from the shed, but luckily, it's on the way to the lake. I just hope the tour bus isn't at the house when I get there.

No fucking way can I handle a single howl in my direction today. I honestly might lose my shit.



“THANKS, BROTHER,” Bram says when I toss him one of the water bottles from my cooler.

We're set up in a thick patch of shade on the wooded side of the lake's shoreline. The chairs we stashed in the brush last time were still here, so at least we're comfortable as we watch our lines remain perfectly untouched in the water.

“So, what got you riled up enough to take a Saturday off to go fishing with me?” Bram asks.

“Why do I have to be riled up?” I shoot back. “Maybe I just wanted to hang out with my best friend.”

When he does nothing but watch me with that flat, disbelieving stare, I sigh. I knew this was a risk. An impromptu fishing trip on one of my historically busiest days of the week is suspicious. I’m sure it raised a handful of red flags for Bram the second I texted him.

“It’s that woman,” I murmur.

“What woman?” he asks, sitting up straighter and staring at me with wide eyes.

I inhale deeply and huff out the breath. “Remember last Friday night? At the tavern?”

He blinks slowly, then gives me a slight nod. “You came in for a beer, then left before you even finished it because...that blonde howled at you.”

“That’s the one,” I grunt, then take a swig of my water. “She’s invaded my life.”

“What do you mean?” he asks.

“She’s everywhere,” I say on a sigh. “She’s staying at Lycan Lodge for the next several weeks, and she’s somehow got my sister championing her. Willow hired her at the shop. I can’t even get a cup of coffee in peace.”

Bram just stares at me for a long moment, so long that my skin starts to itch. My mouth opens and unintentional words flow out like a broken faucet spewing all over an outdated kitchen.

“She’s so annoying. Smiling at me and being polite like she hasn’t called me that godforsaken nickname. *Twice*. Like

she didn't embarrass the shit out of me by causing an entire bar full of people to howl in my direction."

"It was hardly the whole bar. Maybe *four* people," Bram says, but I ignore him as the words continue to spill out.

"She's probably one of the prowlers who tried to break into the house earlier this week. It's like some kind of rite of passage with these fucking people, trying to climb through that God damn window."

I don't have to clarify which house I'm talking about. Bram knows. He's helped me repair the screen more than once, and he was with me when I bought the industrial-sized lock to replace the flimsy latch the window had before.

"Trace."

"People like her come into town, leave their trash all over the woods while they hike to the cemetery, where they disrespect our ancestors by trampling over their graves to take selfies. Did you know some chick rubbed her boobs all over Cedar Hillsop's gravestone and the photo went viral?"

"*Trace.*"

"What?" I bark.

He gives me a lopsided smirk. "You *like* her."

"The fuck I do," I grunt. "How did you get *that* out of everything I just said?"

"Because we've had to live with all this shit for ten years, and I've never once seen a tourist get under your skin the way she has."

"You're wrong," I say firmly, turning my gaze back to my fishing line.

“Okay. I’m wrong.”

He says the right words, but his tone is off. Smug. Like he’s humoring me.

“Fuck you,” I growl under my breath, but there’s no heat in the words.

Bram laughs, but doesn’t say anything else. Just sits there all full of himself like an asshole, watching his own line even though neither of us has gotten a single bite. Grabbing my cooler, I pull out a beer and pop the top before taking a long swig.

“Got one of those for me, you grumpy bastard?” Bram asks, his voice still tinged with humor.

“Only if you admit you’re wrong,” I say, my eyes still on the lake as I take another long pull from the beer can.

“I already did,” he reminds me with a laugh.

“Sure, you did,” I grumble, grabbing the beer I packed for him and handing it over.

He *is* wrong.

I do *not* like Keegan Carpenter.

At all.

And that will never change.

Chapter
Eleven

Keegan

Wolfsbane Tavern is even more crowded tonight than it was last Friday when I came in with the girls. My lips automatically drop into a frown when I think of them, and I force them from my mind. I'm here to meet my new friend, Willow, who has shown me more kindness and concern in a week than those women showed me in all the years we called ourselves *friends*.

Okay, maybe Pressley acted like a real friend most of the time, but she let me down when it really mattered. She didn't tell me the truth about Madison and Carter the second she found out. She kept the secret from me, and that is unforgivable.

"Keegan!"

I look toward the bar to see Willow waving an arm at me, a wide smile on her beautiful face. My troubled thoughts slip away, and I smile and wave back as I snake my way through the crowd toward her. The same bartender who served me before stands across the bar from her, and he's smiling just as broadly as I approach.

Willow throws her arms around me, squeezing me tightly while saying “I’m so glad you’re here.”

I hug her back, unsure what to say. When was the last time someone acted truly happy to see me? God. That’s fucking sad. What have I been doing with my life?

“Meet Bram,” Willow says as she releases me to face the bartender with a smile. “He’s my brother’s best friend, but I’m sure you won’t hold that against him.”

Willow winks at me with that last bit, and I’m a little too stunned to respond. Trace Bardin has a friend? And not just any casual acquaintance, but someone close enough to be considered a “best friend?”

“We’ve actually met,” Bram says, saving me from my embarrassing stupor with his words and a wide, charming grin. “Are we shooting tequila again tonight?”

“Hell, no,” I say with a laugh. “Me and tequila are on the outs right now.”

“Make us four blue kamikazes,” Willow cuts in.

My head snaps toward her. “Four?”

“You’ll love them,” she says with a laugh. “And there’s no tequila.”

I turn back to Bram, who’s still grinning at me, his eyes sparkling with something I can’t quite define. It’s not interest, exactly. But it’s not *not* interest, either. Like...curiosity, maybe?

When he turns to make the drinks Willow ordered, I watch him with a fair amount of curiosity of my own. He’s gorgeous, really. All broad shoulders, strong features, and a thick head of strawberry-blond hair, he looks like a Ken doll come to life.

Or maybe a G.I. Joe, if the bulges beneath his shirt are any indication of the muscles hidden beneath it.

I remember thinking of him as a fine hunk of man meat the first time I saw him, and the description still fits. But despite all that, I feel nothing when I admire him. Just like with Jacob on our date, there's no spark.

Maybe I'm broken. Fucking Carter-douchecanoe-Hawthorne *broke* me.

Before I can build a good head of steam thinking of that asshole cheater, the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. A shiver runs down my spine for no reason. I spin on my stool and scan the crowd, looking for eyes on me, but no one is staring.

Huh. Weird.

As I start to spin back toward the bar, my eyes freeze on the entrance and the tall, dark, bearded man walking in our direction. *His* eyes are on me.

And he doesn't look happy with what he sees.

"Things just got interesting."

Bram's words break through my trance, and I look toward him quickly, breaking whatever weird staring contest I had going on with Mr. Dark And Grumpy. *Trace Bardin*.

He's *here*.

And he's coming this way.

I stare at the four shots Bram has set on the bar in front of us. Four. I snap my gaze to Willow, but she's looking over my shoulder as her brother's unmistakable presence approaches.

"I thought it was just going to be the two of us, Willow."

His voice whispers over my skin like the softest silk despite his angry tone. I fight the urge to shiver again as my mind goes haywire. What is happening here? Why did Willow invite him when she knows he hates me?

Okay. Maybe *hate* is a strong word. But he certainly dislikes me.

“I can go,” I whisper in Willow’s direction, but she grabs my forearm when I start to move and rolls her eyes at her brother.

He’s still standing behind me, and I can feel his breath against the skin of my bare shoulder. No longer able to control it, I curl my shoulders inward as another shiver trickles down my spine.

“Keegan’s not going anywhere,” Willow says firmly. “And neither are you, brother. We’re going to have a few drinks so you two can get to know each other better. She’s my friend, and you’re going to have to get over yourself at some point. Why not tonight?”

I watch Willow’s face as she stares at him intently, silently daring him to disobey her. It’s impressive, really, considering Trace is at least a decade older than her. Maybe more. And he’s a little intimidating with his broad build and thick beard, like a big, grumpy lumberjack. All he needs is an ax to carry around.

“Fine,” he concedes after several beats, effectively shocking the shit out of me.

I twist around to look at him, and I’m *not* shocked to see him frowning back at me. Indignation swells through me, and I stiffen my spine. What’s his fucking problem, anyway? I mean, I know I called him Wolf Daddy—twice—and he

doesn't like it, but I didn't know that. I do now, so I won't let it happen again.

He's acting like I did it on purpose to piss him off.

Well, fuck him very much. I'm here to drink and have fun with my friend, and if Trace wants to be a grumpy stick in the mud, he can have at it. I'm not going to let him bring me down with him.

And I'm not going to think about my body's reaction the second he walked through the door. It was an anomaly. A coincidence. Yeah. The air conditioning kicked on at that exact moment, making me shiver. That's it.

Nothing more.

Looking back at Willow, I shrug, and she releases my arm. Grabbing one of the four blue shots in front of me, I lift it into the air. Willow grins and grabs one for herself, holding it up next to mine. Bram copies suit, and all three of us look toward Trace. His eyes fall closed for a beat, and when he reopens them, the dark orbs bore into me as he reaches out to snag the last shot glass.

Willow cheers, and all four of us clink our glasses together before throwing back the shots. Willow slams her glass down on the bar and motions for Bram to pour another round. I hand my glass over as the liquor warms my belly, then chance a look at Trace.

He stares at his empty glass with a thoughtful expression, then sets it down beside mine for Bram to refill. The bartender fills the three glasses, but sets his own in the dirty bin behind the bar. Willow boos him loudly, and a laugh bursts through my lips.

"Some of us are working, Will," he says with a shrug.

“Ugh. I told you not to call me that,” she groans, then slides off her stool to look at me and Trace. “The band will be starting up soon. We should find a table before they’re all taken.”

She grabs her fresh shot and throws it back before setting the glass back on the bar. I grab mine and follow suit. Without a word, Trace does the same, and Bram promises to send over round three in a few while handing Willow a pitcher of water and three empty glasses.

Taking Bram’s offering, Willow leads the way through the crowd to a round table in the back with four chairs. We slide into two of them, and Trace takes the seat next to his sister, leaving the empty chair between us. Taking the pitcher, he fills each glass with water.

“I’m a lightweight,” Willow explains as she takes a sip. “Bram insists I stay well-hydrated when I’m drinking so I don’t pass out on the floor.”

“Hydration is never a bad idea,” I say, knocking my glass against hers before drinking half of it down.

True to his promise, Bram sends over a round of drinks, but this time, instead of shots, the blue cocktails are in tall glasses, complete with straws, orange slices, and paper umbrellas. Trace grunts—the only sound he’s made since we sat down—and snatches the umbrella out of his glass before tossing it to the table. Willow rolls her eyes as she shakes her head, then pushes the tiny umbrella in her glass aside as she takes a small sip.

I feel like our table is trapped in a bubble of tension, and I don’t like it. This was supposed to be a fun night out to celebrate my first day of work. I’m determined to have a good

time, and I'll be damned if I'm going to let Mr. Grumpypants ruin it for me.

Plucking the umbrella from my drink, I twirl the stem between my thumb and forefinger while I suck down half the drink through my straw. I feel Trace's eyes on me, *judging* me, but I refuse to give him the satisfaction of letting him know I noticed his judgement.

Releasing the straw, I take a deep breath and wiggle in my seat. *Woo*. Bram made these strong. Guess he knew we'd need it.

Willow starts chattering about the shop as the band begins to play a cover of a popular eighties hit. I chime in to keep the conversation going, but Trace remains mute. I see him tracing the condensation on his glass with a finger from the corner of my eye—since I refuse to look directly at him—and I wonder why he's even still here.

His sister made it clear she wanted us to get to know each other, but he's not even trying to contribute to the conversation. And if I'm being honest with myself, I'm not trying to include him, either. I'm just as guilty as he is for keeping that invisible wall between us.

Willow shoots him a frown for the third time as I have that epiphany, and I sigh internally before sucking down the rest of my kamikaze. Slapping my hands to the table as the band shifts into a slow song, I push myself to my feet and stare at Trace so hard, he has no choice but to meet my eyes.

“Would you like to dance?” I ask, my narrow gaze daring him to say no.

“Not re—”

A grunt of pain cuts off his words as the glasses on the table rattle. His pained gaze shoots to Willow, who very obviously just kicked him, and he heaves out a long breath before looking back at me.

“I’d love to.”

Jesus. Make it sound like a prison sentence, why don’t you.

Despite his obvious aversion to the idea, he rounds the table and holds out a hand. I stare at it for a moment, and good God, his hands are huge. Reaching out slowly, I place my palm against his. Strong, warm fingers wrap around mine, and my breath hitches in my chest.

Is that...a spark?

No. No, no, no. *Fuck.*

How is it that the only man to which I have a physical reaction in this entire town is the one man who detests me above all others? And for the stupidest fucking reason, too.

I take a breath and settle my nerves as he leads me into the open area set up as a makeshift dance floor. Trace’s reason for being angry might be stupid to me, but it’s obviously not to him. I should probably apologize if I ever want to ease his animosity.

And I will. Eventually.

But right now, as he places one hand on my hip and keeps the other firmly closed around mine, I feel a bit dizzy. Man, the booze is hitting me *hard*. And it *is* the booze. Nothing else. Couldn’t possibly be because Trace Bardin has his hands on me, and I’m reacting to it. Right?

“How old are you?” I blurt without thinking.

I need to break the tension and stop my own wildly ridiculous stream of thoughts.

“Too old for you,” he grumbles, and my head rears back an inch.

“Don’t flatter yourself,” I snap. “I was just making conversation.”

That little tendon in his jaw bulges and retracts like he’s grinding his teeth before he sighs and says, “I’m thirty-nine.”

Huh. A little older than I thought, then. And despite his declaration, not too old for me. If I wanted him, that is. Which I don’t.

“I’m twenty-six, if you were wondering,” I say when he makes no attempt to keep the conversation going.

“I wasn’t,” he grunts, and I’ve had it with his surliness.

“Why do you hate me so much? Is it because I called you ‘Wolf Daddy?’ Surely, I’m not the only person who’s ever made the comparison,” I say in a rush, and yes, I realize that’s *not* the apology I already decided I owe him. “You know it’s a compliment, right? Women all over the world *literally* swoon over Joseph Lumin.”

“This was a mistake,” he growls and tries to pull away from me.

“Wait,” I blurt, tightening my grip on his hand and gripping the large bicep my other hand was resting on as we danced. “Please. I’m sorry.”

His eyes fall closed with impatience, but he stops trying to pull away and starts swaying to the beat of the song once more. I wait silently until those dark eyes focus on mine again.

“I apologize,” I say in a firm, yet soft tone. “I was drowning my troubles in tequila that night, and when I saw you, I got a little carried away. And when you showed up at the lodge, I had a hangover from no sleep and crying all night. Now that I know you don’t like it, I won’t call you that again. I promise.”

He’s silent as his magnetic eyes search my gaze for several beats, then his head nods ever so slightly. A sense of relief washes over me, then vanishes with his next question.

“What were you drowning in tequila and crying all night over?”

I briefly consider blowing his question off. It’s none of his business, really, but now that I have him actually talking, I don’t want him to clam back up. I like his voice. The husky timbre is growly and grouchy, but it makes my insides gooey every time he speaks. That, and the honest concern in his gaze has words spilling from my lips.

“Oh, you know. Getting dumped and losing my job on the same day because my ex is a douchebag fuckboy whose brother owns the company. My friends brought me here to cheer me up...well, my ex-friends.”

I’m trying to sound flippant, but I can hear the anger and sadness lacing my words. And Trace can, too.

“Ex-friends?”

A harsh laugh blows through my lips. “Yeah, well the joke was on me because one of them was fucking the douchebag for the last few months. And the others knew about it and didn’t tell me. So, yeah. No boyfriend, no job, and no friends. Isn’t life grand?”

Trace nods once, but there's no pity in his gaze. I'm grateful for that.

"So, that's why you decided to stay for the whole summer?" he asks as he spins us around slowly, his grip on my waist tightening the tiniest bit.

I nod. "I need to figure some stuff out. My backstabbing boyfriend fucker is also my roommate. I can't go back there knowing what I know, and I can't afford to move out on my own, especially with no job and no prospects. My life is in a shambles, and I just need some time to decompress and come up with a plan."

He stares at me silently, like he's working some puzzle out in his head. I wait for him to comment, but as the song comes to an end, he still doesn't speak.

"Anyway," I say, feeling the need to fill the silence, "that's my life right now. It's a mess. And now that you know, don't you wish you'd been a little nicer to me?"

I'm only half-joking, but I ask the question in a teasing tone. In true Trace fashion, he grunts in response, and I almost laugh.

Almost.

I don't know how long this truce will last, but it feels good to not be at odds with him. Maybe we could even be friends.

Okay, friends might be a stretch. But at this point, I'd settle for not-enemies.

Not-enemies is good. I'll take it.

Chapter
Twelve

Trace

The song ends, and Keegan and I break apart. I follow slowly behind her as she heads back to the table and slides into the chair next to Willow. I take my previous chair even though I feel the urge to sit next to her now.

Her apology was steeped in sincerity, and I'm honestly feeling like a total ass for getting all bent out of shape over the whole thing. So she howled at me one time. Big fucking deal.

I let my own issues with the whole "Wolf Daddy" thing color my entire opinion of her and never gave her a chance to show me who she really is. And sure, she's a CursedCub, but she's also so much more.

Life's given her a real kick to the teeth, but she's persevering. Doing the best she can until she figures out how to move on.

I watch as she laughs and jokes with Willow, leaving our depressing conversation in the dust. Watching them act like two lifelong friends instead of veritable strangers has me in awe of both of them.

I've never been able to click with people like that. Bram is my only real friend. We clicked instantly like these two seem to have done, but that was over two decades ago, before I shut down and stopped letting people in so easily. All of my other friends moved away after high school—and before the Cursed movies transformed Evening Shade into what it is today—so it's basically just been him and Willow in my life since Grandpa died.

It's been kind of lonely, but I've somehow convinced myself it's better this way. I don't need to force my negativity on anyone else. And I don't need people thinking they can "fix" me. There's nothing to fix. I like who I am. I really do.

"We need more shots!" Willow shouts suddenly, and my introspective thoughts scatter.

She flies out of her seat and heads for the bar. I turn my attention to Keegan, who's pulled out her phone. She taps at the screen, then her face pales as a frown pulls down at her lips.

"What is it?" I ask, and my voice seems to startle her.

"Nothing," she says quietly.

"It's obviously not nothing," I say, my voice gentler than it's ever been with her.

Her lips pinch as she stares at me, then she sighs and turns her phone around so I can see the screen. I study the photo stretched across it. I recognize the skinny brunette as the one who insulted Bram and the tavern the night I first saw Keegan. She's smiling brightly next to a guy with a smarmy smile and slicked-back hair. He looks like an asshole.

"I guess it's official," Keegan says, and the sadness in her voice has my eyes snapping up to meet hers. "At least they

gave me a week to come to terms with the betrayal before rubbing it in my face.”

My hand snakes out before she can blink, and I snatch the phone from her grasp.

“Hey! Give that back,” she demands.

I tap at the screen a few times, then pass it over to her. She stares at the screen for a moment, then looks back at me.

“What did you do?”

“What you should’ve done the moment you found out the truth. Blocked both their lying asses.”

She narrows her eyes at me, saying, “It wasn’t your place to do that.”

I hold my palms in supplication. “Then by all means, unblock them so you can torture yourself some more.”

I take a long drink of my water, and Keegan stares at me for another few beats before locking the screen of her phone and slipping it back into her pocket. I can tell she’s irritated with my heavy-handedness, but also knows I’m right. There’s no good reason to continue to follow the people who broke her heart on social media. If she’s done with them, she should be *done* with them. Completely.

Willow appears beside me, a frown pulling at her lips like she can sense the tension. “What is it? What happened while I was gone?”

“Nothing,” Keegan says, plastering on a smile before I can answer. “Is one of those for me?”

Willow’s frown deepens as she shoots a glance in my direction, but she doesn’t press the issue. She just hands

Keegan a shot, then slides one in my direction while plopping down into her chair.

We call out a cheers and throw the shots back, then a new song starts, making Willow squeal with delight. Jumping back to her feet, she grabs Keegan's hand and pulls her up. Keegan laughs and follows obediently as Willow drags her toward the dance floor.

A waitress materializes next to me with a bottle of beer, and I look over toward the bar as I take it. Bram waves a towel at me as I lift the bottle in thanks. Then, turning my chair toward the throng of dancers, I sip the beer as I watch my sister and her new friend let loose to the heavy bass beat of the song.

Keegan loosens up completely, rolling her luscious hips and shaking that perfect ass until I'm panting for oxygen. *Fuck*, she's beautiful. And sexy as hell.

I squeeze my eyes closed as I reprimand myself for those thoughts. She's too young for me. Too fresh off a broken heart.

And she's only here for a few weeks, not that it matters.

I don't even *like* her.

Okay, that's a lie. Maybe I like her a little bit.

But she's still too young for me.

And I'm too old and grouchy for her. Too set in my ways.

It would never work. *We* don't make sense.

It's settled. She's not attracted to me, and I'm not attracted to her.

Not at all.

But that doesn't mean we can't be friends, right?

Chapter
Thirteen

Keegan

While it might seem insane to me—especially coming from Seattle—the café side of Moonstone Mystic is closed for business *every* Sunday. Willow insists we all need a day to relax and recharge, and people can brew their own coffee or get some from the gas station out by the highway if they're desperate.

She has a single employee that can only work weekends, and he goes in on Sundays to handle the weekend tourists who stop inside to buy mystical objects or Cursed souvenirs. Willow's not stupid, after all, and the weekends are her busiest times, especially during the summer months. She just refuses to give up her Sacred Sundays, as she calls them, and she knows if the café were to remain open, she'd get calls and texts all day about broken machinery, depleted ingredients, and even the odd snobby, pompous customer demanding to speak to someone in management.

And that's how I find myself with absolutely *nothing* to do this morning. I slept in, and when I finally crawled out of bed and stumbled to the kitchen for coffee, I took the mug straight

to the couch where I curled up in the corner and sipped the hot drink while watching *Curse* for the bajillionth time.

My mind wanders as I stare at the television, my eyes not really seeing the images on the screen. I'm in outdoors heaven, and even though the sky is blotted out by a thick layer of clouds, a quick check of my weather app this morning assured me the chance of rain is slight.

I should be out *doing* something, right? I can laze the day away on a couch anywhere.

"Maybe I should go hiking, or something," I whisper to myself, then quickly scoff at the idea.

I'm not a hiker. Those trail walks on the bus tour nearly did me in, and they were easy paths to follow. And if I were tempted to pick up the hobby, I certainly wouldn't be dumb enough to head out alone in unfamiliar terrain as a beginner. So, unless someone locally decides to randomly invite me on a hike with them, that activity is a big *no* for me.

What else?

My phone chimes before I can come up with another idea. I'm instantly suspicious, wondering who might be texting me. It's not my birthday or Christmas, so my parents are out. No one from back home has any reason to reach out, and Willow assured me she would be completely wireless today.

My brow furrows as I open my texting app and read the message.

503-555-2005: *What are you up to today?*

I recognize the area code as being local. Willow's number bears the same. But it's not her. I have her number programmed into my phone. It could be a wrong number, but that's a really weird coincidence that someone in northwestern

Oregon would be accidentally texting my number while I'm *in* northwestern Oregon.

I'd normally just ignore a message from an unknown number—text scammers are real—but the local number has me curious. I text back an innocuous message and wait to see what happens next.

Me: *Sorry, I think you have the wrong number.*

503-555-2005: *It's Trace.*

I sit up straighter, my eyes and nostrils flaring with surprise. Why is Trace texting me? *How* is Trace texting me?

Me: *How did you get my number?*

503-555-2005: *It's on your rental application. I don't mean to overstep by using it, but there's something I want to show you. Something I think you'd really like.*

Flashes of naked flesh against naked flesh flood through my mind, but I shake my head to dislodge the dirty thoughts. No fucking way is Trace Bardin texting because he wants to show me his wolf willy.

