



The

FANGIRL

and the

CROONER



PIPER JAMES

THE FANGIRL AND THE CROONER

FANGIRLS OF EVENING SHADE


BOOK THREE

PIPER JAMES

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*For anyone who's made mistakes and isn't sure how to fix
them... We've all been there.*

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CHAPTER

ONE

Pressley

I blink to clear the road-hypnosis, realizing my mind had been wandering, and I have no idea where I am or how far I've driven. A road sign comes into view, telling me I'm only forty-eight miles from Portland, Oregon. I'm over halfway there.

Over halfway to my new home.

There are things I'll miss about Seattle, sure, but everyone I care about is in Evening Shade. Keegan Carpenter, who used to be part of my friend group when she lived in the city. She broke free of the toxic friendships before I managed to extricate myself, and when I did, I earned her forgiveness for keeping a secret I had no business keeping. Keegan's new fiancé, Trace Bardin. His sister Willow, who instantly took Keegan under her wing when she needed a friend the most, and did the same for me when I returned to town to beg for Keegan's forgiveness. Gavin Reese, Willow's one true love and a literal movie star who turned out to be just a regular guy who's in love with a regular girl.

And then there's Bram. The gorgeous bartender who caught my eye the first time I came to Evening Shade on that fateful girls' trip that went terribly wrong.

Keegan's ex had been sleeping with one of our so-called friends, I knew about it, and I didn't tell her. I should've. I know that. But there were risks involved with spilling the tea. Risks I wasn't ready to face yet. When I *was* ready, I ended

my dependent relationship with that cheating bitch and found the person I truly wanted to be.

Afterward, when I returned to throw myself at Keegan's feet and beg for another chance to be a real friend to her, Bram and I became friends, too. Each subsequent visit brought us closer, but nothing romantic has happened between us save for a little light flirting.

Okay, a *lot* of light flirting.

But that was *before*. Before I messed up, overstepped, and made Bram hate me.

I thought I was helping. I thought he'd thank me for it once he realized the amazing opportunity I was giving him. I thought my actions would bring us closer, showing him I'd do anything for him.

Well...I thought *wrong*.

And now, I'm nervous as hell about seeing him again. Has his anger faded? Will things go back to normal now that some time has passed?

Time heals all wounds, right?

I don't know for sure, but somehow, I doubt it. And having Bram angry with me makes this huge step I'm taking, moving to Evening Shade permanently, so much more nerve-racking.

I've always been a chronic people-pleaser, and while those tendencies have lessened thanks to the love and support of my friends—I know I don't have to give up my own needs and desires in lieu of those of others all the time—there's still a hollow feeling in my chest when I think of how catastrophically I *displeased* Bram.

But at this point, I have to accept that it is what it is.

When the lease on my apartment in Seattle ran out, I didn't renew it. I rented a storage locker for my furniture since I'll be subletting Willow's apartment—she moved in with Gavin once they worked out their own shit—and the place is fully furnished already. All of my personal belongings are packed in the trunk and on the backseat of my car.

And I'm over halfway to my destination.

A familiar song starts to play through the car's speakers, and I reach over and twist the knob to turn up the volume. I start to bounce a little in my seat, my lips turning up into a smile. This is one of the songs Keegan and I danced to in the BingBang video that changed everything.

It was months ago, before we even thought of taking that weekend trip to Evening Shade that altered our lives. Before everything blew up between us. Keegan and I were fooling around, filming ourselves mixing cocktails and dancing ridiculously in our silly pajamas. We decided to upload that video to BingBang, and for some reason, it took off.

It went viral, so viral that Planter's Vodka reached out with a sponsorship opportunity, making Keegan and I legitimate influencers. Everything changed after that. Keegan, who'd lost her job in Seattle, didn't have to struggle to find a new one that could support her. I was able to quit my own position as manager in our ex-friend's boutique. I'd been making her business a success for years, hoping that one day we'd become equal partners, but that was never in the cards for me. Madison—the ex-friend in question—used me to make herself a ton of money and never had any intention of rewarding my efforts.

So, I quit. And, fuck, did it feel good.

I've been driving back to Evening Shade regularly to film BingBang content with Keegan, and I finally realized there was no reason for me to continue to reside in Seattle.

Everyone I care about is in that tiny tourist town where some famous werewolf movies were filmed over a decade ago. Where a new werewolf television series starring Gavin Reese will be filmed very soon, giving Evening Shade an even bigger dot on the map.

I just hope everything works out, and this decision doesn't turn out to be a mistake.

I shake my head. I can't think like that.

It's not a mistake. Regardless of whether or not things between Bram and me will ever go back to normal, this was the right decision. My life is in Evening Shade, now. There's nothing left for me in Washington.

Everything is going to work out, and I'm going to be happier than I've ever been in my life.

I just know it.

CHAPTER

TWO

Bram

Popping the tops off two bottles of beer, I slide them across the bar to the guy who ordered them. He thanks me, handing me a twenty and telling me to keep the change. I nod in thanks and turn to slip the bill into the register.

Wolfsbane Tavern is a second home to me, and tonight, it's crowded as hell. Even with another bartender on shift with me, we're having trouble keeping up with the constant flow of orders. But I'm not stressed over it.

I love this place. I love this job. There's nothing else I'd rather do and nowhere else I'd rather be.

Talking to people, learning their stories and offering advice while they sip cocktails and brews...it's always been my calling. My regulars, people who are actually citizens of Evening Shade, are special to me, and I always try to make them feel that way. And ever since this town became a tourist destination, I've had a steady flow of new faces—new stories—to keep the job from feeling stagnant.

A pretty girl in a tiny little white tank top walks up to the bar, and I offer her my most charming smile. She's obviously a CursedCub, one of the many super fans of the Cursed movies who flock to Evening Shade on the weekends to tour the town and the recognizable movie locations in the area. Her tank top bears the image of Gavin Reese, who starred in the movies

when he was just a teenager and now lives here with his one true love, my best friend's little sister, Willow.

“What can I get you?” I ask when she stops in front of me, her gaze devouring every inch of my face as her mouth falls open.

“Oh, my God! You're him!” she shouts, her face lighting up with recognition.

I try to hold onto my smile while I grind my molars together. I don't acknowledge or confirm her loud statement, but the way she's bouncing on the balls of her feet tells me she's convinced I'm the person she thinks I am.

And unfortunately, it's true.

“What are you drinking tonight?” I ask, keeping my voice even as I place a cocktail napkin on the bar in front of her.

“Oh, yeah,” she says, her face falling a bit. “I'll have a Sex on the Beach, please.”

Her gaze turns sultry as she slowly enunciates the name of the drink, and it's all I can do not to roll my eyes as I nod and get to work mixing it for her. Nobody orders that here. Not since the nineties, anyway, before I even graduated from elementary school.

Except, of course, a random woman here and there who thinks ordering the suggestive drink will somehow make *me* suggest we get out of here and engage in a little sex on the beach, ourselves.

Handing the drink over, I accept her credit card and turn to ring up her order. When I swing back around to return the card, she deftly runs her fingertips over mine while her lips turn up seductively.

“You're so talented. I've watched it several hundred times, and every single time, I'm...affected.”

She bites the corner of her lip while blatantly eye-fucking me. I force a disinterested smile, thank her, and turn toward a guy who's been waiting patiently to order. The woman remains frozen in place for several beats, then I see her

shoulders lift and drop from the corner of my eye, indicating a deep sigh. Then she slowly turns and wanders away, sneaking peeks over her shoulder every few steps as if she expects me to be checking out her ass, or something.

Not going to happen.

I may flirt back with the female customers when they instigate it—or when I'm truly attracted to them—but I will not be swept up in this barrage of fangirling I never asked for and *don't want*.

Fucking Pressley Glade.

We were friends. It was a friendship I was determined to foster, moving slowly while praying it would grow into more. I was into her the first time I met her, but she had some baggage she needed to deal with, so I decided to give her the time and space she needed to straighten out her life before making my move. It turned out to be the best decision, because over several months, we grew extremely close, building bonds that would stand the test of time when and if we ever decided to turn things up a notch and become romantically involved. Plus, she lives in Seattle, a several hours' drive from here that would make dating difficult, if not impossible.

Or *lived*, I guess. She's moving to Evening Shade, which means I'll have a daily reminder of how she broke my trust. How she broke *us*.

I didn't want things to go this way. I didn't want any of it, but Pressley decided to do what she did, anyway. Like she knew best, and I would see the benefits of her choice after the fact.

Rationally, on some level, I know she was only trying to help me. She was sure I'd change my tune once the deed was done, but, unfortunately for both of us, she was wrong.

I like my life just the way it is. *Was*.

I just hope the fervor will die down eventually, my fifteen minutes of fame will fade away, and things will go back to normal.

And as to how I'll deal with Pressley living here? I honestly have no fucking clue.

Only one thing's for sure—it's going to be uncomfortable for both of us.

CHAPTER

THREE

Pressley

I heave a sigh of relief as I pull into the parking lot of Evening Shade's only apartment complex. I've made that drive dozens of times, but this time, it was so much harder. Maybe it's because I left my old life behind to start a new one here. Maybe it's because I knew I wouldn't be driving back in a few days.

Maybe it was because of the tension between Bram and I, a tension I know I'll have to come face to face with sooner, rather than later.

And I'm not ready.

Willow is supposed to meet me here so she can give me the keys and a tour, but I don't see her anywhere. Climbing from the car, I spot her recognizable green hatchback a few spots over, and a sense of relief fills me as I lean back into my own car to grab my purse from the passenger's seat. Straightening, I close the door behind me and make my way toward my new home.

My steps stutter when I look up and see the front door of the apartment gaping open. Streamers made of yellow plastic crisscross the doorway, and streaks of black mar the previously white doorjamb.

I just stand there, gaping, until I hear a familiar voice call my name. Spinning toward the sound, I see Willow rushing toward me with a pained expression. Trace and Keegan follow behind her with similar looks on their faces.

“What happened?” I ask, jerking my head toward the apartment as a sinking feeling spins in my stomach.

“I’m so sorry, Pressley. I don’t know exactly what caused it, but there was an electrical fire early this morning. The fire department put it out before the flames could spread to the rest of the building, but the apartment is a charred and flooded mess.”

“Wh-what?” I stutter, unable to form a coherent thought, much less speak the words.

Where am I going to live? I don’t have many other options, not until someone in Evening Shade puts their house on the market, and the options I do have, I’ve already discounted. I can’t go back to Seattle, either. There’s nothing for me there.

“We’re going to figure this out,” Keegan says, cutting off my internal freak out. “You’re going to stay with Trace and me until you find something else.”

“Or you could stay with Gavin and me. We have a guest bedroom you can use for as long as you want,” Willow adds.

I look back and forth between them as I fight the despondency trying to drown me. I love them for offering, and it isn’t the first time, but I am loath to intrude. Both of their living situations are fairly new, and they’re both still in the honeymoon phases of their romantic relationships. It’s why I refused both their offers before Willow and Gavin came up with the idea to offer me her apartment.

My eyes flit back and forth between them, then fall closed as I blow out a long breath. I don’t have a choice here, really. I need a place to stay, even if only for a little while. And I’ve known Keegan longer, we’re closer than Willow and I are, and her relationship with Trace isn’t quite as new as Willow and Gavin’s is. Plus, Trace and Keegan have a bigger house, which will allow me to give them more privacy. But of course...

I meet Keegan’s eyes. “You just got engaged.”

“It’s fine. Really,” she says, then looks at Trace.

He smiles, wrapping his arm around her. “We’d love to have you.”

“Okay,” I say, scrunching my nose against the burning in my sinuses as my eyes start to water.

“I really am sorry, Pressley,” Willow says, and I sniff before waving a hand in her direction.

“Please don’t apologize. It’s not your fault.”

“But I promised—”

“Really, Willow. I’ll be fine. Thank you, all of you, for being such great friends.”

Pulling myself together as best I can, I offer Willow a watery smile. She reaches out and hugs me, whispering another apology before releasing me and taking a step back. I wave off this apology like I did the first—it’s in no way her fault this happened—then turn to Keegan and Trace and nod.

Once we disperse, I follow them home, taking a deep breath before climbing from the vehicle. They meet me by the trunk of my car, and Trace grabs my two large suitcases from inside while Keegan and I grab a few smaller boxes from the backseat.

Keegan chatters happily about how much fun we’re going to have living together as Trace leads the way up to Willow’s childhood bedroom. After setting down my luggage, Trace mumbles something about grabbing the remainder of my things while Keegan and I plop the boxes down on the bed.

I take a moment to look around, a wave of nostalgia nearly overtaking me. The room looks exactly as it did in the Cursed movies, when it was the main character Aria’s bedroom. And though I’m not quite the fan Keegan is, I did watch and enjoy the movies when they came out. Plus, I’ve sat through several re-watches every time Keegan insisted we *needed* it over the last few years.

“This is going to be great,” Keegan says, snapping me out of my thoughts as she bounces on the balls of her feet.

“I’ll try to stay out of your way,” I promise.

“Nonsense,” she proclaims, slashing a hand through the air. “Trace and I are thrilled to have you for as long as you need. Our home is your home, Pressley. Seriously.”

“Thank you,” I murmur, feeling tears sting the corners of my eyes once more.

“None of that, now,” she says, lunging forward to wrap me up in a tight hug.

Leaving the unpacking for later, I follow Keegan down the stairs. Trace waits for us to pass at the base of the staircase, his arms filled with two boxes. The steps creak and snap beneath his weight, echoing behind us as Keegan leads me into the kitchen and pulls a bottle of champagne and a jug of orange juice from the refrigerator.

“Mimosas?” I ask, sniffing to clear my emotion-clogged sinuses.

“Shit, girl, it’s always a good time for mimosas. You know that,” she says, shooting me a saucy wink.

A laugh bursts out of me, and fuck, it feels good. The day hasn’t gone at all how I expected, but I’m *here*, in Evening Shade, ready to start my new life.

And speedbumps and curveballs only make life more interesting, right?

I nod to myself, then accept the champagne flute filled with tart and bubbly goodness from Keegan. Lifting her own glass, she clinks it against mine, and we both take a hearty sip.

“Oh, I know,” Keegan says, her eyes wide with excitement. “We should veg out on the couch today, eat a bunch of junk food, and watch the Cursed trilogy!”

I laugh again, my smile remaining as I shake my head. “That sounds perfect.”

CHAPTER

FOUR

Bram

It's official. Pressley is back. And this time, she's here for good.

I'm still not sure exactly how I feel about it. Part of me is ecstatic for her. I know she's excited and will be happier here, with her friends, than she was in Seattle. Plus, Evening Shade is a great place to live. It's a beautiful, simple lifestyle we lead, and I know I wouldn't want to live anywhere else.

On the other hand, I'm still angry, and knowing I'll see her—we share the same friends—has me feeling antsy and uncomfortable.

“Hey, man.”

My gaze jerks up from the glasses I've been washing to see Trace across the bar. He slides onto a stool, and I grab a nearby towel to dry my hands as he orders his favorite beer. After grabbing the bottle and popping off the top, I set it in front of him.

“Thanks. It's been *a day*,” he says as he picks it up to take a long swig.

“Oh, yeah?”

“You haven't heard?” he asks. When I shake my head and shrug, he sighs. “Willow's apartment caught fire this morning.”

“What?” I blurt, my eyes flaring wide. “Is everyone okay?”

“Everyone’s fine,” he assures me before I can spin out. “The apartment was empty when an electrical fire broke out. The fire department was able to put it out before it spread, but the apartment is a wreck. It’ll take weeks, if not months, to repair it.”

“I’m glad everyone is okay,” I say slowly, my mind spinning with all the terrible things that *could’ve* happened.

“So that means Keegan and I have a houseguest for the foreseeable future.”

My heart trips as an image of Pressley flashes through my mind. She was planning on moving into that apartment. This disaster has obviously left her with very few options, since she agreed to move in with Trace and Keegan.

I may be upset with her, but I still *know* her. I’m certain she hates this. She would never want to feel like an imposition. I know Trace and Keegan don’t see her that way, but deep down Pressley will always harbor fear that they do.

Plus, she’s determined to make her own way in the world after spending years depending on that bitch of an ex-friend Madison, who used her and tossed her out like yesterday’s trash. Pressley doesn’t want to rely on anyone besides herself. And she absolutely refuses to fall into old patterns.

I shake my shoulders in a physical attempt to release the emotions weighing me down. I’m still angry with Pressley. What she is or isn’t going through is none of my concern.

And maybe if I keep telling myself that, it’ll be true.

It’s not easy, being mad at her. She’s so fucking sweet and generous, and I *know* she thought she was helping when she uploaded that video to her BingBang account. But I specifically told her I didn’t want that. I didn’t want to be internet famous.

My music is for me. It’s for my friends. It’s deeply personal, and was never meant for public consumption.

But Pressley thought she knew best, and that if I'd just take a chance and let her upload a snippet of my talent, I could go places. But she failed to understand that I never wanted to go *anywhere*. I love my life.

Just the way it is.

Pressley filmed me playing one night, and without my knowledge or permission, uploaded the video to her account. Since she's officially an influencer, and all of her videos go viral, this one did, too. Of course, it did.

And since I had my own BingBang account—one I never posted on, but used to kill time watching others' videos—the internet did its thing and found me. I started receiving so many followers and direct messages, I had to delete the app from my phone. The notifications were driving me mad.

But that didn't end the annoyance. Evening Shade is a tourist town, after all, so loads of strangers flow through here every weekend. And a good portion of them visit Wolfsbane Tavern. It's an iconic site from the movies, after all.

And since BingBang is so popular, it never fails...

I get recognized and gushed over regularly. It's so fucking annoying.

I didn't choose this for myself. Pressley chose for me, and I haven't been able to get over it or forgive her, yet.

As if he's read my mind, Trace asks, "Are you still mad at Pressley over the whole video thing? She really thought she was helping you."

"I didn't ask for her God damn help," I snap. Trace lifts his palms in supplication, and I heave a sigh. "Sorry, man."

My, how the roles have reversed. Trace and I have been best friends for what feels like forever, and I have always been the level-headed one to his fly-off-the-handle, town grump persona. I'm the voice of reason. I'm the one who talks *him* down from the ledge.

But now? He's the one trying to make me see reason and be a little more levelheaded.

I know Trace thinks I'm blowing all of this out of proportion, and that's just fucking hilarious. He's spent the last decade blowing up at tourists for recognizing him and disrupting his peaceful life. And they weren't even recognizing *him*. He bears a striking resemblance to Joseph Lumin from the Cursed movies, also known as "Wolf Daddy," and tourists never fail to scream the moniker or howl in his presence.

If anyone could understand what I'm going through, it should be him.

But ever since he got together with Keegan, whom he hated at first for that very reason—she's practically the president of the Cursed fan club—Trace has mellowed. He doesn't get angry with tourists anymore, and I know for a fact he actually likes it when Keegan calls him "Wolf Daddy."

I'm happy for him and his newfound peace, joy, and love, but that doesn't mean I don't have a right to be angry over what Pressley did.

She messed up.

"She apologized, didn't she?" Trace asks, breaking me out of my dark thoughts.

"Yes, but that doesn't change what happened."

"She's human. Humans make mistakes," he says before taking another drink of his beer.

"When did you become so wise and enlightened?" I quip, but the joke falls flat.

"Listen, Bram," he says, leaning forward over the bar. "I have your back. Always. And it's because I have your back that I'm going to say this once, and only once."

"What?" I ask when he pauses.

"Pull your head out of your ass, man. Accept her apology and move on before you lose a really fucking good thing."

I rear back in shock, but Trace just smiles and turns his attention back to his beer. I stare at nothing as my mind whirls,

considering his advice. Then I shake my head and move toward the customer waiting at the other end of the bar.

I'm afraid it's too late. Even if I make an effort to forgive her, things will never be the same between us. Whatever Pressley and I had going, it's over.

CHAPTER

FIVE

Pressley

“Good morning,” I say, looking up from my phone as Keegan wanders into the kitchen. She looks a bit shell-shocked, so I set my phone aside and focus my full attention on her. “What’s wrong?”

Her wide eyes zero in on me, and she shakes her head. “My mom just called.”

“Seriously?” I ask, a shiver of surprise rippling through me.

Keegan and her parents have never been close, even when she was young and still lived under their roof. The way I understand it, they never wanted kids and saw her as an accident. A mistake.

The second she was legally an adult and out on her own, they picked up and moved to Canada, following their own dreams. The only contact she’s had with them since is a phone call each Christmas and a card every year on her birthday.

And today is neither of those things.

“Did something happen?” I ask, my mind flying to worst-case scenarios like a fatal car accident or some life-threatening disease.

Keegan must hear the panic in my voice, because she visibly snaps out of her daze and shakes her head vigorously. “No. Nothing like that. They’re fine, but...they’re coming to visit.”

“What?”

The shout pops out of my mouth before I can stop it. She hasn't seen her mom and dad in years, and I understand now why she looked so off-kilter when she walked into the kitchen.

Keegan slides into the chair next to me at the table, and I hop up to make her a cup of coffee while she gathers her wits. She doesn't speak until I hand her the cup and slide back into my own chair.

“Thanks,” she says, nodding to the mug in her hand. “I texted them after Trace proposed, just to let them know I'm getting married. I guess—somewhere deep down inside me—I hoped they'd come to the wedding. I never got a response, so I gave up and let go of any disappointment I was harboring. It was a longshot, and I knew it when I sent the message.”

“What did your mom say when she called?” I ask, keeping my tone gentle and even.

I'm not sure if this impending visit is good news or bad in Keegan's mind. She obviously has some desire to see them, since she held hope they'd make it to her wedding, but an unexpected visit right now? I'm sure her mind is reeling, and her emotions are all over the place.

“She apologized for not texting back right away,” she says, her words slow and measured. “She was at some weeks-long painting retreat and had surrendered her phone because the attendees weren't allowed to have contact with the outside world. She got the message last night, and flew home to tell dad. They decided it was time for a visit, but it was too late to call, so she waited until this morning.”