Narrowing my gaze, my thumbs fly over the screen as I save his number. I can't resist giving his number the *only* appropriate nickname, though. It's okay. He'll never know. Afterward, I tap out a snarky response.

Me: *Are you trying to lure me out into the woods and kill me? Bury me where no one will ever find my body?*

Wolf Daddy: *No need to bury you. The wolves will make short work of your corpse.*

His mention of wolves after I just saved his number as “Wolf Daddy” has me snorting as I tap out a reply.

Me: *Real funny. Hard pass. Thanks, though.*

Wolf Daddy: *Okay, then. Your loss. I know you would've loved it.*

I nibble my bottom lip as I read his text again.

And, damn it, I'm intrigued.

Me: *What is it?*

Wolf Daddy: *Nope. If you want to see it, you'll just have to trust me.*

Trust him? I blow out a harsh breath.

I do trust that Trace isn't actually going to murder me in the woods. What I don't trust, though, is his sudden personality transplant. I mean, sure, we did have a good time at the tavern last night. He loosened up a bit. We even danced together.

But how did he go from treating me like a plague upon the fine citizens of Evening Shade to texting me on a Sunday morning, offering to show me a pleasant surprise?

I don't know the answer to that, but I *do* know I'm bored sitting here by myself and thoroughly intrigued by Trace's offer.

Me: *Trust you? You literally just said you're planning to kill me and feed me to the wolves. *smirking emoji**

Wolf Daddy: *Do you want to see it or not? I can pick you up.*

I look down at the wrinkled, threadbare pajamas I'm still wearing, then lift my arm to sniff at my armpit. Grimacing, I drop my arm and type out a reply.

Me: *Give me half an hour.*

Wolf Daddy: *See you then.*

Leaping up from the couch, I skip on light feet into the kitchen to set my coffee mug in the sink. Then I rush to the bathroom, turn on the shower, and strip down as quickly as I can before hopping in. I make short work of washing my hair, shaving my armpits and legs, and soaping up my whole body before rinsing myself down and turning off the water.

Once I'm dry, I check the time on my phone. Only twenty minutes left.

Running naked to my bedroom, I find my favorite lavender sundress and slide it on. It has built in cups, so I skip the bra and pull on a fresh pair of lacy underwear beneath the dress. Eyeing myself in the mirror, I nod. The structure of the dress makes my waist look slimmer while the flare of the skirt camouflages my wide hips and ass.

Hurrying back into the bathroom, I blow dry my hair until it's barely damp, then tie it up into a messy bun on top of my head. Swiping on some deodorant and spritzing on some flowery body spray, I decide to leave my face bare—this isn't a date, after all—and rush back into my room to find my white sandals.

By the time I'm fully dressed and have stashed my phone, a tube of sunscreen, and my lip balm into my purse, there's a knock on the front door. Taking a deep breath, I walk as calmly as possible to the door and pull it open.

Trace stands tall on the other side, one hand rubbing the back of his neck as he gives me a hesitant smile. His position makes his bicep bulge beneath the short sleeve of his tight t-shirt. He lowers his hand to his side, and my eyes trail down his wide chest to his narrow waist where his cargo shorts hang low on his hips.

“Hey,” he says, and my gaze snaps back up to meet his.

I swallow the saliva pooled in my mouth and clear my throat. “I texted Willow to let her know I’m going to be with you in case I suspiciously disappear or something.”

I really did. I mean, you can never be too careful, right?

Trace chuckles. Actually *chuckles*. The sound makes my lower half tighten deliciously.

“I know. She texted me a half-dozen questions. Thanks for that.”

Hmm. She didn’t respond to my message, and I assumed it was because she was unplugged like she told me she would be.

“You ready?” he asks when I don’t respond.

“Oh. Yeah, sorry.”

I step outside and pull the door closed behind me before pushing the buttons on the keypad to lock it. Trace’s hand lands on my lower back as we walk toward his truck, then he opens the door and helps me climb in.

My chest hollows out as he closes the door and jogs around to the driver’s side. Carter never helped me into or out of a vehicle. And I kind of love that Trace did.

It’s nice.

“So, where are we going?” I ask as he starts the truck and shifts into reverse.

“It’s a surprise,” he replies.

“You can’t even give me a hint?”

He keeps his smiling lips firmly closed as he shakes his head, a steel vault. Giving up, because who doesn’t like surprises, I lean back in my seat to enjoy the ride. Soft country

music plays through the truck's speakers, and the sun actually peeks through a gap in the clouds, warming my skin through the window.

As Trace slows the vehicle and turns onto a long drive, I sit up, instantly alert. I recognize this place. My head snaps to the left, and I stare at Trace's profile.

"Are we going to Aria's house?"

Trace just smiles, and I face forward as the two-story structure comes into view. He slows the truck to a stop, then looks at me as he shifts the transmission into park. I meet his gaze and cock my head.

"I've been here. I mean, the tour bus stopped here, and I got some pictures. We couldn't go inside, though. The owner doesn't allow tourists to walk through it."

Trace's smile widens as he pulls his keys from the ignition, rifles through them, then holds up a silver house key, saying, "Well, the owner can make exceptions when he wants to."

My eyes widen and zip up to meet his, which are dancing with humor. "You own Aria's house?"

He huffs out a breath and shakes his head. "Aria is a fictional character in a movie that was filmed here. I own *my* house. It's where Willow and I grew up, and our grandfather signed a deal with the producers to film here. The three of us moved into the inn during filming, but yeah, it's mine. Grandpa left it to me when he passed."

I remain still as I process that information. Trace and Willow grew up in *Aria's* house. Or Aria lived in Trace and Willow's house. Whatever. Either way, it's still very *cool*.

"Do you want to see the inside, or not?" Trace asks with an arched brow when the silence drags on for a beat too long.

I snap into action, my hand snaking out to snatch the keyring from his hand. Tugging at the door handle, I pop it open and hop down, Trace's laughter following me out. I hear his own door slam shut as I race up the front steps, then I pause and take a breath, letting Trace catch up before I dart inside like some kind of lunatic.

Reaching out to my right, I run my fingertips over the banister where Lucas and Aria kissed for the first time. I look over at Trace as he steps up beside me, and he motions for me to do the honors. Smiling brightly, I step forward and push the key into the lock. Turning it, the satisfying sound of the lock disengaging reverberates in my chest.

I look back over at Trace, and he gives me an encouraging nod. Holding my breath, I turn the knob and push open the door before stepping inside.

Sweet nostalgia coats my skin as I look around at the familiar space. "It looks exactly like it did in the movies."

Trace flips on a light switch and closes the door behind us before pushing some buttons on a beeping alarm pad on the wall. "Yeah, they kept all the furnishings the same. The director liked the feel of the place. The only thing they changed was Willow's bedroom. They put in more expensive antique furniture and decorated it to appeal to the mass audience. The producers let Willow keep it all when they were done, so she didn't mind."

"Can we go see?" I ask, bouncing on the balls of my feet.

"Of course," Trace says with a nod.

Letting out a high-pitched squeal, I race up the stairs. I head unerringly for the right room, and when I step inside, I'm transported to another world. *Aria's* world. Trailing my

fingertips over the dresser, then the matching night stand, I sit on the edge of the bed and gaze around. This really is awesome.

There's movement in the doorway, and I see Trace standing there, one shoulder pressed against the door jamb as he crosses his ankles. He's watching me with a shadow of a smile on his face, and I can't help but grin back at him.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome."

"So, if this place is yours, why don't you live here?" I ask in an attempt to break the weird tension in the room.

The tour guide told us the place has been empty for years, so I know he doesn't stay here. And Willow has her own place in town.

"My apartment in town is more convenient," he says, then lowers his brows. "And I don't have a tour bus full of CursedCubs on my front lawn twice a day."

I can understand that, especially given his obvious aversion to all things Cursed.

"Why don't you rent it out like your other properties? You could make a fortune. People would kill to stay here."

He stares at me silently for a long moment, then pushes off the jamb and takes a step inside. Pushing his hands deep into his pockets, he shrugs.

"Willow and I have a lot of cherished memories in this place. I can't take the chance that some strangers will wreck it or steal anything that belonged to my grandfather just because they saw it in a movie and want a piece for themselves."

I nod slowly. “I can understand that. Thanks again for bringing me here. I love it.”

Trace smiles, setting off another round of flutters in my belly. He’s so handsome when he’s all stoic and grumpy, but seeing his smile puts him on a whole different level of hotness.

Jerking his head toward the door, he asks, “Well, don’t you want to see the infamous couch in the basement?”

I leap to my feet in a rush, and he chuckles. Pulling a hand from his pocket, he holds it out in invitation for me to precede him. I scurry through the door and down the stairs, making a right toward the kitchen. Finding the door to the basement right where it should be, I pull it open and flick the light switch on the wall just inside before picking my way carefully down the steps.

I reach the bottom, and there it is. The oversized, threadbare couch where Aria and Lucas made love for the first time in the final installment of the franchise. I move toward it, reaching out a hand to touch it reverently. Then I spin to face Trace and prop my hands on my hips.

“So, you know about the couch, which means you’ve watched the movies. Am I right?” I ask, arching a suspicious brow at him.

He sighs as he scrubs a hand down his face. “Willow made me watch them with her.”

“Sure,” I say, facetiously drawing out the word. “*Willow* made you watch them.”

He rolls his eyes and shakes his head, but doesn’t argue. A laugh titters out of me, then I turn to touch the couch one last time before following him back up the stairs. He’s incredibly patient as I tour the rest of the house. He doesn’t try to rush me

even though I know this must be boring for him. He did grow up here, after all.

His childhood bedroom is neat and tidy with a bed, a dresser, a night stand, and a bookshelf filled with everything from the classics to Stephen King to *Captain Underpants*. I chuckle at that section, and Trace just grins back at me.

I peek inside his grandfather's room, but decline to go inside even when he says it's okay. It feels disrespectful to do so, so I just shake my head and move on.

When I've finally gotten my fill, Trace leads me back out to the truck and helps me in the way he did before. I chatter on and on as we drive back to Lycan Lodge, and Trace tells me more about his grandfather and how he took advantage of the movie mania, buying up rental properties and leaning into the whole werewolf theme.

He was a smart man, and I can tell Trace really loved him.

"I don't know why you decided to take me there, but thank you, again. That was amazing," I say when we pull into the drive at my rental house.

"You're welcome," he says, his voice soft and gentle.

I stare at him for a moment, wondering if he's going to say anything else. Like ask if he can take me out again. Or maybe come inside with me right now.

Or kiss me.

When none of those things happen, I realize how ridiculous the mere thought is. Feeling my face heat with a blush, I thank him again and pop open the door. Trace calls out a goodbye as I close it behind me, and I wave before heading inside the lodge.

Leaning back against the closed door, I heave out a sigh as I listen to the truck back out of the drive. That was really nice. Underneath that gruff exterior, *Trace Bardin* is nice.

Who would've thought?

Chapter

Fourteen

Trace

I sink into the sofa cushions with a contented sigh. I just dropped Keegan back off at the lodge, and I'm feeling pretty fucking good about myself right now.

I don't know why I decided to take her to the house. Maybe I just wanted to see her smile after all the shit she's been through in the last few weeks. After she told me what happened with her ex and her friends, I couldn't stop thinking about how shitty they've treated her and how no one deserves to have so much dumped on them at one time like that.

I assumed a private tour of "Aria Strong's" house would really cheer her up, and boy, was I right on the money. Keegan was positively glowing. And seeing her there, within those walls in that pretty dress with that smile on her lips? It was perfection. Like she *belonged* there.

I grunt and take a sip of the beer I grabbed from the fridge before I sat down. I need to stop thinking things like that.

No. I was only being nice to her because Willow asked me to. Yeah. That's it.

It wasn't because I *like* her, or anything like that. She's my little sister's age, for Christ's sake. Too young for me. And too annoying.

Another grunt escapes my lips with that thought. She's not actually annoying. At all. I let my first encounter with her color every subsequent one, and I can honestly admit that's a "me" problem. It's not like she knew me or how much I hate being likened to Joseph Lumin. She was just excited. And a little drunk.

And when she spotted me at the bar, she liked what she saw.

If I'm being totally honest, my sense of pride and satisfaction over *that* fact has been the driving force behind my annoyance with her since that night. I like that she liked what she saw when she looked at me. Too much.

Now that the fog of anger over her use of the nickname has lifted, I can see it for what it is now. I want her, and I know I shouldn't. That I can't have her.

That despite her obvious attraction to me—and she has made it pretty obvious—neither of us can give ourselves over to it. Besides the age difference being a problem, she doesn't live here. She's going to leave in a few weeks. She'll go back to Seattle to pick up the pieces of her life, and chances are, I'll never see her again.

And while I know there's nothing wrong with a casual, short-term relationship, I'm not so sure I could go back to my normal, lone wolf existence once she leaves and takes her bright sunshine with her.

Ah, fuck. Now I'm doing it. All I need to do is add the "daddy" to that statement, and I've become everything I hate

about this town and the tourists who flock here.

God damn it.

Even without giving over to every one of my carnal desires, I'm letting this curvy, gorgeous little thing influence me on levels even the people closest to me haven't been able to do. What is it about her? She's the lighthouse beacon I never knew I needed.

Do I really want to disappear back into the fog?

I lean my head back against the couch, close my eyes, and heave a loud sigh. Knowing I can't, or at the very least, *shouldn't* have her has lost its impact, entirely.

I want her.

There.

I admitted it. To myself, at least.

My phone chimes, and I find myself grinning when I see a text message from Keegan.

Keegan: Thanks again for today. It was really sweet of you. Why do you hide all that sugary goodness beneath such a gruff exterior? Inquiring minds want to know.

A laugh barks out of me as I read the text, and my smile remains as I type back.

Me: No sugar here. And if you try to tell people otherwise, I'll deny it to the bitter end. I have a reputation to maintain, after all.

Keegan: Fine. I'll keep your dirty little secret. My lips are sealed.

Me: Thank you.

Keegan: But you know nothing in this world is free...

Me: *Are you trying to blackmail me?*

Keegan: *Of course, not! How dare you accuse me of such a thing?*

Me: *So sorry. My mistake.*

Keegan: *On the other hand, should you decide to offer me a boon for my silence, I wouldn't be opposed.*

Me: *A boon? What is this, some historical romance novel?*

Keegan: *Funny your mind would go straight to romance. Do you have another secret you'd like to share? Maybe something about me?*

Keegan: *Kidding! I know you don't see me that way. And don't worry, just knowing about your gooey, mushy center is enough reward for me. I don't need any extra boons.*

She sends that last text while I'm still reading the one before it. My smile drops as I finish reading, then re-read her words.

I know you don't see me that way.

Oh, Keegan. I really do.

But I can't tell her that, can I? As much as I want her, even if I were to decide I could handle a short-term thing, the thought that I'd be some kind of rebound for her after everything she's been through leaves a sour feeling in my gut.

I know it makes no sense. Whether I'd be a rebound fling or not, I'd still only be a *fling*. The reasons behind it don't matter when I know whatever we start would have an expiration date. But it still feels wrong.

Pinching my lips together, I type out another text.

Me: *You're welcome for today. It was my pleasure. Really. I'm glad you had fun.*

And I am glad. I really am.

Getting to know her a little better, feeling that Keegan sunshine warm my skin, is all the thanks I'll ever need.

Chapter
Fifteen

Keegan

It's six-oh-four on Monday morning, and Willow is already grilling me about Trace and where we went yesterday. She never did respond to my text, but I know she texted Trace asking what was up because he told me about it.

“Trace really never told you?” I ask as I flip on the espresso machines.

“Not a single word,” she sighs. “Now, spill.”

“He took me to Aria’s—I mean, well, *your* house, I guess,” I say, then grin. “I guess he thought I’d like a tour, and he was right. It was awesome.”

When I realize she’s not responding, I turn around to see her staring at me with parted lips and wide eyes. Cocking my head, I narrow my gaze.

“What?”

She sputters for a second, then asks, “He took you to the house?”

“Yeah.”

“Like, *inside* the house?”

“Yes, Willow,” I drawl. “Inside the house.”

“Sorry,” she says, shaking her head roughly. “It’s just... I’m shocked, really.”

“Why?”

“Besides the fact that he hates that people are so obsessed and constantly refer to it as “Aria’s” house?” she asks, and I feel my face heat.

“I may have called it that when we pulled into the drive,” I admit.

“Exactly,” she says, and her expression softens. “He hasn’t spent more than a few minutes at a time inside that place since our grandfather died five years ago.”

“He...what?” I stutter.

“Too many memories. It makes him sad, so he only goes in there when he absolutely has to, even though he owns the place and quite honestly, should be living there. Raising his own family.”

Her voice turns a little wistful with that last bit, but she quickly snaps out of it and clears her throat. Then she levels me with a serious look.

“The fact that he took you there, knowing it would make you happy because you’re a CursedCub and would love to see *Aria’s* house, is kind of a big fucking deal, Keegan. Shit. No wonder he refused to tell me yesterday.”

“I’m sorry,” I whisper, not really knowing what else to say.

Willow shakes her head again, then lunges forward to take my hands in hers. “No. This is a *good* thing.”

“It is?”

“Yes,” she says, her smile returning. “It means he *likes* you.”

“I don’t think so, Willow,” I say remembering my blunder during our text conversation yesterday.

When I backpedaled and assured him I knew he didn’t feel anything romantic toward me, he didn’t correct me. I gave him the perfect opening, and he let it pass right by.

“He just felt bad,” I go on. “I dumped all of my problems on him Saturday night, and hearing my story made him feel guilty for being an ass. That’s all it was.”

She releases my hands and props her fists on her hips. “If that’s all it was, he would’ve just apologized. And stopped being an ass. He wouldn’t take you to our childhood home just so you can fangirl over a movie franchise he hates. No. I know my brother. There’s more to this. Trust me.”

She pauses for a moment to let that sink in, but when I open my mouth to argue, she shakes her head and cuts me off.

“Do you like him? I mean, would you, like, date him?”

My head rears back. “Why are you asking me that like you want me to say yes?”

And she is. The hope in her eyes shines bright.

“He’s my brother, and I love him, but he’s a grumpy bastard most of the time. Seeing him with you, he’s different. Lighter, somehow. And with what he did for you yesterday... I don’t know. I think you’re good for him.”

“You’re insane,” I say flippantly even though my heart pounds in my chest at her words. “He doesn’t like me. He felt bad for me. That’s all.”

“I know what I know,” she says on a sigh. “Let’s get back to work. We open in twenty, and Mondays are usually busy first thing.”

As we finish the opening routine and the first customers start trickling in, my thoughts keep going back to our conversation and the interactions I’ve had with Trace since I arrived in Evening Shade.

Yes, he’s a grumpy bastard most of the time, just like Willow said. But that’s honestly a part of his charm. Because if he weren’t normally so gruff, those sweet moments, the honest smiles and warm laughs wouldn’t make me feel so special.

And he’s hot. There’s no denying that. Tall and muscular. Thick, dark hair with the lightest sprinkling of silver. I even like his beard, and not just because it makes him look like Wolf Daddy. It makes him look like *him*.

He’s kind of charming when he’s not actively trying to be an ass, and I wasn’t lying when I told him knowing he hid such a sweet, gooey center beneath that grumpy exterior is a reward in itself. It feels like we share a secret. Like I’m already in his inner circle.

And the way my body reacts when he looks at me. Smiles at me. Laughs and jokes with me...

Yeah. *I like him*.

But to what end? He’s thirteen years older than me, and while I don’t really see that as a problem, I’m sure Trace does. Aside from that, I’m leaving in a few weeks. What’s the point of getting involved with someone when it can’t possibly last?

The phenomenal sex?

Oh, yeah. There's no doubt in my mind it would be amazing with Trace. He exudes pure animal magnetism, and I'd probably lose consciousness from how hard he could make me come.

I startle back to reality when the door swings open and the object of my spicy fantasies walks through the door. *Shit*. Can he see what I was thinking on my face? *Fuck*.

"Hey," I say aloud, my voice cracking on the word. Ducking my head and clearing my throat, I ask, "Regular drip?"

"You remembered," he says, his lips curling upward at the corners.

I feel myself relax. "Well, it's not like it's a complicated order. I do have *some* brains in my head."

My sass level is at a ten, and I can tell he likes it by the way his smile widens, showing a row of straight, white teeth.

"Oh, my God, Trace. What is wrong with your face?"

Willow's loud exclamation startles me as she materializes beside me out of nowhere. She's staring at her brother with exaggerated shock. I'm a little confused for a second, then distracted again when I look back at Trace to see his smile has grown even wider.

"My face is perfect, brat," he says, then shoots Willow a wink.

"But...you're *smiling*," Willow says, her voice filled with awe. "I never knew your teeth were so straight. Wait. Holy shit. Is that a dimple?"

I study Trace's cheeks, but his thick beard hides any evidence of whether he has dimples or not. I look back at

Willow, who definitely has a mischievous sparkle in her eyes, and it hits me.

She's teasing him for smiling because he doesn't do it a lot.

He's leaning into it instead of getting huffy.

All because I made him grin with my sassy comeback.

He's happy to see me, and I'm *happy* he's happy to see me.

Oh, God.

"I'll be right back," I blurt as I spin on a heel and stalk toward the bathroom in the back.

Locking myself inside, I brace my hands on the sink and stare at myself in the mirror.

"He likes you," I whisper to my reflection. "Willow was right. Trace Bardin actually likes you."

What am I going to do about it? Do I go with the flow and see where things lead? Or do I make it clear to him we can't be anything more than friends?

What do I even *want*?

I'm so confused.

On one hand, Trace is extremely attractive, even when he's being grumpy. Maybe *especially* when he's being grumpy. Having him smile at me and make jokes just adds another layer to his complex personality. He's proven to be considerate and kind. He's responsible, successful, and protective. All good traits.

On the other hand, I'm a hot mess. Fresh off a breakup and basically homeless. Not to mention, I don't live here, so if we

did progress past friendship, it would be nothing more than a fling. He realizes that, right?

Shit, maybe a short-term, torrid affair is exactly what I need to get back on the horse after Carter sent my self-esteem plummeting straight to hell. Maybe having a fine-ass man like Trace worship my body would be the balm that heals me.

“Maybe I’m rationalizing because I really need some *vitamin D*,” I murmur.

Shaking my head, I turn on the cold water and splash some on my face. I could be making a mountain out of a mole hill, here. Maybe Trace is just in a good mood this morning, and it has nothing to do with me. Or maybe it does, but his feelings are strictly platonic in nature.

That would make more sense, right? That he just wants to be friends? I mean, *look* at him.

He could pretty much have any woman he wants. Why would he be interested in a short, rounded hot mess like me?

Chapter
Sixteen

Trace

“**W**as it something I did?” I ask Willow as we watch Keegan disappear into the back with a frown.

Willow groans and closes her eyes. “I think that might’ve been my fault.”

“Why do you say that?” I ask, turning a narrowed gaze on her.

“She told me what you did for her yesterday, and I may have tried to convince her it means something more. That you’d never done anything like that for anyone.” She pauses and cocks her head. “You really took her on a tour of the house?”

“It’s no big deal,” I say roughly despite the burning in my cheeks.

“If you say so, brother,” she quips with her signature eye roll, then pins me with a serious stare. “Just so you know, I wholeheartedly approve. She’s obviously good for you, and I think you could be good for her, too.”

My first instinct is to make some snide comment about not needing my baby sister’s approval, but I bite it back. If I’m

being honest with myself, I actually like that she approves of Keegan. I've gone over the reasons why we wouldn't work several times, but I've also already admitted to myself I want her despite all that. Having Willow give her stamp of approval only reinforces that I'm making the right decision here.