I take a few moments to absorb that information while I study Keegan's expression. She looks confused and still a little rattled, but there's an opposing emotion shining in her eyes.

It looks a lot like hope.

Despite the way they raised her, making her feel like some kind of imposition, Keegan still longs for their love. I suppose it's only natural, wanting your parents to care about you, and if they're willing to extend an olive branch and try to improve

their relationship with their estranged daughter, who am I to judge?

“That’s great, Keegan,” I say, and her eyes fill with tears.

“It is, isn’t it?” she asks in a small, shaky voice.

“It really is,” I agree, and her tears spill over as she chuckles.

“Sorry. I’m just a little overwhelmed, I guess,” she says as she brushes the wetness from her cheeks.

“How do you think Trace will react?” I ask after taking another sip of my coffee.

He’s very protective of her, and I’m sure he’ll have some reservations about their visit. They hurt her terribly, and Keegan’s fiancé has no qualms about handing out a verbal—or even physical—smackdown to those who insult the ones he loves. *Especially Keegan.*

“I don’t know,” she says, deep furrows forming in her brow. “I need to talk to him about it, but he’s already at the inn. They want to stay for at least a couple of weeks, and...”

Her words trail off as her worried eyes snap up to mine.

“What is it?” I ask.

She blows out a harsh breath before offering me an apologetic smile. “They want to stay here. With us.”

“Here?” I ask.

They have the room, of course. Trace’s childhood bedroom sits empty. My stomach twists as I think about it, and I know what I have to do.

“I can find somewhere else to stay,” I say, my voice firm with the decision.

“What? No. I didn’t mean *that*, Pressley. It’s just bound to be...awkward, and I’m worried about submitting you to that. I haven’t even talked to Trace, yet. He may insist on clearing a rental for the duration of their visit. In fact, I’m sure he will.”

“No,” I say, reaching over to cover her hand with mine. “It’s okay. Don’t worry about me. And you should insist they stay here if Trace tries to hem and haw over it. You need this time to reconnect with them. It could change everything for you, Keegan. You could start a new relationship with them as an adult. I’m sure Trace would agree once he sees the possibility of making one of your dreams come true.”

She’d never admit it, but I’ve seen the longing in her expression when she talks about her parents, even when she’s angry. They took care of her when she was growing up, feeding and clothing her, seeing to her education like any good parents should. But the emotional detachment and subsequent abandonment the second she went to college hurt Keegan. If they’re willing to heal those scars now, no one should stand in the way of that.

Not me.

Not even Trace.

Keegan deserves all the happiness in the world, and while she’s found her bliss with Trace and will soon marry him and start her own family, I know there’s a missing slice where her parents are concerned.

She needs this time with them.

And *shit*, I need to find a new place to stay.

CHAPTER

SIX

Bram

It's Thursday, which means "family dinner" is tonight. It used to be a tradition for Trace and Willow to catch up and spend time together, but since Keegan and Gavin became part of their family, it's become a larger gathering that often includes me, and when she's in town, Pressley.

And since Pressley is here, permanently, and living with Trace and Keegan, I know she'll be there tonight. I briefly considered making an excuse to miss it, but in the end, I decided against it.

What am I going to do? Miss every gathering that may include her? That would mean missing *everything*.

Plus, it's a small town. I can't avoid her forever.

Trace's words about forgiving and moving on echo through my mind, and now that I've had some time to really think about it, I know he's right. Pressley made a mistake. No one's perfect.

And *fuck*, I miss her. I might have become a little disillusioned when she posted that video behind my back, but that doesn't mean she's not the person I came to know and like over the last several months. What's done is done. There's no changing it. Staying angry solves nothing.

And maybe tonight can be the first step to repairing our friendship.

With the decision made, I get ready for dinner. Once I'm dressed and looking presentable, I head out. I spend the entire drive giving myself a pep talk about mending fences and moving slowly. One night won't fix everything between us, but accepting her apology and spending a pleasant, relaxing dinner together with everyone we love will start us moving in the right direction.

I see Willow's green hatchback when I pull up the driveway, so I know I'm the last to arrive. Shutting off the engine, I take a few deep breaths before climbing out of the car. Icy January wind quickly chases up the back of my neck, so I slam the door and jog up to the house. Rushing up the steps, I knock before shoving my hands into the deep pockets of my jacket. Lifting my shoulders to protect my bare neck, I bounce on my feet until the door swings open.

"Hey, gorgeous," I say, pausing for barely a second to kiss Keegan's cheek as I hurry inside, getting out of the cold.

"Hey, yourself," she replies, closing the door quickly before turning to face me. "I'm so happy you came."

It's a loaded statement. She thought I might beg off because of the drama between Pressley and me, and I won't be admitting I considered it.

"Of course, I came. I was promised chicken enchiladas and cold *cervezas*," I say with a wink.

Keegan laughs and waves me forward as she turns to head toward the kitchen. Chatter and laughter ring out as I turn the corner, and my eyes zero in on Pressley, her head thrown back as she laughs at something Gavin has said.

I freeze. She looks like a God damn angel with that halo of wavy blonde hair surrounding her, and my throat tightens at just the sight of her.

Get it together, man. You want to be friends. That's it. Nothing more.

"Bram!" Willow shouts, snapping me out of that moment of paralysis. "Get your ass over here and tell Trace he's mixing my drink wrong."

I chuckle as Trace shoots his baby sister a narrow-eyed frown. He sets the bottle of vodka he's gripping down on the counter and crosses his arms over his chest.

"It's a vodka-lemonade, Willow. You can't mix it wrong. It's two ingredients."

"And you're supposed to stir the shot into the lemonade, not the other way around," she says, her voice firm and knowing.

They both look up at me, each of them fully expecting me to back them up. Knowing Trace for most of our lives and Willow for *all* of hers, I lift my palms in the universal sign for "I'm staying out of it." I'm not stupid. Neither one of them will back down when they start to bicker, especially over something as silly as how to mix a simple drink.

"Coward," Willow spits, but there's humor and love in her gaze so I know she doesn't mean it.

"Oh, hey, Bram."

I turn to see Gavin walking in, and I take his extended hand before pulling him in for a one-handed hug as I say, "Good to see you, man."

"You, too," he replies, his eyes darting to his left and back so quickly, I would've missed it if I hadn't been watching.

Of course, he was looking at Pressley. I'm sure he and everyone else here were convinced that I'd be skipping this dinner tonight. As he moves on, pulling Willow away from Trace to effectively end their squabble, I inhale deeply and turn to face Pressley. She's not looking at me, but the tension in her shoulders and her obviously averted gaze tell me she's very aware of our proximity.

"Hey, Pressley," I say, and her entire body shivers before she takes a deep breath and turns to face me.

"Hey, Bram," she says, her voice so quiet, I almost don't hear it.

I nod as I move past her to the fridge, eager for that beer I was promised. Pulling out the lighter of the two Mexican beers

lined up on the top shelf, I crack open the can and take a long drink. Just as I'm gearing up to turn back to Pressley and say something, *anything*, Keegan calls out that it's time to eat and everyone should go find a seat at the table.

I follow behind the crowd and watch as everyone finds their seats, leaving the head of the table and the chair next to it empty for Keegan and Trace. Willow and Gavin take the two seats on the other side of the table while Pressley takes the chair opposite Willow, leaving the only available spot at the other end of the table—adjacent to the chair Pressley is currently occupying.

Moving forward, I sit down as she studiously avoids eye contact. *Fuck*, I hate this. While I was angry and disappointed by her choices, this awkwardness between us is worse. I need to let her know I'm ready to move past it.

"Pressley," I whisper, and her head whips toward me, a look of sheer surprise on her face.

She must see the desperation in my expression, because her own softens with an odd mix of regret and hope. "Yes?"

"I don't know how to fix things between us, but I'm willing to try if you are," I say, then snap my mouth shut as Trace and Keegan walk into the room with two baking dishes filled with enchiladas, a bowl of rice, and a pot of refried beans.

As everyone starts to fill their plates, Pressley picks up the bowl of rice and passes it to me. When I move to take it, she holds onto it as she stares at me with wide eyes.

"I took the video down, you know. But it was too late. Too many people had already shared and reposted it. I'm so sorry, Bram. I really thought I was doing you a favor."

"I know, Press," I say, and she releases her grip on the bowl.

"I promise I won't do anything like that ever again," she whispers as she scoops some beans onto her plate, and I offer her a small smile.

It might take some time to get back to where we were, but in this moment, I know it'll be worth it. I've fucking missed her.

"Excuse me, everyone. I have an announcement to make," Keegan says, standing from her chair at the opposite end of the table from me.

We fall silent, and as all eyes turn toward her, she looks down at Trace, who reaches over to take her hand. What is this all about? Wait...

Is she...pregnant?

"All of you stop looking at me like that," she says with a laugh. "I'm *not* pregnant."

A round of nervous chuckles from Willow and Gavin tell me I wasn't the only one thinking it. Pressley remains still with a serene, yet somehow sad smile on her face, and I get the feeling she already knows exactly what Keegan is going to say.

I turn my attention back to the lady of the house just as she takes a deep breath and blurts, "My parents are coming to visit. They'll be here in three days, and they're planning on staying for at least two weeks."

My eyes flare at her announcement. I don't know all of the details, but I *do* know Keegan has very little contact with her parents, and they've pretty much cut her out of their lives. I'm not sure if this visit is a good thing or a bad thing, but one thing is obvious—Keegan is really excited about it.

She sits back down, and Trace pulls her toward him for a quick kiss. I can't help but smile at the loving relationship they share, especially after the way Trace was determined to avoid her at all costs in the beginning. Chatter fills the room as everyone lobbs questions Keegan's way with one notable exception.

Looking back at Pressley, I lean closer, asking, "Hey, are you okay?"

She nods, but her nose twitches like she's holding back some strong emotion. Gavin asks Keegan where her parents

are staying, and Pressley's body jerks slightly, though her tight smile remains.

"They're staying here, with us," Keegan says, and since I'm still watching her, I see another slight twitch in Pressley's expression.

She swallows thickly and forces a brighter smile as she says, "And that's why I need to find somewhere else to stay."

"Pressley, we talked about this," Keegan says before anyone else can respond. "You're more than welcome to stay here. We have plenty of room."

Pressley shakes her head while focusing on cutting off a bite of her enchilada. "And I told you, Keegan, I don't want to interfere with your reunion."

"You can stay with us," Willow says, and I look over to see Gavin nodding in agreement.

"Thanks," Pressley says, but I can see she doesn't want to do that either.

Hell, I don't blame her. Gavin and Willow have only been living together for a few weeks, and the house they bought—which was one of Trace's rental properties—is small enough that she'd have trouble getting away from their constant physical affection. And even if that weren't a problem, Pressley would still feel like she's intruding on their little love nest.

"I have a room open at the inn until next weekend," Trace offers, but before Pressley can respond, I cut in, surprising everyone, including *myself*.

"No. She can stay with me."

CHAPTER

SEVEN

Pressley

You could cut the silence with a butter knife, it's so thick. I'm staring at Bram with wide, startled eyes, and I'm sure everyone else is, too.

"What?" I breathe, breaking the silence. "No, Bram. I couldn't."

Like the words are some kind of starting gun, everyone else turns their full attention to their food in some dramatic attempt to give us a modicum of privacy. Forks clink against plates as they start to eat, but Bram ignores them as he holds my stare.

"I have a spare bedroom, and it's no trouble," he says, keeping his voice low.

I just stare at him in a dazed and confused stupor, my mind reeling as I try to figure out the punchline of this joke. Because it *is* a joke, right?

I mean, sure, we had a very brief conversation about leaving what happened in the past and moving forward, but there's a huge leap between that small olive branch and *moving in together*. What is he thinking? Doesn't he realize how incredibly awkward it would be?

"Then, it's settled," Keegan announces, proving she was listening to our murmured conversation. "Pressley will stay with Bram."

I turn my wide-eyed gaze in her direction to find her sporting an impish grin while she waggles her eyebrows at me. I shake my head, the movement barely perceptible, and she rolls her eyes, mouthing the words “it’ll be fine.”

When I look back at Bram, he’s still watching me with a questioning gaze. All I can do is shrug as conversations swirl around us. Trace offers to transport my things to Bram’s place. Willow says I’ll love it because Bram’s backyard sports a huge deck with a glorious hot tub. Gavin makes some kind of joke about not wanting to know what’s swirling in that bubbly water, then grunts when Willow’s elbow connects with his ribs.

I remain locked in a staring contest with Bram, neither of us blinking as he waits for my answer, and I scramble for some way to decline without sounding like a massive ingrate. Finally, I close my eyes and breathe deep before opening them to refocus on his handsome face.

“Thank you. I accept,” I whisper, giving him a shallow nod.

His lips curve up slightly at the corners, and he returns the nod. “Good.”

I should be feeling relieved, but there’s a knot in my stomach that remains for the rest of the meal. I mostly just push the food around on my plate, my mind conjuring all sorts of disastrous scenarios that will result from this decision.

The relationship between Bram and me isn’t in a place where we can coexist as happy roommates. It’s going to be awkward and uncomfortable, at the very least. He’ll try to avoid me, changing his routine in his own home just to do so, and I’ll tiptoe around, doing everything I can *not* to be a nuisance and make him hate me more than he already does.

Sure, he’s the one that suggested we try to move past everything that’s happened, but I’m convinced that was for everyone else’s benefit. Bram wouldn’t want his beef with me to affect the overall group dynamics, after all. And I wholeheartedly agree. I don’t want that, either.

But I also want him to truly forgive me. To give me a chance to earn his trust back.

I take a deep breath and hold it for a moment. Maybe this is the perfect opportunity to do just that. If I'm living in Bram's house, he can't *really* avoid me, can he? Not completely, anyway. I can show him I'm the same girl he liked before I messed up, and that I've learned my lesson and will never do anything like that again.

After dinner, the guests linger for a while, and I pretend to be relaxed as my mind continues to swirl. Eventually, Willow and Gavin say their goodbyes and head out. Bram rises from the table right behind them, and after giving Keegan and Trace hugs and thanking them for dinner, he moves in my direction. I push myself to my feet, holding his gaze as he approaches.

Is he rethinking his offer? Has he been waiting for a semi-private moment to rescind the invitation?

"I'll be by in the morning with a key for you," he whispers, and my breath hiccups in my chest before relief washes through me.

"Thank you, Bram," I say, injecting more meaning into my tone so he knows I'm not just thanking him for the key.

"Of course," he says, then shifts his weight and leans forward before jerking back like he's not sure if he can—or *should*—hug me.

I feel the urge to make the decision for him, to pull him into my arms and hold him tight, but I chicken out and remain frozen, waiting to see what he'll decide. His Adam's apple bobs as he swallows, then he shakes his head slightly before taking a small step backward.

"Good night," he says, and I temper my disappointment while offering him a soft smile.

"Good night, Bram."

I head for my room after calling out a goodnight to Keegan and Trace, who are cleaning up the kitchen, and though I feel guilty for not helping them, I really need some time alone to decompress.

Collapsing on the bed, I groan into the mattress. I hate feeling so awkward with Bram, but it is what it is. I drove us to this point, but he seems willing to...what? Let bygones be bygones? Try to be friends again?

I don't know if he has any idea what he wants. It could've just been instinct, some white knight impulse to save me when I needed him. Whatever his motivation, though, I'm going to prove to him that I'm the person he thought I was before I messed up.

There's a light tap at my door, and I roll over onto my back before sitting up. The door creaks open, and Keegan pokes her head through the crack. Seeing I'm still dressed, she smiles and slips inside before closing the door behind her.

"How are you holding up?" she asks as she moves toward me.

"I don't really know," I say, patting the mattress beside me in an invitation for her to sit. "I'm confused, obviously. Bram has barely said three words to me since I...did what I did, and now he's suddenly inviting me to be his roommate?"

"He's a good man, and he cares about you, Pressley," she says, and when I open my mouth to argue, she holds up a palm, silencing me. "He's been angry, sure, but that doesn't mean he'll be angry forever. Maybe he's decided it's time to put the past where it belongs...in the past. Or maybe he's just being generous. He has an empty room and you need a place to stay. People take roommates all the time. It's no big deal. But either way, Pressley, this is your chance to fix things with him. To show him he can trust you again."

"I already thought of that, actually," I admit, feeling my cheeks heat.

"Good," she says, nodding. "I believe you can do it. But if for some reason you can't, if he remains bullheaded and stubborn, it only has to be for two weeks. Once my parents leave, you're more than welcome to come right back here."

"Thanks, Keegs," I whisper, my eyes burning with emotion. I wave a hand to motion around the room. "And not

just for this. For forgiving me when I broke *your* trust. For giving me a chance to prove I can be the friend I'm supposed to be."

"Stop before you make me cry," she says, reaching out to yank me in for a tight hug. "I love you, you know that?"

I nod against her shoulder. "I love you, too."

"Now," she says, pushing me back so she can meet my eyes, "let's do a little online shopping so you can pick out some sexy pajamas to wear around the house in front of Bram."

A laugh bursts out of me as I shake my head. "Oh, no. Absolutely not."

"Fine," she says with an exaggerated eye roll. "You'll come around, eventually. I'll do some searching and have a few options for you to choose from when you're ready."

I shake my head again, chuckling, then sober as I search her gaze. "You really think everything is going to work out?"

"Absolutely," she says, no question in her voice at all. "You and Bram will mend your friendship first, then it will grow into more. I know it will. It's meant to be."

CHAPTER

EIGHT

Bram

What in the hell was I thinking?

I acted on the urge to rescue Pressley in her moment of need, but after having the whole night to think about it, I'm not so sure it's a good idea. In fact, I'm almost certain it's a terrible one. Sure, I decided to try to forgive her, and we talked a little last night, but things are far from perfect.

Moving Pressley in here with me is going to be a disaster.

But my second thoughts mean nothing. I made the offer, which is tantamount to a promise, and I intend to keep it. We'll just have to find a way to make it work. Decision made, I grab the spare housekey from the hook in the kitchen and slip it into my pocket before grabbing my car keys from the hook next to it. After picking up my wallet and phone from the counter where I left them earlier, I head out the door.

When I get to Keegan and Trace's house, I turn off my car and sit in the driveway for a minute while I stare at the closed front door. I can do this. Just walk up, knock, hand Pressley the key, and leave. Easy.

I don't know why I'm so nervous, my gut twisting like I'm a teenager picking up his girl for their first date. This is definitely not romantic, and Pressley is *not* my girl. It's a simple arrangement. Two acquaintances who used to be friends sharing a space. Nothing more.

Forcing myself from the car, I slam the door behind me and jog up the front steps. Before I change my mind, I raise a fist and knock it against the wood, then take a small step back to wait. I notice for the first time that Trace's truck isn't in the driveway, which means he's already left for work. I wonder if Keegan and Pressley rode into town with him.

But I told Pressley I was bringing her the key this morning, right? She wouldn't just leave when she's expecting me, would she?

Before I can spin out completely, I hear soft footfalls inside the house. Steeling my spine, I hold my breath as the door swings open, and there she is. Her soft and wavy blonde hair is tied up in a messy bun on top of her head, her oversized sweatshirt hangs off one shoulder, and her leggings are so tight, I can see the delicious curves of her thighs.

"Hi."

The single word snaps me out of the trance I'd fallen into, and my gaze zips back up to meet Pressley's as I blurt, "Hi."

"Come on in," she says, stepping back and motioning for me to enter.

Thanking her with a nod, I step inside and look around. "Is Keegan here?"

"No," she says, closing the door behind me. "She made some excuse about seeing Willow at Moonstone Mystic and rode into town with Trace this morning."

"An excuse?" I ask, turning to face her fully.

She shrugs. "She wanted to give us some privacy for this...conversation."

Deciding not to respond to that, I exhale through my nose and shove a hand into my pocket. Closing my fingers around the ring with the single key on it, I tug it free and hold it out in her direction. I expect Pressley to reach out and take it, but she only stares as the metal glints under the light fixture above us.

Finally, she meets my eyes. "Are you sure about this?"

My first instinct is to assure her I know what I'm doing, but honestly, I have no fucking clue how this is going to play out. It's better to be honest, so I shake my head.

"No. Not really. I know things are strained between us, and this might not work out, but I'm willing to try. Besides, we're still friends, right?"

"I hope so," she says, her voice so soft I almost don't hear the words.

"Then, it's settled," I say, pushing the hand holding the key toward her.

I almost sigh in relief when she takes it, but I manage to hold back. Seeing that key in her hand symbolizes a sort of finality. No more going back and forth, wondering if this is a terrible idea or not. It's settled, and we're both going to find out for sure.

Closing her fingers around the key ring, she meets my gaze, asking, "What if we put a time limit on it? Will that make things easier?"

"What do you mean?"

"Keegan's parents only plan to stay for a couple of weeks. We can agree right now, if this," she pauses for a moment to wave a hand between us, "doesn't work out, or either of us is uncomfortable with the living situation, I can move back in here. No questions asked. No hurt feelings. Keegan already said it would be okay."

I tilt my head, studying her expression as I think it over. She seems intent on making the deal, like it will give her an out if living as my roommate is unbearable. The thought makes my gut twist, then it relaxes. It's not just an out for her. It's an out for me, too.

"Sounds like a plan," I say finally, pushing a hand out for her to shake on it.

Her lips curve up into a soft smile, and she takes my hand in a firm handshake saying, "Okay. Deal."

I return her smile as we release each other, and I'm about to turn to leave when she opens her mouth, sucks in a breath like she wants to say something else, then snaps her mouth closed again.

I remain perfectly still, waiting for her to speak, and her eyes turn worried as she shifts her weight from foot to foot. Her lips pinch together, and she looks so fucking cute, I almost laugh out loud. It reminds me of when we first met, and she was nervous talking to me. Those were simpler days. Easier times.

“What is it?” I finally ask when it looks like she's losing her nerve.