As if she's reading my mind, Willow says, "I know you like her. And I know you're only really holding back because she'll be leaving in a few weeks. But, Trace, you do know it's okay to have a casual, no-strings fling with her, right? You're both adults. Sure, you grew up in the olden days when such things were frowned upon in polite society, but—"

"Shut your trap," I cut in with a growl, making Willow laugh.

"Seriously, I think you should go for it," she says, her voice softer than before. "Just make sure you talk and both agree to keep it light and casual so nobody ends up getting hurt."

I watch her as she turns and pours the cup of coffee Keegan never got around to making for me. When she brings it back and hands it over, I spin on a heel and walk away without uttering a word.

"Think about what I said," Willow calls out to my retreating back, and I wave a hand over my head as a response.

Leaving Moonstone Mystic, I cross the street and head down the sidewalk toward the inn. My mind is racing, replaying the whole scene with Keegan, Willow's interruption, and our conversation after Keegan ran away.

And she did run.

What does that mean? If Willow was right, and Keegan was reacting to her insistence that I like her, did she pull that

little Houdini act because she doesn't feel the same and needed to escape?

My jaw tightens as I let myself into the office and head for my desk. I don't think that's it. Keegan was flirting with me. I know it.

I guess there's a chance she considers her flirting harmless, and having me actually flirt back scared her. She just had her heart broken, after all. Hell, it broke twice. Once by her douche of an ex, and then again by her best friends.

I'm sure she's feeling fragile after all that, so maybe the thought of starting something with me, no matter how casual we agree to keep it, frightens her.

Hell, it scares the shit out of me.

Sure, I've had flings and one-night stands. That's pretty much *all* I have. But there's a tiny voice deep inside telling me that no matter my intentions, Keegan Carpenter is going to burrow her way under my skin.

That she already has.

And it's not just my physical attraction to her, which is there in spades. I had a good time with her yesterday. Seeing that joy in her eyes when I took her to the house. Our text messages. Her sassy comebacks and sweet smiles.

The more time I spend around her, the more time I *want* to spend around her.

I blow out a quiet sigh. Maybe starting something with her *is* a bad idea. I've never had my heart broken by a woman. And at my age, I was sure it's impossible.

But if I allow myself to get closer to Keegan, I can see it happening.

She has the power to steal my heart and take it with her when she leaves Evening Shade for good.

I just need to decide, should I throw caution to the wind and go for it, if the reward would be worth the risk.

Chapter

Seventeen

Keegan

It's finally Friday, and it's been a great week.

I like working with Willow, and she always manages to keep things interesting. She's been trying to teach me to read tea leaves, but honestly, the only thing I see is, well, tea leaves. She's taught me about crystals and the properties they hold, how to use divining rods, and how to meditate to find the answers I seek.

I'm having so much fun, I don't have the heart to tell her I'm certain it's all a bunch of mumbo-jumbo. She's earnest in her beliefs and abilities, but she also laughs at herself when she realizes she's being off-the-charts kooky.

I've never had a friend like her. Completely selfless. Positive and encouraging, always. Affectionate, giving out hugs like they're a necessary way to start each day.

I love her so much, I don't know how I'm going to say goodbye when it's time for me to go.

Only six weeks left.

I've already decided that wherever I end up when this is over, I'll be coming back for regular visits. And Willow has

promised to come visit me, too.

And Trace? Well, things have settled into a casual familiarity. We text every day, but the messages are playful and light. Acquaintance-type stuff. He comes in for his coffee every morning. We smile and make small talk, but there's been no mention of that awkward scene we had Monday morning when I ran and hid in the bathroom.

Each time I see him or we text, I feel a little more comfortable with him. Like we're settling into a friendship that's simple and drama-free.

And honestly, I'm not really sure how I feel about it. Of course, it's a good thing. I do like him and I want to be friends. But on the other hand, I still get butterflies in my stomach the moment my eyes land on him. I feel hot when he smiles or laughs.

And my lady bits squee with excitement when he pins me with that dark gaze, his eyes almost seeming to undress me before he shakes his head and reverts to friendly-yet-uninterested Trace.

As if I've conjured him, the man who's occupied most of my headspace all week walks through the door. I smile brightly at him from behind the counter, and his steps stutter before he regains his stride and heads straight for me.

"Ready to try something sweet and creamy today?" I ask, then flinch as the innuendo in my words occurs to me.

Trace just laughs, though, and shakes his head. "My usual, please."

"Bor-ing," I sing-song, hoping the joke will cover my nervous reaction to my own snafu.

When I turn back to hand Trace his cup of black coffee, I find him staring at me. Hard. A shiver tiptoes down my spine, then a stronger one follows it as I hand him the cup and his fingers brush against mine in the process.

His pink tongue peeks out to wet his lips, and my heart skips a beat at the sight of it. *Jesus*. What is wrong with me?

“Hey,” he says, his voice so quiet, I almost don’t hear it. Then he clears his throat, adding, “Can I take you out to dinner tonight?”

Holy shit. Did he just ask me out?

I think he did, but what does it mean? Is it a date? Or will it just be two friends sharing a meal together?

I realize he’s still waiting for me to answer, and I shake my head as I say, “Yes.”

His lips curl up the tiniest bit, yet even that small smile reaches his eyes as he nods in response.

“Hey, what’s going on?”

My feet leave the floor as Willow’s voice startles the shit out of me. A tiny squeak bursts through my lips at the same time, and Willow looks at me like I’ve lost my mind before turning that gaze on her brother.

He just smirks, turns his gaze to me, and says, “Great. I’ll pick you up at eight.”

With one last nod, he turns and walks out. As I watch him go, Willow’s hand clamps around my forearm and spins me toward her.

“What was that?” she demands, her eyes wide with surprise.

My mouth opens and closes twice, then I shrug, saying, “He asked me out to dinner.”

“Finally,” she squeals, her face lighting up with glee.

“What do you mean, finally?” I ask with an arched brow.

“Girl, he’s been wanting to ask you out all week,” she says with firm conviction.

“How do you know? Has he talked about me?”

“Not exactly,” she admits, then steels her spine. “But I’m his sister, and I *know* him.”

“Okay,” I say, drawing the word out in disbelief.

“Trust me, Keegan. This is a *good* thing. And it’s definitely a *date*.”

How did Willow know I was questioning that? Maybe she *does* have some psychic witch powers.

And if that’s the case, she might be right. Maybe this is a date, and the start of something different.

I smile so big, my cheeks strain with it. I can’t wait for tonight!



AFTER SHOWERING, shaving, and shampooing, I slip into a pair of yoga pants and a t-shirt to blow dry my hair and apply my makeup. I plan to get dressed at the very last minute so there’s zero chance I’ll get the dress I plan to wear tonight dirty. I want to look perfect.

I want *everything* to be perfect.

As I finish drying my hair into fat curls and shut off the blow dryer, there's a knock at the front door. I tap the screen of my phone to check the time in a panic, thinking I'd somehow lost track, but it's only seven-thirty. Trace said he'd pick me up at eight.

Despite not being anywhere near ready, I can't fight the smile on my face as I walk toward the front door. Gripping the handle, I turn it and pull the door open, saying, "You're early."

I punctuate the words with a gasp as I catch sight of the person on my doorstep. It's not Trace.

"Pressley?" I breathe, taking in her tear-stained face and curled-forward posture. "What are you doing here?"

"Can I please come in?" she asks, her voice thin and reedy. "I really need to talk to you."

I stare at her for a long moment, tempted to slam the door in her face, but she looks so desperate, I can't bring myself to do it. At her core, Pressley isn't a bad person. She made some horrible choices where I'm concerned, sure, but she's nothing like Madison and Sloan.

Sucking in a deep breath, I take a step back and motion for her to come in.

"Thank you. Thank you," she whispers through her tears as she hurries in like she's afraid I might change my mind.

She stops in the middle of the living room and nibbles on a cuticle while she waits for me to close the door and join her there. I motion for her to sit in one of the chairs while I take the couch. Once we're comfortable, she blinks rapidly like she's trying to keep her eyes from leaking again. Then, sniffing delicately, she squares her shoulders and stiffens her spine.

“I came here to apologize and try to explain,” she says slowly, then relaxes a bit when I don’t jump in with an argument and an order to get out. “I should have told you the second I found out. It was the day Carter broke things off with you. I didn’t even know, yet, and I got to the boutique early that day and overheard Madison and Sloan talking about how Carter ended your relationship and how Madison had been sleeping with him for months. I didn’t know before that moment. I swear. I was shocked, to say the least, and when Madison realized what I overheard, she threatened to fire me if I told anyone, especially you.”

She pauses to let me digest that information. Madison owns a bougie boutique in downtown Seattle, and Pressley has been managing the place for her for the last several years. She’s worked her ass off to make that place a success in hopes that Madison would one day let her buy in and become a full partner. Pressley has big dreams of opening more locations and turning what started as a tiny boutique into a national chain.

Being fired and having all of her hard work go down the drain would be devastating for Pressley. As much as it pains me, I can understand why she’d be hesitant to cross Madison, even for me.

“But that’s not all,” Pressley goes on when I don’t speak. “She convinced me that you’d hate me for telling you. That our friend group would dissolve because of it, and losing your best friends on top of your boyfriend and your job would break you. That you might...hurt yourself.”

“What?” I bark, finally breaking my silence. “I would never.”

“I know,” she says, her voice turning pleading, “but at the time, I was so upset, it kind of made sense. She played on my worst fears and my desire to make everyone around me happy. Convinced me you’d be better off not knowing, and together, we’d get you through the rough times. I didn’t know what to do, so I just went along with it. I know it was wrong. I’m so sorry, Keegs.”

Threats. Emotional blackmail.

Yep. It checks out. Sounds like something right out of Madison’s playbook.

“Give me a minute,” I say, pushing myself up from the couch.

I head back into the bathroom and grab my phone from where I left it on the counter. Biting my lip, I pull up my text thread with Trace. My thumbs hover over the screen for a few beats, then I sigh.

It has to be done.

Me: Please don't hate me, but I have to cancel for tonight. Pressley just showed up on my doorstep, and she's a wreck. I need to stay here with her so we can work everything out between us. Rain check?

I get a response almost immediately.

Wolf Daddy: I completely understand, and I'm going to hold you to that rain check.

Me: Tomorrow night?

Wolf Daddy: It's a date.

Energy surges through my chest as I read those three little words. It’s a *date*.

I'm smiling as I walk back into the living room, and when I look at Pressley, she's watching me with hope in her eyes.

"Sorry about that," I say. "I had to cancel my date."

"A date? What?" she says quickly. "Oh, no, Keegan. I'm so sorry. My timing is apparently terrible."

"It's okay," I say. "We rescheduled for tomorrow. Did you bring any luggage with you?"

She nods slowly. "I didn't want to assume, but I brought a few things on the off chance you decided to forgive me. I finally told Madison to go fuck herself and quit my job at the boutique, so I don't have anywhere to be for a while."

"You did what?" I ask, my eyes wide.

I honestly don't know what shocks me more—Pressley quitting her job or actually standing up to Madison and cussing her out.

"It felt so good," she says on a rough exhale, and I don't think I've ever been prouder of anyone in my life.

I jerk my head toward the door. "Go get your things. You can stay here as long as you want."

Pressley leaps to her feet and rushes toward me. I woof as she slams into me, the impact knocking the breath from my lungs. Wrapping my arms around her, I hold onto her tightly as she starts to sob again, her tears soaking my t-shirt.

"Sorry," she says on a laugh when she finally pulls away. Taking my hands into hers, she squeezes them and says, "Thank you for giving me another chance. I've been so heartsick over this whole thing and my part in it. I love you so much."

“I love you, too,” I say, my own eyes stinging with emotion.

I jerk her back in for another hug, and we stay that way until both of us are cried out. Pressley finally goes out to get her suitcase, and I grab some ice cream I stashed in the back of the freezer for emergency purposes.

She changes into some comfy clothes, and we sit on the couch together, eating ice cream and talking until all the hurt is gone and there’s nothing left but love and friendship. It’s like a missing piece inside me snaps back into place, making me feel a little more whole.

And fuck, it feels good.

Chapter
Eighteen

Trace

“**A**nd so we spent the whole night just hanging out and getting reacquainted without the dark clouds of Madison and Sloan hanging over us. It was really...nice.”

Taking my eyes off the road for the hundredth time since I picked Keegan up, I look over at her. She's staring through the windshield with a soft smile on her lips, and I try to swallow around the lump in my throat. Again.

I can't help it. She looks even more beautiful tonight than she usually does, her hair falling in fat curls down her back, her blue eyes popping from between dark lashes, and her lips glossed in shiny pink.

Her dress matches her lips, the low-cut neckline showing off more cleavage than I've seen from her before. I fight the urge to dip my eyes to it and instead look back at the road.

“That's really great,” I say. “I'm glad you two cleared the air. She sounds like she'd be a good friend.”

I don't know if that's true, but I'm hoping it is. If this is some trick those women planned to somehow suck Keegan

back into their orbit, I don't know what I might do. And that scares me, a little.

I've never felt protective of a woman like this, except of course, where Willow is concerned. But she's my sister. Protecting her is a given.

But Keegan? I don't know when it happened. I honestly think I might completely lose my shit if anyone were to deliberately try to deceive or hurt her in any way.

"She is one of the good ones," Keegan says, and I see her turn toward me in my periphery. "She's always been too easily manipulated, though. She has these massive people-pleaser tendencies, and people like Madison tend to use it against her. If nothing else, this whole ordeal has taught her to stand her ground when it's really important."

"And her friendship with you is important to her," I reply, then look over to see her nod.

"I think it is," she says. "And hers is important to me. She's going to stay with me at the lodge for a while. She needs a break from the city, and since she quit her job, nothing is holding her there."

"Sounds like you're finally getting the friend-vacation you expected when you came to Evening Shade."

"I guess I am," she says, and when I glance over, her smile is as bright as the sun.

I smile back at her, and when my traitorous gaze drops to her chest, I clear my throat and snap my eyes back to the road. I think I hear her chuckle, but the sound is mostly drowned out by the rev of the engine and the soft music playing through the speakers.

When we drive past the Evening Shade city limits sign, Keegan sits up a little straighter and looks through her window.

“Where are we going?” she asks.

“Jonas Hill. It’s slightly bigger than Evening Shade, and there’s an Italian restaurant there that makes the most delicious alfredo sauce you’ve ever tasted.”

“And there’s less chance of someone howling or calling you that nickname that shall not be mentioned between us ever again?” she asks, and I can hear the mischievous grin in her voice.

“That, too,” I say, fighting the urge to smile, myself.

Jonas Hill isn’t as charming as Evening Shade, but Keegan smiles as we pull into town, her eyes darting around as if she’s trying to soak in every ounce of it and commit it to memory. Her youth is showing in that exuberance, but for once, it doesn’t make me feel like a lecherous old man.

For once, it makes me feel young, too.

When I pull the truck into the parking lot at Vincenzo’s, Keegan sits forward, peering at the building’s façade with a wide smile.

“It’s gorgeous,” she breathes, and I look at the restaurant with fresh eyes.

Hanging plants with long, trailing vines decorate the wide front porch, and there are several rocking chairs spotting the deck beneath a protective, green-and-red-striped overhang. A large, stained-glass window sports the business’s name, and it glows like a beacon in the darkness, backlit by the soft lighting inside.

“Wait,” I say when she reaches for the handle on her door.
“Just wait.”

Swinging open my door and jumping down, I slam it shut before jogging around to open Keegan’s door for her. She takes my offered hand with a smile and hops down, and a hiss whistles through my teeth when her hip brushes against me in the process.

“Everything okay?” she asks, worry lines forming in her usually-smooth forehead.

“All good,” I say, closing her door and using my key fob to lock the truck.

I hold out an arm, inviting her to precede me, and she smiles as she moves toward the entrance. I shove my hands into my pockets and fall into step beside her.

I can’t touch her. Not even innocently.

Because my body is going a little haywire, and if I press a palm to her back, I don’t know if I’ll be able to stop it from sliding down to that delicious-looking ass. And fuck, I don’t want to be *that guy*. The guy who cops a feel at the beginning of a date like some skeezy asshole.

I’m *not* that guy. Ever. But tonight? Tonight, I can see myself throwing all caution and morals to the wind. I can see myself touching Keegan like she’s *mine*.

As we approach the door, I take a quick double-step forward and grasp the handle. Pulling it open, I motion for her to go inside with a smile and a slight bow of my head.

“Such a gentleman,” she says in a teasing voice. “And he *smiles*, too. Don’t worry, I won’t tell anyone. It might ruin the whole ‘town grump’ persona you’ve got going on.”

“I appreciate your discretion,” I tease back, and her soft, husky chuckle makes all the hairs on my body stand on end.

Jesus.

Admitting to myself that I like Keegan and am physically attracted to her seems to have opened the floodgates. I’ve lost all control, and everything she does and says sparks a chain reaction in my body. I’ve been half-hard since I picked her up at the lodge, and if she keeps flirting with me like this, I’m going to embarrass myself in my favorite restaurant.

And if Chef Enzo has to ask me not to come back to his restaurant because I walked through the dining room with a raging hard-on, I may never live it down.

“Nice to see you again, Mr. Bardin. I have your table ready,” the hostess says as she grabs two menus and leads us toward the back of the dining room.

Keegan falls into line behind her, and I take up the rear. My gaze drops to Keegan’s ass of its own accord, and I stifle a needy groan.

I give myself a mental slap and try to focus on my surroundings, but it’s too late. My toe catches on something, and I’m going down before I can take my next breath. A shout bursts through my lips as I fall, followed quickly by a grunt as my body slams onto the carpeted floor. There’s a collective gasp from the dining room at large, and I groan as I push myself back up.

“I’m so sorry,” a feminine voice says, and I look over to see a woman picking her purse up from the floor to hang on the back of her chair. “I didn’t realize it had fallen off.”

“It’s okay,” I grumble, then turn back to see the hostess and Keegan staring at me from a few feet away.

The former looks horrified, like she's afraid I might sue the place, or something. And the latter? Well, that one looks like she's trying her best not to dissolve in a fit of laughter. I narrow my eyes at her as I approach, and she takes a long, shaky breath.

"Are...are you okay?" she asks, obviously trying not to let her humor show.

"I'm fine," I say, moving around the table the hostess has stopped at to hold Keegan's chair for her.

Keegan slides into the chair with a soft word of thanks, and the hostess waits for me to take my seat before informing us our waiter will be with us shortly. She scurries away, and I watch Keegan as her eyes dart everywhere but at me.

"Go ahead," I sigh, and bright laughter peals out of her.

"Oh, my God," she says, wiping a stray tear from her eye. "I'm so sorry. I'm a horrible person for laughing at you like that."

"You really are *the worst*," I say with a hint of sarcasm.

"The worst of the worst," she agrees, her laughter fading into a soft smile. "You didn't hurt yourself, did you?"

"Just my ego," I admit, and her smile widens.

"Well, if it's any consolation, you still looked hot even when you were falling flat on your face."

"It is, actually," I say, then puff out my chest and deepen my voice. "So, you think I'm hot?"

Keegan rolls her eyes dramatically. "Seems that ego is just fine, after all."

I laugh with her, and fuck, it feels good. I haven't had an enjoyable night with someone like this in I don't know how long. I feel...relaxed.

The waiter arrives with a wine list, and Keegan and I both order a glass. We chat about the menu, and when I recommend the chicken alfredo with salad and bread, she readily agrees. After we have our wine and our waiter takes our order to the chef, I lean back in my chair and watch Keegan over the rim of my glass.

She's telling me about something funny that happened with Willow at work, and her animated movements have my lips curling upward. She's so vibrant. So full of life. Once again, I can feel her exuberance rubbing off on me.

God, it just feels *good* to be in her presence.

Her ex-boyfriend was a fucking idiot to let her go.

Oh, well. His loss is my gain. If he hadn't, she wouldn't have come to Evening Shade. We never would've met, and I wouldn't be sitting here wishing I could kiss that sassy, beautiful mouth of hers.

"Are you even listening to me?"

"What?" I say with a start, then drop my shoulders. "Sorry."

"I'm that boring, huh?" she asks with an exaggerated frown.

"No. You're just so pretty, I keep getting distracted."

"And you're forgiven," she says with a breathy laugh, her cheeks darkening with a pink blush.

Our food arrives before I can come up with a clever response. The waiter places our plates of pasta and salad in

front of us, deposits a basket of bread in the center of the table, then offers us some freshly grated parmesan. Keegan nods enthusiastically, and he grates the cheese over her already cheesy meal. I decline with a small wave over my steaming plate, and he nods, then departs.

Keegan plucks a piece of garlic bread from the basket and bites into it with a quiet groan. The sound makes my dick twitch, and I silently berate it for being obnoxious. I watch as she closes her eyes and chews, then drops the remainder to her plate. Grabbing her fork, she twirls some pasta around the tines before lifting it to her lips. She pauses for a moment, inhaling its delicious scent, then pushes the bite into her mouth with another groan.

Fuck. I'm glad she likes it. This place was obviously a good choice. But if she keeps making those incredibly sexy sounds, I really *am* going to embarrass myself worse than I already have.

I manage to keep up with the conversation as we eat, but Keegan continues to make those little noises with each bite, driving my self-control to the very edge of its restraint. When she hums and sets her fork down, she finally seems to notice my discomfort.

“Is everything okay?” she asks, leaning slightly forward. “You have a weird look on your face.”

My eyes close as I shake my head. When I reopen them, I spear her with a heady look.

“All those little noises you've been making haven't left me...unaffected,” I admit.

Honesty is the best policy, right?

Keegan's mouth forms an "O" as her cheeks flush. She presses her lips together, then parts them as her pink tongue darts out to moisten them. A groan vibrates in my chest at the sight of it, and her eyes widen.

Keeping that blue gaze locked on me, she picks up her abandoned fork, stabs a leftover chunk of chicken, and lifts it to her lips. Her pupils dilate a bit as she pushes the morsel into her mouth, removes the fork, and lets her eyes roll back as a moan vibrates up her throat.

My hand shoots up to gain our waiter's attention, and I mouth the word "check" to him. When I look back at Keegan, her eyes have darkened to a deep indigo, and her chest is heaving a bit as she breathes.

"Do you want dessert?" I ask her as an afterthought, and thank fuck, she shakes her head.

Our waiter arrives with the check, and after checking the total and seeing it's only seventy bucks, I pluck a hundred-dollar bill from my wallet and toss it down. I'm up and out of my chair in an instant, moving around to pull Keegan's chair out for her.

Taking her hand, I pull her from the restaurant and across the parking lot, careful not to move too fast. Her short little legs have to work double time to keep up with my long strides, and the last thing I want to do is make her uncomfortable before I even get the chance to kiss her.

When we reach my truck, I move to open her door, but she spins and leans back against it. Her fingers fist in my shirt, yanking me down to her level as she pushes up on her toes to meet me halfway.

Then our lips touch, and the entire world fades away save for the feel of her against me. Gripping her hip in one hand, I push the other through her hair to curl my fingers around the back of her neck. Her lips part, and I waste no time dipping my tongue inside to get my first taste of her.

And fuck if she doesn't taste even more delectable than I'd imagined.

I shuffle forward, pinning her against the door with my body as my mouth works hers over, licking and nipping and swallowing every sexy noise she makes. My cock is rock hard against her stomach as she tugs harder at my shirt, trying to pull me even closer.

Breaking off the kiss, I take a few beats to catch my breath as I stare into Keegan's liquid eyes. She's panting, too, just as affected as I am, which drives my need even higher.

"Come back to my place?" I whisper, then dip my head to kiss the side of her neck before filling my lungs with her flowery scent.

"Yes, please," she says, and I lean back to meet her eyes again as I chuckle.

"We have to get into the truck, first."

"Oh. Sorry," she says, then releases her grip on my shirt so I can step back.

Pulling her with me, I reach around her to pop open the door. Helping her inside, I take the liberty of buckling her seatbelt for her just so I can lean in and peck another kiss against her mouth. That quick peck progresses quickly as she pushes her tongue between my lips, and we end up kissing for several moments before I finally break away and close the door.