She fills her lungs and blows the breath out harshly. “I just wanted to say... If you want to play and sing while I'm there, I promise to leave my phone in my pocket the whole time.”

My head jerks back at the statement. I didn't expect her to bring up the giant elephant in the room. I thought we were quietly trying to push that mammoth beast into the closet and forget about it. And though I haven't really thought about it, I realize I'd subconsciously made the decision not to play in front of her for the time being. Maybe even forever.

As if she's read my thoughts, her face falls, and she shakes her head sadly. “I understand if you don't want to play for me, but I really hope you'll change your mind. It's one of my favorite things in the whole world.”

I stare at her for several long beats, then slowly nod. It's not a promise to play for her, by any means, but I can at least agree to consider it.

I mean, it's not like she'd seriously record me and upload it to the internet without my consent *again*. Right?

We say our goodbyes, and I head back out to my car with the thought heavy in my mind. Turning the car around, I cruise slowly down the drive as images of Pressley, her face soft and dreamy as I play my guitar and sing, flash through my mind.

I always felt like a star when I played for her. I just never wanted to *actually* be one.

As I drive into town, I spot Trace's truck parked at the inn. Making a last second decision, I swing my car into the lot and park next to him. Hopping out, I walk into the office and find him sitting behind the desk in the lobby.

"Hey, man. How's it going?" he says as I approach.

"Good. I just dropped the key off with Pressley," I say, and his eyes narrow the slightest bit.

"And you're still okay with her staying with you?" he asks.

"Yes. Of course," I say, then heave a long breath. "I don't know, Trace. Am I making a huge mistake?"

He leans back in his chair and studies me for a moment before saying, "Only you can answer that. I can tell you she's been great at our house. Cleans up after herself, helps us around the house, and tries to stay out of the way. I've had no problems with her at all."

"I'm not concerned about all that," I say with a shake of my head.

"Then, what are you concerned about?" he asks, but his tone tells me he already knows the answer to that.

"We're not exactly close at the moment," I reply, the words slow and measured.

"So, why did you offer to let her stay with you?"

He's starting to sound like a therapist, answering everything with a question. I tamp down any annoyance it sparks because I know he's just trying to help.

"Because I have a superhero complex?" I offer, shrugging, and he makes a scoffing noise.

"Try again."

I drop my shoulders with a sigh. "Because despite everything, I still care about her. I could tell she didn't want to stay in Willow and Gavin's little love nest, and I wanted to help."

"So, what has you second-guessing yourself this morning?" Trace asks.

“I don’t know. Common sense? It’s going to be awkward, man. Plus, when I dropped off the key, she promised not to record me if I decide to play for her again.”

He nods slowly. “Of course, she won’t. She definitely learned her lesson the first time around.”

“You’re right,” I breathe. “I know she wouldn’t do anything like that again.”

“So, I’ll ask again. What are you concerned about?” he asks.

“Nothing, I guess,” I say.

“Good,” he says with a smirk. “Now, get your ass out of here so I can work. You should go buy new sheets for your guest bedroom. Maybe some flowers to brighten up the place.”

I narrow my eyes. “When did you become so concerned about things like new sheets and flowers?”

His mouth splits in a wide grin. “When I fell in love with an amazing woman who likes those kinds of things. Maybe you should try it.”

I shake my head and turn to go, calling out over my shoulder, “Not going to happen.”

And Trace’s laughter follows me out the door.

CHAPTER

NINE

Pressley

It's moving day.

I've got all of my things packed, and Bram is waiting at his house for me to show up, but I've been stalling for the last fifteen minutes. While checking my toiletry bag for the third time to make sure I haven't forgotten anything, I give myself a mental pep talk about how everything is going to be fine, and I'm making a mountain out of a mole hill.

"Hey. You almost packed?" Keegan asks as she walks into the room, and I look up at her with a shaky smile.

"I think I am."

"Stop worrying," she says, throwing her arms around me and pulling me into a warm, tight hug. "Everything is going to work out, and if it doesn't, you'll be back here with me in two weeks."

She's right. I know she is. And I also know that if things *do* go well, I'll have my friend back. This is a new beginning for us, a chance for me to fix what's broken between Bram and me.

Of course, even the thought of being friends with him again leaves me a little uneasy. As Keegan releases me from the hug and leans back to search my gaze, I realize why.

Some of the nerves I'm feeling are attributed to the fact that I don't want to be *just* friends with Bram. I never have. I always hoped that things would progress between us and turn

romantic, but I never wanted to push him. I let Bram set the pace, which was sloth-like in its momentum, and now that we're back at square one, I don't know if we'll ever get to a place where he might want more from our relationship.

I don't say any of this aloud, but Keegan's softening expression tells me she knows exactly what I'm thinking. We already went over it, and she's convinced this living arrangement is going to be the start of something more.

"Let me know when you want to look at the silk pajamas and lace lingerie I found online for you," she says with a grin, and a laugh bursts out of me, breaking the tension completely.

"That was for Pressley?" Trace asks with a frown as he walks into the room to grab my suitcase for me. "I saw it in the cart and ordered it, thinking it was for you."

Keegan laughs. "You obviously didn't look at the details. I picked Pressley's size, and they'll never fit over my big ass."

"I love your ass," he says, giving it a slap as he walks by with my luggage and leaves the room.

Keegan looks at me with an arched brow. "I guess it's settled, then. I'll bring everything over when it gets delivered, and you can see it, then."

I shake my head with a laugh. "I'm not wearing skimpy p.j.'s around the house to try to entice Bram."

"We'll see," she says with a wink, then grabs my toiletry bag in one hand while wrapping the other around mine. Pulling me from the room, she adds, "Now, let's get you out of here. Bram's waiting."



MY MIND SCROLLS through all of my questions and concerns as I drive over to Bram's, and by the time I arrive, I've convinced myself nothing is ever going to happen between us. I just need to keep my head on straight, be a good roommate, and prove I'm a good friend to make this work.

This isn't some romance novel. Living in forced proximity does not automatically guarantee feelings will change, sex will

be had, or love will be found.

As soon as I pull into the drive, the negative thoughts scatter. I park and just stare at the house through my windshield, the sight of it awing me the way it always has. Bram's house is a gorgeous modern log cabin with a wraparound porch that leads to a giant deck out back and big picture windows all the way around. I've always found its façade beautiful, and it's finally hitting me that I get to live here.

The daze I've fallen into snaps when the front door opens, and the man, himself, steps out onto the porch. My heart starts to pound, and I forcibly pull myself together before stepping out of the car with what I hope is a passably believable smile.

"Hey," he calls out as he jogs down the steps and strides toward me. "Let me get your bags for you."

"Thanks," I say, rushing around to open the trunk for him.

I grab two of the smaller bags while Bram lugs out the suitcases, then he motions for me to precede him toward the house. The crunch of his footsteps behind me hastens my pace, and I hurry up the steps to the front door, swinging it open and stepping aside so he can go in first.

The second I'm inside, the scent of wood—cedar, maybe—surrounds me as it always does when I come here, and my nerves settle. The scent and the coziness of the place is familiar and comforting. I've been here a few times when Bram would host our group, but this is the first time I've been here with him, alone.

And that thought has my nerves ratcheting up once more.

"You've seen the living room, powder room, and the kitchen," he says, walking toward a hallway on the left I've never ventured down. "The room at the end is mine."

I glance at the closed door at the end of the hall, then turn my attention back to him as he swings the first door on the left wide. Stepping back, he motions for me to enter, and my eyes widen as I get my first look at my new room.

It's huge, with a giant bed, big, sturdy furniture, a large-screen television hanging on the wall, and it also has its very own fireplace. An open door on the right of the room reveals a large closet, and through that...

"This room has its own bathroom?" I ask, awe lacing the words.

Bram chuckles. "I inherited this place from my parents when they passed, and they were the ones who designed and built it. Both bedrooms have an en suite, and there's another full bath across the hall for guests who stay on the pull out couch in the living room."

"This is amazing, Bram. Thank you," I say with meaning, and he just nods like my gratitude makes him uncomfortable.

"Let me know if you need anything. I'll make some lunch while you get settled," he says, stepping from the room and closing the door behind him before I can thank him again.

Dropping the bags I'm still holding on the massive bed, I wander into the closet. It's double the size I need, with lots of shelves, a built-in shoe rack, and even empty hangers waiting for my clothes. Moving all the way through, I step into the bathroom and gasp.

There's a freestanding, clawfoot tub, a walk-in shower with three heads—including a rain shower head hanging from the ceiling—and a large vanity with dual sinks and several drawers for my things.

And this is just the guest room. I can't even imagine what the main bedroom and bathroom must look like.

Walking back out into the main area of the room, I fall backward onto the bed. It's cushy and comfy, and I know I'm going to sleep like the dead in here. My eyes roam across the exposed beams in the ceiling, and I wonder what Bram's parents did to be able to afford to build a place such as this.

I shake my head and roll over, burying my face in the soft memory foam pillow. It doesn't matter. It's Bram's home, and I'm only a temporary guest.

Rolling off the mattress, I land on my feet and grab the handle of one of my suitcases and roll it toward the closet. I need to start unpacking. Bram is preparing lunch for us, and I don't want to make him wait.

CHAPTER

TEN

Bram

I wipe down the already-clean counter, looking for anything to keep my hands busy while I wait for Pressley to finish unpacking. The BLT's I made for lunch are resting on the counter, and I pulled out several bags of chips so she could pick the flavor she wants. And now, I'm cleaning to help fight the urge to go knock on her door and see if she needs anything.

She'll come out when she's ready.

I'm repeating the mantra in my head when she suddenly appears, breezing into the kitchen in a pair of snug-fitting pink joggers and a matching cropped hoodie that leaves an inch of skin visible between the two garments. I almost swallow my tongue at the sight of her, but quickly clear my throat, toss the towel aside, and straighten to my full height.

"Something smells delicious," she says as she moves closer.

"I hope you like BLT's," I say, wincing when my voice cracks on the words.

"What's not to love about bacon?" she shoots back with a teasing wink, and I feel my muscles relax one by one.

"I wasn't sure what kind of chips you like," I say, rubbing a hand across the back of my neck while she peruses the large stockpile of chip bags strewn across the counter.

“Sour cream and onion, of course,” she says, swiping the green and white bag and pulling it open.

“Of course,” I repeat. “Those are my favorite, too. What would you like to drink? I have water, orange juice, beer, and a few sodas to choose from.”

“Water is good,” she says, picking up the two plates and carrying them both, along with the bag of chips, to the small table in the breakfast nook.

Grabbing two bottles of water from the fridge, I follow her to the table. She slides into a chair after setting my plate in front of the one next to it. I briefly consider moving it to the seat across from her, and she must sense it, because she clears her throat and motions toward the seat she picked for me.

“I thought this would be easier to share the chips.”

“Of course,” I say, sliding into the chair.

I put the sandwiches on small plates, leaving no room for anything else, so obviously, we’ll have to eat the chips straight from the bag. And why am I overthinking this?

Just fucking eat and relax, man.

She picks up her sandwich and takes a big bite, the bacon crunching noisily as she chews, making her cheeks blush. I just watch her for a moment, remembering when we first met. She was a blusher, her cheeks turning pink every time I spoke to her. Hell, every time I *looked* at her. It always made me feel warm all over.

She had this magnetic personality that drew me to her, and even though we’ve always kept things strictly friend-zoned, I’ve never been immune to her charms. She’s a beautiful woman, inside and out. I’ve often wondered what her lips would feel like against mine. What she’d taste like. How she’d feel beneath me—

Stop. She made it pretty clear from the beginning she only wants to be friends. Flirty friends, but *friends*, nonetheless. And now? Now we’re barely even that.

But I have faith we can get back to where we were before everything went to hell. Pressley has made it pretty obvious she regrets what she did, even if she was sure she was helping me. Eventually, we'll find our way past it, completely.

We have to.

She's staying in Evening Shade, for good. Once Willow's apartment is repaired, she'll move in there. We're connected by our friends, and we'll be constants in each other's lives. So, if I don't want to make things uncomfortable for everyone I care about, I need to move past these lingering feelings of betrayal and mistrust.

We chat a little while we eat, and by the time we finish our sandwiches, I'm feeling more confident in our ability to coexist in this house without a lot of strained awkwardness. We're falling back into old patterns, and she even teased me over a dab of mayo I smeared across my chin.

"Do you want a cup of coffee?" I ask her after she insists on loading the dishwasher.

"I'd love one," she says, then meets my eyes. "Thanks."

I nod, then grab a mug from the cabinet and slide it beneath the single-cup coffee maker. Adding a pod and setting it to brew, I turn toward the fridge and pull out the bottle of chocolate creamer I bought when I went grocery shopping yesterday. I can't stand the stuff, but I know Pressley likes it, so I threw a jug in the cart.

I close the refrigerator and turn to set it on the counter. I freeze when I see Pressley standing stone still, her eyes locked on the bottle in my hand. I watch her eyes widen before they dart up to meet mine.

"You have chocolate creamer in your house? I thought you were a black-bean-water kind of guy," she says, but the emotion in her eyes belies the teasing lilt she tries to add to the words.

"Well, I know you like it, so I bought some for you."

"Thanks, Bram," she breathes, the words so quiet, I almost miss them.

“You’re welcome, Pressley,” I whisper back.

The moment feels charged, an invisible current of electricity zipping back and forth between us as we remain rooted to our spots, staring at each other. Then Pressley shakes herself, and the moment is broken. Huffing out a quiet laugh, she moves in my direction, then swerves to the left to pull her mug from the coffee maker. I watch as she opens the seal on the creamer before replacing the lid, then pours a splash in to the steaming brew, a soft smile on her lips the entire time.

My gaze slides back down to that bare strip of skin beneath her cropped hoodie, and my tongue darts out to wet my suddenly dry lips. I clench my hand into a fist, fighting the urge to reach out and touch her waist to see if the skin there is as soft as it looks.

Jesus. What is wrong with me? One minute, I’m sure we’ll never make things right again. The next, I’m sure we’ll get past it all and be friends. *Only* friends.

And a few beats later, I’m imagining what she tastes like and how her skin would feel beneath my fingertips?

I turn away, taking a deep breath before murmuring, “See you later.”

I head straight for my bedroom, closing myself inside and leaning back against the door. Digging the heels of my hands into my eye sockets, I rub them roughly before pushing myself upright and striding into my bathroom.

I need to take a shower and get ready for my shift at the tavern. And if I’m going to make it through that shift—and the next few weeks—with my sanity intact, I need to get my head on straight.

It’s like having Pressley in my home and providing for her, even if it was just lunch and a cup of coffee, has drawn out some latent caveman tendencies I never knew I possessed. I want to conk her over the head with a club—figuratively speaking, of course—and drag her into my bedroom before branding her as *mine*.

It’s ridiculous.

I know it is.

And it just needs to stop.

CHAPTER

ELEVEN

Pressley

Bram left for work, and I've finished unpacking, so I take some time to update my address information with the post office, the bank, and my credit cards. Sure, I'm going to have to do it again—maybe in two weeks—but I need to make sure everything is correct so I won't miss a payment from the companies I work with or the BingBang app, itself. If anything on my accounts is incorrect, it could delay my payments, which would mean not paying Keegan, too.

As if I conjured her with my mind, my phone chimes with a text from my best friend.

Keegan: How's everything going over there? You settling in okay?

Me: It's good. Bram made us lunch while I unpacked, and while it was awkward, at first, I think we both relaxed and enjoyed ourselves.

Keegan: Well, that sounds positive!

Me: Yeah. And he bought some chocolate creamer to keep in the fridge for me, too.

Keegan: That's cool.

Me: I was surprised he knew I liked it.

Keegan: Really? You know he's one of the most observant people we've ever met. Of course, he knew. And it's nice to know he was thinking of you while he was at the store.

Me: *Yeah, you're right. It doesn't mean anything.*

Keegan: *Oh, I didn't say that. It definitely means something. It means he wanted you to feel welcome and at home in his place. That's not nothing. That's a good thing.*

I send back a lame “thumbs up” emoji as a response to that because I’m not ready to start dissecting every move Bram makes and try to figure out if it means something more. Keegan must get the hint, because she sends one last simple text.

Keegan: *Okay, well, have fun and don't hesitate to reach out if you need to talk.*

Me: *Thanks, girl.*

Moving into the living room, I plop down into the corner of the couch and curl my legs up beside me. Keegan is a really good friend. She completely forgave me for keeping our ex-friend Madison’s secret—that she’d been sleeping with Keegan’s ex-boyfriend for months before they broke up—and she encourages me to be my authentic self and focus on my own happiness every day.

I used to be different. I thought making everyone else in my life happy was the key to finding my own happiness. I catered to Madison and Sloan, the two witches Keegan and I used to be friends with in Seattle. Madison was also my boss, and I worked my ass off to make her boutique a screaming success in the hopes that, eventually, she’d make me a full partner.

I know now that was never going to happen. And the second I realized how toxic my friendship with those two was, I drove right back here to Evening Shade to apologize to Keegan and beg for a chance to earn her trust back.

That was the best decision I’ve ever made.

Despite my problems with the move and my housing situation, this is the happiest I’ve ever been in my life.

I now know what real friendships should feel like. They should be easy and comforting. And filled with kindness and affection. I never had any of that with my old so-called

friends, but now? With Keegan, Willow, Trace, Gavin, and Bram? I feel like I have it all.

Even when he was at his angriest, Bram never disrespected me the way Madison did daily. And unlike Sloan, the others in our friend group refused to take sides. They didn't talk shit about me or make me feel small for making a mistake. They remained quiet advocates, offering support while assuring me Bram and I would work it out, eventually.

And that is happening right now. He invited me to live here when I needed a place to stay, he was helpful and kind as I settled in, and he made a point to make sure I didn't need anything before he left for work.

Madison would rip me a new asshole if I accidentally stepped on her toe, then ice me out for days to teach me a lesson. I still can't believe I held onto that relationship for as long as I did.

I feel stupid just thinking about it, so I push the dark thoughts away and grab the remote control. Turning on the television, I find my favorite streaming app already installed and logged in, so I search the titles for a sappy romantic comedy that'll make me feel better.

After what feels like an hour of searching, I settle on a classic I've already seen at least ten times. It's a comfort-watch for me, and it requires comfort *food*. Pausing the movie in the opening credits, I hop up and head into the kitchen to grab the bag of chips Bram and I opened at lunch and a soda from the fridge. After grabbing a paper towel and the box of tissues from the bathroom—because let's be honest, I'm going to cry—I settle back in on the couch and start the movie.

Just as I'd hoped, the movie reels me in just like it always does, and soon, I'm laughing out loud. The chips and the soda lift my spirits as much as the movie does, and I'm glad no one is here to see me pigging out on junk and cackling like a hyena at the suggestive jokes in the movie.

But, fuck, it feels good. I've had so much uncertainty in my life in recent days, and it's really nice to feel truly at home somewhere. To feel like I belong.

Would I feel this comfortable if Bram were home? Probably not. But that's a "me" problem. He's been nothing but welcoming.

When I've had enough of the chips, I roll the top of the bag down before setting it on the coffee table next to my soda. Feeling stuffed, I stretch out on the sofa on my side with my cheek nestled against a throw pillow. The sofa is soft and cushy, very comfortable, and warm from my own body heat.

Within minutes, I'm yawning. Before I even get to the "all is lost" moment of the movie, my eyes start to droop. I blink a few times and attempt to keep them open, and I know if I sit up, I'll be less likely to doze off, but the couch is just too fucking comfortable. I can't force myself to move.

I fight the sleepiness for as long as I can, but in the end, exhaustion wins.

Doesn't it always?

CHAPTER

TWELVE

Bram

Blow across the surface of my coffee, my eyes unfocused as memories of last night roll through my mind, unhindered. I got home from work around midnight, and when I walked into the house, I found the television on, a partial bag of chips and a half a soda on my coffee table, and an undeniably adorable, *sleeping* woman curled up on my couch.

I watched her breathe for several beats before deciding to just let her sleep. I could've woken her and sent her to bed, but she looked so serene, I ended up fetching a blanket from the closet and draping it over her before turning off the television and taking myself to bed.

Okay, maybe I picked up a strand of her hair and twirled it around my fingers before I went, but fuck, that memory gives me distinct *stalker* vibes when I think it out loud. So, I'm pretending that never happened.

My thoughts shatter when I hear a noise from the living room. Moving to the coffee machine, I brew a cup for Pressley. Grabbing the chocolate creamer from the fridge, I pour a splash in before adding a small spoon of sugar. Stirring the sweet concoction, I drop the spoon into the sink before walking into the other room.

Pressley is folding the blanket I covered her with last night, and I must make some noise, because she spins around to pin me with a wide-eyed stare.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to scare you,” I say, moving forward to offer her the mug.

“You didn’t,” she says, her cheeks turning pink as she accepts my offering and adds, “Thank you.”

A few beats of silence stretch between us as she sips her coffee, and the tiny moan that reverberates from her chest makes my skin tighten with goosebumps. I need to get out of here. Away from her, before I do something stupid.

Like...

No, I’m not even going to think it.

Before I can make up some excuse to go, she takes a deep breath and says, “Sorry about sleeping on your couch. I must’ve dozed off during my movie.”

“It’s not a problem,” I say. “You looked so comfortable, I didn’t want to wake you.”

“You should’ve,” she says with a slight shake of her head. “The last thing I want to do is move in here and take over your space.”

“Really, Pressley, it’s fine. I was wiped out after work, and all I wanted to do was go to bed, anyway. Besides, I want you to feel at home here.”

She stares at me for a long moment, then slowly nods her acceptance. A breath of relief slips through my lips, but that relief quickly morphs into discomfort as another awkward silence stretches between us.

“I should probably go take a shower,” she mumbles finally, then turns and strides for the hallway with her coffee mug still in hand.

I remain frozen on the spot, staring at the now-empty hall while wondering if I said something wrong or could’ve done something differently to dispel all the awkward tension between us. Because while I’m still working on total forgiveness and fixing things between us, I do want Pressley to feel at home and completely comfortable here.