And as I jog around to the driver's side, my smile is so wide, it hurts.

Chapter
Nineteen

Keegan

Neither of us says a word as Trace pulls the truck out of the parking lot and onto the highway that leads back to Evening Shade. My entire body is vibrating, and I'm here for it.

Kissing Trace was unlike any other kiss I've ever had. His grip on me was firm and warm, and his hungry lips felt like they wanted to devour me whole. Like he was starved for it. For *me*.

As starved for me as I've been for him.

I squeeze my thighs together in an attempt to relieve some of the pressure in my lady bits, and Trace's hand lands on my thigh, his fingers curling over it to squeeze lightly. I suck in a sharp breath and fight the urge to grab his wrist and push his hand up beneath the skirt of my dress.

I'm asking myself why I'm fighting it instead of taking what I want when Trace speaks.

"We should probably discuss what, exactly, this is," he says, his voice low and quiet.

I look up from his hand to meet his gaze. “What do you mean?”

“I mean,” he says, then pauses like he’s trying to form the right words. “You’ll be leaving, eventually. Going back to your real life. So, if we’re going to do this, we need to be realistic. We have to keep it casual. We both have to remember that this can’t be serious so that when you *do* leave, no one gets hurt.”

My first instinct is to argue, to tell him we could make anything work if we both want it badly enough, but I bite my tongue to hold the words inside. He wouldn’t be starting this conversation if he wanted more than a casual fling. And if that’s all he wants...fuck, I’ll take it.

I can do this.

“We should make some ground rules,” I say slowly with a single nod.

“What kind of rules?” he asks.

“No anal,” I say with a perfectly straight face.

Trace gasps, his wide gaze moving from the road to me. My serious façade crumbles, then bright laughter pours out of me. Trace’s hand squeezes my thigh tightly, and I squeal and squirm as I try to dislodge his grip.

“Don’t,” I laugh. “That tickles.”

He eases his grip, but doesn’t move his hand. I settle down as my laughter fades, then ever-so-slightly spread my thighs. I hear Trace take a quick breath, then his pinky slowly brushes up my inner thigh, making me gasp with pleasure.

“Rule number one,” I say between heavy breaths. “This thing between us has an expiration date. When I leave Evening

Shade, it's over.”

Trace's hand tightens on my flesh for an instant before his grip eases and his hand slips an inch higher. “Agreed.”

“Rule number two,” I say, spreading my legs a little wider in invitation. “If any feelings start to develop on either side, see rule number one.”

“Sounds good,” he grunts, his hand moving again, only stopping when his pinky brushes against the damp material of my underwear.

He swears under his breath, but keeps his eyes on the road.

“Rule number three,” I say, lifting my hips slightly to encourage more light touching. “Even though it's casual, it must be monogamous. No seeing other people.”

I hold my breath as I wait for him to argue that one. But he only nods as his eyes remain on the road and his finger brushes against me through my underwear a little more firmly.

“And rule number four,” I groan as he increases the pressure right over my clit. “No falling in love with me, Trace Bardin.”

That last bit comes out as he pulls the truck into the inn's lot and parks in front of the office. Pulling his hand away from my thigh, he turns off the truck, unbuckles his seatbelt, and twists to lean over the center console. His right hand tangles in my hair, pulling me closer for a ravaging kiss as his left hand pushes between my legs. I groan as he strokes me through my underwear, his touch firm and the motion steady and in tempo with the movements of his tongue against mine.

After several long moments, he breaks away, saying, “Deal.”

It takes me a moment to recall what he's agreeing to, and before I can respond, he's out of the truck and dashing around to my side to open my door for me. Helping me down, he closes the door behind me and takes my hand.

When we're upstairs and behind the closed door of his apartment, I take a moment to look around. The place is small, but tidy. There's a tiny living room and an even smaller kitchen in the main space. An open door reveals a bedroom filled to its limits with a king-sized bed, and another door leads to a small bathroom.

When I finish my perusal and look back at Trace, he's staring at me with obvious hunger in his dark eyes.

"Can I get you something to drink?" he asks, taking a slow step toward me.

I shake my head, and his lips curve up into a feline smile as he closes the distance between us. His hands grip my hips, taking only a moment to knead them with a moan before he lifts me up to his level in a single, rough motion.

I squeal because...when has any man ever picked me up? Never. That's when.

But Trace lifts me like I weigh no more than a rag doll, and my legs automatically wrap around his waist as he spins and heads for the bedroom. His mouth presses against my throat, licking and nipping as we move, then my back hits a soft mattress. Trace stretches over me, his hips settling between my legs as his lips and tongue blaze a path across my collarbone and down the cleft between my breasts.

I can feel his hard cock pressing against me, and my hips buck as I rub myself against it. Trace grabs my hip with one hand and pushes down as he lifts his head to meet my gaze.

“If you keep doing that, I’m never going to last,” he says in a thick, gruff voice.

I nod as a thrill shoots through me at the admission. Knowing Trace, who’s older, wiser, and most likely more experienced, is having trouble controlling himself with me? That’s fantasy file gold, right there. I tuck that little nugget away to pull out later when I’m alone and refocus on the here and now.

And right here and now, Trace Bardin is pulling the neck of my dress *and* my bra down to reveal a single breast. I close my eyes as his breath wafts over the tip, making it even harder than it already was. A second later, my spine is bowing, and I’m gasping for air as his hot mouth devours me, sucking that nipple hard and deep as his tongue rolls around the sensitive bud.

“Trace,” I moan, and he runs his tongue over every inch of my breast before lifting off me.

“You have on too many clothes,” he says when I look at him wide-eyed for an explanation.

I lift and shift my weight to help him as he tugs my dress up and over my head. All it takes is that few brief moments for me to get inside my own head, and I suddenly feel exposed and nervous.

How wide do my hips look in the underwear I chose while laying down? I made sure they looked good while standing in front of my mirror, but gravity works differently when a person is stretched out on their back.

And Jesus, how did I not notice how bright it was in here before? Trace is going to see every stretch mark on my thighs, stomach, and ass. Will they gross him out like they did...

No. Not thinking of that asshat right now.

Trace makes some noise deep in his chest that snaps me back to the present. I lift my head to locate him beside the bed, looking down at me with absolute focus. I watch as his gaze slides over every inch of my body like he's cataloguing a series of screenshots to pull out and pore over later.

"You're so fucking perfect," he grits out between clenched teeth before he rips his shirt over his head and tosses it aside. "Take your bra off, baby."

I obey without question as he unbuckles his belt and pulls it free of his pants in one smooth motion. As I toss the stretchy garment aside and fall back against the mattress, Trace continues to eat me alive with his eyes as he ditches his pants and underwear.

My fingers move to my nipple, plucking it as my eyes travel down the length of him. His shoulders are broad, his pecs defined, and while his abdomen is muscular, it's not cut like a washboard with zero body fat. No, Trace has some meat on his bones, and I'd like to gnaw on—

"What the fuck is that?" I squeal before I can stop myself.

His entire body stiffens as he rears back, saying, "What?"

"That," I say, pointing toward the mammoth appendage between his thighs.

"My cock?" he asks, looking thoroughly confused as his hand wraps around the hard length.

"Jesus, your fingers barely touch. No fucking way are you putting that ginormous thing anywhere near my poor, unsuspecting vagina," I say, scooching up the bed on my back.

I'm only half-joking as a rush of equal parts fear and anticipation floods my system. He's fucking huge, much bigger than any cock I've experienced before. There's no way it's going to fit.

No.

Fucking.

Way.

Trace laughs at the comical horror on my face, releases his cock and wraps his fingers around my ankles.

"I'll tell you what." He pulls me back toward him, then releases me to peel my underwear down my legs. Cupping my mound, he grinds against my clit with the heel of his palm. "I'm going to lick and suck this sweet pussy until you scream my name. Then you'll come again on my fingers. You'll be so drenched and so relaxed, my *ginormous* cock will slide right in, but if at any time you feel uncomfortable with it, say the word, and we'll stop. No questions. No complaints. Deal?"

"Deal," I groan as pleasure floods through me, whatever fear I felt forgotten.

Moving his hands to my thighs, he pushes them apart and dips down to blow a cool breath over my sex. I shiver in response, then groan as his tongue glides along my slit.

"Fuck, you taste good," he murmurs against my flesh as his fingers spread me open.

"Oh, shit," I gasp when his tongue finds my clit, stroking it in lazy circles.

He's in no hurry to finish me off and get to his own pleasure. Hell, if the humming noises he's making down there are any indication, tasting me *is* for his own pleasure.

Another first for me.

Carter used to lap like he couldn't—

Fuck. Stop.

There's no room for thoughts of that fucker here.

“You okay?” Trace lifts his head and asks like he could feel my lady bits recoiling at the mere thought of my ex.

“Yep. All good. Don't stop,” I say between choppy breaths.

He dives back in without further question or comment, his lips sucking at my clit gently as he slides a single, thick finger deep inside me. Pumping the digit slowly, he works me over with his tongue. My body tenses as my orgasm builds, and as if he can feel the energy coiling inside me, Trace pulls his finger free and adds a second before pushing back in.

The stretching sensation is almost too much, and that slow build I had going on skyrockets into an explosion that has me screaming toward the ceiling. Trace continues to lap at my clit as moisture floods my channel, allowing his fingers to slip in and out easily.

I have the urge to push him away, my over-sensitized bits begging for a break. But that feeling quickly passes as another orgasm starts to build inside me.

Yes. Already.

I can't fucking believe it, either, but this man and his magic mouth have me gasping for air as a ball of tension builds in my lower abdomen. My hips rock in time with his movements, his fingers stretching me deliciously with each pass. Then he curls his fingertips and hits a spot deep inside

me that has my entire torso coming off the mattress with a shout.

“Oh, my fuck. Shit balls,” I gasp as I fall back, the waves of a second, stronger orgasm wreaking havoc through my body.

Did he just...

Yes. *Fuck*. Trace found my G-spot, that mystical, mysterious sexual holy grail I was certain I didn't possess. Lord knows, no one's ever had any luck finding it before now.

Yet *another* first.

How am I supposed to abide by the rules and not fall in love with this man? I already love his tongue and his fingers. It wouldn't be a huge leap to fall for the rest of him.

Shaking my head to clear the errant thoughts, I open my eyes as Trace's weight lifts from the bed. Lifting my head, I see him staring down at my pleasure pouch...

Ew. Where did that come from? No.

...at my lady parts with a pleased smile on his face. His hand is wrapped around his cock again, and my mouth waters as he strokes it slowly. I can practically *see* him adding this moment to his own fantasy files, and fuck if that isn't hotter than hell.

I watch him move around to the side of the bed, his eyes on me the entire time, before he leans over to yank open his night stand drawer. Dipping his hand inside, he pulls out a condom and jiggles it.

“Do you think you're ready to try now?” he asks as he moves back to the end of the bed.

Licking my lips, I keep my gaze rooted to his oversized appendage as I nod. “Yes. I think I am.”

“Good,” he says, and my heart flutters in my chest at the implied “girl” in the statement.

I feel like he wanted to say it, but for some reason, felt the need not to. Like it might accentuate our age difference and that would somehow ruin the mood.

Hint: It wouldn't.

Not for me, at least. But maybe he has some kind of mental block when it comes to how much younger I am than him.

As I watch him rip open the condom wrapper with his teeth, pluck the latex ring out, and slowly roll it over his erection, I decide to let the matter go. For now. But we will be discussing it later.

Because, fuck, I *really* want to be his good girl.

Kink, unlocked.

Then, he's climbing over me and all thoughts flee, leaving me addled and excited. Trace was right. Those two unprecedented, glorious orgasms left me relaxed and ready, and I'm anxious to see how and *if* he can actually make that behemoth of a cock fit inside me.

Because if two fingers made me feel deliciously stretched and full, his cock should—

His mouth seals over mine, cutting off all thoughts as his tongue pushes between my lips. I can taste traces of myself on him, but his hand covering my breast and kneading it has my mind going blank again before I can decide how I feel about

that fact. His fingers pluck at my nipple, sending electricity streaking toward my core.

My legs spread wider to accommodate his hips as Trace nestles between my thighs. That anaconda between his legs presses against my entrance, and the tip slides in easily. A shudder races through Trace's body, and he breaks off our kiss to drop his face to the crook between my neck and shoulder. He's panting, hard, like it's taking every ounce of his strength to go slow and not just drive his cock home in one violent thrust.

Trace's fierce consideration lights some spark inside me. This isn't just about me. I want him to enjoy it, too, not spend the whole time worrying because of my mini freak-out when I first laid eyes on his giant erection.

I'll be fine.

No one's ever died from being impaled on a mega-cock, have they?

And if they have...what a way to go. Am I right?

Decision made, I tilt my hips upward to drive him a little deeper.

"Keegan," he grunts. "Don't."

Ignoring his command, I lift my feet and drive my heels into his ass cheeks, effectively opening myself to him even more as I apply pressure.

"You're killing me," he gasps as his cock slides in the tiniest bit further.

I'm not dead. And fuck, the way he's stretching me feels like...like...like I just won the God damn super-cock lottery.

"Deeper, Trace," I beg. "Please."

“Keegan,” he sighs, bucking his hips to drive himself in another inch.

“More,” I breathe, lifting my own hips again.

He groans, backs halfway out, then slams forward, filling me completely in one forceful motion. I’m pretty sure I black out for a moment, then wake to Trace’s rough breaths tickling my ear.

“Jesus Christ, you’re so fucking tight, baby,” he grits out in a strangled, hoarse voice.

I try to say, “I like it when you call me baby,” but I’m pretty sure it comes out in some extra-terrestrial language. Or maybe Pig Latin.

Then he starts to move, and even the most bizarre and irrational thoughts flee my head. There’s nothing left but the feeling of Trace’s cock filling me again and again. He pushes up onto his forearms, and I can feel him hovering over me as he pumps faster.

“Open your eyes and look at me, Keegan.”

My eyes pop open without my permission, and the look of pride on his face makes me glad they did.

“That’s it, baby,” he says. “I want to see those beautiful blues while you come all over my cock.”

Like those dirty, dirty words slithered down and found my heretofore undiscovered G-spot all on their own, I squeal and buck as my inner walls squeeze and pulse around Trace’s cock. And just like he instructed, I keep my eyes open and locked on his.

He smiles, then tenses as his own orgasm rockets through him. His cock jerks inside me as he slams forward and freezes

with a long, gravelly grunt. His head drops to my shoulder as he breathes through it, and I wrap my arms around him and hold him tightly against me.

“Oh, God,” I pant. “That was...you’re magnificent.”

“Right back at you, baby,” he huffs, turning his head to press his lips to my neck. “You’re stunning. Perfect in every way.”

Chapter
Twenty

Trace

I don't do this.

When I do happen to surrender to the pleasures of the flesh, it's outside of my hometown's city limits. In a motel room, or sometimes, at *her* place. Never mine.

And it's done when it's done. I quickly get the hell out before I'm coerced into some pillow talk with a side of post-coital snuggling.

But here I am, in my own bed with Keegan curled into my side, her hair tickling my chest as my fingers dance over the bare skin of her shoulder. She'd gotten up and attempted to get dressed while I was in the bathroom disposing of the condom, and I was the one who growled at her to get her ass back in bed, climbed in beside her, and pulled her against me.

I wasn't ready for this night to end. I'm *still* not.

And I don't know how I'm supposed to feel about that.

I'm certainly breaking the rules we set in the car on the way here. Holding her like this, refusing to even consider letting her go...it doesn't feel *casual*.

The thought vanishes from my mind as Keegan turns her head to press a light kiss to my chest. A shiver races through me at the gentle touch of her lips, sending the jolt straight to my cock. Flashes of the last hour scroll through my mind—her harsh breaths, the sexy sounds she made, the way her tight, slick pussy squeezed me with every single thrust.

My heart picks up its pace as my cock starts to swell, and I feel Keegan tense next to me. Without a word, she slides a palm down my abdomen, never pausing until she has a firm grip around the base of my rapidly growing erection.

I blow out a harsh breath as she loosens her fingers to stroke it. Up to the tip, light squeeze, then back down to the base before repeating the motion. I feel the urge to close my eyes, but I force them to remain open so I can watch the motion of her hand.

“Mm,” I hum, letting her know how good it feels without letting words shatter the moment.

As if that single sound gave her some kind of permission, she sits up, twists around, then leans over to lick the tip like an ice cream cone. My entire body shudders as I groan, and she does it again, this time starting at the base and licking a path upward before closing her lips over the tip and sucking it gently.

She pauses to take a breath, then closes her lips around me again, this time driving me deep into her mouth as her tongue laps at my shaft.

“God, that feels good,” I murmur, reaching out to touch the back of one creamy thigh.

My hand runs up and down her soft skin, curving around to the inside on the last pass. When my fingers find her slick

and swollen, a growl rumbles in my chest. Keegan moans in response, the vibration of it against my cock driving me a little nuts.

Grabbing her hips with both hands, I yank her up and over me, settling her knees on either side of my head. Her mouth pops off my cock with a startled yelp, and she struggles to scoot off me.

“Trace. What...?”

I tighten my grip, refusing to let her budge even an inch as my tongue darts out to tease her delicious entrance. She shivers and moans, then tenses before trying to move off me again.

“Wait. Wait,” she says. “Won’t I suffocate you?”

In response, I pull her down until she’s fully seated on my face. My tongue drives into her, pumping and flicking against her inner walls. I hear her mumble a few breathy expletives, then she’s no longer fighting, but pushing down harder to drive my tongue deeper.

God damn, this is hot. I can breathe when I’m dead.

Keegan lifts slightly off me, but as I move to stop her again, I realize she’s not trying to escape. She’s leaning over to push my cock back into her hot, wet mouth. Her back bows as she shifts her position again, stabilizing herself as she drives me closer and closer to the back of her throat with each thrust.

Her new position moves her clit right over my mouth, and I don’t waste a second attacking that sensitive nub with my tongue. Swirl and flick, over and over in a steady rhythm...or as steady as I can manage while her sweet, sassy mouth is working me over.

My balls tighten when she pushes me deeper than ever before, her throat clenching around the tip as it hits her gag reflex. My first instinct is to protect her from the discomfort. To tell her not so deep.

But she repeats the motion, and my thoughts scatter. Using my grip on her hips, I pull her down and wrap my lips around her clit. Giving it a long, hard suck, I feel Keegan tense just before she moans around my cock. Her release soaks my face, making me a little crazy as my hips pump upward without my permission.

Keegan takes me without recoil, and my own release fills her mouth. She swallows rapidly, and the suction sends pleasure spiraling through my body and out to each of my extremities.

Fuck. Am I dead? Is this heaven? If it is, I'm ready, God.

Keegan releases my softening cock, then moves to climb off me. This time I let her, and she flips around to curl back into my side. We lay there for a while, silent save for our harsh breaths and pounding hearts.

“Are you okay?” I ask finally, worried that I somehow hurt her tender throat with that single brutal thrust.

“I’m perfect,” she whispers back, and I slide away from her a few inches so I can turn onto my side and face her.

“You’ve never done that before?” I ask, truly curious after her panic when I first pulled her over me.

She shakes her head. “No one has ever tried. Or forced the issue.”

She gives me a light smile to let me know she’s joking, but hearing her say it like that fills me with a moment of regret.

“I’m sorry about that,” I say quickly. “I felt how wet you were from sucking my cock, and it drove me a little crazy. I needed to taste you. To feel you come on my face.”

She presses a palm to my cheek. “Don’t be sorry. I’m not. It was just...surprising.”

“Surprising?”

She shakes her head again, then sighs. “I always assumed that would never happen for me because of my size.”

My head jerks back, and my brow draws down in confusion. “What do you mean, your size? I’m a big guy, and you weren’t too short to reach.”

“I wasn’t talking about my height,” she murmurs, and it finally dawns on me.

She thinks she’s too heavy. I force myself not to scoff at the ridiculousness of that thought process. Her feelings and fears are valid to her, but that doesn’t mean I can’t try to disabuse her of the notion.

Reaching out, I wrap my arms around her and roll, bringing her with me until I’m flat on my back and she’s stretched over me. Sliding my hands down, I grip her ass and squeeze it with a satisfied moan.

“Listen to me, baby,” I say softly. “Your body is fucking perfect. Every part of you turns me on. And if I have to worship every inch of your soft, gorgeous flesh to prove it to you, I will.”

She blinks a few times like her eyes sting, then her lips slowly curve up into a sweet, brilliant smile.

“I might just need you to do that,” she says with a coy expression.

“Done,” I say, then flip us over so she’s beneath me. Pressing a soft kiss to her lips, I pull back and meet her sparkling eyes. “I hope you’re not tired. This is going to take me all night.”

Chapter

Twenty-One

Keegan

Pressley and I had plans to spend the day closed up in the lodge today, just hanging out and getting to know each other again on our own terms, without the oppressive influence of Madison and Sloan. I don't know if she heard me slink in at five this morning or not, but thankfully, she let me sleep instead of coercing me into getting up at a normal hour to get the day started.

I stumble out of my room around noon, and she waves me over to the couch where she has a whole snack buffet laid out on the coffee table. Grabbing a bottle of soda, she pours some into a plastic cup and wiggles it in my direction.

“A little late for coffee,” she says, “but the caffeine in this should get you going.”

“Thanks,” I say as I plop down next to her and take her offering.

“Long night?” she asks with a smirk.

“You could say that,” I murmur against the lip of the cup before I take a long drink.

“So the date went well,” she says, pulling her legs up and crossing them in front of her as she swivels to face me. “Tell me everything.”

She listens raptly as I tell her about dinner at Vincenzo’s. She swoons when I describe Trace’s chivalry. She laughs when I tell her about him tripping and falling. When I get to the part about Trace being turned on by the noises I made as I ate, Pressley squeals and presses a hand to her heart.

“It’s like a romcom movie,” she sighs.

“We decided to go back to his place,” I say, “but we made some ground rules before anything happened.”

“What kind of rules?” she asks, her brow quirking with confusion.

“Keeping it casual,” I answer. “I don’t live here. I’ll have to leave, eventually, so we just made everything clear so neither of us gets hurt.”

Pressley nods slowly. “And do you think you can both abide by those rules?”

“I think so,” I say slowly, remembering how adored Trace made me feel as he set out to prove how much he loves my body. Shaking my head, I meet her dubious gaze head-on. “Yes. Yes, we can keep it simple.”

“Okay,” she says with a firm nod as if she believes me more than *I* actually believe me. Then she cocks her head and gives me a sly smile. “Did you call him ‘Wolf Daddy’ in bed?”

“No,” I shout, drawing out the sound into a wolf’s howl, making Pressley burst into a fit of giggles. “Seriously though, he really hates it when people call him that.”

“Well, maybe you should drop the ‘wolf’ part and just call him ‘daddy.’ He’s old enough for that,” she says with another laugh.

Picking up the pillow behind me, I swing it at her head while shouting, “He is not! He’s not that much older than me.”

Pressley blocks the pillow assault, then spins to grab the pillow stuffed behind her back. I quickly set my cup of soda on the table, then scooch back with my own pillow ready to block her counter-attack.

It’s ridiculous. I know that. Like some raunchy scene from a male-written-and-directed porno movie. Grown women don’t pillow fight. Not in real life.

But as Pressley and I chase each other around the lodge, laughing until we’re crying and snotty as we try to pummel each other with couch cushions, I feel *alive*. I realize that this is what our friendship should’ve always been like.

We don’t care how we look. Neither of us will snub the other for being childish. There will be no pointed barbs between us meant to make each other feel small or insignificant. No blackmail photos or videos hastily snapped on camera phones.

We can just be ourselves. Our goofy, ridiculous, *happy* selves.

And when we finally tire out and plop down onto the couch, I look over at Pressley with a sigh. “You’re different.”

“We both are,” she replies softly.

“Why did we stay friends with them for so long?” I ask, leaning back to voice the question to the ceiling.