The faint sound of running water reaches my ears, and I perk up, straining to hear more clearly. It's definitely the shower, which means Pressley is...naked.

Naked and wet and slippery with sweet-smelling soap.

"Fuck," I mutter, turning and striding back into the kitchen.

I need to get out of here before my thoughts turn to actions, and I walk into her room and...

What? Proposition her? Skip the words completely and seduce her with my hands and mouth?

Jesus. I *just* admitted to myself I want her to be comfortable and feel at home here. And sneaking into her bedroom while she's showering is not the way to ensure that.

Shit. Maybe I *am* a stalker.

I shake my head to clear the thought and pull my phone from my pocket. I need a little guy time with someone who's always willing to bend an ear. Pulling up Trace's contact, I shoot him a quick text.

Me: *Meet me at the lake for a little fishing?*

It's the middle of winter and the fish will definitely not be biting, but Trace knows "fishing" is code for "I have a problem and need help." Lord knows, I've met him there enough times to have a beer and talk over his own problems.

Trace: *I can be there in twenty.*

Me: *Thanks, man.*

Grabbing a pad of paper from a drawer, I scribble out a quick note to Pressley that I've gone out to meet Trace and I'll be home soon. Leaving the note on the counter, I grab a couple of beers from the fridge—which we probably won't drink, seeing as how it's barely nine in the damn morning—then shove my keys, phone, and wallet into my pockets before tugging on my coat and slipping through the back door.

Outside, I move to the shed to grab my small cooler for the beers, my tacklebox, and my fishing pole. Tossing everything

into the backseat of my car, I climb in behind the wheel and start the engine. Pausing, I look back at the house one last time, my imagination conjuring up images of Pressley in the shower again.

Blowing out an irritated breath, I shift the car into reverse and back down the drive. Pushing all thoughts of her to the back of my mind, I concentrate on my driving, the bare branches on the trees bending beneath the breeze, and the sound of my tires eating up the asphalt as I race toward the lake.

Anything to expunge Naked-Pressley from my mind.

Because if I don't, I'm going to turn this car around and do something really stupid.

When I get to our secret fishing spot, Trace's truck is already there. I park beside it and climb out. Grabbing my things from the backseat, I tread through the weeds to the lake's edge.

Trace is sitting, having retrieved our hidden chairs from the bushes where we stash them, a smile on his face and zero fishing equipment in sight. I heave a breath, and he smirks, so I toss my pole and tacklebox to the ground, set the cooler down a bit more gently, then plop down into the chair.

"I'm assuming this is about your new roommate?" he asks when I don't speak for a full minute.

"You assume correctly," I say with a sigh as I slump deeper into the chair.

"What happened? Did you get into an argument, or something?"

"No," I say quickly. "Nothing like that."

"Then, what's it like?" he asks when I don't elaborate.

"She was sleeping on the couch last night when I got home from work. She looked so peaceful, I didn't want to wake her, so I covered her with a blanket."

"And?" he asks when it seems like that's all I have to say.

“And I may have touched her hair before I walked away.”

Trace’s brow furrows. “Is that all you touched?”

“Fuck you,” I say, some of my tension ebbing away as he laughs at his own joke.

He knows I would never take advantage of a woman while she was sleeping or touch her without her consent. But, fuck, I guess I did do that, even if it was just her hair. That doesn’t make me an asshole, does it?

“You’re spiraling,” Trace says as if he can read my chaotic thoughts. “Touching her hair isn’t a big deal. So, what else is bothering you?”

“This morning, she apologized for taking over my space by sleeping on the couch. I assured her it was no big deal, and I want her to feel at home. She seemed to accept it, then went to her room to take a shower and get dressed.”

Trace tilts his head and narrows his eyes. “And?”

“And I couldn’t stop myself from imagining her in there, all...”

“Naked?” he offers when my words trail off.

I shake my head. “I’m supposed to be mad at her.”

“There’s a fine line between anger and lust. Trust me. I know,” he says.

“That’s the thing, though,” I say. “I’m having a hard time remembering why I was so mad to begin with. Like her mere presence has cast a spell over me, or something.”

“Fuck, you’re so clueless. I’m kind of loving this, since you’re usually the one offering sage advice.”

“What are you talking about?” I ask.

“You’ve obviously forgiven her,” he says, “and it’s about damn time, too. You know she didn’t mean any harm, and she’s realized her mistake. And now that you’ve forgiven her, you can focus on repairing your relationship with her. Now, whether that means remaining friends or exploring something more is up to you. And her, of course.”

I think about his words for a few beats, then turn in my chair to face him. “When did you get so wise?”

He shrugs. “I have this bartender friend who always knows what to say and always has the right advice to give. Maybe his skill has rubbed off on me, or something.”

“Maybe it did,” I say with a grin. “Or maybe, you’re just an old softy beneath that gruff, grumpy exterior and have been hiding it from everyone your whole life.”

“Okay. I’m out of here,” he grumps, standing and folding his chair before stashing it back into the bushes.

“Hey, Trace,” I call out when he starts to walk away.

Turning back, he asks, “Yeah?”

“Thanks.”

He gives me a firm nod. “You’re welcome.”

After he leaves, I sit for a while, staring out at the lake. Trace was right. I have forgiven Pressley.

And now, it’s time to decide what I really want and what I’m going to do to get it.

CHAPTER

THIRTEEN

Pressley

When I re-emerge from my room, Bram is gone. Wandering into the kitchen, I find a note that he's meeting Trace and will be back later, and honestly, I'm relieved. That whole scene between us this morning was just damn awkward. I hate not knowing how to act around him. And I hate that he doesn't seem to know how to act around me, either.

It's like we're both performing the same dance, but our individual rhythms are slightly off-beat.

Pulling my phone from my pocket, I tap the screen to open the text thread between Keegan, Willow, and me. My thumbs fly across the screen as I furiously type out a message.

Me: Can you guys meet? I feel like I'm having an existential crisis over here.

I don't have to wait long for both of them to respond.

Willow: I'm at work. Come on by, and I'll take a break so we can talk.

Keegan: I can be there in ten.

Me: Thanks, ladies. I'll see you soon!

Flipping Bram's note over, I grab the pen he left beside it on the counter and write out a quick note that I've gone to Moonstone Mystic to see Willow and Keegan, and I'll be

home soon. I freeze, staring at the word “home” while I consider scratching it out and replacing it with...what?

Shaking my head, I drop the pen. Even if I came up with a more suitable word, the change would be obvious. I’d look and feel like an overthinking idiot. Bram probably won’t give the word a second glance.

Slipping my feet into some furry boots, I grab my purse and keys and head out. The drive over to the shop is short, and as I walk inside, I see my friends already at a table with coffees.

“Thanks for meeting me,” I say as I slide into my chair and pick up the mug Willow left in front of it for me.

“Of course, girl,” Keegan says. “We’re always here for you. What’s the crisis?”

“As if we have to ask,” Willow stage-whispers, making Keegan laugh.

I’m sure it was meant to make me laugh, too, but all I do is groan. They both straighten and focus on me, ready to listen without judgment or mockery.

“I fell asleep on the couch last night while Bram was at work, and when I woke up this morning, he had covered me with a blanket. I was so embarrassed and apologized for taking over his space, and he, of course, was kind and generous, and I didn’t know how to act, and it was just fucking awkward.”

“Okay, take a breath,” Keegan says, reaching over to squeeze my shoulder. “That doesn’t seem like such a big deal to me.”

“Yeah, I agree,” Willow adds.

“You don’t think it made me look like a slob taking advantage of his generosity?”

“Oh, my God, Press,” Keegan says with a laugh. “You’re too much. You fell asleep on the couch. You didn’t eat all his food and leave trash all over the living room, did you?”

“Well, there was a half-eaten bag of chips and a soda can,” I admit as my eyes drop to my lap.

“Ugh, and he didn’t kick you out for that?” Willow asks, her voice laced with a heavy dose of sarcasm. When I just look at her, she huffs and droops her shoulders. “Sorry, that snark was uncalled for. What I meant to say was this. I think you’re blowing it out of proportion. And if Bram said he didn’t have a problem with it, he didn’t have a problem with it. He’s a kind, generous man, and he’s not a liar.”

“I think we should dissect this and get to the heart of the problem,” Keegan says.

“And what’s that?” I ask, almost fearful of her answer.

“You think you want things to be normal between you two again.”

My eyebrows draw down. “No, I *know* I want that.”

“No, you don’t,” Willow says, seeming to know where Keegan is going with this.

“Yes, I do,” I argue. “I just want everything to go back to the way it was before I messed up.”

“Do you, though?” Keegan asks.

I scrub a hand down my face. “Just tell me what you’re getting at. I’m too emotionally exhausted to figure it out.”

“Being obtuse doesn’t suit you,” she says with a small smile and a shake of her head. “You want more. You’ve always wanted more with him, but you’ve been too scared to go after it.”

Of course, she’s right. I *was* being obtuse, and I do want more than what I had with Bram before things got messy. But at this point, I’d settle for the friendship we had over whatever fresh hell is going on between us at the moment.

Settle. That word sends a shiver of revulsion through me. I don’t want to settle. I did enough of that in my old life, and I came to Evening Shade to start over. To take life by the balls and be happy, for once.

I shift my gaze between them, then ask, “How do I do it? How do I get Bram to see me as more than a friend?”

“That’s easy,” Willow says. “You *stop* being his friend.”

“Wait. What?” I ask, thoroughly confused.

Keegan shakes her head. “What Willow means is, you’ve only ever treated Bram like he’s your buddy. Sure, you flirt, but it’s innocent, friendly flirting. You should get serious about it.”

“I don’t know if I can do that,” I murmur. Then louder, I add, “I don’t know if I know *how* to do that.”

“Of course, you do,” Willow says, drawing my attention back to her. “Just don’t backtrack and laugh it off when the tension builds between you.”

“How did you...?”

“Please, girl,” she says with a chuckle. “It’s obvious. As soon as a spark flickers to life, you douse it and scurry right back into the friend zone. I’ve literally watched it happen.”

She looks over at Keegan for backup, and that one gives me a sad smile and a nod. “I’ve seen it, too.”

“Do you think Bram’s noticed?”

“Uh, yeah,” she says forcefully, then reaches over to take my hand. “But he’s been doing it, too. I always assumed it was because you lived in Seattle, and he didn’t want to get into a long-distance relationship. Then everything went down with the viral video...”

“But he’s obviously getting over that since he asked you to move in,” Willow jumps in to say when Keegan’s words trail off. “And you’re almost as *short*-distance as you can get being just down the hall from him.”

I shake my head. “I’m not sure if he’s really getting over it, or if he’s just being *Bram*. I needed rescuing, and he felt obliged to be a white knight.”

“Nope,” Willow says with authority. “I’ve known him my whole life, so you can believe me when I say he’s definitely softening.”

“I agree,” Keegan says. “Now we just need to come up with a plan to make him realize how much he wants you and how great you’d be together.”

“Did you guys ever buy those sexy pajamas you were talking about?” Willow asks, directing the question to Keegan while keeping me locked in a mischievous gaze.

“No, but Trace did,” Keegan says with a completely straight face.

“He did what?” Willow snaps, turning her head to look at Keegan so violently, I’m surprised she didn’t crack her neck.

Keegan’s serious mien crumbles as laughter peels out of her. “He found some things I put in my online shopping cart for Pressley, thought they were for me, and ordered them. They should be here in a few days.”

“Jesus,” Willow breathes, pressing a hand to her chest. “You made it sound like you guys were getting ready for a three-way with my brother, and I almost threw up in my mouth.”

“Shut up,” I say, shoving Willow’s shoulder. “You thought no such thing.”

Willow shrugs. “I don’t want to know what kind of freaky-deaky things those two get up to behind closed doors.”

She shivers dramatically, and Keegan chuckles while pointing a finger at her. “You’re right. You really don’t want to know.”

“Okay, enough,” Willow says firmly. “We’re getting off track, here. We’re supposed to be helping Pressley with her Bram situation.”

“If my opinion matters, I think I should make sure our friendship is repaired before trying to move things forward,” I offer, raising a hand into the air for effect.

“You’re backsliding,” Keegan says sadly. “I thought we decided you were going to go after what you really want.”

She’s right. I am backsliding. Because I’m afraid.

I'm afraid that if they're wrong, and Bram doesn't really want me in that way, any attempt to push things between us will end in disaster, and I'll lose him completely.

"Don't let fear control your actions," Willow says softly, obviously using her witchy powers to read my mind. "I did that for too long and wasted so much time I could've had being happy with Gavin."

I heave out a sigh. "I'll think about it. Seriously. And if the occasion arises, and I think he's game, I'll shoot my shot."

"That's my girl," Keegan says, lifting her mug and holding it out so we can clink ours against it. "And in the meantime, I'll bring the sexy nighties Trace bought you over to Bram's as soon as their delivered."

We both look at Willow, whose nose is wrinkled in distaste, and burst into laughter. She shakes her head and crosses her arms over her chest. She narrows her gaze at each of us, then takes a drink of her coffee while murmuring, "Kinky bitches."

"I love you guys," blurts out of my mouth without a thought, and they both smile.

"We love you, too," Willow says. "Now, go get your man."

CHAPTER

FOURTEEN

Bram

Pressley is gone when I get home, so I have some extra time to consider Trace's advice before I see her. I think he's right, and I *have* forgiven her for her mistake. He's also right about the other thing, too.

I do want more.

I always have, since the moment we met. But she's been a bit skittish from the beginning, flirting with me, then backtracking into the friend zone when I try to flirt back. If she could get past her apprehension, I think we could have something special together.

But I'm not going to push it. Not while she's living here and has nowhere else to go. I don't want her to think she owes me anything or that my hospitality comes with strings attached. I'll just work on repairing our friendship, on getting back what we had before, until she decides to make a move on me or moves out. Whichever comes first.

The sound of the front door opening jerks me out of my thoughts, and I lean against the kitchen counter in an attempt to look casual before Pressley walks in. As she rounds the corner, her steps stutter and her cheeks turn pink.

"H-hey," she says, then seems to shake herself and stiffen her spine.

"Hey. Have fun with the girls?" I ask, keeping my tone light and casual.

“Always,” she says with a smile. “You had a good time with Trace?”

“As good as can be had with that grumpy bastard,” I joke, and her smile widens a bit.

Silence falls between us, and her smile dims as it grows awkward. I rack my brain for something to say. *Anything*.

“Well, I’ll be in my room if you need me,” she says before I can come up with something, then scurries out like a scared rabbit.

“Fuck,” I mouth, straightening before turning to brace my hands against the counter.

Leaning forward, I drop my head and roll it back and forth in an attempt to loosen the tight muscles in my neck. That did not go how I wanted or expected. Lifting my head, I turn my stare toward the empty hallway.

I need to do something. Make some kind of plan that will force us to spend time together. If we don’t, we’re never going to fix what’s broken between us.

Looking around for inspiration, I pause when my gaze lands on the stove. We could cook dinner together. We’d have to be in the same room and communicate, then we’d eat together in a nice, relaxed atmosphere.

Moving around the kitchen, I check the pantry, cabinets, and fridge. While there is food here, I don’t have the right ingredients to make a full meal. I pause, thinking for a moment, then my lips start to curve upward.

This is perfect, actually. If she agrees to my idea, we’ll have to go buy groceries. Shopping can be fun, right? And that’ll give Pressley more time to feel at ease around me before we get to the cooking part.

Decision made, I head down the hallway and knock lightly on her bedroom door. A few seconds later, she opens it, her slight smile looking more nervous than happy to see me. Staying the course, I lean against the doorjamb like I don’t have a care in the world and hold her gaze.

“So, I was thinking, and since I don’t have to work tonight, I thought it might be fun to cook dinner together.”

Her eyes widen like that’s the very last thing she expected to come out of my mouth. “Dinner?”

“Yeah,” I say, keeping my tone light and relaxed. “There’s not a lot in the fridge, so I think we should go grocery shopping. We can decide what to make while we’re there. It’ll be fun.”

“Fun,” she repeats, looking a bit dazed like she can’t decide if she’s hallucinating this conversation or not.

“Yes, Pressley. Fun. Are you in or out?”

She blinks slowly, bites her lower lip in a way that has my thoughts shifting to a completely different arena, then nods.

“I’m in.”

“You are?” blurts out of my mouth before I can stop it. I honestly thought I’d have to work harder to get her to agree.

“I am,” she says, her smile turning genuine, and it nearly takes my breath away. “Give me a few minutes to get ready.”

I nod and push upright from the jamb. We stare at each other silently for a few beats, just grinning like maniacs, then she shakes it off and takes a step back. I tell her I’ll see her in a few before spinning around and fleeing the scene.

Because if I didn’t, I was going to push forward into her room and find out if that gorgeous grin tastes as good as it looks.

Down, boy.

I head for my own room to change into a pair of jeans with brown boots and a beige Henley long-sleeved shirt. This color looks great on me and brings out my eyes...or so I’ve been told. Slipping my wallet into my back pocket, I grab my phone and head out into the living room.

Pressley is already there when I arrive, and my steps stumble to a halt as I get a look at her. She always looks beautiful, but right now? Something’s different. There’s a

certain radiance about her as she checks her hair in the mirror hanging on the wall, unaware of my presence. She's wearing a cream-colored sweater that hangs off one shoulder, revealing a black bra strap. Her skinny jeans are black, too, and she's wearing a pair of ankle boots that match her top.

As if she senses my presence, she spins around to face me. I clear my throat and smile, holding a hand toward the front door.

“Are you ready to go?”

“I am,” she says, her voice light and happy.

And, fuck, that makes me feel like a million bucks. That a simple overture, an invitation to go to the damn grocery store, would make her feel more comfortable than she's been with me in weeks.

The drive to the store is mostly silent, but not as awkward as it might've been yesterday. It's more comfortable. Easy.

At the store, as we walk up and down the aisles, Pressley visibly relaxes even more. We bicker over what main course to make—chicken or beef—and debate the starchy superiority of potatoes and pasta over rice and beans. Before we're done, we're laughing and joking like we did before our friendship took a nosedive.

“I think we should make Hamburger Helper,” she says excitedly, like she just came up with the greatest idea on the planet.

“Excuse me?” I ask, my tone dripping with exaggerated disdain.

“Hamburger meat's on sale,” she says with a shrug.

Without thinking, I reach over and grip her side with my fingertips and squeeze. She squeals and jumps away from my tickling fingers, laughing over her shoulder as she skips down the aisle away from me.

Oh, yeah. This is good.

Everything is going to be okay.

CHAPTER

FIFTEEN

Pressley

It still amazes me how just a little wine can lower the inhibitions. After a single glass, any nervous tension I was still holding onto after our shopping trip melted away.

Bram and I had a lot of fun cooking together. We ended up buying ingredients to make chicken alfredo, caesar salad, and buttery garlic bread. I grated the parmesan and made the salads while he did the rest, impressing me with his ease and confidence in the kitchen.

We talked, we laughed. We acted like the last few weeks never happened and our friendship was fully intact.

By the time I finished my second glass of wine during dinner, I was physically unable to stop staring at Bram with “bedroom eyes.” I don’t know what, exactly, I was trying to tell him with that sultry stare, but I know I’d never be so bold without the liquid courage.

I also know I’m probably going to regret that boldness in the morning.

But tonight? Tonight, I have zero fucks to give.

Dinner was delicious, and now, as we finish cleaning up the mess in the kitchen, I’m starting to feel a bit nervous again, despite the wine. What happens next? Do we just say goodnight and head to our separate rooms? I don’t want the night to end, but I can’t get a clear read on Bram and what he

wants. So, in true Pressley fashion, I decide to offer him an out.

“This was really fun, Bram. Thank you.”

“You sound like you’re saying goodnight,” he says, cocking his head to study me as he closes the dishwasher and dries his hands.

“Yes. I mean, no. I mean...I’m not really tired, yet.”

“Good,” he says, and the word sends a thrill shooting down my spine. “Want to go sit in the living room for a while?”

“Sure,” I say, nodding when he picks up the bottle of wine and motions with it toward my empty glass.

After we both have refills, he follows me into the living room. I take a seat at one end of the couch, squeezing as close to the edge as I can get for some insane reason even I can’t comprehend.

Why am I acting so standoffish? I’m throwing out signs I definitely don’t mean with that maneuver, so I slowly scoot away from the edge, wiggling my body like I’m just trying to get comfortable in an attempt to make the move not so obvious.

Bram sets his wineglass on the coffee table, and the shock nearly sends me into cardiac arrest when he picks his guitar up from its stand and sits a mere foot away from me on the sofa. My heart starts to pound as he plucks the strings and twists the knobs to tune it. I fight to keep my breaths slow and shallow, and I set my glass down when the liquid inside starts to slosh a bit from the force of my shaking hand.

Then, Bram looks directly into my eyes and starts to play.

I hold his stare, unable to look away, and when he starts to sing, my stomach hollows out. Heat builds in my core as my mind registers the words—words of love lost and desires unquenched. I’ve never heard the song before, and my head feels dizzy as I imagine Bram writing those words just for me.

But of course, he didn't. I'm being ridiculous. Looking away, I grab my wine from the table and chug down the rest of it. When I glance at Bram again, he's smiling as he sings, and the heat starts building all over again.

Whether he wrote it for me, or not, he's definitely singing it for me now. And after fearing he'd never sing or play for me, again, the moment feels kind of epic.

And this is when I start to go batshit crazy.

I have a sudden urge to reach over and pull the guitar right out of his hands. Set it aside, and climb onto his lap, straddling him while my hands dive into his gorgeous, strawberry-blonde hair. Our lips would touch lightly, at first, then Bram would deepen the kiss, sliding his tongue into my mouth as his fingers grip my hips. He would push me down until the ridge of his cock rubs against my aching center, the friction driving me wild until I buck against him. Then—

“Oh, God,” I blurt, leaping to my feet in a panic.

Can he tell what I was thinking? Shit. Shit, shit, shit.

The song cuts off abruptly, and Bram stares at me with a confused expression as he asks, “Are you okay?”

“Yes,” I say, shifting my weight from foot to foot as my fight or flight instinct goes a little haywire. “I...uh...need to go. Sorry.”

And with that, flight wins, and I flee the room. I don't stop until I'm in my bedroom, the door closed behind me. I lean back against it, trying to slow my heart and my heavy, erratic breaths, and just as I start to calm, a light tap sounds from the other side of the door.

Startled, I leap away with a yelp, then groan silently when I realize he probably heard that. Can I make any more of a fool of myself? What is *wrong* with me?

The food and wine churns in my gut as I smooth my hair and clothes, then, taking a deep breath, reach out and open the door. Bram meets my eyes with a concerned expression.

“Hey,” he says softly. “Are you okay? Did I do something wrong?”

“No,” I say, the word flying from my lips almost violently. Then calmer, I add, “Of course not.”

“Then what happened out there?” he asks.

“You don’t want to know,” I mumble under my breath.

“Yes, I do,” he says, obviously hearing the words despite my mumbling.

I rack my brain for an excuse, but the only thing that comes to mind is Keegan’s voice from earlier.

“You’ve only ever treated Bram like he’s your buddy. Sure, you flirt, but it’s innocent, friendly flirting. You should get serious about it.”

Clenching my jaw, I swallow thickly and say, “That song...”

“The song?” he says, moving a step closer.

My chest starts to heave as I fight to fill my lungs. “Your voice...”

Apparently, I can’t complete a full sentence, but Bram doesn’t seem to mind.

Inching a bit closer he repeats, “My voice.”

A whole-body shiver courses through me, and my words are slow and soft as I admit, “It...did things to me.”

“It did things to you,” he says in the same tone as he slowly lifts a hand.

I freeze, waiting with bated breath for his touch on my face. Then something happens inside Bram’s brain, and he blinks, curls his fingers into a tight fist, then drops his arm back to his side. Disappointment floods my system, and I almost cry out in protest as he takes a quick step back out into the hall.

“Sorry. I should go,” he says, then spins on a heel and strides down the hall to his bedroom.

I poke my head out and watch as he closes the door behind him without looking back, leaving me feeling bereft. Straightening, I close my own door as softly as possible and then just stand there, staring at it.

After a couple of minutes, I accept the fact that he's not coming back.

And...I guess I have my answer.

Bram and I are just friends, and that's all he wants. Friendship.

And even though I told myself I'd be happy with that—and I definitely *am* happy—I can't stop feeling the disappointment that floods through me and saps the energy from my entire body. Without changing or brushing my teeth, I walk toward the bed, climb onto it, and curl myself into a ball on top of the covers before letting the tears leak from my eyes.

One cry. I'll allow myself to mourn what could've been this one time, then I'll get over it.

I have to.

CHAPTER

SIXTEEN

Bram

Fuck, that was close.

I'm not stupid. I could clearly see how my little performance was affecting Pressley. And the effect I was having on her had an effect on *me*. One I had no desire to tamp down.

I don't know. I guess I was hoping she'd lose control? Maybe attack me right there on the couch and put us both out of our misery?

I should've known better. Pressley did exactly what Pressley does... She ran.

But I couldn't leave it at that. No, I had to follow her to her room and coerce her into admitting what we both knew. She was turned on and didn't know how to handle it.

And hell if I didn't almost take advantage of her little flash of desire. I was *this* close to pushing my way into her room, throwing her on the bed, and finding out the answers to all of my questions. For instance, how would she feel with her body pressed against mine? How would she taste? How loud does she scream when she comes?

I *just* fucking decided it would be best to keep the line between us firmly drawn at friendship, and here I am already toeing that line just a few short hours later. She's too tempting as it is, but when she's obviously turned on by me? *Fuck* me.

I don't know how I'm going to do this. I don't know how I'm going to be Pressley's friend without succumbing to my not-so-hidden deeper desires.

Moving to the bed, I stretch out on the mattress and pull my phone from my pocket. Tapping the screen, I pull up Pressley's contact and open our text thread. I stare at it with my thumbs poised over the screen for several beats, then slowly tap out what I hope is a "safe" message.

Me: *I had a good time tonight. Thank you.*

I watch as the message status goes from delivered to read and fight the urge to hold my breath as I wait. Several beats tick by, and just when I'm convinced she's not going to text me back, a little bubble with three dots appears on the screen. I hold my breath now, waiting for her response.

Pressley: *I had fun, too. Dinner was great.*

It doesn't escape my notice that she avoided mentioning what happened after, focusing solely on the dinner portion of the evening. I'm fine with that.

Me: *You didn't think the sauce was too salty?*

Pressley: *No, it was perfect.*

Me: *Well, your salads were amazing.*

Pressley: *I put lettuce, cheese, and croutons in a bowl and drizzled bottled salad dressing over it.*

Me: *The perfect amount of each ingredient.*

Pressley: *You're ridiculous. LOL*

Me: *I've never claimed otherwise. *winky-face emoji**

Me: *What should we cook next time?*

Pressley: *Next time?*

Me: *Teamwork makes the dream work. You didn't think I'd be cooking for us by myself every night, did you?*

Pressley: *We could alternate days.*

Me: *We could, but isn't it more fun when we do it together?*

As soon as I hit send on that one, I realize the innuendo in the words. Shit. I hope she doesn't misinterpret it and run for the hills again.

Pressley: *That's what she said.*

I bark out a laugh as my thumbs fly over the screen.

Me: *Did you seriously just make a "that's what she said" joke? I thought you were better than that.*

Pressley: *These walls are thin, Bram. I heard you laugh.*

Me: *I certainly did not laugh at that lame attempt at a joke. You must've heard the T.V.*

Pressley: *That's your story, and you're sticking to it, huh?*

Me: *Exactly.*

Pressley: *Okay, then. I'll try to refrain from making any more lame jokes.*

Me: *Impossible. It's your very nature.*

Pressley: *To be lame?*

Me: *Shit. I walked right into that one, didn't I? You know that's not what I meant.*

Pressley: *I don't know... I'm pretty sure I heard an insult in there somewhere.*

Me: *Okay, fine. I totally laughed.*

Pressley: *I knew it! And to answer your original question, chicken enchiladas, homemade pizza, and steaks with baked potatoes are some of my favorite meals to cook.*

Me: *Got it. I'll hit the grocery store tomorrow.*

Pressley: *You don't want me to come? What if you buy the wrong cheese?*

Me: *You're right. You should probably come supervise me in the dairy section, at the very least.*

Pressley: *Great. Just let me know when, and I'll be ready.*

Me: *That's what she said.*

Pressley: **eye roll emoji* Not as funny when you say it.*

Me: *That's sexist.*

Pressley: *It has nothing to do with gender and everything to do with my sparkling wit and perfect comedic timing.*

Me: *Okay, Tina Fey, I'll see you in the morning.*

Pressley: *You flatter me. Truly, you do.*

Pressley: *Good night, Bram.*

Me: *Good night, Pressley.*

I set my phone on the nightstand and stare up at the ceiling for a while. That was good. The texting seemed to dispel the awkwardness between us, and it felt like we fell right back into that familiar rhythm of being good friends. Buddies.

And I refuse to admit, even to myself, the disappointment weaving through me at the thought. No. This is for the best for the both of us.

I know it is.

CHAPTER

SEVENTEEN

Pressley

The last couple of days have been nice. Bram and I are back to being the friends we were before, and neither of us has mentioned that little scene in my bedroom doorway the other night. He's either brushed it off and forgotten my erratic behavior, or he's just pretending it never happened for both of our benefits.

It's Friday evening, and Bram left for work about an hour ago. I've spent the time since getting ready for a night out. I'm meeting Keegan, Trace, Willow, and Gavin at Wolfsbane Tavern in a bit, and as soon as Bram finishes his shift tonight, he'll be joining us.

I check my appearance in the mirror, and I have to admit, I look good. My dark jeans and lavender sweater look good without looking like I'm trying too hard. I've curled my hair into fat waves, and my makeup is elegant with a dark, smoky eye and a red lip.

It's nothing I wouldn't normally wear for a night out with friends.

It has nothing to do with the fact that I'll be seeing Bram, and he's only seen me with light or no makeup and regular clothes since I moved in.

Okay, fine. It does have a little something to do with that. Hell, I'm only human.

Pulling on my ankle boots and stuffing my phone and my tube of lipstick into a small purse, I head out, locking the door behind me. I pump myself up as I drive to the tavern. Just hanging out with friends. Nothing more. Nothing to feel nervous about.

When I walk into the tavern, Bram and I lock gazes instantly. I give him a little wave, and even from his position behind the bar, I don't miss the way his eyes travel down my body and back up again before he waves back. I feel my cheeks heat and send up a silent prayer of thanks for the dim lighting in here.

I spot Keegan and Trace at a table across the bar. Keeping my head down, I stride toward them and quickly slip into one of the empty chairs.

“Hey. You okay?” Keegan asks.

“I'm good,” I say a little too brightly, meeting her eyes before turning my attention to her fiancé. “Hey, Trace.”

“Pressley,” he says with a touch of humor.

“So, how's the visit with your parents going?” I ask, my desperation to keep the subject off me and Bram completely obvious.

“It's been good, actually,” Keegan says slowly. “We haven't really talked about it, but I get the feeling they regret the distance they put between us. Especially now that I'm getting married and grandkids are a distinct possibility.”

My tension drains away as I focus on Keegan. “How does that make you feel?”

I know I'd feel shitty if my parents only wanted to be in my life for access to my children.

Keegan shrugs. “They're trying. That's all that matters. And if Trace and I *do* have kids, I want them to know their grandparents.”

“Not if. When,” Trace cuts in, reaching over to massage the back of Keegan's neck.

“Will your kids call you *Wolf Daddy*?” I cut in before Keegan can respond, and a laugh bursts out of her instead.

Trace snarls as I smile sweetly at him, but there’s no heat in it. It’s amazing, how much he’s mellowed since he and Keegan moved in together. She insists their kids will, indeed, call him that, and he kisses her to shut her up. I grin at them, so happy that they’re happy, and look over my shoulder at the bar.

I freeze when I lock gazes with Bram, who was apparently staring this way before I glanced in his direction. My smile falters, but I force it back into place as he motions that he’ll be sending drinks over shortly. I nod and turn back around, but I swear, I still feel his gaze burning into my back.

I meet Keegan’s eyes, which are wide and bright with humor as she waggles her eyebrows at me. I shake my head and look at Trace, but he’s not looking my way. No, he’s smirking in Bram’s direction, obviously watching the man *watch me*.

A waitress materializes beside me and sets a beer in front of Trace before placing two margarita glasses on the table. Before she can hand it over, I snatch the pitcher of frozen goodness off her tray and slosh some into a glass. Keegan chuckles as I set the pitcher on the table and slide it toward her, and the waitress hums before hurrying away.

Picking up my glass, I hold it up in salute to my friends before upturning it, pouring the slush into my mouth. Tequila burns my throat as I swallow it down, and I groan as pain explodes in my skull.

“Brain freeze?” Keegan sing-songs, then takes a dainty sip of her own margarita.

“Shut up. Ugh,” I groan again, pressing my palms to my temples and my tongue to the roof of my mouth.

I’m convinced that particular remedy for brain freeze is a myth. And though it’s never worked for me, I continue to try every time it happens. Isn’t that the definition of insanity?

Trying the same thing over and over and expecting a different result? Hell, if I know.

All I know is it hurts.

Willow and Gavin arrive, taking their seats with greetings all around. The same waitress appears, eyeing me carefully as she sets a fresh glass in front of Willow and a beer in front of Gavin. They thank her before she flits away, then Willow starts chattering about something funny that happened at her shop today.

I try to listen, but her voice fades away as I focus on the feel of Bram's eyes on me. At this point, I'm not sure if I'm imagining it, or not, but it feels real. It feels...hot.

Maybe I should've just worn a muumuu, or something.

No. This is stupid. He's my friend. My roommate. Nothing more.

I force myself to focus on my friends, joining the conversation when I can while carefully sipping margarita after margarita to avoid another brain freeze situation. I'm not sure how many I've had or how many times we've received a fresh pitcher of tart, frosty goodness, but it doesn't take long for me to relax, completely.

The girls bait me when I start slurring, but I don't care. I just laugh along with them, finally enjoying the night. At one point, Gavin tries to get me to drink some water, but I pull the pitcher toward me with the argument that there's water in the drink—it's made with crushed ice, obviously.

"This is so much fun," I cheer as I hold up my glass. "To good times with good friends."

"Here, here," Willow calls out, clinking her glass against mine and Keegan's when she raises hers.

"Ditto," she adds, then sips her drink before pinning me with a heavy stare. "You should probably think about slowing down, Press. We all know tequila is the devil, and you're going to be hurting in the morning."

“Nonsense,” I slur loudly. “Tequila is an angel sent down from heaven to make me happy and complete. I’ll be right as rain tomorrow.”

“Don’t say I didn’t warn you,” Keegan sighs, and the conversation steers away from me and my drunken state for a few minutes.

Turning to look over my shoulder, I find Bram’s gaze locked on me once again. But liquid courage is a real thing, so instead of looking away, I smile and hold my half-empty glass up in a toast to him and his yummy-sexy self. Bram shakes his head, but his lips lift up at the corners before he turns his attention to another customer at the bar.

I mentally undress him as I watch him work, my tongue darting out to lick my lips as I imagine what his skin must feel like. What it must taste like.

“Pressley. Hey,” Keegan says, snapping her fingers in my direction to get my attention.

“What?” I ask as I turn around, feeling grumpy at the interruption.

I was just getting to the good part of that particular daydream.

“You were eye-fucking Bram,” she hisses under her breath.

“I certainly was *not*,” I say with a flair of drama as I press a palm to my chest. “I was just looking at him and imagining... Oh. I guess I was eye-fucking him, wasn’t I?”

That strikes me as hilarious, and I start to giggle. As I teeter sideways in my chair, I cut the laughter off. Shit. I’m giggling. I must be drunk.

“Can someone get me some water?” I blurt out as I press my face to my crossed arms on top of the table.

“Here,” a deep voice murmurs, and I sit back up in a rush.

I look up to see the man of my dreams holding a glass of water in my direction. I take it as he slides into the empty chair next to me amidst greetings from the rest of the group.

“Bram,” I say, my drunken voice turning a bit dreamy, “I missed you.”

Then I lean toward him and rest my head against his shoulder. My eyes close as a smile curves my lips. Someone pulls the glass from my fingers before I spill it, and I snuggle into Bram’s side just before everything else fades into dark, silent nothingness.

CHAPTER

EIGHTEEN

Bram

Every eye save for Pressley's—who seems to be dozing off against my shoulder—is on me, all filled with excessive humor. I roll my own eyes at them and lift my shoulder to nudge Pressley a little bit without completely dislodging her.

“I guess you liked the margaritas I sent over?” I ask, turning my head so my lips move against her hair as I speak.

“Yes, I did. They were yummy. Just like you,” she replies accentuating those last three words.

Keegan spits her drink out across the table, making Willow and Gavin slide their chairs back in reflex. They start to laugh as Keegan attempts to clean up the mess with cocktail napkins while apologizing through her own laughter.

Whipping my arm around Pressley's shoulder, I pull her against my chest, clear my throat, and say, “Okay, I think it's time we get you home and into bed.”

Pressley nods against my chest, then inhales deeply like she's savoring my scent before exclaiming, “Yay! Take me to your bed, Brammie-boo!”

I close my eyes and groan as Keegan and Willow titter behind their glasses. My cock twitches a bit at Pressley's words, but I ignore it. I will *not* be taking Pressley to my bed tonight. Not like this.

I freeze, then rush to correct my mental mistake. I won't be taking her to my bed *any* night. We're just friends, and that's all we will be until she moves out of my place. Yeah. That's what I meant.

Blowing out a long breath, I push to my feet and carefully guide Pressley up and out of her chair. Willow reaches over to dig into the pocket of Pressley's jeans, fishing out her car keys and jiggling them in the air.

"I'll make sure her car gets back to your house," she promises, and I nod in thanks before plucking Pressley's purse from the back of her chair and saying goodbye to everyone.

As I guide her toward the exit, someone lets out a loud wolf whistle, and I flinch. But I don't look back. Odds are good that the whistler was Keegan, and I'd only be feeding into her humor if I acknowledged it. Laughter follows us out into the parking lot, and Pressley somehow manages to stay on her feet as I half-carry her to my car.

She sighs as I get her settled in the passenger's seat, then lets out a husky hum as I lean in over her to buckle her seatbelt. Those little noises play hell with my equilibrium, and when I pull myself out and close the door, shutting her inside, I take a moment to breathe deep and settle myself.

Once we're on the road, Pressley is silent. Her face is turned toward me, and when I glance over, her eyes are closed. I'm pretty sure she's dozing, and she doesn't stir when we pull into the driveway. I climb out of the car and rush around to her side. After I open the door and lean in to unbuckle her seatbelt, she yawns and stretches. The act pushes her chest out, and her breasts brush against my chest, making me tense. My cock twitches again and starts to harden, and this time, there's nothing I can do to tamp it down. I just have to ignore it.

It takes a little work, but I manage to maneuver Pressley out of the car and onto her feet. After I close her door, I try to lead her to the porch, but her legs don't seem to be working. Bending my knees, I scoop her up into the cradle of my arms and pull her against my chest. She snuggles in, sighing contentedly as I carry her to the front door.

I manage to unlock the door without dropping her, and once we're inside, I kick it closed behind us and head straight for Pressley's room. Laying her on the bed, I pull off her boots and socks. Stepping back, I stare at her for a minute. I know she'd be more comfortable out of those clothes, but there's no way in hell I'm undressing her.

She sighs and rolls onto her side, already half-asleep again, and I grab a blanket from the closet and drape it over her gently. I turn to leave, then pause when she whispers my name. Moving back, I brush her hair away from her face.

“What is it? Do you need something?”

“I'm good,” she says, never once opening her eyes. “I just wanted to thank you. You're a good man, and I'm so lucky to have you in my life.”

Her words go almost silent at the end, and before I can even think to respond, she starts to drift off. I murmur something to her about getting some sleep, and she doesn't reply, already falling deep into slumber.

I turn off her light on my way out, then close the door softly behind me. Then without thought or debate, I head straight to my own room, closing myself inside. Stripping out of my clothes along the way and dropping each piece to the floor, I go into the bathroom and turn on the shower. As soon as the water heats, I step inside and let it pound against my shoulders.

Images of Pressley flash behind my closed eyelids, and I turn toward the spray, dropping my head and bracing one hand against the wall. My abdominal muscles tense and roll as I breathe deep, imagining peeling that purple sweater from Pressley's body to see what color bra she has on beneath it.

I hear her voice in my ears, urging me on with desperate pleas, and my free hand wraps around my erection like it has a mind of its own. I stroke it gently as I imagine tasting every inch of Pressley's skin. Licking and biting my way up her thighs before burrowing my face between them, eating her until she screams her release.

Grabbing the body wash, I squirt some into my palm before rubbing it all over my cock. I try to keep my breaths quiet as I pump it fast and hard, my mind conjuring a vision of Pressley beneath me as I drive into her hot, wet, tight pussy again and again.

My balls tighten as my leg muscles start to contract, and I pump faster, chasing the high of an orgasm until a grunt bursts from my lips. My release shoots from the tip in long ropes, hitting the shower floor before being washed down the drain.

Releasing my cock, I press that hand next to the other one on the shower wall and hang my head between them, letting the water pound against my shoulders and back as I catch my breath. It doesn't take long for the self-recriminations to close in, clouding my mind and pushing out the images of Pressley and me.

I shouldn't have done that. I shouldn't have jacked off to visions of her. She's my friend, and now I'm not going to be able to look at her without remembering this moment. How amazing she looked and felt in my mind.

How hard those imaginings made me come.

I try not to think any more about it as I quickly wash up and rinse off. Turning off the water, I open the door and grab a towel from the wall rack. Wrapping it around my waist, I step out and move to the sink to brush my teeth.

When I finish, I walk back into the bedroom, pick up my dirty clothes and toss them into the hamper, and pull a clean pair of boxer briefs from my dresser drawer. Dropping the towel I pull them on before picking the towel up off the floor and shoving it on top of the dirty clothes. Then I turn out the lights and climb into bed.

Sleep evades me for a long time. I can't stop thinking about Pressley and how things could be between us if I allowed myself to show her how much I want her. Then I rebuke myself for even thinking it. I know keeping things simple is the better choice.

The cycle starts again, the internal debate driving me mad before I finally start to doze off. Realizing I'm fading, I breathe deep and let the air out slowly.

I'm just going to have to figure this out tomorrow.

CHAPTER

NINETEEN

Pressley

“O h, God.”

The groaned words only intensify the pounding in my head, chasing the last dregs of sleep from my body. Lifting my hands to my face, I press my fingertips against my temples and massage in slow circles for several moments, but it doesn't seem to help.

Shit. How much did I drink last night? And where the hell am I?

Cracking open one eye, I lift my head slightly and look around before dropping it back to the pillow. Oh. I'm in my bed at Bram's house. Running a palm down my body, I realize I'm still fully dressed, but the cool air on my toes tells me someone took off my socks and shoes.

I push myself upright in small increments, careful not to jostle my head too much. I'm on top of the covers, and there's a blanket bunched around my legs I don't recognize. Bram must've draped it over me after I passed out.

How *embarrassing*.

Twisting, I drag my legs over the edge of the bed in preparation to get up, but freeze when my gaze lands on my nightstand. There's a glass of water resting there, and beside it are two aspirin with a small sticky note that has "Take me!" written on it. My lips tick up at the corners as I pick up Bram's

offering, toss the pills into my mouth, and chase them down with half of the water.

Embarrassing or not, it feels good to have someone take care of me. Especially since that “someone” is the man I can’t stop fantasizing about.

And is that...bacon I smell? My stomach grumbles in response, and I realize I’m starving. I need to get up and get moving.