“I don’t know,” she says, the words slow and even. “At first, I just wanted to be like them. Classy. Sophisticated. Connected. And when I started working at the boutique with Madison, I could see a bright future in front of me. I thought we’d be partners one day, and I’d be on the same level as her.”

I turn my head to gaze at her. “You’re *so far* above her level, Pressley.”

“Thank you,” she whispers, then shakes her head as if to clear it. “I realized a while ago that Madison, and even Sloan, only kept me around as some kind of lackey. Someone to simp over them and make them feel superior. But I didn’t know how to get myself out of it. I didn’t want to waste all the years and work I put into making the boutique successful, and honestly, I didn’t want to be *alone*. Having asshole friends seemed better than no friends at all. Plus, with them, I had *you*.”

“I don’t know why I stuck around,” I admit when she finishes. “Laziness, maybe. I didn’t want to start over as a grown woman trying to make new friends. It’s *hard*.”

“But you did it,” she says. “You threw us all out of here like the badass you truly are.”

“I was mad,” I say, shaking my head. “I don’t know if I’ve ever been that mad before.”

“I should’ve told you,” she whispers. “I was weak. And terrified of what would happen when the truth finally came out.”

“You’re here,” I say. “You found your strength and faced your fear. That’s pretty badass, too.”

“Thanks for that,” she says with a sad smile. “It took a couple of weeks of soul searching, but I finally figured out that I didn’t need Madison and Sloan *or* their negativity in my life.

That I needed to cut out the toxic people and hold onto the good ones. People who encourage me to stick up for myself and lead by example. People like you.”

A fat tear rolls down her cheek with that last bit, and the sight of it as well as the crack in her voice sets off my own tears. We stare at each other for a moment, then laughter bursts out of us. When we settle, I reach out and take her hand.

“I’m proud of you, Pressley.”

“I’m proud of *us*,” she shoots back, squeezing my fingers tightly.

I hear my phone chime from the bedroom, and I give her hand one last squeeze before releasing her to go get it. Pulling the charging cord free of the port, I pull up my messaging app to see a text from Willow. Reading through it once, I hurry back into the living room where Pressley is shoveling a handful of popcorn into her mouth.

“Hey,” I say. “That was from Willow. They’re having a cookout at the lake and want us to come.”

“Who’s *they*?” she asks, tilting her head.

“Willow, Trace...and *Bram*,” I say, accentuating the last name.

“The bartender from the tavern?” she asks, excitement flaring in her eyes.

“That’s the one,” I say.

“I’m in,” she says happily, then deflates. “I didn’t bring a swimsuit with me.”

“Neither did I,” I say, “but there’s a big box store on the edge of town we can hit on the way out to meet them. I’m sure we can find something there.”

I text Willow back that we'll meet them there, and she responds with some easy directions to find the right spot. Pressley cleans up the living room while I take a quick shower, and I pack some towels, water bottles, and other necessities into a large bag while she showers.

When we're ready, we climb into her car and get on the road, happy smiles lighting up both of our faces.

I get to hang out with Pressley, introduce her to Willow—I'm sure they're going to love each other—*and* see Trace again.

Life is good.

Chapter

Twenty-Two

Trace

I'm setting up the portable grill while Willow and Bram argue like siblings when the crunch of gravel meets my ears. I look up to see a car I don't recognize, but it only takes me a second to lock onto the gorgeous blonde in the passenger's seat.

Keegan is here.

I straighten as the door flies open and she pops out, looking downright edible in a black knit sundress. Her bright blue gaze zeroes in on me, and I only have a second to brace myself as she charges forward, leaps at the very last second, and wraps herself around me like a monkey. My hands land on her ass to hold her up as her mouth seals to mine, and fuck, I could get used to this kind of greeting.

A high-pitched whistle grates against my eardrums just before my darling sister lets out a wolfish howl. I break off the kiss to glare at her, but she only laughs and shakes her head.

"Hi," Keegan whispers, her lips brushing against my cheek with the word.

I turn my head to meet her eyes, and I can feel my expression softening as I return the sentiment. “Hi.”

She pecks another quick kiss against my lips before wriggling to get free. I set her back on her feet, and she takes my hand to pull me toward her blonde friend.

“Trace this is Pressley Glade. Pressley, this is Trace, and that’s his sister and my boss, Willow.”

“Boss and friend,” Willow says, moving forward to bump her hip against Keegan’s before stretching out a hand to Pressley.

“And I think you’ve met Bram,” Keegan says with a devilish lilt to her voice.

Pressley turns a bit pink as she nods in Bram’s direction, then quickly looks away from him. Willow immediately takes charge in her classic ‘Willow’ way, hooking an arm through Pressley’s before doing the same with Keegan.

“Come on, girls. Let’s cool off in the water while the boys finish setting up.”

“How is that fair?” Bram complains, crossing his arms over his chest.

“You get to watch us get all half-naked and wet,” she quips.

“Willow,” I grunt impatiently, but the little imp just blows me a kiss and drags the other two to the water’s edge.

Releasing them, Willow whips her cover-up over her head to reveal a skimpy white bikini. I flinch, making a mental note to gift her with a more substantial bathing suit for her next birthday. My gaze shoots to Bram to make sure he’s not

checking out my sister, but his eyes are focused on someone else.

I follow his line of sight to see Pressley pulling off her t-shirt and shorts, revealing a red string bikini with even less coverage than the one my sister is wearing. She's pretty, I guess, though a little too slender for my tastes. Bram seems to be entranced, though.

Interesting.

Movement catches my eye, and I glance over to see Keegan staring right at me as she slowly pulls that black sundress up, revealing her perfect, juicy thighs. My mouth goes dry as she snaps the dress up and over her head, revealing a high-waisted two-piece that accentuates her hourglass shape while revealing only a thin strip of skin between the top and the bottom.

My dry mouth floods with saliva as my eyes trace every inch of her. She looks like a fucking pinup model, and I have a sudden urge to grab her, drag her away, and peel that damn swimsuit off her to reveal every carnal delight hidden beneath it. I can still feel those thighs wrapped around my face as she sucked me into her mouth, and the thought makes my dick twitch with need.

She doesn't move until my gaze moves back up to her face. Her grin is full of mischief as she shoots me a wink, then turns and chases the other two into the water.

Shaking my head at her antics, I turn back to the grill. Making sure it's solidly put together, I bend over to grab the bag of charcoal and pour some into the basin. Bram heads over with a bottle of lighter fluid and a long lighter, laughing as Pressley and Keegan squeal over the coolness of the water. I

hear Willow call them a bunch of babies before splashing them, causing them to squeal all over again.

“So,” Bram says, moving around the grill to turn his back to the water, “that was quite the greeting.”

“Shut up,” I grunt.

Ignoring my outburst, he goes on. “Seems like things have progressed between you two pretty quickly.”

“We’re just having fun,” I say, feeling a bit defensive. “We agreed to keep things light and casual. When she leaves town, it’ll be over.”

“Are you sure about that?” he asks, and my head snaps up to meet his eyes.

“What does that mean?”

“Trace, I’ve known you for a long time. I’ve never seen you look this...*lovestruck* before.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” I grumble. “Lovestruck. Please.”

“Okay,” he says, holding up his palms in supplication. “It’s casual and meaningless. Got it.”

He turns and walks away, and I feel like I should apologize. But I hold my tongue and look back out at the girls in the water. There’s no reason to get defensive. Bram can think whatever he wants. I know the truth.

Keegan and I are having some fun. Enjoying each other while it lasts. That’s all.

I get the fire lit, then follow Bram out to the water’s edge. We have a little time before the fire dies down, leaving the coals nice and hot, so we pull off our shirts and join the girls in the lake.

As I wade toward her, Keegan disappears beneath the water. I keep moving in her general direction, trying to see beneath the murky surface, but too much dirt has been stirred up by the girls' playful antics.

I yelp as something closes around my ankles, then jerks, pulling them from beneath me. I manage to hold my breath before I crash into the water, and when I resurface, Keegan is treading water in front of me with a wide grin on her face.

“Oh, you're going to pay for that,” I growl, and a high-pitched noise squeaks out of her before she turns to swim away.

My hand darts out to grab her ankle, making her shout for help as I tug her back toward me. Suddenly, she stops fighting and turns back, wrapping her arms and legs around me while pushing her boobs into my chest. My mind goes blank as she kisses the side of my neck, making me forget where we are and with whom.

But before I can wrap my arms around her and grind her down on my rapidly growing erection, she laughs maniacally, braces her hands on my shoulders, and pushes down with all her might. The surprise attack startles me back to reality a little too late, and my feet slip through the mud on the lake's bottom. I find myself beneath the surface once again, and my grasping hands find nothing but water as I claw out to capture my little antagonist.

Popping back up, I shake my wet hair out of my eyes and look around for her. I spot her swimming around the group to hide behind Bram.

“I can't protect you,” he shouts as I lunge forward, swimming toward them in long, smooth strokes.

Bram tries to move out of the way, but Keegan moves with him, keeping him firmly between us. Narrowing my gaze, I sink beneath the surface, reaching out blindly, I find Bram's knees. Gripping them to propel me forward, I slip right between his legs and pop up right in front of Keegan, who screams and tries to dart away again.

This time, I catch her, reeling her in until she's pressed fully against me. She stops struggling as a feline smile stretches across her face, and she wraps her legs around my waist, rubbing her pussy over my crotch.

"Fool me twice," I murmur, narrowing my eyes at her.

"No tricks," she says, tangling her fingers in my hair and rubbing against me again. "Only treats."

"Keegan," I groan quietly. "You need to stop. We're not alone, here."

Her smile widens before she leans closer, bringing her lips to my ear and whispering, "If I stop, will you call me your *good girl*?"

With her still clinging to me, I walk forward, taking us a little further away from the others. By the sounds of their fun, they're not really paying any attention to us, but I'm not taking any chances.

When I'm sure we're far enough away, I run my hands over her ass before grinding her against what's now a full-mast erection. Keegan sinks her teeth lightly into my neck with a quiet moan.

"You want me to call you *good girl*?" I ask quietly as one hand slips up between us to pinch her nipple through her bathing suit top.

"Yes," she groans. "I want to be good for you."

“Oh, baby,” I whisper harshly. “You *are* good. So fucking good, I don’t think I deserve—”

“Come on, lovebirds! The grill is ready,” Willow shouts from behind us, her voice like a bucket of ice water over the head.

“To be continued,” Keegan purrs into my ear before biting the lobe and pushing out of my embrace.

She swims away, her laughter floating back to me over her shoulder. The little minx.

I give myself a minute to...er...*calm down* while the others wade toward the bank, talking and laughing as they go. There’s a strange feeling in my chest as my lips curl up, and it takes me a moment to define it.

It’s obvious, isn’t it?

I’m having fun.

When was the last time I was this lighthearted and carefree?

I honestly can’t remember.

Chapter

Twenty-Three

Keegan

As twilight turns to dusk, we light a bonfire and circle around it on blankets Willow pulled from the trunk of her car. We changed out of our wet swimsuits in the woods earlier, and I'm naked beneath my black cover-up, so I have to be careful with my legs so I don't flash anybody.

Bram pulls out a guitar and starts to play, singing along with the melody of some old country love song. I'm impressed. He sounds really good.

I'm cradled between Trace's outstretched legs, leaning back against his chest with his arms curved loosely around me. I relax as the soothing strains of the guitar and Bram's rich voice lull me.

My eyes move to Willow, who's watching Bram with a soft smile. It takes me a moment to realize there's love in her eyes, but not the kind that normally occurs between a woman and her crush. No. She's looking at him like she looks at Trace, with the love and pride of a sibling.

When my gaze moves over to Pressley, I perk up a bit. She's staring at Bram, too, but her expression is decidedly

more *interested*. Like she's crushing, hard. I look over at Bram again, and catch him peek over at Pressley every few seconds as he plays.

Interesting.

"Hey," Trace whispers into my ear, "do you want to take a walk?"

I nod, and we stand. The others look over at us, but no one says anything as we wander away, hand-in-hand. Trace leads me into the wooded thicket where I changed with the girls earlier, pulling me deeper into the brush and further away from the bonfire.

A large boulder materializes in the darkness, and Trace leads me over to it before swinging me around and gently pushing me back against it. Pinning me there with his large body, he dips his head and kisses me. My lips part automatically to accept his probing tongue, and my core clenches with need.

"You looked fucking edible in that swimsuit earlier, and I've been dying to taste you all day," he grumbles against my lips, then drops to his knees before me.

His palms glide up my thighs, taking my dress with them, and he groans with approval when he finds me bare beneath it. Lifting one of my legs, he drapes it over his shoulder and dives in, pushing his tongue through my flesh to find my clit with unerring accuracy. I lean back against the boulder and close my eyes, fighting furiously to keep quiet. Sound carries out here by the lake, and if I get too loud, the others will hear me, for sure.

I realize this is yet another first for me, doing something like this outside in the open. Knowing we could get caught

somehow makes it even hotter, and I bunch my dress in one hand to hold it out of the way while my other hand fists in Trace's hair. Tightening my grip, I pull him closer, increasing the pressure of his mouth on me.

A long, low, ferocious growl vibrates out of him, causing unexpected laughter to bubble out of me. Trace pushes two fingers deep inside me, whispers the tips across the secret spot he found last night, and pulls his head back to look up at me.

"What's funny?" he asks, his voice husky and deep as he pumps his fingers deep inside me.

"You just...*oh, God...*yes...right there...you growled... just like a—"

My words cut off as he brushes his fingertips against my G-spot with the perfect amount of pressure.

"Do not say it," he orders, and I snap my mouth shut as I nod. Then he touches that spot inside me one last time and adds, "Good girl."

And that's all it takes. I slap a hand over my mouth to stifle my groan as I come. *Hard.*

Trace leans back in to stroke his tongue over my clit, drawing out my release as I writhe against the boulder, panting and sweaty. When I eventually sag with relief, Trace kisses the inside of my thigh, gently pulls my leg off his shoulder, and stands, leaning into me and bringing his mouth close to my ear.

"If I had a condom with me, I'd fuck you against this rock until you scream," he says, grinding his erection against me.

"I have an IUD," I blurt, and he freezes for a second before leaning back to meet my gaze.

“What?”

“It’s birth control,” I whisper. “I can’t get pregnant, and got myself tested after Carter. I have a perfect bill of health.”

“What are you saying, baby?” he asks, brushing my hair back and tucking it behind my ear.

I swallow thickly. “I’m saying I want you to fuck me against this rock right now.”

His tongue darts out to wet his lips. “I get tested every year. My results always come back negative.”

“I believe you,” I say, reaching down to grip his cock through his shorts. “Please, Trace.”

“Are you sure?” he asks, his voice cracking as I squeeze him harder.

I nod quickly, then press my mouth to his. He kisses me ferociously, devouring me. He doesn’t fight me when I untie the drawstring of his shorts, then push the waistband down until his cock springs free. He groans into my mouth when I grip him, squeezing my fingers around his girth and stroking his length firmly. His cock swells in my hand, and I’m more than ready for him to push that behemoth into me.

Trace’s hands grip my bare hips, lifting me against the boulder before slamming me down onto his cock. We both freeze, panting together as I adjust to his size, and he revels in the feel of me with no barrier between us.

“God damn,” he mutters, pressing his face against my neck. “You’re so warm and wet.”

“You make me that way,” I murmur back, then moan as he rolls his hips.

“You like that?” he asks, repeating the motion.

“I like everything you do,” I groan. “But I really love your cock.”

“Good,” he says, pulling his hips back, then slamming forward to fill me completely.

“Yes,” I breathe. “More.”

My legs are already tingling as my release builds inside me. I don't know if it's the taboo nature of fucking in a public area, the danger of getting caught, or just the skill of this man and his perfect cock, but I'm going to come fast and hard.

And I want Trace to come with me.

“Fuck me, Trace. Give me everything you've got, and fill me up with your come,” I whisper.

“Fuck,” he grunts, gathering me against him and rocking his hips in a steady motion. “You feel so good, baby. I could stay buried inside you forever.”

My heart thumps in my chest at that last word, but before I can decide if I'm feeling excitement or panic, Trace yanks down the top of my dress and seals his mouth over my breast. He sucks at it, hard, sending a shot of pure need to my core and every coherent thought right out of my head.

I try to hold off. I really do. But my orgasm is barreling through me before I can stop it, sending flashes of heat through every inch of my body as Trace pounds into me again and again.

“That's it, baby,” he murmurs before licking at my nipple again. “Come for me like a good girl. Squeeze my cock with that perfect pussy.”

I pinch my lips to stifle my long moan as the world explodes, shattering me into a million pieces before putting me

back together again. Through the fog of euphoria, I hear Trace grunt as he plunges deep and freezes. His cock jerks inside me, filling me with his release and setting off a chain of aftershocks that leave me weak with an urge to weep at the pure joy of it.

Holy shit.

I haven't had sex without a condom since I was a stupid teenager who let her hormones overrule her brain. And it was not even close to this. Not by a longshot.

This was some kind of evangelical experience, and I know I will never forget it. Never.

And when Trace carries me through the woods to a secluded patch of shoreline, strips us both down, and pulls me into the water to gently clean me up, I thank God in heaven for the darkness of the new moon sky.

Because I do get weepy, a single tear trailing down my cheek.

This man. He's...everything.

I need to be more careful, or I'm never going to be able to let him go.

Chapter

Twenty-Four

MONDAY

Keegan: *Willow just scared the shit out of some teenager by pretending to cast a hex on him and all his future generations.*

Wolf Daddy: *Did he deserve it?*

Keegan: *He was messing with her crystals and making loud comments to his friends about how it was all bullshit.*

Wolf Daddy: *So he deserved it.*

Keegan: *I guess so.*

Keegan: *Hey, did you know your sister has a potion that guarantees a more pleasurable sexual experience?*

Wolf Daddy: *Please never mention my sister and sex in the same sentence again. Thanks.*

Wolf Daddy: *And no, I've never needed help in that arena.*

Keegan: *Cocky much?*

Wolf Daddy: *There you go, obsessing over my cock again.*

Keegan: *Well, it is magnificent.*

Wolf Daddy: *What are you doing tonight? I'd love to reacquaint you with it.*

Keegan: *No can do. I have plans with Pressley. Plans that include Vincenzo's and some amazing alfredo sauce.*

Wolf Daddy: *Now I'm hungry.*

Keegan: *I'll think of you while I'm gorging on Italian food tonight.*

Wolf Daddy: *Gee, thanks.*

Wolf Daddy: *I'll think of you gorging on something while I'm all alone in my sad apartment tonight.*

Keegan: *Send pics! *winky face emoji**

Wolf Daddy: *Not happening.*

Keegan: *Boo! You're no fun.*

TUESDAY

Wolf Daddy: *How was dinner?*

Keegan: *Delicious. And no one fell on their face.*

Wolf Daddy: *Brat.*

Keegan: *Ooh, now I'm a brat. Are you going to punish me?*

Wolf Daddy: *Do you want to be punished?*

Keegan: *I don't know. A little light spanking might be fun.*

Wolf Daddy: *Keegan.*

Keegan: *What?*

Wolf Daddy: *I'm not going to be able to get any work done with the image of my red handprint on your gorgeous ass stuck in my head all day.*

Keegan: *You're welcome.*

Wolf Daddy: *Tell me I can see you tonight.*

Wolf Daddy: *Fuck. Never mind. I can't. I promised Bram I'd go with him to an open mic night at a bar in Jonas Hill.*

Keegan: *OMG. Is he going to play and sing in front of a crowd?*

Wolf Daddy: *Yeah. It's his first time, and he's nervous. Want to come cheer him on with me?*

Keegan: *I'd love to, but I won't. He needs his friend, and me and my bratty ass will only distract you.*

Wolf Daddy: *What if I promise not to be distracted by you in the least?*

Keegan: *No can do. Bros before hoes and all that jazz.*

Wolf Daddy: *Please never say that again.*

Keegan: *What? Bros before hoes?*

Wolf Daddy: *You said it again.*

Keegan: *Oops. Guess you're going to have to teach me a lesson. A real good one.*

Wolf Daddy: *Jesus Christ.*

WEDNESDAY

Wolf Daddy: *Why did I just receive a screenshot of our text thread from Willow with a dozen laughing emojis?*

Keegan: *Excuse me while I go murder your sister.*

Keegan: *Okay. I'm back. She's good and dead. I left my phone on the counter in the back and she found it. I guess I'm going to have to finally add a security code to the lock screen.*

Wolf Daddy: *Care to explain why my contact name isn't my actual name?*

Keegan: *Oh, shoot. Willow is alive after all, and she needs my help with something. Don't want to get fired. Toodles!*

Wolf Daddy: *Keegan.*

Wolf Daddy: *Don't ignore me.*

Wolf Daddy: *I really am going to have to spank you, aren't I?*

THURSDAY

Keegan: *Are you still mad?*

Wolf Daddy: *I found out you've been calling me Wolf Daddy behind my back, and when I called you out on it, you ghosted me. So, you tell me. Am I still mad?*

Keegan: *Naw. You secretly like it.*

Wolf Daddy: *I really don't.*

Keegan: *I know how to make it better.*

Wolf Daddy: *You can start by changing my contact in your phone.*

Keegan: *I already did.*

Wolf Daddy: *Why don't I believe you?*

Keegan: *Well, I added that security code to my phone, so you'll never know for sure. Guess you're just going to have to trust me.*

Wolf Daddy: *Mm-hmm.*

Keegan: *Do you want to know how I'm making it up to you, or not?*

Wolf Daddy: *Tell me.*

Keegan: *I gently suggested to Willow that she should invite Pressley over for a girls' night-slash-sleepover tomorrow. They both agreed, so I'm all yours. If you still want me, that is.*

Wolf Daddy: *I'll pick you up at seven.*

Keegan: *Good boy.*

Keegan: *Ooh, I kind of like that. I might use it tomorrow night.*

Wolf Daddy: *You're definitely getting that spanking we talked about.*

Keegan: *Can't wait!*

Chapter

Twenty-Five

Trace

It's only been five days since I've seen her, but it feels like five weeks as I hop out of my truck and jog up the steps to Lycan Lodge. I feel kind of idiotic, being *so* excited, and I try to school my features as I lift a hand to knock at the door.

I take several deep breaths as I wait, then the door is swinging open and she's there, right in front of me. My eyes devour her, looking so pretty in a pair of tight jeans and a lacy blue tank top that's the exact color of her eyes.

"Hey, you," she says, stepping over the threshold to stand right in front of me.

"Hey," I say, then lose the fight with my restraint.

Leaning over, I wrap my arms around her, holding tight as I straighten. She laughs as her feet leave the floor, then moans as my mouth seals over hers for a much-needed kiss.

I've missed her this week. And while that should scare me, considering the short-term status of this thing we have going, all I feel is relief to finally be in her presence again. Touching her. Kissing her.

And it takes every ounce of will power I have inside me not to walk right into the house and kick the door closed behind us, blocking out the rest of the world while I strip her down and slake my lust.

Instead, I set her back on her feet and take her hand in mine.

“Are you ready?”

I can wait a couple of more hours. We’re going to the tavern for some dinner and drinks, then I’ll have her all to myself. Finally.

“Let me just grab my bag,” she says, squeezing my hand before pulling hers free and stepping back inside.

When she returns, I look down to see she’s chosen some comfortable-looking boots. Meeting her gaze, I jerk my head toward the street.

“Do you want to walk? It’s a gorgeous evening.”

“Sure,” she says, her lips curling up into a smile. “That way, I can get you drunk and learn all your secrets.”

“Good luck,” I say, taking her hand and leading her down the steps. “I’m a steel vault.”

“We’ll see,” she says with a grin.

We chat about our days as we make the short trek into town to Wolfsbane Tavern. When we arrive, I reach out to grab the door handle, then pause to take a deep, cleansing breath. Keegan gives me a curious look, but I just shake my head and pull open the door.

I already know how this will go. She’ll find out soon enough.

As soon as we step inside, I feel at least a dozen eyes on us. Keegan seems oblivious as she returns the wave Bram sends our way from behind the bar. Taking my hand, she pulls me over to him, and I keep my gaze straight ahead, ignoring the looky-loos.

“Hey, guys. What can I get you?”

“I’ll have a vodka-lemonade,” Keegan says, then looks up at me.

“Pale ale,” I say, and Bram nods.

As we wait for our drinks, Keegan gives her back to the bar and looks around, presumably for an empty table. I keep my gaze on Bram, but I can feel her tensing up next to me. And I know why.

Once we have our drinks, I turn as Keegan points out a table in the back corner. As we head over, I see the stiffness in her gait. I know I’m tense, too, but I’m determined to ignore everyone else and just have some fun with my girl.

“I feel like a bug under a microscope,” she hisses as I pull her chair out for her. “Do I have something on my face?”

“No, of course not,” I say as I take my seat with a sigh. “It’s not you, it’s me.”

“I’ve heard that one before,” she says with a healthy dose of sarcasm and an exaggerated wink.

Her humor eases my tension as I shrug and sigh. “The town folk are staring because they haven’t seen me in public with a woman in years. *This* is why I really wanted to go out of town on our first date.”

“Wait,” she says, holding up a finger as she takes a long drink of her cocktail. “Years?”

“I don’t date,” I say as my fingernail scrapes at the corner of the label on my beer bottle.

“Why not?”

I shrug again. “After my grandfather passed, I kind of shut down. He was both parents to Willow and me, and even though I had time to prepare for his death—cancer—I never did. I kept praying for a miracle, and it never came. When he died, I was angry with the universe and bitter over the whole wolf-mania circus my home has become. I didn’t show my face around town at all for weeks.”

“That wolf-mania is what brought me here,” she says softly.

My mood lifts, and I smile. “Maybe I’m starting to see the silver lining in all of it.”

She visibly brightens, then her expression turns devilish. “Does that mean I’m allowed to call you—”

“Don’t even think it,” I cut in, my voice deep and brusque, which only makes her laugh.

“Fine. I’ll wear you down eventually.”

“Not going to happen.”

She grins at me for another moment, then sobers, saying, “I’m really sorry about your Grandad.”

“Thanks,” I murmur. “I know he’s in a better place now, as cliché as that sounds. There was a lot of pain at the end.”

“I can’t imagine how hard it was to live through that with him,” she says, real empathy shining in her eyes.

I shake my head and take a long swig of my beer. “What about you? Are your parents still around?”

“Define *around*,” she says with more than a little resentment, then sighs. “They’re alive, yes. They live in Canada.”

“Canada?” I ask.

“They never wanted kids, and I was an oops baby. They raised me, but they were never really present, if you know what I mean. As soon as I went to college, they sold the house and moved to Canada and bought a winery. Mom paints, and Dad makes wine. They send me a thousand dollars in a birthday card every year and call on Christmas, but that’s really our only contact.” She huffs out a breath, then, and shakes her head. “Okay, this is too dark for a date. Let’s talk about something happier.”

“Like what?” I ask.

She shoots a coy look toward the bar. “How about the fact that your best friend has the hots for Pressley?”

“You noticed that, too, did you?” I ask, then chuckle. “He hasn’t said anything about it, but I’ve seen the looks between them. He’s not alone in his interest.”

She nods with enthusiasm. “She likes him. And he’s texted her a few times since that day at the lake. Pressley swears he’s just being friendly, though. I think the years she spent around Madison and Sloan killed her self-esteem. She just can’t imagine a hot guy like Bram being into her.”

“Hot, huh?” I say, narrowing my eyes.

“Totally,” she gushes, waving a hand in front of her face like she needs to cool off.

I grunt noncommittally, and her bright laughter rings out like a heavenly chorus.

“Relax, big guy,” she says. “I only have eyes for you. But I had Willow do a reading for Pressley and Bram, and she said it’s *true love*.”

“Ha,” I scoff. “First of all, my sister is a charlatan. She’s no more a witch than you or I. But, I did sense something between them at the lake. His interest is definitely peaked. I even remember him giving her the goo-goo eyes the first night we saw each other right here in this very bar.”

“Oh, you mean the night I called you—”

“Zip it, Woman. Or I really will acquaint that perfect ass with the palm of my hand.”

“Promise?” she sing-songs, batting her eyelashes at me.

“I solemnly swear,” I say, placing the aforementioned palm over my heart.

“Well, if I can’t call you...you-know-what...I’ll just have to come up with another reason to earn the punishment,” she says coyly, tapping the tip of a finger against her chin. “Maybe I’ll tell Willow what you said about her being a charlatan. She won’t like that at all.”

“Don’t test me, baby,” I growl.

“Oh, I love tests! I was always a good test-taker in school.”

“Finish your drink,” I grumble. “We can eat back at the lodge.”

“Oh, I’m counting on both of us doing a lot of *eating*,” she says with a playful eyebrow waggle.

Lord, this woman is going to be the death of me.

Chapter
Twenty-Six

Keegan

We're mostly naked and all over each other within seconds of the door closing behind us. I'm not even sure it latched properly, but the concern vanishes as Trace picks me up with a growl and carries me toward the couch.

Instead of laying me down like I expected, he sets me on my feet, spins me around, and applies pressure to my upper back until I bend over with my ass in the air. Trace's hand slides up between my thighs, and a satisfied moan vibrates in his chest when he finds me soaked and ready for him.

But instead of immediately giving me that D, he drops to his knees and eats me from behind, his hands spreading me open as his tongue fucks into me. His thumb finds my clit, massaging it just the way I like, and I widen my stance to give him better access.

He brings me right to the edge, and I don't even try to suppress my sound of frustration when he pulls away just before I fall over it. Trace chuckles and stands, his palms smoothing over my ass for a minute before he speaks.

“You’ve been baiting me all week,” he says slowly, sliding a single finger deep inside me before pulling it right back out. “You’ve been begging to be punished, haven’t you, baby?”

My heart leaps into my throat, half-anticipation, half-fear as he rubs my right ass cheek in slow circles. *Oh, God.* This is it. And even though I’m kind of freaking out, I lift my ass a little higher, presenting it to him like some kind of gift.

His hand disappears, and I tense, waiting for the crack of his palm. The anticipation makes me even wetter as I hold my breath. But the slap doesn’t come, and I crane my neck to look back at him.

He’s watching me with an intense expression as he says, “Are you sure you want this? I don’t want to do anything you don’t find enjoyable, and you seem tense.”

Warmth fills my chest at his worry as I nod. “Please. Do it.”

I face forward once more, my blood racing as he begins smoothing the skin of my ass again. His touch disappears, and before I can react in any way, his hand cracks against my flesh, sending waves of heat through my core.

His palm soothes away the sting, leaving me panting as he growls and buries his cock deep inside me. I cry out at the pleasure of it, then again as he grips my hips roughly and pistons his body, driving into me again and again as the sounds of our slapping skin echo off the walls around us.

His right hand releases me, and before I can even think about bracing myself, another slap stings my ass, setting off an orgasm. I shout as my inner walls clench down, and Trace grunts and drives deep one last time. He rolls his hips as his

hand smooths my stinging skin, both movements setting off a round of aftershocks that have me groaning with pleasure.

“Jesus,” he mutters between heavy breaths.

“I concur,” I gasp back, and he chuckles.

Pulling out, he wraps his arms around me and spins, pulling me down onto his lap as he sits on the couch. I curl up there, my head on his chest, listening to his rapid heartbeat gradually slow as he runs his hand up and down my back.

“It wasn’t too much, right?” he asks softly, breaking the silence.

“Definitely not,” I say. “I might have to bait you more often.”

Laughter rumbles in his chest as the hand on my back slides down to my ass, rubbing it gently. “I wouldn’t complain.”

I tilt my head back to look up at him, and he leans down, softly brushing his lips over mine. It’s such a simple kiss, yet at the same time, catastrophic. Something snaps in my chest and heat rushes in as I realize I could get used to this.

And not just during our temporary, casual fling.

I could get used to this...for forever.

Before I can work myself into a blind panic over the epiphany, the front door slams open and a banshee’s wail threatens to puncture my eardrums. I twist around so forcefully, my neck cracks. I see Pressley, a hand pressed firmly over her eyes, slowly backing toward the doorway. Then she pauses, reaches out and blindly searches for the door handle with her free hand, shouts a slurred apology, and pulls the door closed behind her as she steps back outside.

I look back at Trace, who's staring at me with wide eyes, then we simultaneously burst into laughter. I slide off his lap in search of my clothes, then find his underwear and toss them at him.

"I thought she was staying with Willow," he says as he pulls them on.

"I thought so, too," I say, hastily pulling on my own underwear before grabbing the rest of my clothes and darting into my room.

Pulling on some comfy pajama shorts and a tank top, I find Trace fully dressed and heading for the door. I join him there as he pulls it open, and we find Pressley standing on the other side, her hand still over her eyes as she stifles a round of tipsy giggles.

"Pressley?" I call out, and she burps, setting off another round of drunken laughter.

"Is everybody decent?" she asks.

"You can open your eyes, goofball," I say, and when she slowly lowers her hand, I grab her wrist and pull her inside.

"I'll see you later," Trace says, stepping out once we pass him.

"You don't have to go," I offer, and he shakes his head before shooting a pointed look at my inebriated friend.

"I'll text you later."

I mouth the word "sorry," but he shakes it off with a smile.

"Don't leave on my account, *Wolf Daddy*," Pressley says with a giggle.

My eyes widen as I slap a hand over Pressley's mouth, but Trace doesn't get angry. He doesn't even look slightly irritated. He just shoots me a wink, then spins around to jog down the stairs, a jaunty whistle streaming from his lips as he goes.

"Pressley," I say once I close the door behind him, "what are you doing here?"

"I live here," she sighs, then stumbles over to plop down on the couch.

"I thought you were staying with Willow."

"Oh...yeah," she says with a pout. "Willow made mimosas, but she added vodka to them, too, the little sneaky-sneak. But joke's on her. She passed out first, and I saw a ghost, so I came home."

"You saw a ghost?" I ask as I slouch onto the couch next to her.

"Yep. It was a hot werewolf ghost with glowing eyes."

"Are you sure it wasn't the life-size cut-out of Lucas Lumin she bought for the store?" I ask, remembering Willow saying it was delivered to her house on accident.

"No," she says, then wrinkles her brow. "Maybe. I don't know. Hey. Is it safe to sit here? I don't feel any wet spots, but I'm drunk."

"Shut up," I say with a laugh, and she starts giggling again.

"I'm sorry, Keegs. I didn't think about you being here with Wolf Daddy. I should've thought."

"It's okay, Press. I'm just glad you made it back okay and didn't pass out in a ditch somewhere along the way."

“Me, too,” she says on a sigh. “Willow tried to get me drunk to drill me about Bram.”

“What?” I ask, turning my head to look at her. “I don’t think she’d do that.”

“You’re right,” she says. “We both got drunk, then she asked me about Bram. She said she thinks he likes me, but I don’t think that’s true.”

“Why not?” I ask, reaching out to smooth her hair back from her face.

“I’m too young for him,” she says with pouty lips.

“Don’t start with that. He’s the same age as Trace, and you’re the same age as me. And Trace and I got past the whole age difference thing.”

“But Trace has always seen you as a *woman*,” she says, her voice taking on a definite whining quality. “Bram sees me differently.”

“Why do you think that?”

“He texts me all the time to check in on me. To make sure I’m okay and don’t need anything. Like I’m a child, not an adult. Like he’s my *father*, or something.”

“Maybe he just wants to be your *daddy*,” I say with a chuckle, and Pressley’s frown flips into a wide grin.

“Shut up. He does not,” she says with a laugh, her arm swinging out to smack mine.

When she completely misses, we both start laughing. Then she says, “Don’t tease me. I read a lot of romance books, and if I’ve learned anything, it’s that I have a not-so-deeply buried daddy kink.”

“Well, then you should go for it.”

“I don’t think so,” she says, her smile dropping once more.

“Why not?”

“I think Willow might have a thing for him. I think that’s why she brought it up. Testing the waters, you know? They’re a ‘brother’s best friend’ trope in the making.”

“No way,” I say, shaking my head. “Trust me when I say this, Pressley. They love each other like siblings. That’s all. If Willow brought it up, she’s either trying to get intel for him or sussing out your feelings, herself, because she cares about him and doesn’t want him to get hurt.”

“I would never hurt him,” she says, then drops her mouth open in a wide yawn. “If anyone is getting hurt, it would be me.”

Her head drops to the armrest of the couch with that, and within seconds, her breathing turns deep and even. I consider waking her up and taking her to bed, but quickly discard it. Drunk Pressley is impossible to wake. I know. I’ve tried.

So instead, I push myself up and pull her legs up onto the couch. Once I have her situated in a semi-comfortable position—the best I can do by myself—I pull a blanket from the closet and drape it over her.

I watch her sleep for a moment, then sigh as I turn and make my way to my room. Tonight didn’t turn out quite like I expected. I thought Trace would be warming my bed, holding me close while we slept.

But that’s okay. We’ll have other nights together. We have just under a month until I’m expected to check out and head back to Seattle.

But to what?

My time here was supposed to help me figure out what I want for my life, but so far, all I've figured out is how to make Trace Bardin give me all the orgasms.

And I refuse to even acknowledge how the thought of leaving this place, leaving *him*, makes me feel.

No. We made the rules for a reason.

I need to start abiding by them.

Chapter
Twenty-Seven

Trace

It's the end of the month and a slow Wednesday morning, so I decide to kill time by updating the books of my rental properties and setting up payments for the cleaning crews instead of waiting until the weekend.

As I record all the payments I've received this week, I see a payment from Keegan for the upcoming month. I stare at the screen, realizing this is the last payment I'll get from her because in a month, she'll leave.

Shaking off the dark feelings that accompany the thought, I click on her payment before hovering the cursor over the refund option. I just don't feel right charging my girlfr—

I blow out a harsh breath and lean back in my chair. What in the hell am I thinking? Keegan is *not* my girlfriend. She's a casual summer fling. Nothing more. She'll go home after the Cursed convention, and I'll probably never see her again.

End of story.

I stare at the flashing cursor for several beats, then lean forward and move on with my work. I can't refund her payment. We're not in a real, lasting relationship, and if I did

something like that, I know Keegan would think I'm treating her like some kind of charity case. And she'd hate it.

Or, she'd think I was comping her stay as some kind of payment for services rendered. That would be even worse.

Several minutes later, my phone chimes. Picking it up from the desk beside me, I smile when I see Keegan's name flash across the screen.

Keegan: *I can't stop thinking about your mouth.*

I blink and read the message again, then a slow smile spreads across my face. Are we sexting now? If so, I'm here for it.

I'm still trying to compose an appropriately dirty response about how my cock swells when I think about putting my mouth on her when another text comes through.

Keegan: *Sorry about that. Pressley figured out my phone passcode, and she thinks she's a comedian.*

I instantly deflate as disappointment rockets through me.

Me: *Ha, ha. That's okay.*

No, it's not. I wish it were really her.

Keegan: *But she's not wrong, though.*

Hold on a minute. Is this going where I think it is?

Me: *Really?*

Keegan: *Your mouth is a gift sent straight from God. Or maybe it comes from Satan, himself. It's positively sinful.*

My heart pounds as I read the words. This *is* happening, right? I've never sexted before. Never wanted to. But I can suddenly see the appeal as my cock swells painfully.

Hopping up from my desk, I lock the office door and flip over the sign that tells any visitors I'll be back in fifteen minutes. As I jog up the steps to my apartment, I tap out a response to Keegan.

Me: *What would you want me to do with my mouth if I were there with you?*

As I close and lock the apartment door behind me, I watch as the dot bubble indicates she's typing a response. The bubble disappears a second later, and no response comes through, making my heart drop into my stomach.

Maybe this *isn't* happening.

Me: *You still there?*

This time the dot bubble pops back up, followed a few beats later by a reply.

Keegan: *Yes. Sorry. I had to lock myself in my bedroom because Pressley wanted to know why my face was suddenly so pink.*

Me: *Are you embarrassed? We don't have to do this.*

Keegan: *I'd want your mouth to kiss me everywhere.*

I suck in a sharp breath at the image her words create. Moving toward the couch, I fall onto it and stretch out before texting her back.

Me: *Tell me where you want me to kiss you, Keegan.*

Keegan: *My lips. My neck. My breasts.*

I reach down to grip my erection through my jeans, giving it a hard squeeze as I imagine moving my mouth over her perfect body. Releasing it, I grip my phone so I can send another message.

Me: *You taste divine. Where else should I kiss?*

Keegan: *My clit. I love it when you swirl your tongue over it.*

Fuck. Me.

I quickly unbutton and unzip my jeans, shoving them down before my cock busts right through the zipper. Reaching into my boxer briefs, I stroke it slowly as I use voice-to-text to send my next message.

Me: *You should touch your clit. Pretend it's my tongue and tell me how it feels.*

Keegan: *Oh, God. It feels so good. I'm so wet for you right now. Are you stroking that beautiful cock for me?*

Me: *I am. I'm so hard, it almost hurts.*

Keegan: *I want to see.*

My hand pauses as I read the text, and before I can even begin to come up with a response, my phone starts ringing with a video call from Keegan. My eyes and nostrils flare, and I only pause for a second before stabbing my thumb against the answer icon.

Keegan's face fills the screen, and I almost come on the spot. She's flushed and damp with sweat, her eyes dilated and glossy as she stares back at me. She's breathing hard, each exhale humming with a quiet moan.

"Show me," she says without preamble.

I swallow thickly and nod, then slowly move the phone down until I'm sure she can see the bulge of my fist cock beneath the cotton of my underwear. Pulling my hand free, I push the elastic waistband down until my erection springs free.

I hear a gasp from the phone's speakers, then another one as I grip my shaft and slowly pump it.

"Oh, God," she says, her voice cracking on the words.

I let her watch for a few more beats, then move the phone's screen back up so I can see her face. She's panting harder, her body bouncing slightly as she works herself over.

"My turn," I say, licking my lips. "Show me that sweet, delicious pussy."

She swallows visibly like she's nervous, but before I can take back the words, her phone is on the move. I catch a glimpse of her juicy breasts, then her soft stomach before her pussy fills the screen, making my breath catch in my throat.

She's got two fingers working her clit tirelessly, rubbing in quick, clockwise circles before changing direction. I pump my cock faster as I watch, unable to tear my eyes away from that perfect, rhythmic motion.

Then she moves, pushing both fingers down and driving them inside her channel. My name trickles from her lips as she pumps them a few times, then drags them back up, all glistening with her own juices, and swirls them over her clit even faster than before.

"Oh, God," she groans, and her hips buck upward and freeze as she comes.

A second later, my cock erupts, shooting ropes of come across my stomach as I grunt and groan my own release. There's a blur of movement on the screen, then Keegan's face reappears, all flushed with a satisfied expression.

"That was a first for me," she says between heavy breaths.

"Me, too," I admit.

“Really?”

I nod. “Really.”

Her face lights up as she says, “I love that.”

So do I.

So.

Do.

I.

Chapter

Twenty-Eight

Keegan

Saturday mornings are typically busy at Moonstone Mystic, and today is no exception. All of our regulars show up early, before the tourists come in droves for some coffee and breakfast before they set off for a day of exploring.

I'm pleasantly sore after staying at Trace's last night. It was the first time we'd seen each other since our little phone sex adventure on Wednesday, and he was intent on proving to me how horny he'd been for me ever since.

He proved it, all right. And I loved every second of it.

The bells over the door jingle, and when I look up to greet our newest customer, I see Pressley hurrying toward me. She looks a little flushed, and her movements are erratic, putting me immediately on edge.

"What's wrong?" I ask as soon as she stops on the other side of the counter.

"What? Nothing," she says, shaking her head violently. Leaning over, she lowers her voice, saying, "But I really need to talk to you. Can you take a break?"

We're in the middle of a slow period, and when I shoot a glance at Willow, she nods and jerks her head toward the back. I mouth a thank you and wave Pressley in that direction. We meet at the end of the bar, and she scoots around it to precede me through the kitchen and back to Willow's office.

I close the door behind us and turn to find Pressley pacing back and forth.

"What's going on?" I ask when she doesn't immediately start speaking.

"You should probably sit down. Hell, so should I."

With that, she plops into one of the chairs in front of Willow's desk, and I take the other. She's gripping her phone so tightly, it looks like it might crack.

I narrow my gaze. Did Bram text her? Did he finally ask her out?

"Do you remember when we made that BingBang video, taste-testing different mixed drinks a few weeks ago?" she asks, catching me completely off-guard.

I nod slowly. I do remember. We were back in Seattle, before my life fell apart. Madison and Sloan had dates, so Pressley and I decided to get drunk and have a sleepover at her place. She set up her phone on a tripod and recorded us mixing drinks and taste-testing them while acting goofy and dancing in our pajamas.

We were just having fun, and when Pressley suggested uploading it to BingBang, a popular video-streaming app, I'd drunkenly agreed that it was a magnificent idea.

I kind of forgot all about it after, well, my life went to hell in a raging dumpster fire, and I can't figure out why she's

bringing it up now. As if she senses my confusion, Pressley bounces in her chair and taps at the screen of her phone.

When she turns it around, I flinch when I see myself jumping up and down and swinging my hips like some eighties aerobics instructor as I proclaim Planter's Vodka and strawberry lemonade to be the best drink in existence.

"Oh, God," I murmur with a self-deprecating chuckle. "I look like an idiot."

"No," Pressley says quickly. "Don't look at the video. Look at the views."

I look to the margin of the video, and my eyes flare as my head jerks back.

"Is that right?" I whisper.

"Yes," she squeals. "We're at over three million views, and it's still climbing."

"After..." I say, pausing to do the math, "seven weeks?"

She grins and turns the screen back toward her before tapping at it. Then she flips the phone to face me again.

"And look at the comments."

I take the device from her hand and scroll through. Of course, there are the usual troll comments calling us "cringe." Some comments on my weight. Pressley's *fuckability*. Things like that.

But those comments are far-outweighed by positivity. People talking about how much they'd love to be friends with us because we look so fun. People talking about the drinks we made, how they tried them, and which ones they preferred. Thanking us for the recommendations. Calling us gorgeous and hilarious.

“My BingBang account has shot up from about six thousand to over a million followers, Keegan,” Pressley says, and I look up from the screen to meet her excited gaze.

“Wow,” I say. “That’s amazing. Congratulations.”

She shakes her head violently. “I got an email this morning from Planter’s Vodka.”

“What?” I chirp as I hand her phone back to her.

“They offered us a contract.”

“What?” I repeat, then shake my head. “What are you talking about? What kind of contract?”

Her knee bounces nervously as she shoots me a beatific smile. “They want us to make another video like this one using only *their* vodka flavors. And they’ll pay us for it.”

“Seriously?” I ask, my voice rising in pitch as some of her excitement rushes through me.

She nods. “They’re offering us ten thousand dollars for three videos, plus a five-thousand-dollar bonus if any of them hit a million views.”

I shake my head. “This can’t be real. Are you sure it isn’t some kind of internet scam?”

“I checked the address and the name on the email. It’s legit. They want to schedule a video chat with us to discuss the terms and what they expect.”

“Holy shit,” I breathe, then look up to lock gazes with her. “We’re influencers?”

Pressley squeals and wiggles in her chair. “We’re influencers!”

I reach over to grab her free hand, squeezing it tightly. Pressley laughs and shouts toward the ceiling before meeting my eyes.

“Keegan Carpenter, our lives are about to change. Forever.”



AS DUSK APPROACHES, Trace picks me up and drives me back out to the lake. He lays out a blanket picnic, and we talk and munch on bacon sandwiches and potato chips.

I decided not to tell him about the influencer thing with Pressley. Not yet. We have a video call scheduled with Planter’s Vodka tomorrow morning, and I don’t want to jinx it. Pressley and I decided not to tell anyone until it’s a done deal.