After I drink a little more water, I force myself to stand. I wobble a little as fresh pain explodes in my skull, but once it recedes back into a steady, constant throbbing, I move slowly toward the closet to find something clean to wear. Pulling out a pair of joggers and a matching cropped hoodie, I find a pair of clean underwear and a bra before heading toward the bathroom.

Leaving the water as hot as I can stand it, I let the steam of the shower soothe my tired muscles for a few minutes before I start washing my hair. It’s a slow process, but eventually, every inch of me is cleaned, shaved, and rinsed. Turning off the water, I wrap a towel around my hair before drying off and getting dressed. After squeezing the excess water out, I wrap my damp hair into a tight bun with a hair tie. When I’m done with that, I brush my teeth, swipe on some deodorant, and spritz on a cloud of body spray.

That’s it. This is as good as it gets this morning.

Padding out of my room on bare feet, I make my way to the kitchen. My head is still pounding, but I forget the pain as soon as I round the corner and see Bram. My heart stops, then pumps back to life at a too-rapid pace as my eyes take him in.

He’s standing in front of the stove, holding the handle of a frying pan in one hand and a spatula in the other as he flips a large pancake up into the air and catches it in the pan. I can smell the bacon even stronger in here, and my mouth starts to water.

Yeah. It’s the bacon. It has nothing to do with the fact that the man of my dreams is standing in the kitchen in nothing but

a pair of gray sweatpants, revealing his wide, muscled, *bare* chest as he performs domestic duties and whistles a jaunty tune.

It's every woman's wet dream come to life right before my very eyes.

I clear my throat as the excess saliva pooling in my mouth threatens to choke me, and Bram looks over with a surprised expression.

"Oh, hey. You're up," he says, his gaze moving down my body before zipping back up to meet mine.

I know the feeling, buddy.

"Didn't anyone ever tell you you're not supposed to fry bacon shirtless?" I ask, opting for a little levity so I don't drop to my knees and beg him to take me right here, right now.

"Bacon's in the oven, actually," he says with a smirk. "No popping grease to worry about, here."

He rubs a palm down his bare chest as he says that last bit, and I'm pretty sure at this point, I'm having a very realistic hallucination brought on by copious amounts of tequila. Or an out of body experience.

Or I died last night and this is my own personal heaven.

"That's for you," he says, pointing toward the coffee machine where a full mug of steaming coffee rests beneath the spout.

"Thank you," I reply, moving forward to take it before pulling my chocolate creamer from the fridge.

After I've doctored it up the way I like it, I take my coffee to the table and slide into a chair. Bram plates the pancake he's been cooking, then pours some fresh batter into the pan. Turning to face me, he gives me a compassionate look.

"How's your head?"

"It feels like there's a dozen tiny jackhammers going off in there, but I'll survive," I say. "Thanks for the aspirin. And for taking care of me last night. I don't know what got into me."

Liar.

He nods, and turns back to his cooking. I allow my gaze to rove over his back for only a moment, then force myself to look down at my coffee before I do something stupid. I keep my gaze averted while he finishes breakfast, and a few minutes later, he appears beside me and sets down a plate with two fluffy pancakes and three slices of bacon on it.

“Thank you,” I murmur, then watch as he sets his own plate down and plucks a t-shirt from the back of his chair before sliding it on and taking the seat across from me.

Pity.

No. Not *pity*. Good. It’s good he’s fully dressed and not tempting me.

I almost roll my eyes at that thought. This man would tempt me in a potato sack.

We eat in silence for a while, but the quiet leaves me feeling unsettled and a bit itchy. I need to say something. Anything.

“I really am sorry for last night,” I say again when I can’t think of anything else.

Bram shakes his head. “You don’t need to apologize. I deal with people who over-imbibe on a regular basis, and as far as drunks go, you’re a very cute one.”

My face heats at the compliment. “Did I embarrass myself? Or anyone else? I don’t remember much after the second pitcher of margaritas arrived. You made it strong.”

He chuckles and shakes his head. “Nah. You were good. You just got sleepy, so I brought you home.”

I search my memories and I vaguely recall him leading me from the bar. I work backwards, trying to remember anything else, and then my entire body stiffens as the fog in my head clears a bit.

Oh, God. I told Bram to take me to *his* bed. In front of everyone.

Kill me. Kill me, now.

“Oh, my God,” I whisper to myself as the memory replays through my head.

“What?” Bram asks, startling me.

“Nothing,” I say quickly, and he watches me for a moment before shrugging and refocusing on his food.

Relief trickles through me. Either he doesn't remember what I said, or he's gentleman enough not to repeat it and embarrass me further.

I'm good with either. I just want to forget it ever happened.

CHAPTER

TWENTY

Bram

Ah, she remembers what she said last night. Her cheeks turn a pretty shade of pink as she stares a hole into what's left of her pancakes. I feel an urge to say something, anything, that will put her at ease. But anything I say could have the opposite effect, so I decide to just let her work through it on her own.

Picking up my coffee mug, I lean back in my chair and take a long sip. I stretch out my legs a bit, and my bare foot accidentally brushes against Pressley's. She jerks it back so violently, her knee bangs into the underside of the table, setting the dishes to rattling.

"Sorry," I say, quickly pulling my feet back toward me, and she shakes off the apology.

"It's okay. Just surprised me, is all," she says, refusing to make eye contact.

"Are you sure that's all it is?" flows from my lips before I can stop it, and I silently curse myself as her blush deepens, and she still refuses to meet my eyes.

"I'm sure," she squeaks, then hops up and carries her dishes into the kitchen.

I watch as she scrapes her leftovers into the trash and loads the plate and fork into the dishwasher. I finish eating and follow her, loading my own dishes into the machine and

leaving it open as I turn to look at her. She's leaning against the counter, staring at the wall as she finishes her coffee.

When she's done, I hold out my hand for the empty cup. As she hands it over, our fingers brush, and a shock of electricity shoots up my arm. She must feel it too, because she gasps before jerking her hand back. Placing the cup into the dishwasher and closing the door, I feel my temper spike.

"This is stupid."

"What's stupid?" she asks, and I spin back to face her.

I motion between us. "This. Us. You and me. The way we're tiptoeing around each other, pretending we both don't want what we both *obviously* want."

"And what is that?" she says, the words coming out in a choked whisper.

I take a step closer, and she sucks in a deep breath and holds it. Lifting a hand, I run a gentle finger down her cheek. She exhales a shaky breath, and her tongue darts out to wet her lips.

"I want to kiss you, Pressley Glade," I murmur as my hand reaches her throat and curls around it lightly.

"You do?" she croaks, and I nod.

"And I think you want to kiss me, too," I add.

Her gaze drops to my mouth, her eyes dilating as that little pink tongue slips out to wet her own lips again. Pressing my fingertips a little deeper into the sides of her neck, I tug her forward an inch, and her eyes fly back up to meet mine. I lean in slowly, giving her plenty of time to stop me, but she just watches me watch her as I grow closer and closer. Her chest is heaving now, and mine is too, and the second our lips touch, her eyes fall closed.

Tilting my head slightly, I brush my lips over hers again and again, learning the feel of them against mine as all my blood rushes to my groin. They're just as soft as I imagined. Softer, even.

She moans quietly and parts her lips, inviting my tongue inside. I don't waste a second, slipping it in to brush against hers. She tastes like chocolate coffee and sunshine, and as I withdraw, her tongue chases mine, and her hands tangle in my hair, squeezing it in an almost painful grip.

I move forward, pushing her against the counter and bending her backward as I deepen the kiss, devouring her the way I've dreamed of doing for months. When she breaks away, gasping for breath, I release her throat and replace my hand with my mouth, licking and nipping my way down the column and back up again until I reach her ear.

"I want to taste every inch of you, Pressley," I whisper.

Pressing one last kiss to the sensitive skin below her ear, I pull back so I can meet her gaze. Her eyes flutter open, and she watches me for a few beats before nodding slowly. I can't contain my smile as I bend my knees and hoist her up. Her legs wrap around my waist immediately, and she presses her mouth to mine as I spin and carry her to my bedroom.

Setting her on her feet beside the bed, I pull my t-shirt over my head with one hand and toss it aside. As her gaze devours my bare chest, she lifts a hand to touch me, running her fingertips over the bumps and valleys. I let her have her way for as long as I can stand it, then I grip her wrist and press a kiss to her palm, letting my tongue touch it briefly.

She gasps a ragged breath, and I bend to press my mouth to that strip of bare skin between her cropped hoodie and her pants.

"It drives me crazy every time you wear these," I admit, pushing the material up so I can kiss a path upward.

Impatient, Pressley tugs the hoodie off, completely. I straighten, letting my gaze devour her. God, she's beautiful. So fucking sexy.

My finger slips beneath the shoulder strap of her pale pink bra and slowly tugs it down her arm. Leaning in, I nibble the ridge of her shoulder, making her shiver. My arms circle around her, my hands meeting at the clasp of her bra. I grip the

edges of the elastic and pause, silently asking for permission as my mouth moves along her shoulder to her neck.

“Please,” Pressley breathes. “Don’t stop.”

With a quick pinch, I have the clasp undone. My mouth moves back to hers, ravaging it while my hands pull her bra free. Once the garment is gone, I run my palms over her bare breasts, kneading and testing their weight.

My heartbeat pounds in my ears as I pinch her nipples lightly, and I barely hear her moan of pleasure over the roaring. Breaking off our kiss, I lift one breast as I bend to taste the pebbled tip. Pressley makes another sound of pleasure, and my eyes flick up to catch the pure ecstasy etched on her face.

I almost can’t believe this is real. It’s like something out of my raunchiest dreams, finding out how sensitive and responsive this woman is and knowing I hold the key to her carnal pleasure.

I press open-mouthed kisses along her chest to the other breast while my hands move to the waistband of her joggers. Slipping my fingers beneath, I push them down slowly as I lower to my knees. My lips blaze a trail south, and Pressley’s breathing becomes noisier with each inhale and exhale.

I lick and nip her thighs as I pull her feet free of the material, then slowly run my fingers up her legs while gently nudging them apart. My thumbs skate over the edges of her underwear when I reach the apex of her thighs, and she automatically spreads her legs wider.

I’m ready to dive in, to finally taste her, but somehow manage to hold back. I don’t want the first time to be like this, a rushed affair, when I’d much rather draw it out and make it last as long as possible.

Pressley groans in disappointment when I push to my feet, then squeals when I pick her up and toss her onto the bed. She watches me with wide, excited eyes as I climb onto the mattress and crawl forward. She bends her knees and spreads them wide as I move, and I nearly lose what little control I

have when I see how soaked that scrap of material between her legs is.

Sitting back on my heels between her legs, I reach out and run a thumb over the wet spot. “You’re so wet for me, aren’t you, angel?”

“Yes,” she huffs out on a harsh exhale as I run my thumb over the spot again.

My erection is almost painfully hard now, but I ignore it, focusing all of my attention and energy on her. I need to make her come. To hear what kinds of noises she makes when she’s close. To feel her muscles vibrate with tension as the buildup becomes too much to bear. To see the jolt of ecstasy in her expression.

Running my palms up her abdomen, I curl the tips of my fingers under the elastic waist of her underwear and slowly tug it down. Pressley lifts her hips in an effort to help, and when the lacy material slips past them, she drops and lifts her legs upward, straightening them so I can slide the underwear all the way off.

Then she spreads them and drops her feet to either side of my knees, opening herself to me and granting me my first look at her pink, bare pussy. Her flesh glistens with moisture as I run my hands up her thighs, and I can’t fucking wait another second.

Bending over, I snake my arms beneath her knees and pull her lower half up off the mattress. She yelps when I make contact, licking the length of her slit with the flat of my tongue.

Pure ambrosia bursts on my taste buds, and a deep moan vibrates in my chest as I lick her again, this time burrowing the tip of my tongue through her flesh to find her tight, swollen clit. Her entire body jerks at the contact, but I hold her tight to keep her still as I swirl my tongue around the bud for several long beats.

Fuck, she’s perfect. And she tastes so much fucking better than I’d imagined. My wildest dreams never came close.

I hum as I suck and lick at her clit, and she pumps her hips slightly in time with my ministrations. I drop her thighs and straighten my legs, dropping to my belly as I continue to feast on her. Pushing her thighs wider, I move down and press my tongue inside her. She groans and writhes as I pump in and out, flicking and rotating the tip of my tongue.

After I've had my fill, I move my mouth back to her clit as I slowly push a finger inside her. Her hot, slick inner walls squeeze the digit, and my cock weeps with jealousy. But I continue to ignore it.

This moment is about Pressley. About her pleasure.

"Bram," she moans as I fuck her with my finger and suck her clit, and the sound of my name on her lips drives me wild.

Pulling my finger free, I add a second to it and push back in. My tongue lashes at her clit as I drive into her again and again, and I feel her thighs tense against my cheeks.

She's getting close.

Lifting my head, I continue to fuck her with my fingers as I say, "Pressley, look at me."

She lifts her head from the mattress and opens her eyes, obeying when I instruct her to pull a couple of pillows beneath her head to prop it up. Keeping my gaze locked on hers, I dip my chin and flick my tongue against her clit. She passes the unspoken test with flying colors, keeping those gorgeous eyes open and on me.

"Good girl," I say, my tone thick and husky. "I want to see the look in your eyes when you come."

She nods jerkily, and I reward her by lowering my mouth back to her swollen, needy flesh. Sucking her clit gently, I drive my fingers deep and curl the tips, hitting a sensitive patch inside her that makes her squeal and pant. Her muscles quiver as I repeat the motion, this time sucking her clit a bit harder, and that's all it takes to push her right over the edge.

I watch in awe as she falls apart, shouting her release and somehow keeping those eyes open and locked on mine. Such a *good* fucking girl.

My cock throbs at the sight, begging for attention, but I mentally order it down as I continue to pump my fingers and lick and suck at her, drawing her orgasm out as long as possible. When she finally slumps, her body a weak, boneless mess, I pull my fingers out and give her slit one last lick before smacking my lips and pushing up to look down at her.

“Pressley Glade, you are perfect. Pure, fucking perfection.”

CHAPTER

TWENTY-ONE

Pressley

Holy shit. What is even happening right now?

My brain has completely shorted out, unable to process the last half-hour. I'd think it was all a dream if Bram Baker wasn't kissing his way up my body right now in a slow, measured pace that tells me he's in no hurry to end this shocking interlude.

I knew coming for him would be good. There was never any doubt. But the intensity of my orgasm shocked me, as did his stern order to watch him while I came like one of those dominant lovers in the romance novels I've read.

And when he called me a good girl? *Fuck me*. I know I've always been a people-pleaser, but pleasing Bram enough that he'd say those words almost made me come on the spot.

As his mouth reaches my neck, burrowing there for a few kisses and nibbles, his hips settle between my thighs. I can feel his erection nudging against me from beneath the sweatpants he still wears, and I buck my hips slightly to increase the pressure.

Bram groans against my skin, then lifts his head to look down at me with liquid, half-mast eyes. Then he presses a firm, closed-mouth kiss against my lips before releasing a contented sigh, and he rolls off me to land on his back beside me. Sliding his arm beneath me, he tugs me over until I'm nestled against his side. I lift my head to look down at him,

and his eyes are closed as he lays there with a satisfied smile curving his lips.

That's it? He gives me the greatest orgasm of my life, and it's over? Though I appreciate the fact that he expects nothing in return for the life-altering bliss he just delivered, I'll be damned if I'm going to leave him hard and throbbing for more.

Resting my cheek on his shoulder, I look down at his crotch, and sure enough, there's a tent in his pants. A very *large* tent. My mouth fills with saliva at the sight of it, and I slowly brush my hand down his chest.

When my fingers reach his abs, his hands snaps out to grip my wrist in a gentle, yet firm hold. I lift my head to look at him again, and this time I meet his heady gaze.

"You don't owe me anything, Pressley. That was as much for me as it was for you."

I nod as if I'm in agreement, and he releases my wrist before dropping his head back to the pillow and reclosing his eyes. My hand drops back to his abdomen, and he can't suppress his quiet groan or hide the way his muscles tighten beneath the touch. His erection bobs and springs back beneath those fucking gray sweatpants, and damn it, I want to see it. Touch it. Taste it the way he tasted me.

I sit up in a rush, and his eyes pop back open. I meet his questioning gaze and lick my lips as my fingers explore the ridges and valleys of his abs on their slow trek south.

"And this is for me," I say as my fingers slip beneath his waistband to brush over the tight, smooth skin of his erection before curling around it and squeezing lightly.

Bram groans as his eyes fall closed once more, his expression tightening as he exhales harshly. He sucks the breath back in on a hiss as I begin to stroke his length, my fingers sliding over the sensitive skin. His extreme reactions make me feel powerful and fearless. I'm not used to the feeling, and I fucking love it.

Rolling onto my knees, I release his cock and work on tugging his sweats down. His own hands move to help as he lifts his hips, and his lack of underwear means the second his pants reach his thighs, that glorious cock springs free, allowing me to get my first sight of it.

I look at it for a moment with awe-filled eyes, then slowly reach out to grip it at the base. Bram hisses again, but my attention is focused solely on the bead of liquid forming at the tip. Moving closer, I lick it clean, and Bram grunts with pleasure.

Pumping my fist up and down his shaft, I suck the tip between my lips, and he makes more unintelligible noises. I push him deeper into my mouth, licking at the veiny ridges as I go, and I can feel myself getting turned on by the act. Surprise trickles through me as my core clenches with need, both because I literally *just* came and also because though I don't usually mind the act, it never makes me wet and needy. Not like this.

Maybe it's the noises he's making or the tension in his powerful thighs as I suck him, or maybe it's just because it's *Bram*. But either way, I feel my own need building and building as I work him over, and I need some relief.

His cock pops free of my lips as I straighten, and when I look over at his face, I see Bram watching me silently. Keeping my gaze locked on his, I move slowly, throwing a leg over his hips to straddle him before lowering and rubbing my slit along the length of his cock.

"Fuck," he grits out between clenched teeth, his hands finding my hips and squeezing the flesh in a tight grip.

I've never acted so brazenly before, but I'm feeling zero embarrassment or desire to stop. I roll my pelvis in a quick, smooth motion, grinding my clit against his hard ridge as my hands explore his bare chest. I lean over, pressing hot kisses to his skin before flicking my tongue against one flat nipple.

This all feels so fucking good, I lose concentration, and I slide a bit too far forward. I freeze as the tip of his cock

notches at my entrance, and I don't think either of us breathes for the next minute. Or hour. Time has no meaning.

When I do finally take a breath, I unintentionally move backward an inch, pushing him a little deeper. Some kind of weird purring noise I've never made before erupts from my chest, and all I can think about is driving him deeper. Feeling him stretch and fill me with his perfect cock.

Bram's fingers tighten on my hips, and I freeze again. When I open my eyes, he's watching me carefully. Holding that gaze, I push down again, driving him in a little more.

"Pressley," he groans, sounding like he's in pain.

"It's okay," I breathe. "I'm on the pill."

"I've never...not without..."

"Me, neither," I say with relief.

This will be a first for both of us, and I can't help but feel a thick sense of satisfaction coating me like a warm blanket.

"Are you sure?" he asks. "There are some condoms in my nightstand."

I know that would be the smart and responsible thing to do, but fuck, I'm tired of being smart and responsible all the time. And I want to *feel* him. All of him with no barrier between us.

"I'm sure," I say, then push myself upright, careful to hold myself above him without allowing his cock to slide in any further until I get an answer to my own question. "Do you want to?"

He stares at me for a long moment, breathing like he just ran a marathon, then slightly increases the pressure of his fingers on my hips. Then, in one swift motion, he pushes down while bucking his own hips upward, filling me completely.

"Oh, fuck," we groan in unison, and I have the ridiculous urge to laugh and yell "Jinx!"

Because I'm so happy. Because he feels so good.

I manage to control myself as I sit there, motionless, adjusting to the feel of his cock stretching my insides so deliciously. I tighten those muscles around him, and he hisses through his teeth, so I do it again.

“Pressley,” he moans, “you keep doing that, and I’m going to embarrass myself.”

Whatever sassy response I was going to give comes out as a strangled yelp when he suddenly flips us over. My back hits the mattress with a bounce, and Bram looks down at me from above, a warm smile on his lips.

“This is better,” he says, moving his hips slowly to pull out and push back in the tiniest bit.

Electricity sparks my nerve endings as heat builds in my core. Bram lowers himself until his weight is braced on his elbows instead of his hands, then kisses me while his hips pick up the pace. I dig my heels into the mattress so I can meet him thrust for thrust, and soon, we’re both gasping for air as a raging fire combusts between us.

Tilting to one side, Bram squeezes my opposite breast, then pinches and tugs at the nipple. A jolt of pleasure shoots straight to where we’re connected, and I cry out. He keeps driving into me at a perfect pace and rhythm, and I hold my breath as a ball of tension forms in my core.

Then, I’m coming, crying out his name as he pushes harder and faster, chasing his own release now that I’ve found mine. The new speed and friction sets off a fresh pulse of need inside me, and as the tension builds again, I almost panic.

I can’t possibly be having another orgasm, can I? I’ve never had it happen before, and I was sure I wasn’t one of the lucky ones who *could*.

Centering my mind, I focus on Bram, what he’s doing, and how good it feels. He’s moving even faster now, and fuck, how does he do that? He’s like a machine, or something. Like the Terminator.

Stop, Pressley. Focus.

He drives forward with a roar as he comes, and that seems to trigger my own explosion. Lava fills my veins, shooting to my extremities with the force of a volcano as I shout something unintelligible, even to myself.

My mind goes blank as I float back to earth. Bram's moving again, this time a soft, slow roll that keeps the aftershocks coming at a steady pace.

"Holy shit," I breathe when I can finally speak again.

Bram chuckles, presses his mouth to mine in a soft kiss, then pulls back slightly to say, "Holy shit is right."