And though it feels wrong keeping anything from Trace, I manage to hold the news inside. I can tell him tomorrow, after the call.

After we finish eating, we lay on our backs and look up at the stars.

“Is this where you thought you’d be when you were growing up? Still living in this small town, running your Grandad’s businesses?”

“I never wanted to leave Evening Shade,” he says. “At least I didn’t until Curse blew up and changed everything. But, I have to say, I’m feeling a little differently about all that these days.”

He turns his head and kisses my temple, making me smile.

“What about you?” he asks when he turns his face back to the night sky.

I sigh. “I certainly never thought I’d be dumped, jobless, homeless, and hiding out in the town where my favorite movies were filmed at twenty-six, but I’m feeling a little differently about all that these days, too.”

Trace rolls onto his side, and I turn toward him before scooting closer. His hand tangles in my hair, holding me still so he can kiss me slowly. Tenderly. A kiss not filled with our usual heated lust, but something else. Something *more*.

He flops over onto his back, pulling me with him until my legs straddle his hips. We kiss for an eternity, then I rest my cheek on his chest while he softly strokes my hair.

I could get used to this.

If this whole influencer thing is legitimate, and Pressley and I can make it work, I won’t have to go back to Seattle. I could stay here, and we could drive back and forth to meet each other to film the required videos. It wouldn’t be easy, but we could make it work.

I grit my teeth and try to expel the hope trickling through me. That’s not what Trace and I agreed on when we made our deal. He expects this arrangement to expire in a few short weeks, then he’ll go back to his normal life.

And while I know I should talk to him about the possibilities so I don’t end up leaving Evening Shade with a bunch of questions and what ifs, that’s a conversation for later.

Tonight, I just want to enjoy being here with him, his body warming mine while the stars shine down on us from a perfect, velvet sky.

Chapter
Twenty-Nine

Trace

I walk into Wolfsbane Tavern like I'm on a mission, and Bram must see something in my expression, because he has a beer waiting for me by the time I make it to the bar. I slide onto the empty stool next to him with a mumbled thanks, and he picks up his own beer and clinks the neck of it against mine.

He's off today, but had no problem meeting me here at noon when I called and asked if he had time to get together.

"So, what's going on? You sounded stressed on the phone," he says after we both take our first drinks.

"Something's going on with Keegan," I grumble, feeling stupid even saying it. I know I sound like a lovesick teenager, but I forge ahead. "I went to get my coffee this morning, and she wasn't at work. Willow said she'd called in sick, and when I called to talk to her, she didn't answer. She just texted back, saying she didn't feel well and might be contagious."

"Why does that have you all grumpy and suspicious?" Bram asks, cocking his head to study me. "Sounds like she's looking out for you and doesn't want to get you sick."

I shake my head. “Something is off. I was with her last night down at the lake, and she was fine.”

“Maybe she caught a cold. It gets chilly down by the water at night.”

“Call it a sixth sense. I don’t know why,” I say, taking another long pull from my bottle, “but she’s lying.”

“I think you should take her at her word,” Bram says, his voice firm.

I wish I could. It’s not like I don’t trust her. I do.

At least, I *want* to. But when you live your whole life with trust issues because your loser parents didn’t love you like they should, it’s hard to fully trust anyone.

And I have this nagging feeling, like maybe she’s changed her mind and wants to end things with me. Or maybe she’s planning to pack up and go back to Seattle sooner than she planned.

And I fucking hate the hollow feeling in my gut at just the idea of that.

This thing between us was never supposed to last. Easy, carefree, no strings attached. That’s all.

Yet here I am, freaking out that she might be lying to me about being sick. That she’s packing her bags at this very moment, planning to sneak out of town without so much as a goodbye.

God, I really am a lovesick teenager.

Minus the *love* bit, of course.

My phone chimes, and I pull it from my pocket to see a text from the woman in question.

Keegan: *Can you come over to the lodge? We need to talk.*

That hollow feeling expands, putting so much pressure on my lungs, I can't breathe. What in the fuck is wrong with me? God, man. Get it together.

"Was that her?" Bram asks.

I nod. "She wants me to come over so we can *talk*."

"Oh."

That's all he says. Nothing more. Nothing less. Just *Oh*.

"Right," I say, tipping my beer bottle up and chugging the rest down. "Guess I better get this over with."

"Don't assume anything. Go in with an open mind," he calls out as I give him a salute and walk away.

I decide to walk to the lodge, and by the time I get there, Keegan is sitting on the front porch steps. She stands up as I approach, and she looks so beautiful, my heart cracks in my chest.

"You look like you're feeling better," I say, only half-attempting to keep the sarcasm out of my voice.

She blushes, saying, "I lied. I wasn't sick."

My feelings of justification are short-lived, quickly replaced by a sickening sort of anticipation. "Why?"

"I had a video chat meeting this morning, and I didn't want to say anything until it was a done deal."

"A meeting?" I ask, all my negative feelings morphing into confusion.

"Come inside, and I'll tell you all about it. Pressley is at Moonstone Mystic, explaining everything to Willow."

“Pressley?” I ask, even more confused than before as I follow her up the steps and into the house.

“She’s part of it,” she says, closing the door behind us and moving to the couch. “Come sit with me.”

I move slowly, my mind racing as it tries to make sense of what she’s said so far. When I finally sit—on the opposite end of the couch from her—she sighs and scoots closer, taking one of my hands in both of hers.

“Have you heard of BingBang?” she asks, throwing me off-kilter once again.

“The social media app?” I ask.

“Yes. So, several weeks ago, Pressley and I were fooling around and made a video together.”

All sorts of sordid thoughts zoom through my mind, and Keegan chuckles.

“Nothing like that, you big pervert,” she says gently, then squeezes my hand. “We were being silly while mixing and taste-testing drinks. Apparently, the video went viral and has three-point-five million views, and counting.”

“Wow,” I breathe.

I don’t use a lot of social media, but I know that’s quite the feat. And this conversation isn’t going anywhere close to where my vivid imagination was taking it on the walk over here.

“Planter’s Vodka reached out to Pressley, since the video was posted to her account. They want us to make more videos featuring their vodka. Correction. They want to *pay* us a lot of money to make more videos.”

“Seriously?” I ask, feeling my tense muscles loosen a bit.

“We had a video meeting with them this morning to finalize the deal. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you about this, and that I lied this morning, but I was being superstitious and didn’t want to jinx it. Do you forgive me?”

“Of course,” I say, feeling genuinely happy for her. “I mean, I don’t like that you lied. I knew something was up, and I’ve been stressing over it all day.”

“I promise I won’t ever lie to you again,” she says. “I was just so nervous, and like I said, I didn’t want to jinx it. And I didn’t have time to explain everything when you called. The meeting was about to start.”

“I understand,” I say.

And I do. And while I am happy for her, I can’t help but get the feeling this is the beginning of the end for us. If she and Pressley got this big deal with Planter’s, they’ll have to cut this vacation short and get back to Seattle, right?

The thoughts slip out of my mind as Keegan mumbles something about celebrating and climbs over me, straddling my lap and pressing her mouth to mine. I grip her hips as we kiss, grinding her down against my rapidly growing erection. She groans into my mouth, then breaks off the kiss roughly before climbing off my lap.

Taking the hand she stretches toward me, I stand and follow her into her bedroom. She closes and locks the door, then holds my gaze as she slowly strips out of her clothes. My throat goes dry while my mouth floods with saliva. It’s a strange feeling, and I swallow rapidly as I pull my own shirt over my head and unbutton my jeans.

Keegan climbs onto the bed, stretching out onto her back before reaching her arms out toward me. I stomp my jeans and

underwear off, then climb over her, settling between her thighs.

We make love slowly. Tenderly.

It feels amazing to be inside her, as usual, but it also feels a little sad. Final. Like it might be the last time.

It feels like goodbye.

Chapter
Thirty

Keegan

The shipment of vodka Planter's promised us arrived at the lodge yesterday, so Pressley and I have spent this whole Sunday afternoon setting everything up and getting ready to film. It's only mid-afternoon when we're ready to start, but hell, it's five o'clock somewhere, so we put on our cutest pajamas, attach Pressley's phone to her ring light stand, and start filming.

Nineties pop music plays in the background as we dance around and combine several different flavors of vodka with various mixers, add fruit garnishes to make them look pretty, then taste them. We ooh and ahh over the ones we love, which are most of them, then move on to the next.

By the time we've finished, we've cracked open five bottles of vodka and are feeling more than a little tipsy. Pressley ends the recording, proclaiming the editing will have to wait until tomorrow when we're sober. Neither of us is ready for the party to end, though, so I send out a group text to Trace, Willow, and Bram, ordering them to get their asses over here. They each respond in the affirmative, and Pressley

squeals and rushes into her room to change into something sexy enough to impress Bram.

I, on the other hand, know Trace would think I'm sexy in a potato sack, so I just keep dancing while sipping on my favorite drink of the day—grape-flavored vodka and lemonade with a splash of lemon-lime soda on top.

I shake my ass as I hand wash our dirty glasses. We used every one we could find, and if I don't, our guests won't have anything to drink from. It's no easy feat—I'm drunk and my fingers aren't really obeying my commands—but I somehow manage to do it without breaking a single one.

Giving myself a high-five for the accomplishment, I slurp down the rest of my cocktail and am in the middle of mixing another when there's a knock at the door.

“Come in, bitches!” I shout over the music, and the door swings open. Willow steps inside with a wide smile, followed by Bram, then Trace.

My whole body lights up when I see him, and I rush forward, slamming into his chest. I probably should've put my very full glass down first, though, because most of it sloshes over the edge to soak his light gray t-shirt.

“Shit,” he gasps, jerking out of my sloppy embrace.

“Oops,” I slur. “Sorry, Wolf Daddy. My bad.”

Trace's eyes narrow, but before I can apologize again, Willow grabs my elbow and pulls me away.

“Let's get you cleaned up,” she says as I glance over my shoulder at Trace.

“He looks mad. Why is he mad?” I ask Willow as she pulls me into the kitchen. “I apologized for spilling my drink on

him.”

“Maybe because you called him Wolf Daddy?” she offers, taking the drink from my hand and setting it on the counter.

“No,” I say, snatching it back up the moment she turns her back to find a dish towel. “Pressley called him that when she was drunk, and he didn’t get mad at *her*.”

“Pressley’s not his girlfriend,” Willow says, taking my drink away again before I can take another long sip.

“I’m not either,” I say, then go still. Well, not completely still, but as still as a swaying drunk person *can* go. “Am I?”

Willow shakes her head. “Okay. Pressley’s not the girl he’s having a summer fling with. Is that better?”

“No,” I say honestly. “Maybe I *want* to be his girlfriend.”

Willow freezes, her eyes trained over my shoulder. I turn on unsteady feet to see Trace, Pressley, and Bram standing behind me. Pressley’s staring at me with wide eyes, but I don’t know why and I honestly don’t care.

“Trace,” I breathe, forgetting what Willow and I were just talking about, completely. “I’m so happy you’re here.”

I stumble toward him and wrap my arms around his middle. I don’t know why his shirt feels wet against my cheek, then I remember I spilled my drink on him and tilt my head back to meet his dark gaze.

“I’m sorry about the drink.” I pause to waggle my eyebrows. At least, I think that’s what I do. “Maybe you should take your shirt off.”

“Excuse us, please,” Trace grumbles, then wraps his fingers around my upper arm and pulls me down the hall and into the bathroom.

Once we're closed inside, he picks me up and sets me on the counter before grabbing a towel off the rack and blotting his shirt with it. Leaning forward, I slip my hands beneath the wet material and stroke my fingers up and down his abs before plucking at the button on his jeans.

He drops the towel and grips my wrists, saying, "What are you doing?"

"What do you think I'm doing?" I reply, trying to sound coy.

"I'm not going to fuck you in a bathroom, in a house full of people, while you're drunk, Keegan."

"Why not?" I slur. "I can be quiet. Promise."

"Stop," he says, pulling my grasping fingers away from the zipper of his jeans and pushing them into my lap.

"Okay, what about a blow job?" I ask, slipping off the counter and dropping to my knees in front of him.

"What is wrong with you?" he barks, reaching down to grip my upper arms and pull me to my feet.

"What is wrong with *you*?" I shoot back, my own anger rising as it dawns on me he's seriously turning me down and not being very nice about it.

"I'll tell you what's wrong with me," he snarls. "I'm not some horny twenty-something who'd fuck his girl in the bathroom at a party. You need to grow up, Keegan."

I reel back, suddenly feeling much soberer than I was a second ago. Trace has never blatantly held our age difference against me like that, and he certainly hasn't spoken to me with such disdain, at least, not since we started sleeping together.

“Maybe you should just go,” I whisper in broken syllables, my eyes cast downward as I take a step back.

I feel him stare at me for a long moment, then he spins and leaves the bathroom, closing the door gently behind him. I wrap my arms around myself as I take several too-fast breaths. I blink against the stinging in my eyes as I begin to shiver.

The door opens, and Willow and Pressley crowd into the small room, leaving the door open behind them.

“What just happened?” Willow asks softly. “Trace just stomped out of the house without a word to any of us.”

I shake my head, refusing to speak the words.

I think we just broke up.

I think I just experienced *real* heartbreak for the first time in my life.

“Bram followed him out, so it’s just us,” Pressley says. “Let’s go sit down so we can talk about it.”

I shake my head again, then slip past them. Rushing to my room, I close myself inside and lock the door. Leaning back against it, I slide down until I’m on the floor, my knees against my chest and my arms wrapped around them.

Unable to hold them back for a second longer, the tears start to fall.

It’s over.

Whatever we had, whatever it was *turning into* is done.

What am I supposed to do now?

Chapter
Thirty-One

Willow: *What did you do?*

Willow: *I can hear Keegan crying through her bedroom door, but she won't tell us what happened.*

Willow: *Answer me, damn it.*

Willow: *Don't make me come hunt you down.*

Trace: *Give it a rest, Willow. Just like I told Bram, I don't feel like talking right now.*

Willow: *Fine. But just know, I'm really mad at you right now.*

Willow: *I love you. Talk to you soon.*



WILLOW: *Has she said anything, yet?*

Pressley: *Not a word. It's been two days. Has Trace?*

Willow: *Nope. Stubborn fucker. Maybe we need to organize an intervention.*

Pressley: *I'm not sure that will work. We don't want to make things worse.*

Willow: *They need to talk. I know whatever this is could be worked out if they'd just communicate.*

Pressley: *But what's the point? She's still planning on leaving in a few weeks, and it would be over anyway, right?*

Willow: *I guess. But I still don't like the way things are.*

Pressley: *Me neither. But they're both adults. We need to let them work this out on their own.*

Willow: *Easier said than done. Trace has been even grumpier than he was before he met her, and that's saying a lot. He's trying my damn patience on the daily.*

Pressley: *Hang in there. I'll try again to get Keegan to tell me what happened, then maybe I can get her out of the house. Sorry she kind of left you in the lurch at the shop.*

Willow: *I can handle it. And good luck with that. Maybe if she talks about it, she'll start to feel better.*

Pressley: *Fingers crossed!*



WILLOW: *Just checking in. It's been 5 days, and I haven't heard from you at all, other than that bland, impersonal resignation email you sent. I know Pressley headed back to Seattle, and I hate that you're cooped up all alone out there.*

Willow: *Keegan!*

Willow: *That's it. If you won't tell me what happened, I'll beat it out of my stupid brother.*

Chapter

Thirty-Two

Trace

I haven't spoken to Keegan all week, and I'm exhausted from pretending it doesn't bother me. The walls have been closing in on me as I replay that whole scene in the bathroom over and over in my head, trying to reassure myself I was right to end things.

It's not working.

I was a total ass to her. She was sloppy drunk, and I wouldn't have engaged in anything sexual with her in that state, but I didn't have to be such a prick about it. I know this. I accept my culpability in the current state of things between us.

But I was all up in my head even before I went over there that night, obsessing over our last night together and how it felt so final. I'd spent hour after hour trying to convince myself it was no big deal. That she was leaving town, anyway.

That I really needed to remember our deal and squash any feelings that may have been blooming for the curvy little spitfire.

Then I walked in and saw her in those cute tiny pajamas with pink cheeks and that ridiculously sloppy-drunk grin, and my heart cracked under the pressure. In that moment, I *knew*.

I was falling for her. *Hard*.

That epiphany scared the shit out of me, so I used her behavior as an excuse to lash out. I didn't give a shit that she spilled her drink on me or called me "Wolf Daddy." I'm not hating the moniker nearly as much as I used to, especially coming from Keegan. I wasn't frustrated with her at all, really.

I was frustrated with myself and my stupid *feelings*.

So, when she tried to fool around with me in the bathroom, instead of gently disengaging and putting her to bed, *alone*, I dumped all my fear and anger on her. I said things I knew would sever whatever bond we had, then I walked out.

I hate myself for it.

But I also know it was the right thing to do.

She's leaving soon. Things between us were always going to end. Delaying the inevitable would only serve to hurt us both more than we already have. We needed a clean break, and I made it happen.

I stiffen as my office door slams open, and my sister blows in like a tornado. Stopping in front of my desk, she props her fists on her hips and snarls at me.

"What's with you?" I ask, leaning back in my chair and crossing my arms over my chest.

"What's with me?" she scoffs. "What's with *you*? Tell me what you did."

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

Lie.

“Keegan quit her job at the shop, and I haven’t heard from or seen her all week. Did she check out of the lodge?”

“No. Not officially. Not yet.”

“So she’s still there.”

“I don’t know.”

Another lie.

I’ve been driving by Lycan Lodge every night after dark, and I’ve seen lights on in the house and her perfect shadow moving behind the drawn curtains. She’s still there. At least, for now.

“Tell me what you did.”

“I didn’t do anything, Will,” I say in a soft, cajoling voice, but it doesn’t work.

She turns around, and I think she’s leaving until she gently closes the door, locks it, and plops down into the chair across from me. Then she copies my posture, leaning back and crossing her arms over her chest before frowning at me.

“I’m not leaving until you give me a straight answer.”

I close my eyes and scrub a palm down my face with a sigh. I know Willow, and she’s not going to let this go. So, I give her an abbreviated version of what happened in that bathroom. She blinks slowly like she’s processing, then her frown turns into an outright scowl.

“You fucking idiot.”

“Hey, now,” I say, holding up both palms to slow this train before it gains momentum.

“Stupid douche-nozzle fuckfaced asshole.”

Too late.

“Willow, please,” I beg, but she’s on a roll, and there’s no stopping her.

“You pushed her away because you were afraid she’d leave, and you wanted to leave first, didn’t you?”

“I’m not afraid...she *is* leaving.”

“Not if you give her a reason to *stay*, dumbass. She has nothing in Seattle to go back to, and every reason to stay in Evening Shade.”

“What about her big influencer gig with Pressley? They have to be near each other to film videos together, right?”

“Right,” she says, but the word carries a tinge of sarcasm and a boatload of disappointment.

In *me*.

She thinks I should’ve fought, and instead, I just gave up and ended things with Keegan.

But what would I be fighting for? While I admitted to myself that my feelings were evolving, Keegan never made any such admission. She, for one, stuck to our deal.

And I refuse to acknowledge what I overheard her saying to Willow in the kitchen that night about wanting to be my girlfriend. She was drunk. Nothing more.

And while she may be a little upset that I ended the arrangement earlier than expected, she’ll get over it. Over me.

Just like she always planned to.

Chapter

Thirty-Three

Keegan

Why am I even still here? I've been cooped up in this house since the night everything fell apart, and I've been completely alone since Pressley left a week and a half ago to head back to Seattle.

The video we filmed that night ended up going viral, just like the last one, and Planter's set up and in-person meeting to discuss our partnership moving forward. Pressley begged me to go with her, but I refused. I convinced her I needed more time and promised I wouldn't miss the next one. Pressley assured me she'd tell the company representatives I'm sick so they won't get the idea that I'm not fully invested.

I am. I just need time.

Pressley has been an incredible friend to me since she showed up on my doorstep that night. She paved the way for this influencer opportunity and has had my back through this thing with Trace even though I refused to tell her what happened.

I haven't told anyone. I turned off my phone after sending my resignation to Willow and hid in the bedroom when she

came knocking at the front door a few hours later. I know I'm going to have to talk to her, eventually. She took me under her wing and supported me when I had no friends and no job. I owe her an explanation.

So, I turned my phone back on a few days ago and, after skimming through dozens of texts from her, sent her an apology and told her I'd let her know the second I was ready to talk about it. She, of course, immediately texted back, scolded me for the radio silence like a mother hen, and assured me she'd be here the instant I gave her the word.

And I haven't given that word, yet.

Honestly, I'm feeling kind of foolish about the whole thing. I shouldn't have tried to force Trace into something he didn't want to do. That's on me. But he was wrong, too, disparaging my age and maturity like that. He could've just patted me on the head and put me to bed, telling me we could talk when I sobered up. That, I would have no problem with.

And after everything Trace said to me, he hasn't tried once to make things right. He left and hasn't contacted me since. Not a call. Not a single text message. Nothing.

That should tell me everything I need to know, right?

I was so fucking stupid, allowing myself to fall for him. I knew the rules. Hell, I *made* the rules. It was only supposed to be about the sex. But I never expected the man I found beneath that grumpy exterior. And I certainly never expected to love him.

"I need food," I mumble to myself as I stumble into the kitchen.

Opening the refrigerator, I frown at the contents, which include several bottles of juice and soda Pressley and I used as

mixers in our video, one lemon, and half a block of cheese. I check the freezer before slamming it shut, too. Nothing but half a bag of pizza rolls in there and a spoonful of ice cream I left just so I wouldn't feel bad for eating the whole pint in one sitting.

The cabinets are practically bare, too, and I realize I haven't gone grocery shopping in at least two weeks. Maybe longer, since Pressley was the last to shop, and that was several days before she left for Seattle.

I bite my lip. I could try my ride-sharing app, but I'm not sure if a town as small as Evening Shade actually has drivers. Maybe there's a taxi in town.

I grab my phone from the counter, but instead of running a search on local transportation options, I pull up my calendar app. I don't even know what fucking day it is, I've been so out of it.

When I see it's Sunday, I close out the app and twitch my thumbs over the screen without tapping it. Moonstone Mystic is closed, so Willow might be free. Releasing a pent up breath, I pull up her number and shoot off a text.

Me: I'm starving, and there's no food in this house. Give me a ride to the grocery store?

Her reply is instantaneous.

Willow: Be there in ten.

I shoot off a quick thank you and rush into my room. Thank God, I decided to shower today. Those have been few and far between over the last couple of weeks. What's the point when there's no one else here to smell me?

Okay, I know there's more to showering regularly than that, but it's the excuse I gave myself when I was too

depressed to pull myself out of bed.

But no more.

It's time I got back to the business of living, and this is the first step.

Stripping out of my shorts and tank, I pull on the lavender sundress I love so much. Might as well try to look good even if I'm not quite feeling it, yet. Strapping on some sandals, I hurry to the bathroom and brush out my hair and pull the sides back in matching barrettes. Pinching my cheeks to put some color into them, I leave the bathroom just as a knock sounds on the door.

That was *not* ten minutes.

I shake my head and smile as I head over and pull it open. Willow launches herself into my arms before I can greet her, and I hug her back just as fiercely as tears prick my eyes.

God, I've missed her.

Pulling back to meet my gaze, she says, "Trace finally told me what happened, and if you want me to kick his ass up and down Evening Shade, I will."

"No ass kicking required," I say with a laugh, then turn to grab my purse. "Let's go. I'm starving and there's no food in this house."

We're quiet for the first part of the drive, and I can tell Willow is waiting for me to speak, like she doesn't want to force anything. Taking a deep breath, I blow it out slowly before turning in my seat to face her.

"I was out of control that night. I forced his hand, and he reacted."

She's shaking her head before I even finish. "It wasn't your fault, Keegan. It's not my place to explain why he acted like that. It's his, if he ever gets the balls to do it. Just know, the fallout is on him, not you."

"What does that mean?" I murmur, but she just shakes her head.

"You want to know? Ask Trace."

I drop it after that. Partly because I know she won't spill Trace's secrets, and partly because I'm not entirely sure I *want* to know. If my theory is right, he lashed out that way because I'm nothing but a fling and things got too messy.

I got too messy.

I don't blame him, honestly. Do I wish he'd felt the same way for me that I felt about him? Of course. But he doesn't. And that's not his fault.

I'm the one who broke rule number four. I fell in love.

Not him.

I push the thoughts aside as we pull into the store's parking lot. Willow makes everything fun and easy, and before I know it, I'm laughing at her antics as we stroll up and down the aisles. We grab lots of comfort food, but also some fruit, vegetables, and healthy grains so I don't die from malnutrition.

When we check out, Willow tries to pay, but I stand my ground and staunchly refuse. Planter's already paid Pressley and me for our services, so I have plenty of money in my account. She eventually backs down, and we're back to laughing while we load the bags into the back of her green car.

On the drive home, she goes quiet for a moment, then looks over at me with searching eyes before returning her gaze

to the road.

“What?” I ask when she doesn’t speak.

“You know I love you, right?” she asks softly.

I nod, feeling my eyes sting with emotion. “I love you, too.”

“Your job at the shop is still waiting for you. And if you decide to stay in Evening Shade, it’s yours for as long as you want it.”

“Thank you,” I breathe. “I’ll think about it.”

I will think about it, but I’m not sure if I’ll accept. If everything goes well for Pressley at the meeting, we should have a long-standing deal with Planter’s. And that could lead to other companies approaching us, as well. I won’t need a day job, because I’ll be making plenty of money posting fun videos on BingBang.

But that’s not the real reason I’m so hesitant. I love the shop, and I loved working with Willow.

No, I’m hedging because if I go back to work, there’s about a hundred-percent chance I’d run into Trace.

And I’m not ready for that. I don’t know when I’ll ever be.

Chapter

Thirty-Four

Trace

Did I say the “Wolf Daddy” nickname doesn’t bother me anymore? Scratch that.

I fucking *hate* it.

It’s been three weeks since I’ve spoken to Keegan, and if that’s not enough to send my mood straight to the shitter, the Cursed convention has begun. Evening Shade is crawling with tourists, most of them CursedCubs, and I’ve been howled at, chased, ambushed, and physically accosted by more women than I can count scrambling to get photos with their favorite *Wolf Daddy*.

The actor that played the character in the movie hasn’t shown up yet, the fucker, and I’ve been hiding out in my apartment as much as possible. Even going out in a baseball cap and sunglasses hasn’t protected me. These women are on the prowl, literally, and there’s no use running.

The good news is that the inn and all of my rental properties are booked to capacity. The small businesses in town are making huge profits, too, so I’ve been *trying* to focus

on the positive and see this whole circus as a good thing for Evening Shade.

It is. I know it is. I just wish it wasn't so God damn annoying.

I can't spend another minute in this apartment by myself today, so I decide to brave the crowds and head down to Wolfsbane Tavern. Bram is working, so if I can find a stool at the bar and keep my back to most of the crowd, maybe I can have a beer in peace and spend some time with my friend.

The tavern is packed when I get there, but somehow, I manage to slip through the crowd unnoticed. Thank God for small favors.

There's even an empty barstool at the far end of the bar, and I almost smile as I slide onto it. Bram sees me and jerks his head in my direction from the other end, then grabs a bottle of my favorite beer from the ice chest and holds it up. I nod, and he pops the top off as he brings it over to me.

"Thanks," I say when he hands it over. "It's crazy in here."

"That's a good thing," he says. "This thing is giving our economy a much-needed boost. I hope the organizers decide to do this every year."

"Shut your mouth," I gripe, and he laughs.

"Pressley is back," he says, keeping his tone intentionally conversational. "She wanted to be here with Keegan for the convention."

"How do you know?" I ask, wondering if Keegan has been in here to see him.

"Pressley and I have been texting," he says, his tone nonchalant though his eyes speak volumes.

He knows I want to ask about Keegan. To see if Pressley has said anything about how she's doing. He also knows I'm too stubborn to actually ask. But he's not going to take pity on me and just tell me.

He knows how I acted that night in the bathroom—Willow ratted me out—and had *one* conversation with me about it. He made it perfectly clear he thought I was being a dumbass, then promised to never speak of it again until I was ready to admit it, myself, and do something about it.

Before he can say anything else, a loud cheer erupts, the roar bouncing off the walls and hurting my eardrums. Straightening my spine, I peer through the frenzied crowd to see the stars who played Lucas and Aria in the movies standing just inside the door, holding hands and waving to their fans. I want to be annoyed by the pandemonium, but hell, at least their presence keeps everyone's attention off *me*.

Willow materializes out of nowhere next to me, and I slide off the barstool to offer it to her. She shakes her head as her gaze darts around the room nervously, so I slide back onto the stool and twist around to face her, using my back to shield her from the crowd.

“What's wrong?” I ask.

“What?” she chirps, her shifty eyes snapping up to meet mine. “Nothing.”

She leans to the left to look around me, and I peer over my shoulder to scan the crowd. That's when I see it.

That guy, “Lucas,” is staring back at Willow with an intensity that almost knocks me backward, and he's not even looking at *me*. I turn back to stare at my sister with wide eyes, and she looks like she's about to bolt. What the fuck?

“Hey,” I say, and her attention snaps back to me as she edges closer to the bar and out of the actor’s line of sight. “Do I need to kick someone’s ass?”

“What?” she squeaks, looking thoroughly confused.

I jerk my head toward my left shoulder. “Why’s he staring at you, and why do you look like you’ve seen a ghost?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. I’d never be surprised to see a ghost,” she says with a grin that doesn’t even come close to reaching her eyes. “I was just leaving, and I wanted to say goodbye.”

She pushes up on her tiptoes and kisses my cheek, then grabs Bram’s attention and motions toward the door that leads to the kitchen, mouthing, “Can I go out the back?”

Bram, who’s been helping a crowd of women at the other end of the bar, nods and jerks his head in that direction.

“Willow,” I say sternly as she turns to leave, and she sighs.

“Don’t worry, big brother. I’m fine. Everything is fine.”

Then she waves and spins around, hurrying away on quick feet with her head tucked down. I spin around on my stool to face “Lucas” head-on only to see him frowning at Willow’s retreating form. He has his arm around “Aria’s” shoulder, and that one is tucked into his side like he’s her protector. And her lover.

After a couple of beats, he meets my gaze. I snarl at him, warning him off without words, but he just dips his chin and whispers something to the woman under his arm. She nods, and they move out onto the makeshift dance floor as a pop song starts to play. The crowd swarms around them almost immediately, and I lose sight of the little prick.

“What was that all about?”

I turn back to face Bram, who posed the question, and shake my head.

“Hell, I don’t know. But I’m *going* to find out.”

Chapter

Thirty-Five

Keegan

“**O**h, my God, I still can't believe we met Gavin Reese!”

With that exclamation, Pressley tilts backward, falling to the couch with a fake faint. I hum in response as I snack on the bag of cheese puffs I snagged from the kitchen as soon as we got home. Pressley sits up, turning to face my end of the couch with a frown.

“What?” I ask defensively. “It was fun.”

“Okay, that's it. I can't take this anymore,” she growls, and I tense up.

“Why are you angry?”

“Why am I angry?” she repeats, though her tone is dripping with sarcasm. “You should be over the moon! Planter's Vodka set up a private meet and greet after offering Gavin-fucking-Reese a contract to be in one of our BingBang videos. We get to hang out and drink with your fucking teenage heartthrob crush, *the* Lucas Lumin, and you think it's *fun*,” she says, using air quotes on that last word.

“Pressley, don’t,” I groan, knowing exactly where this is going.

“No. I’m not going to let you wallow anymore. You’re obviously still pining over Trace. You need to go fucking get him. Kiss and make up. Whatever you need to do. Fix it.”

“You make it sound so easy,” I murmur, slumping further back into the couch.

“He’s just as miserable as you are, Keeps,” she says, her tone and volume much softer.

“You don’t know that,” I say.

“Yes, I do.”

“Oh, you do, do you?” I ask, feeling my hackles raise. “Then why hasn’t he made a move? Why is he still keeping his distance?”

Feeding off my own burgeoning ire, she shouts, “Because he thinks you’re leaving, and he’s just trying to protect himself!” Then she rears back with a horrified expression, saying, “Oops.”

“Wait, what?” I ask, sitting upright and leaning toward her.

“Shit,” she grits out, then shoots me a pleading look. “Forget I said that?”

“Oh, no,” I say, drawing out the syllables. “Spill. Now.”

Pressley slumps back, looking defeated. She holds my stare for a long moment, then sighs.

“I’ve been texting with Bram. He’s told me things—in confidence—that I can’t repeat. Please don’t ask me to break his trust any more than I already have.”

I nod in agreement even though everything inside me is screaming to demand more details. To discuss and pick over every word Bram has said about Trace. But Pressley is my friend, and friends don't put friends in tight spots like that. Madison and Sloan wouldn't hesitate to drag it out of her, and I want to be better. I want us *both* to be better, and that means letting her keep Bram's secrets without guilt or recrimination.

Could she be right, though? Could the reason Trace acted the way he did and broke things off with me have anything to do with my leaving?

Am I leaving?

Of course, I am. I've only rented the lodge through this weekend. After that, I'll be just as homeless here as I am back in Seattle. My *home*.

But is it, though? My home?

As hard as I try, I can't think of a single reason to go back there other than Pressley and our budding influencer business. As if she's read my mind, Pressley's foot kicks out to nudge my knee.

"If you decide to stay, we can make it work. I would insist on us visiting each other regularly, anyway, and we could just film a bunch of videos at once. It's totally doable."

My eyes sting with tears as I shoot her a wide smile. Hopping up, I ditch the bag of cheese puffs and grab my shoes. As I slip them on, Pressley lets out a loud whoop.

"Do you want to borrow my car? The keys are in the kitchen."

"No," I answer. "I can walk. It'll give me time to figure out what I'm going to say."

“Good luck,” she gushes, jumping to her feet to hug me. “I love you, girl.”

“I love you, too,” I say, squeezing her back. “And Pressley?”

“Yeah?”

“Thanks for being such an amazing friend.”

“Right back at you, babe,” she says with a teary laugh. And as I release her and head for the door, she shouts, “Go get him!” punctuated by a long, loud howl.

Laughter bubbles out of me as I shake my head and dart through the door, jogging down the steps and not slowing until I hit the crowded sidewalk in front of Moonstone Mystic. It’s pure mayhem. A town this size isn’t meant to handle this many people. I search every face in the crowd, looking for the one I love, but he’s nowhere to be seen.

I rush across the street to the inn, waving at the night manager as I jog up the steps to Trace’s apartment. I bang my fist on the door and bounce from foot to foot as I wait, but there’s no answer.

He’s not home.

Rushing back down the steps, I almost trip, but manage to catch myself on the banister before I tumble the rest of the way down. Waving at the guy behind the desk as I pass by again, I run outside and snake my way through the crowd.

Fuck. Where is he?

I pull out my phone, deciding to just call him, but before I can tap the screen, I spot his beautiful, scowling face as he stomps out of the tavern. My chest hollows out as my heart

speeds up, the sight of him bringing me back to life after three weeks of grieving over him.

Lifting a hand into the air in a wild wave, I scream the one thing that's sure to get his attention in my loudest, highest voice.

“Wolf Daddy! Ahh-ahh-ahh-wooo!”

Trace freezes and squeezes his eyes closed as hundreds of howls echo mine, making me laugh. CursedCubs unite!

I start to run, and as if by magic, the sea of people parts like I'm freaking Moses, or something. The howling continues, cheering me on as I race toward my man. I see him open his eyes, and a second later, they land on me. His scowl disappears, replaced by a dumbfounded expression, like he can't fathom why I'd be rushing toward him.

Without slowing, I slam into him, wrapping my arms around his waist and plastering my body to his. His own arms come around me without hesitation, and he hugs me so tight, I can hardly breathe.

I don't care. Who needs air, anyway?

This hug is worth it. Worth everything.

“Keegan,” he breathes, hugging me even tighter than before. “What are you doing?”

“I missed you,” I mumble against his broad chest.

He hugs me for a moment longer, then grips my upper arms to hold me still while he takes a step back. He looks devastated, and little cracks form in my heart.

“We can't—”

“I’m not leaving,” I cut in before he can finish that statement, and his body petrifies on the spot.

“What did you say?” he whispers like he can’t believe his own ears.

I’m terrified, but I refuse to let that stop me. If Bram was telling Pressley the truth, the only reason Trace set me aside was to protect his own heart. Because he was sure I was leaving him.

But I’m not, and he already has my heart. I need him to understand he can trust me with his.

“I’m staying here...with you.”

“But Seattle,” he says. “And your work with Pressley.”

“Pressley and I talked about it, and we’ll work it out. And Seattle isn’t my home. Not anymore. Not when everything I want, everything I *love* is right here in front of me.”

My heart stops as a myriad of emotions spins across his face. The carousel stops on a stern look, and I experience a split-second of panic before he growls, yanks me toward him, and seals his perfect mouth over mine.

I melt into him as relief and joy war for supremacy inside me. I stiffen back up for a moment when the crowd erupts around us, and I suddenly realize everyone had gone silent while we spoke, waiting to see what would happen between their Wolf Daddy lookalike and the curvy little woman laying her heart on the line.

Breaking off our kiss, Trace smiles down at me as he takes my hand. The crowd parts again as we cross the street toward the inn, and I smile and wave at our audience as they shout encouragement and congratulations. I catch sight of Willow outside Moonstone Mystic, cupping her hands around her

mouth and shouting before shooting me a thumbs-up. I return the gesture, and her eyes dart to my left before her face turns pale, and she disappears into the crowd.

I look around but don't see anything out of the ordinary. Weird. What was that all about?

I shout as Trace picks me up and tosses me over his shoulder, and all thoughts of Willow and her strange behavior disappear. I grip his ass with both hands for leverage as he pushes through the door to the inn, greets his night manager like his carrying a woman like a caveman is no big deal, and starts to climb the stairs.

I'm smiling so hard, my cheeks hurt. I've never been this happy and in love.

And I'm about to show Trace Bardin just how much he means to me. All night long.

Chapter
Thirty-Six

Trace

Even when I set Keegan on her feet in front of my bed, and she stares up at me with those big, gorgeous eyes, I can't believe she's actually here. I can't believe she said what she said. That she's staying. That she *loves* me.

A sentiment I have yet to return, and I will, but first...

"Keegan, I'm so sorry about how I acted that night. I didn't mean any of what I said."

"It's okay," she says, pressing her palms to my chest.

"No, it's not," I say, shaking my head firmly and covering her hands with my own, holding them there. "I was an asshole. I was scared of what I was feeling, and I lashed out at you in some ridiculous attempt to protect myself. It was cruel of me to treat you like that, and I've hated myself every second of every day since for the things I said to you. And for leaving, too. I never should've left. I've been miserable without you."

"And what were you feeling?" she asks with a coy smile, ignoring the rest of my little speech.

I shake my head as one corner of my mouth lifts, then drops. Searching her gaze, I tighten my fingers around her

hands and tilt my head to bring my face closer to hers.

“I’m in love with you,” I whisper with every ounce of feeling that’s been locked inside me over the last few weeks.

“Then, you’re forgiven,” she says with a shaky laugh as her eyes well with tears. “And I love you, too, Trace. So much.”

Releasing her hands, I pick her up and hold her against my chest so we’re face-to-face. Giving her my best impression of pure irritation, I growl, “I’m still going to spank you for screaming *Wolf Daddy* in the middle of town like that.”

“Oh, *Wolf Daddy*,” she purrs, “I was counting on it.”

Then she presses her lips to mine in a kiss so filled with love and devotion, my heart bursts in my chest, filling the rest of my body with warm lava. Her little punishment can wait.

Now is the time for absolute love, to show her how precious she is to me. To reassure her that I’ll never leave her again, and if she tries to flee, I’ll chase her to the ends of the earth like the werewolves she loves so much would their own mates.

Setting her back on her feet, I undress her, slowly peeling off every layer of clothing until she stands before me completely naked. She tries to hold still as I brush my fingertips over every inch of her skin, then she gasps when I pluck her up and set her on the edge of the bed.

I kiss her lips, then her breasts, until she moans, begging for more. Then, dipping low, I spread her thighs and run my tongue over her pussy. The familiar taste of it sends chills down my spine, making me realize exactly how much I’ve missed this.

Keegan groans and falls backward, spreading her arms wide across the mattress and gripping the quilt in tight fists as I lick her again, a long, slow stroke with the flat of my tongue. Picking up her legs, I drape them over my shoulders and spread her wide before focusing on her clit.

“Oh, God,” she moans. “I’ve missed this so much.”

“Hold on tight, baby,” I say, then flick her clit with the tip of my tongue as I push a finger deep inside her soaked channel. Groaning, I add, “Already so wet for me?”

“Always,” she gasps as I swirl my tongue around that sensitive bit of flesh once more.

I curl the tip of my finger, easily finding that special spot inside her as I suck and lick at her clit. Her breathing quickens and turns ragged, and she moans my name as her hips pump upward. Then, she goes rigid and shakes her head.

“Wait. Stop,” she huffs. “I want to come on your ginormous cock.”

A chuckle bursts out of me at her repeated use of the word “ginormous,” and she smiles even though her eyes are still closed. Giving her one last teasing lick, I pull her legs off my shoulders and step back. I undress in record time as she scoots up the bed and spreads her legs wide, inviting me to slip between them.

Climbing onto the bed, I settle between those creamy thighs and position the tip of my cock at her entrance. I go still, not moving an inch until she opens her eyes and meets my gaze.

“Call me Wolf Daddy,” I whisper, and the surprise on her face is almost comical. “I know you want to, and I intend to

give you everything you want. I'll do anything to make you happy, baby. *Anything.*”

Her lips part in a brilliant smile just before she replies. “Then fuck me good and hard, Wolf Daddy.”

My hips buck forward, driving my cock deep inside her. She's so wet and ready, I bottom out in one single motion, pulling matching moans from both of us.

“I love you so much,” I whisper against her lips as I start to move inside her.

“I love you more,” she whispers back, then lifts her head to steal a kiss.

Growling as her hips lift to meet me thrust for thrust, I grip one breast and knead it before pinching the nipple. She hums with pleasure, and I press my lips to hers, kissing her long and deep.

This is my life now, and I'll never take it, or *her*, for granted. Keegan is everything to me, and I plan to make sure she knows it every second of every day for the rest of our lives.

And I know she'll prove her love to me just the same.

The fangirl and the grump were made for each other, and nothing will tear us apart ever again.

Epilogue

Keegan

The convention ended a few days ago, and though the other stars of the movies left Monday morning, Gavin Reese is still in town. He made a big show of telling his fans goodbye and climbing into a car with Julia Warner, the actress who played Aria, to head for the airport in Salem to catch a private jet, but a few hours later, the car returned with him inside.

I only know because he privately rented one of Trace's rental properties using a fake name, and Trace said he's been hiding out there for days, waiting until the crowds leave and Evening Shade returns to normal before venturing out.

Then this morning, he texted Pressley and asked us to come over later to discuss the logistics of the BingBang video we'll be filming together. Trace is coming along with us, but when Pressley asked Willow if she wanted to join, she said she was busy rearranging the shop now that the convention is over.

I found it odd she wouldn't want to meet Gavin, in person, but forgot all about it when Trace appeared at the lodge and asked me to go somewhere with him. We're in his truck now, and he's being all mysterious and refusing to tell me where we're going.

“Just give me a hint,” I beg, bouncing in my seat as we drive out of town.

“Patience, lotus flower,” he says with a grin.

“Come on, Wolf Daddy,” I say, and he just smiles wider as he does every time I’ve called him that since the night of our reunion.

He starts to slow the truck, and I squeal with delight as I realize where we are. He’s taking me back to Aria’s house—his family home. I haven’t been back here since the first time we came, and I’m excited to get to explore it again.

When he pulls the truck to a stop in the drive, I unbuckle my seatbelt, lean over to pop a kiss on his cheek, then open my door and hop out. Just being here on the property makes me feel all warm and gooey inside. This house was an escape when I was an angsty teenager, watching Aria and Lucas’s love grow as they spent time together in each of its rooms.

And now? Now, knowing Trace and Willow grew up and flourished here with their Grandad makes it even more special. This time, I’m not here to recreate scenes from the movies in my mind.

This time, I want to know everything about the boy who grew into the man I love.

Trace steps up behind me and wraps his arm around my waist, linking his hands over my stomach. I lean back into him with a happy sigh.

“Thank you for bringing me here again.”

“I didn’t just bring you here for another tour,” he says quietly.

“Oh, yeah?” I ask, my mind going to the dirtiest of dirty places.

Sensing my thoughts, he chuckles. “*That* will come later, baby.”

“Promise?”

“Promise,” he says, pressing a kiss to the top of my head before releasing me and turning me around to face him. “I brought you here today because your rental agreement at the lodge ended a few days ago.”

My smile drops as I stare at him, my brow furrowing in confusion. “Are you kicking me out?”

“Yes,” he says with a wicked grin, then nods at the house behind me. “How would you feel about moving in here?”

“What?” I squeak, glancing over my shoulder before meeting his eyes again. “Seriously?”

He nods. “Grandpa would hate how the place has sat empty all these years. And I think he’d approve of us living here and bringing some life back to the house.”

“Wait. *Us*?” I ask, my entire body sparking with excitement.

“If that’s what you want,” he says, shifting uneasily. “I mean, you could move in here by yourself, if you’re not ready for that step, yet.”

“Shut up,” I say through the widest smile I’ve ever smiled.

Gripping his shirt, I yank him down to my level and press my mouth to his. After a single second’s hesitation, Trace takes over, gathering me up into his arms and pushing his tongue between my lips to worship my mouth.

“So that’s a yes?” he asks with a chuckle as I break away and proceed to pepper kisses all over his face.

“Yes,” I squeal as he spins me around in tight circles without warning.

“Good,” he says when he stops and sets me back on my feet. “Because I plan on spending the rest of my life making you happier than you’ve ever dreamed of being, Keegan Carpenter.”

“I can hardly wait,” I reply as tears of happiness drip from my eyes.

“Well, then, we better get started,” he says, then takes my hand and pulls me toward the front porch.

Toward my new home. With him.

My future.

Now, forever, and always.



THANKS FOR READING *The Fangirl and the Grump!* I hope you loved *Evening Shade* and its eclectic bunch of residents as much as I do. If you have a sec, I’d love it if you’d leave a review!



WANT MORE? Sign up for my mailing list to receive a **Bonus Scene!** Something weird is going on with the people of *Evening Shade*, and Keegan is right at the center of it.

[Click here to download the Bonus Scene.](#)



WONDERING what's going on between Willow and Gavin Reese? Find out in Fangirls of Evening Shade Book 2, [The Fangirl and the Playboy!](#) (And don't worry, we'll get to Pressley and Bram in book 3...)

About the Author

Piper James lives in Idaho with her husband, two teenage sons, three cats, and a dog.

Her favorite things are romance novels, coffee, potato chips, and her Jeep Wrangler...and her family, of course. Seriously. She loves her family more than coffee and her jeep. *exaggerated wink*

When she's not writing, she watches ghost shows and spends most of her time trying to convince her family their house is haunted. Because it is.

She wrote YA paranormal romance for 6 years under the name Wendi Wilson before giving into her desire to write spicy romcoms, and it was the best career decision she's ever made...until she decides to write a book about the ghosts. Because they are definitely real.

Also by Piper James

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The Bliss List (A Standalone Fake Relationship Romance)

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Fangirls of Evening Shade

The Fangirl and the Grump

The Fangirl and the Playboy