I gasp as he pulls out, his cock still girthy even though it's mostly soft now. I watch as he rolls off the bed to land on his feet. His sweats are still cinched around his thighs where I left them earlier, so he pulls them up and disappears into the bathroom.

I'm feeling self-conscious, lying here completely naked, so I start to move as soon as I hear the water running. Sitting up, I scan the floor for my clothes, but before I can hop up to grab them Bram reappears, shooting me a frown.

"Where are you going?"

He doesn't seem to expect an answer, though, as he strides forward holding a wet washcloth. I try to take it from him, but he snatches it out of reach with a shake of his head. After gently pushing my legs apart, he cleans me up before tossing the cloth into a nearby hamper.

I don't have time to decide whether to be touched or mortified by his assistance before he hops over me, lands on his back, and pulls me down into the cradle of his arms. I snuggle into his side, and his fingertips trail over my back as his heartbeat thumps against my ear. We lay like that for ages, neither of us in any hurry to move or get on with our day.

So, Bram Baker likes to cuddle.

Good to know.

And I, Pressley Glade, cannot stop smiling.

CHAPTER

TWENTY-TWO

Bram

My cheeks hurt. I don't really understand why. I always smile a lot at work, so today should be no different, right? It's like the reason for my smile has somehow made the muscles in my face work harder than usual.

Or maybe it's because I can't. Stop. Smiling. Even for a minute.

This morning was...perfect. And earlier this afternoon? Well, this afternoon somehow trumped that perfection and was too amazing to be measured or described by a simple word.

I knew Pressley and I had chemistry. We always have, even from the very beginning when we tacitly decided to be just friends. And that connection we've built made the sex indescribably great. We *know* each other. She trusts me, and despite my previous anger over the whole video thing, I trust her.

I stayed in bed, just holding her, until I had to get up and come to work, and I don't think I've stopped smiling the entire time. Hence, the pain in my face.

The door opens, and I force my mouth to relax into a normal smile of greeting as Trace and Gavin walk in. The tavern isn't crowded this time of day as it's too late for lunch and too early for dinner, but they ignore the empty tables and take seats at the bar in front of me.

We exchange greetings and fist bumps, and they each order a beer and cheese fries. They watch me as I grab the bottles from the cooler and pop the tops off, and by the time I slide the drinks in front of them Trace is staring me down with narrowed eyes and a thoughtful expression.

“Something’s happened,” he says without preamble as he picks up his beer.

“Lots of things have happened,” I say, keeping my own expression flat. “The kitchen staff ran out of onion rings. Old Chuck came in for a late lunch, then left with a grunt when his waiter informed him we were out, and Miss Penelope—who was eating the last of them—held one up and cackled at him like a hyena as he stomped past her. Oh! And I heard from John Wickham that Jonas Hill is getting a new gas station that’ll have a fried chicken restaurant inside.”

“Stop,” Trace barks before I can go on.

And I can’t help it. My mouth pops back up into the wide grin I’ve been sporting all day, making my cheeks ache all over again. Trace and Gavin stare at me for a long moment, then Gavin’s mouth curls up into a grin that matches mine.

“Finally,” he murmurs, and Trace looks over at him with a frown.

“Finally, what?”

Gavin jerks his head in my direction. “He slept with Pressley.”

Trace’s gaze snaps to mine, and he arches a single brow. “You did?”

“I don’t kiss and tell,” I say, but somehow my smile expands even more, and I think it might end up stuck like this forever.

“Well, shit,” Trace says, his expression softening. “I feel like I should congratulate you, or something.”

“So, are you guys officially together, now? Or is it some kind of friends-with-benefits thing?” Gavin asks, and I’m saved from answering when a waitress appears with their food.

It's a good thing, too, because I don't really know how to answer the question. Pressley and I didn't talk about it. I move to the opposite end of the bar when a new customer arrives, and my mind reels with questions, distracting me while I mix his drink.

Are we together? I know what I want, and I think Pressley wants the same thing. I have no interest in having meaningless sex with her. I have no interest in having meaningless *anything* with her. It all means something to me, and I need to tell her so and get her take on the situation, or I'll never make it through my shift.

Pulling my phone from my back pocket, I open my texting app and shoot her a message.

Me: *We need to talk.*

Shit. That sounds bad, doesn't it? I quickly tap out another text.

Me: *Sorry, that came out wrong. I don't mean it like it sounded. I do want to talk to you, though. Can you come by the tavern?*

Pressley: *Sure. What time do you go on break?*

Something in my chest relaxes as I respond.

Me: *In about an hour.*

Pressley: *See you then.*

Me: *Looking forward to it.*

I manage to get through the rest of the conversation with Trace and Gavin without giving too many details about my new relationship status with Pressley. After they leave, the bar is empty, and I have nothing to distract me from the anticipation of talking to her. I'm on pins and needles the whole time, and the anxiety doesn't settle until she walks into the tavern.

The second my gaze lands on her, the tension inside me disappears. I smile and wave as she walks in my direction, and while she returns the smile, hers is laced with anxiety. She's

nervous and unsure about what I have to say. Like she thinks I'm going to tell her I regret what happened between us earlier.

No fucking way.

I call out to the other bartender to tell him I'm going on break, then head to the end of the bar where the opening is to wait. When Pressley reaches me, I take her hand without a word, pull her past the bar, through the kitchen, and right out the back door. As the door swings shut behind us, I yank her into my arms and press my mouth to hers in a searing kiss.

I can feel the tension drain out of her as she kisses me back, opening her mouth in an invitation I can't refuse. I walk her backward as I kiss her, and when her back meets the brick wall, I lean into her, my hands cupping her throat while my thumbs brush tenderly against her cheeks.

When I break off the kiss, I only pull back the tiniest bit to say, "Hi."

"Hi," she parrots back, her chest heaving with each quick breath. Then her lips curl upward as she adds, "Is that what you wanted to talk about?"

"That's part of it," I say with a smirk, then nibble her lips one more time before taking a step back and giving her room to breathe.

"I can't wait to hear the rest," she says with a waggle of her eyebrows.

I grin back, then the smile drops as my expression turns serious. I had it all worked out, what I wanted to say, and now that I have her here in front of me, my mind has gone blank. I start to pace back and forth, and when I look back at Pressley, her smile is gone and the worry is back in her eyes.

I stop pacing with a sigh, then cross my arms over my chest as I say, "Trace and Gavin were in earlier. They guessed that something happened between us. I didn't confirm anything, but I guess they could tell how happy I am and put it together."

"Okay," she says slowly, drawing the word out. "Did you not want them to know?"

“No,” I say with a shake of my head, then grimace. “I mean ‘no, that’s not what I meant,’ not that I didn’t want them to know. I don’t care who knows. I want *everyone* to know, actually. It’s just, Gavin asked me a question I couldn’t answer, and I need to talk to about it.”

“What is it?” she asks.

“He asked if we’re doing some ‘friends-with-benefits’ thing.”

She goes completely still, then asks in a thready voice, “Is that what you want?”

I shake my head slowly. “No.”

Her expression brightens immediately, and she replies, “Me, neither.”

“Good,” I say. “I don’t know what’s going to happen or where this is going, but I’m ready to find out. I’m all in, Pressley.”

She responds by leaping forward, wrapping her arms around my neck, and pulling me down for another long kiss. Circling my arms around her, I brush my palms down her back to her ass. Gripping both cheeks firmly, I yank her into me, letting her feel how the kiss is affecting me. She groans into my mouth when my rapidly growing erection pushes into her stomach, then somehow manages to climb up my body until her legs are wrapped around my waist and my cock is pressed against her center.

We make out for several more minutes, but reality intrudes eventually, and our kissing slows to tender pecks and nibbles. I bury my face in her neck and hug her to me for a few more moments before I grudgingly set her on her feet.

“I have to get back to work,” I groan before pressing one last kiss to her lips.

“I’ll be waiting at home for you when you get off,” she says, and hearing her call my place *home* ignites something in my chest.

“I can’t wait,” I say, then lead her back inside.

We hold hands as we walk back through the kitchen, ignoring the pointed stares and knowing chuckles of the cooking staff. We break contact as she heads to the opposite side of the bar, and our gazes remain locked across its width as we both walk toward the other end.

Pressley shoots me a saucy wink just before she walks through the door, and I swear to Christ, my smile is even bigger than it was earlier. I can't wait to get home tonight.

I can't wait to see her again.

I'm officially addicted, and I plan to feed this addiction as often as possible.

CHAPTER

TWENTY-THREE

Pressley

As I walk the short distance between Wolfsbane Tavern and Moonstone Mystic, the joy I felt in Bram's arms starts to slip away, replaced by more anxiety. While I'm ecstatic he doesn't want to have some casual, friends-with-benefits arrangement, some old fears are creeping in past that joy.

What if we dive headlong into a relationship, and it doesn't work out? Would I lose his friendship, completely?

Probably.

It would definitely make things awkward, considering how tightly knit our friend group is. We'd be around each other all the time, because I know neither one of us would ever expect our friends to choose between us. That would be awful for them, and we both love them too much to expect them to pick sides. No, we'd just have to deal with and tolerate the situation as best we could.

But isn't being with Bram worth that risk?

Sex has never felt so amazing with anyone else. *Ever.*

I'm completely self-aware that up until recently, I was one-hundred-percent a card-carrying people pleaser. And that personality trait included what happened in the bedroom. I've always been so intent on making sure my partners found as much pleasure as possible, I oftentimes neglected to make sure

they pleased *me* just as well. I was just happy to make them happy, and subconsciously decided that was enough.

But Bram? He was intent on making sure I came on his mouth this morning, and he didn't expect anything in return. And when we had sex, he was perfectly in tune with my every need and desire, which in turn, brought his own pleasure.

That's rare, at least in my experience. And no matter how much I covet our friendship and don't want to risk ruining it, I'm not ready to give up the rest. I don't know if I'll ever be.

The bells over the door jingle as I walk into Willow's shop, and she looks up with a smile to greet me. Before she gets a single word out, though, her smile drops and her eyes flare wide. She calls out to a barista that she's going on break and he should make two mochas and deliver them to us. Then she points to a table in the back and heads in that direction, fully expecting me to follow.

"What's happening?" I ask as I slide into the chair across from her, noticing we're far from her other customers where no nosy ears can eavesdrop.

"Don't play dumb with me, missy. Spill," she says, narrowing her gaze at me.

"Spill what?" I ask, teasing her with an innocent look.

She obviously knows something's happened, though I have no idea how she knows. She clears up the mystery with her next words.

"Please," she growls. "You've got that thoroughly fucked glow all over you. Now stop stalling and tell me everything."

The barista arrives with our coffees, and heat burns my cheeks at the thought that he may have heard Willow's words. He doesn't reveal a thing, though, setting the mochas down and disappearing without so much as a knowing look in my direction.

Once we're alone again, I slowly tell Willow everything that happened this morning. Well, maybe not *everything*, but she gets the gist of it. When I finish telling her about our little

conversation a few minutes ago, she cheers and pulls her phone from her pocket.

“What are you doing?” I ask.

“I’ve got to text Keegan,” she says, then her eyebrows draw low. “Oh, it looks like I missed a text from her. She already knows.”

“What?” I chirp, and she turns the phone around so I can see the message.

Keegan: *Oh, my God! Press and Bram finally hooked up! We need to plan a girls’ night to get all the dirty details.*

My eyes lift from her phone screen to her face as I shake my head. “I didn’t tell her.”

Turning her screen back toward her, Willow initiates a video call with Keegan, who answers immediately. I scoot my chair around the table so Willow and I can both be in the frame, neither of us getting a word in edgewise while Keegan speaks rapidly.

“Oh, my God. You’re there! Tell me everything. Right now. I can’t wait.”

“How did you find out?” I ask.

“Trace told me,” she says. “I guess he and Gavin went to the tavern, and it was all over Bram’s face. Trace said he couldn’t stop smiling. Now, I need details, Pressley. Talk.”

“Well,” I say, organizing my thoughts, “we’ve been getting along really well lately.”

“I’ll say,” Keegan interjects in a knowing tone.

“Do you want to hear this, or not?” I ask, and she mimes zipping her lips and throwing away the key.

“Bram’s been wonderful, forgiving me and working to repair our friendship. I woke up with a massive hangover this morning, and he really took care of me. I was pretty jumpy after I remembered what I said last night while I was drunk—”

“That part where you asked him to take you to his bed?” Keegan cuts in, then mimes zipping her lips once more when I

frown.

“Yes, *that* part,” I grumble. “I was acting a bit skittish, and he proclaimed that what we were doing was stupid. That we were ignoring what we both wanted. And when I asked him what that was, he said he really wanted to kiss me.”

“Swoon,” Keegan sing-songs, and Willow lets out a dramatically contented sigh.

“One thing led to another—and I’ll give more details when we’re all together, if you want—and let’s just say we had an amazing morning. When Trace and Gavin saw him at the tavern, I guess they figured it out, and Gavin asked him if we were in a relationship or doing a friends-with-benefits type deal. Bram texted me to come see him during his break so he could inform me, in no uncertain terms, that he does *not* want to be friends with benefits.”

“Double swoon,” Keegan sings, making me chuckle.

“I’m so happy,” I say slowly, “but I’m also worried about what will happen if this doesn’t work out. I don’t want to lose his friendship.”

“That’s not going to happen,” Willow says.

“You don’t know that,” I argue.

“Well, I know Bram, and I know he won’t let that happen. If things don’t work out romantically, he’ll still be your friend,” she counters.

“I hope you’re right,” I say in low tones.

“She is right, and besides,” Keegan says, “you’ve already had sex. If it’s going to cause problems in your friendship, it’s already too late. You might as well go all in and enjoy the hell out of it while you can.”

“Which will be forever,” Willow adds. “I’ve got a great feeling about this.”

“Thanks, guys,” I say to them both, feeling much better than I did when I got here.

They're right. We've already jumped into this, and there's no going back. We just have to move forward and see where this thing goes.

And just like Bram, I am definitely all in.

CHAPTER

TWENTY-FOUR

Bram

“Welcome. What can I get for you?”

“I’ll just have a glass of Pinot, please.”

“Coming right up.”

The woman slides onto a stool as I take her order, and a surge of awareness tattoos down my spine. I don’t know her. I’ve never seen her before this very moment. But there was something in her eyes as she spoke to me. Something I’ve come to recognize very well.

She knows *exactly* who I am.

I brace myself for the gushing compliments and maybe even a little flirting as I turn back around with her glass, but I’m left stunned and frozen when I see a single teardrop track down each of her cheeks. Setting the glass on a cocktail napkin in front of her, I take a deep breath and offer her a larger napkin to dry her face.

“I’m sorry,” she says with a self-deprecating chuckle as she takes the napkin and uses it to dab her cheeks. “I’d say I don’t know what came over me, but that would be a lie. You’re him, right? The crooner from BingBang?”

“Bram,” I say, offering her a hand to shake over the bar.

“Natalie,” she says as she takes my hand and gives it a firm shake. “You have a beautiful tone to your voice. And that song changed my life.”

I've heard those words before. Tipsy women gushing over my performance while trying to peak my interest. Shy women lowering their eyes and quietly asking for selfies. Women who are barely old enough to drink telling me my music somehow changed everything in the lives they've barely just begun.

It's never meant anything to me other than a passing annoyance, but something in Natalie's eyes tells me this is different.

"Do you want to tell me about it?" I ask, pulling a clean glass from the sink and drying it with a towel.

Listening to people talk is commonplace for me. Familiar. Comfortable.

Natalie swallows thickly before saying, "If you loved me, you would've listened when I spoke. If you loved me, you'd have heard the words I didn't say. I knew you didn't love me, but I was holding on so tight. I thought my love for you was enough to make everything all right."

I recognize her words, of course. They're lines from my song. The song Pressley recorded and uploaded for the world to see and hear. Natalie takes a long sip of her wine, then pushes her dark hair away from her face as she clears her throat.

"I was engaged," she says, her tone soft and filled with melancholy. "I loved him with everything in me, and I thought he felt the same. We dated for three years, and after he proposed, we moved in together. That's when things started to change. It was minimal, at first. He'd make a mess in the kitchen and leave it, expecting me to clean it up. Backhanded compliments about my wardrobe and hair choices. You know? The kind where it's really a veiled insult?"

I nod, and she returns the gesture before continuing.

"He'd come home cranky from work, and because I work from home, he expected the house to be spotless and dinner to be waiting for him on the table every night. I found myself bending over backwards to please him, to get back the man I fell in love with, but nothing worked. He'd just find something

else to complain about. His complaints morphed into blatant insults, and before I knew it, I was constantly catering to a man I barely knew. And yet, I didn't leave. I still believed the man I loved was inside him and it was up to me to find him again."

"That sounds awful. I'm sorry you had to go through that," I say softly, and she dabs at her tears again as her lips curve upward.

"I was scrolling on BingBang one day, and the video of you popped up. I watched it at least a dozen times, then saved it to my phone. I watched it multiple times every day for two weeks, and by then, I had the whole song memorized. I felt myself getting stronger every day, and a month before the wedding, I waited for him to go to work, I packed my things, and I went to stay with my best friend. I cut him off, completely. Changed my phone number, blocked him on all my socials, and blocked his email address. I realized my love for him was never going to change him back to the person he was before because that person never existed. It was all an act. A very long, very intricate act, but an act all the same."

"That took an incredible amount of bravery and inner strength, Natalie," I say, and she smiles at me again.

"I sold the ring to help fund a weekend vacation to the west coast for me and my best friend, and she begged me to add Evening Shade to the itinerary because she's a full-on CursedCub." She pauses to smile once again, adding, "I'm glad she did, because now, I get to thank you."

"You don't need to—" I start, but she cuts me off.

"Thank you, Bram, for inspiring me to change my life and not settle just because promises were made. For making me realize he broke those promises first when he changed his personality, completely. Thank you for your music. I know it's touched others, too. Why did the original poster delete it?"

"Because I asked her to," I admit quietly.

"Well, I hope you'll change your mind and put it back up. Who knows who it could help, next?"

With that, she takes her wine and slides off the stool. Giving me a little wave, she heads for a table, sliding into a chair next to a blonde with a pixie cut and a swath of tattoos down one arm.

I look back down at the glass I'm still drying, and I feel something inside me shift.

I'd been so opposed to Pressley uploading a video of me because I'd felt like a hack. An imposter. A wannabe artist with minimal talent. And even after she did it anyway, and the thing blew up, I still felt the same. Like the outpouring of love was a flash in the pan. A fluke I didn't deserve.

But knowing my song had actually helped someone through something tough? That it had inspired Natalie to change her life for the better? I almost teared up as she was telling me her story.

Sure, my friends have been telling me for years I'm good, but they're my *friends*. They have to say shit like that, right? But a single stranger accomplished something none of them were able to do—she made me believe in myself. In my talent as a songwriter as well as a musician.

She also made me want to help others. To do it, again.

Pulling out my phone, I check the time. My shift is almost over, thank God. But before I leave, I open my texting app and pull up Gavin's number.

Me: Hey, I need a favor. Come to the tavern. There's a blonde with short hair and a sleeve of tattoos sitting with another woman who has long dark hair. Do your movie star thing, okay? Take some pictures and sign some autographs.

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

Gavin: I can be there in a minute. I'm actually at Moonstone Mystic, now. Want to tell me why I'm doing this?

Me: I can explain later. Just know, they changed my perspective and possibly my entire life, and the least I can do is help them meet THE Lucas Lumin.

Gavin: Fine, but you owe me, buddy.

Me: *Thanks, man.*

Grabbing my things and clocking out, I stop by Natalie's table and thank her again for telling me her story. She introduces me to her friend, who gushes in the usual way over that video, and this time, I don't get even a little uncomfortable. The door swings open, and I look over to see Gavin striding in.

“And as a real thank you, I'd like to introduce you both to my good friend, Gavin Reese.”

The blonde starts to squeal, and I slap Gavin on the back before I turn and stride toward the door. I need to get home.

I need to talk to Pressley right now.

CHAPTER

TWENTY-FIVE

Pressley

I'm sitting on the couch, reading a book, when the front door flies open. I look up to see Bram stride in, his head swiveling from left to right until his bright gaze lands on me. Kicking the door shut behind him, he hurries over. I barely manage to mark my spot in the book and set it aside before he grips my shoulders and pulls me to my feet.

“What—” I start, but the question is cut off when his mouth lands on mine.

His tongue demands entrance, so I part my lips. I groan and lean into the kiss, driving my hands up into his hair to grip the strands tightly as desire begins to buzz in my core. He breaks off the kiss just as abruptly as it began, then pulls back slightly to meet my gaze.

“What was that for?” I ask as I release his hair, my voice a bit breathless. “Not that I’m complaining, or anything.”

He chuckles and gives me another quick kiss before sitting and pulling me down onto the couch beside him. “I just had the most amazing conversation.”

“Really? With whom?”

“A woman,” he says simply, then chuckles again at my arched brow. “A tourist. She came into the tavern, and she recognized me.”

He let that sink in for a moment, and anxiety rears its ugly head inside my chest. Confusion quickly follows, because he

said the conversation was *amazing*, didn't he? Yeah. He did.

“What did she say?”

I listen raptly as he repeats her story. A toxic relationship with her ex-fiancé. Her feeling of being trapped, of being convinced the guy would somehow go back to the man she thought he was. And then she heard Bram's song.

“She said my music gave her the strength to get herself out of that situation. My lyrics touched her, changed her, and now her life is so much better.”

My pride for Bram nearly overwhelms me as he speaks. He looks so affected by this woman's story, so humbled and touched by his own part in it.

“Pressley,” he says, his tone dropping an octave, “I'm so sorry I got so angry with you over the whole thing.”

I'm shaking my head before he even finishes. “No. I deserved your anger. I took your choices away and did what I thought was the right thing. I should've listened when you said you didn't want that.”

“Stop,” he says before I can go on. “I'm telling you, you were right. If my music can touch people this way, if it can help them, inspire them...I shouldn't keep it to myself. I should share it with the world.”

I go completely still save for the widening of my eyes. “What are you saying, Bram?”

He takes a deep breath and blows it out slowly. “Will you help me record more content and get it out there?”

“Really?” I squeak out, my eyes burning with emotion. “You're sure?”

“I'm sure. It's time. I'm ready.”

With that, he pushes to his feet. He plucks his guitar from the stand in the corner, then moves back to the couch, sitting on the edge and facing me expectantly.

“Oh,” I say, tugging my phone from my pocket. “You meant right now?”

“No time like the present,” he says, then starts plucking the strings while listening intently and turning the pegs at the end of the neck.

“Wait,” he says, pausing to look down at his white t-shirt and black jeans before glancing over at me. “Should I shower and change first?”

I shake my head as a smile curves my lips. “No, you look great.”

“This is something I’ve been working on,” he says, playing a soft melody after I start recording. “I’ve just got the first verse, so far.”

When he starts to sing, I glance up from my phone screen to look directly at him, my heart tripping the way it does every single time he plays for me. I force myself to look back down, making sure I’m keeping the camera pointed at him.

His voice reverberates in my chest, his words ring in my ears, and the overall effect has me practically swooning as Bram sings about lost chances and a possibility for love that slipped through his fingers.

Even though I know, realistically, the song isn’t about me—I’d be crazy to think so—it touches me so deeply, I feel tears prick at the back of my eyes. That’s the beauty of great music. It makes the listener feel the emotion. It makes them feel as though it’s being sung for them, and them alone.

Bram finishes with a long, harmonious chord, then looks at me expectantly. I end the recording and toss my phone onto the coffee table as I stand. Moving in front of him, I gently take the guitar and set it back on its stand, then straddle his lap as I wrap my arms around his neck.

“That was amazing,” I say, then press my lips to his.

His arms circle around me, his hands finding my ass and squeezing it as he takes over the kiss. Breaking away abruptly, I rip my sweatshirt over my head and toss it aside before quickly unfastening my bra and sending it the same way as the shirt.

Bram lowers his head to kiss my breast, one hand moving up to cup its weight before his lips close over the nipple. I throw my head back and moan as he sucks on it and flicks the tip of his tongue against it at the same time. His other hand burrows beneath the waistband of my pants so he can grip my bare ass cheek, and I roll my hips to grind down on his erection.

“I want you, Bram,” I murmur, and he grunts before moving his mouth to worship the other breast.

He grips me tightly as he stands, still sucking at my breast, and carries me to his bedroom. He sits me on the edge of the bed, and I fall backward and lift my hips so he can slide my pants and underwear off. Pushing my knees apart, he dives in, licking me thoroughly before sucking my clit between his lips.

“Bram, please,” I groan, and he hums against me.

As he continues to drive me wild with his mouth, I hear the telltale sounds of his zipper lowering and the rustle of denim as he works the jeans down his legs. Giving my clit one last lick, he straightens and moves in closer, lining his cock up with my entrance as he braces his hands on either side of my hips.

I open my eyes and look up at him, and the second our eyes meet, he drives forward to the hilt, filling me completely. I mumble something incoherent under my breath as my inner walls clench around his cock, and Bram mumbles something as equally garbled in response.

Then he starts to move.

“You’re so fucking beautiful,” he chants in time with his thrusts. “So God damned sexy. I fucking love the way it feels to have you wrapped around my bare cock.”

“I love...the way you feel inside me,” I say, barely stopping myself from saying the word “you.”

I start to panic over the near mishap, but my mind goes blank when he does something with his hips, rotating them with some kind of black magic that has me seeing stars. I mumble out a couple of “fucks” as my pleasure spikes, and

Bram starts to pump in earnest, driving into me again and again until all I know is the pure bliss of an impending orgasm.

It explodes inside me suddenly, and I scream as my entire body bucks with the impact. Bram's hands find my hips, holding me still while he thrusts even faster, not stopping until his own release erupts inside me.

He falls forward, his upper half covering me while his feet remain on the floor. Burrowing his face into the side of my neck, he kisses my throat while we both try to catch our breath.

My mind kickstarts back to life, and I try to keep my body still and my breathing even as I remember what I almost said in the throes of passion.

Fuck, that would've been a disaster.

And Bram's disastrous reaction would've been made all the worse, because in all honesty?

I would've been speaking the truth.

CHAPTER

TWENTY-SIX

Bram

A few days later, I find myself on Trace's couch watching Keegan and Pressley bop around the kitchen, mixing drinks and laughing their asses off in matching satin pajamas. A clothing company hired them to feature their product in a three-video series, and fuck if they both don't look adorable, dancing around in shirts and shorts sporting little cartoon dogs and cats.

I hear a grunt from the opposite direction, and my eyes flare ridiculously wide when I spot Trace shuffling in, a frown on his face. He's wearing satin pajama pants and a white t-shirt, and the pants match the girls' outfits.

A laugh bursts out of me, and a quick glare from Trace has me covering it with a cough. As he heads toward Keegan, apparently being coerced into starring in this particular video, I pull my phone out and start recording. No way am I passing up this opportunity. It's just too good.

Keegan grabs his hands and swings them back and forth, encouraging him to get into the moment and dance with her. His frown softens the tiniest bit when she touches him, but he's far from smiling as he shifts his weight from foot to foot like he's slow dancing at a sixth grade Sadie Hawkins.

His eyes snap in my direction, then narrow when he sees I'm filming him. "Turn that off and delete it, or I'm going to beat your ass."

I huff out another laugh and stop recording, then slip my phone back into my pocket without deleting the video. No way am I giving up that perfect blackmail material. Or hell, maybe I'll make sure it's played at his and Keegan's wedding reception. The possibilities are endless.

A few minutes later, they finish up, and Pressley skips over to me, happy and breathless from all the dancing. My chest heats when she plops right down into my lap, not even a sliver of self-consciousness or embarrassment that Trace and Keegan are watching. Not that there's anything to feel embarrassed over. We're together now, and it's normal and healthy to show affection.

Pressley's just always been a bit timid and unsure. Careful to make sure she's not doing anything that would cause someone else discomfort or upset. And the fact that she feels so confident in *us* that she'd plop down into my lap without a second thought for how I might or might not take it? Honestly, it makes me hot.

My hand lands on her bare thigh, my thumb slipping just beneath the hem of her silky shorts. She lets out a tiny gasp, so quiet, I'm sure I'm the only one who heard it, yet it's powerful enough to rocket through me. My cock twitches and starts to swell, and Pressley's wriggling ceases the instant she feels it.

"Are you ready to go home?" she whispers, her mouth so close to my ear that her lips brush over it as she speaks, driving me even more wild.

I give her a slight nod while rolling my hips so she can feel exactly how hard I've gotten for her. She leaps up like the damn thing stabbed her and announces that we're leaving because *I'm tired*.

Keegan boos obnoxiously, and Trace picks her up and tosses her over his shoulder before giving her ass a slap. He mumbles something about needing payback for the pajamas, waves at Pressley and I, then turns and heads for the stairs without another word, Keegan hanging from his shoulder. She pushes herself up, and I can see her grin before she shoots Pressley a conspiratorial wink.

Pressley and I see our own way out, and when we get to the car, instead of opening her door, I push her back against it and lean in for a deep, heady kiss. She responds instantly, pushing her body against mine as her hips buck, and I break off the kiss with a groan before I take her right here in the driveway of my best friend's house.

I open the door and help her inside, leaning in to buckle her seatbelt and give her another quick kiss. Closing her door, I jog around to the driver's side and climb in, forcing myself to take deep even breaths in an attempt to calm my raging hormones. By this point, I'm so fucking hard, it's almost painful.

I drive too fast and cut corners too sharp, and we're home in record time. Pressley hops out before I do, and when we meet by the hood, she takes my hand and drags me toward the front door. We barely make it inside before she's all over me, hot and eager and demanding as she rips her pajamas off. My cock throbs when I see she's not wearing a bra or any underwear, then swells even more when she takes my hands and guides them to her breasts, moaning softly when they make contact.

God damn, she's sexy. Especially when her inhibitions fade, and she takes what she wants.

Pinching her nipples and tugging them gently, I kiss her until we're both breathless. Then I step back, watching her watch me as I undress. Her gaze drops to my cock, and it bobs in response when she licks her lips and swallows thickly. But as much as I love the feel of her mouth on me, I'm too far gone for that right now. I need to be inside her.

Moving slowly, like a predator on the prowl, I circle her until I'm directly behind her. Moving in, I press my chest to her back as my arms cinch around her. One hand finds her breast while the other moves south. My fingers find her soaked and swollen with need, and she yips quietly as I begin to stroke her clit.

Pressley raises her arms, leaning back into me as she wraps them around my neck. The move pushes her chest out, and I

press my mouth to her shoulder as I watch my fingers pinch and tug at first one nipple, then the other. My other hand is still working her clit, the fingers moving in fast, tight circles over the tender nub until she's panting and writhing in need.

Her body tenses against me, and I know she's close. Without breaking the rhythm of my fingers against her clit, I move her toward the end of the couch and bend her forward slowly. Releasing her breast, I line my cock up with her entrance, teasing her by pushing just the tip in and stopping there.

"Bram," she groans, pushing her ass up in an attempt to drive me deeper.

"You want my cock, baby?" I say, my voice deep and husky with lust as my fingers work even faster against her clit. "Tell me."

"I want your cock," she gasps. "Drive it deep and fuck me hard."

As soon as the word "fuck" passes her lips, I lose what little control I was holding onto. I slam into her and, hand to God, she comes on that single thrust. She shouts my name as her inner walls clench down around me, and some ancient, animalistic instinct takes over as I roar with pride and piston my hips, drawing out her release until I reach my own.

It's fast and dirty and intense, and the second my cock empties, I yank free of her, pull her upright, flip her around, and kiss her until I can't breathe. Eventually, the ferocity fades, and our kisses slow to soft and tender touches that leave me lightheaded and sentimental.

My soul settles, and I know nothing in this world will ever feel as right as this very moment. We have something very special, and I make a mental promise to protect it with everything I've got.

CHAPTER

TWENTY-SEVEN

Pressley

Bram's at work and I'm home alone, so I check in on my BingBang account. I'm not surprised to see the video I posted of Bram the other day has gone even more viral than the first. Viewers were hungry for more after discovering him the first time, and the numbers prove it. The views, likes, and shares are off the charts, and the comments are overwhelmingly positive.

Of course, there are the random jealous trolls saying mean things about Bram, but those are few and far between. He's hot as hell, sings like a professional, and plays magnificently, so the negative comments make very little impact and are followed up with dozens of replies shooting them down.

I have a few direct messages, and I swear, my heart stops beating when I see one from a verified account touting the name of a popular recording label. Tapping the screen, I open the message, and my eyes start to tear up as I read.

They want Bram's contact information. They want to discuss a possible recording deal with him.

Holy shit.

Closing out the app without responding, I drop my phone to the couch beside me and lean back, closing my eyes. As exciting as this news is, I have conflicted feelings. Bram just barely decided he wanted me to post a video of him, so how is he going to feel about this? It's happening so fast, it doesn't

feel real, and it's not even happening to *me*. I have no idea how Bram will react.

He's never wanted a music career. He's happy in his life, and the only reason he asked me to upload another video was because he thought his music might help someone like it did that woman he met at the tavern.

Signing a recording contract would lead to other things, like making music videos, accepting radio and television interviews, and eventually, *maybe* going on tour. It's a lot.

To Bram, this will feel like a runaway train. And that train might carry him far away from here. Far away from me.

No. I can't think about myself. This is an amazing opportunity, should Bram decide he wants it. I just have to be cautiously excited for him until I see how he reacts when I tell him. Which should be any time now. He's been at work all afternoon, and since he's not working the late shift today, he should be home soon.

Home.

That's what this place has become to me. I can't imagine leaving, which is why when Willow texted me this morning, I didn't say anything to Bram before he left for work. I needed to figure out what I'm going to say.

Because the contractors finished repairing the apartment way ahead of schedule, and should I decide I still want to live there, I'll be able to move in the day after tomorrow.

That thought tempers my nervous excitement over the possible recording deal offer. I've been trying not to stress over it all day. I know I should be happy to finally have my own place. It's what I wanted when I moved here, to be on my own and not dependent on anyone.

But Bram has never made me feel like a mooch. I'm comfortable here, and now that we've taken our relationship to the next level, the last thing I want to do is take a step backwards. But I also don't want to overstay my welcome or take advantage of his generosity.

I know our relationship won't end if I move out. I just don't know if Bram wants his space and privacy back. Most people move in together after they fall in love, and we did this whole thing backwards. And while I've admitted to myself that I'm falling in love with him, I haven't told him, yet, and I have no idea if he feels as strongly for me.

I shake my head to clear it and decide to focus on the record label's message for the time being. I hear the engine of Bram's car as he pulls into the driveway, and my pulse spikes. When he walks inside and spots me on the couch, his lips curve up into a wide smile. Walking into the living room, he plops down beside me and presses a single firm kiss to my lips.

"Hey, you," he says tenderly when he pulls back to meet my gaze.

"Hey," I reply back, then clear my throat. "I have something to show you."

"Oh, yeah? What is that?" he asks, the innuendo clear in his voice.

"Not *that*," I say with a sassy eye roll, then pull up the message on my phone before handing it over.

I watch his face as he reads, his eyes darting left to right as his entire body tenses up with shock. When he finishes reading, he glances up to meet my eyes.

"Is this real?"

"I think so," I say with a nod for emphasis. "It's a verified account, so it's really them. And I'm honestly not surprised. You're extremely talented."

He looks back down at the phone and reads the message again before handing the device over to me. I wait patiently as he digests the request, then finally, he shakes his head.

"I need some time to think this over," he says. "I don't want to make a knee-jerk decision."

"Of course. That sounds like the smart thing to do," I say softly.

I can't be selfish and try to push him in either direction. He needs to make this decision on his own, and I'll only give my input if he asks for it. I place my phone on the coffee table, and Bram wraps his arm around my shoulders and pulls me into his side. Grabbing the remote, he turns on the television and finds a movie we both agree on.

We spend the next two hours cuddled there together, watching the film and not speaking. I'm sure his mind is reeling despite the distraction. I know mine is, over his possible record deal and the text I got from Willow.

Will he expect me to move out the moment the apartment is ready? Or will he ask me to stay here with him?

I know I should just ask him about it, but I can't bring myself to do it. Not yet.

Tomorrow will be soon enough.

CHAPTER

TWENTY-EIGHT

Bram

I walk into Vincenzo's, Trace's favorite restaurant in Jonas Hill where I'm meeting him and Gavin for lunch. I spot the two of them at a table and wave off the hostess when she turns my way. She nods when she sees where I'm headed, and I hear her instruct a waiter to bring me a glass of ice water.

"Hey, Bram. How's it going?" Gavin asks as I slide into an empty chair at their table.

"Good, man. Good," I say, then return Trace's nod.

Trace and I have been best friends for decades, and somehow, Gavin has notched himself seamlessly into that friendship like he's been here all along. You'd think there'd be some tension since he's dating and living with Trace's little sister—who's also been a little sister to me since the day she was born—but he's a great guy, so we have nothing to complain about.

At least, not since he came clean to Willow and made her realize he never cheated on her with his costar in the Cursed movies like she thought he did when they were teenagers. He meshes well with us, and our "catch-up" lunches have included him the last several times.

I settle in and peruse the menu while they continue whatever conversation they were having before I arrived. My mind starts to wander, inevitably focusing on the looming decision I have to make regarding the music label. I look up

from my menu at the two of them as I try to picture how my life would change, in turn, altering our friendship.

I'd have to fly to Los Angeles to record the music, I'm sure. I looked them up and saw the label has their own studios there with all the most expensive, high-tech equipment an artist could ask for. I have no idea how long I'd have to be there or how many trips south I'd have to make. Then there's promoting that would have to be done, I'm sure. Interviews, appearances, performances.

My heartrate kicks up just thinking about it, and not necessarily in a good way.

I'm happy with my life. I love Evening Shade, my house, my friends, my job. It's part of the reason I was so upset with Pressley when she posted that first video. I didn't want anything to change.

And what about her? We've only just started this romantic relationship, and I'm excited to see where it goes. What would happen if I had to leave her for weeks at a time? Even months? I don't know, and I'm not sure I want to find out.

But at the same time, would I really pass on such a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity because of a little fear? I know Pressley cares about me and loves my music. She wants me to share it with the world, so she'd support me if I decided to go for it. Right?

"Bram."

I snap out of my thoughts at the sound of my name. "Sorry, what?"

"Where were you?" Gavin asks, and I shake my head.

"Sorry, I just zoned out for a minute," I reply. "What was the question?"

"I said that was good news about the apartment," Gavin says.

My brows pull low with confusion. "The apartment?"

"Didn't Pressley tell you? The crew made record time repairing everything, and it's going to be ready for her

tomorrow.”

Trace must see something in my expression, because he cocks his head, saying, “Maybe it’s not such good news, after all.”

“Pressley knows about this?” I ask Gavin while ignoring Trace’s accurate observation.

Gavin nods. “Willow texted her yesterday. She didn’t tell you?”

“No.”

What does it mean? Why wouldn’t Pressley tell me about this last night? I know we talked about the message from the label, then I told her I just wanted to relax and watch a movie. Maybe she didn’t want to pile on the news that she’s moving out.

The mere idea of her leaving forms a pit of dread in my stomach. I know her staying with me was always supposed to be a short-term solution to her housing problem, but things have changed. Haven’t they?

Yes. Of course, they have.

Even though we haven’t exchanged any deep words of love or labeled our relationship, we’re definitely *in* one. A relationship, that is.

And she wouldn’t just pack her stuff and move out without a discussion, would she? Shit, is she packing right now?

“I have to go,” I say, my chair screeching across the tile as I forcefully slide it backward and stand.

“What about lunch?” Trace asks, a spark of humor in his eyes.

“Next time,” I say, and he gives me a single nod.

“Go get her, Tiger.”

I roll my eyes at his terrible sense of humor, then give Gavin a wave before stalking out of the restaurant. Hopping in my car, I get back on the road, praying Pressley isn’t planning on packing up and leaving before I get home. I have to force

myself to drive the speed limit. The last thing I need is to waste more time by getting pulled over.

When I pull into the drive, the tension drains out of me when I see Pressley's car still parked in front. She hasn't left.

Inside, I find her on the couch, staring at the carpet with a frown marring her lips. She looks up when I walk into the room, her sad expression turning to one of confusion.

"I thought you were meeting the guys for lunch," she says.

"I was," is all I say, and she seems to accept it without explanation before standing to face me.

"Willow texted me. The apartment is going to be ready tomorrow," she blurts like she's trying to get it out before changing her mind.

"I know."

"You do?" she asks, her confused expression returning.

"That's why I'm back so early. Gavin told me, and I left and came straight here to talk to you," I say, then tilt my head. "Why didn't *you* tell me?"

"I don't know," she says, then shakes her head. "That's a lie. I *do* know. I was scared."

I take her hand, then sit, pulling her down beside me. "Scared of what?"

Her face turns an adorable shade of pink, and she bites her lip before taking a deep breath and saying, "I was scared you'd want me to move out."

My chest swells with joy and relief. "You don't want to go?"

She shakes her head. "I know it's crazy. My staying here was always supposed to be temporary. And here we are, barely getting started as a couple, and I want to stay here. Like, officially move in together. But for real this time, not like a roommate thing. Ugh, I'm so stupid. It's crazy, right?"

"Pressley," I say, halting her rambling stream of words.

She snaps her mouth shut, and I can't stand the mix of worry and embarrassment in her expression. Reaching over, I grip her upper arms and pull her over into my lap, twisting her until she's straddling me. Then I lightly grip the sides of her throat, using my thumbs to tilt her face up until she meets my eyes.

"You should've seen how fast I ran out of Vincenzo's when I thought you might be here packing. I was freaking out, terrified you'd leave before I could talk you into staying."

She inhales sharply, her eyes going wide before filling with tears. "You really want me to stay?"

"I really do."

Leaning forward, I press my lips to hers. I feel her tears wet my thumbs as they drip down her cheeks, and a relieved laugh puffs out of her as we seal our unspoken promises with a long, lingering kiss.

This, right here, is what life is all about. I don't know if I'll talk to the music label reps. Maybe I will. Maybe I won't.

But whatever I decide, this woman will be right by my side, in my arms, and that's all that really matters.

CHAPTER

TWENTY-NINE

Pressley

It's been days, and I still can't stop smiling. When I told Willow I wouldn't need her apartment, after all, she screamed and called Keegan, who screamed even louder until I started screaming with them. It was all ridiculous and juvenile, but who cares? I'm over the moon, and my friends are ecstatic. That's what real friendship is all about, and I'll be damned if I'm going to temper my excitement just because we look and sound silly, screaming like a bunch of teenagers.

I officially moved my things into Bram's bedroom—*our* bedroom—and we turned the spare room into a sort of set for Bram's BingBang videos with a backdrop against one wall, a chair for him to sit in, and a table next to it.

I worked out a deal with Planter's, and if I display a bottle of their vodka on that table and the video goes viral, they'll give me a small bonus in addition to the regular pay Keegan and I get for their sponsored content. We've only shot one video in there so far, and it went viral almost immediately, gaining over eight-hundred-thousand views in the first twenty-four hours. And it's still growing.

Bram walks into the living room where I'm supposed to be reading, a smile on his lips when he catches me staring off into space.

"Not holding your interest?" he asks as he plops down beside me and taps the book.

I shake my head as I mark my place and set it aside. “I can’t stop thinking about how amazing my life is.”

“*Our* life is pretty awesome, isn’t it?” he asks, brushing his thumb across my cheek. I nod, and he pulls his hand back before taking a deep breath. “I’ve put a lot of thought into it, and I’ve made a decision. I want you to give my number to the music label guys.”

My face tightens, but I somehow manage to hold onto my smile and sound believable when I say, “Really? That’s great, Bram.”

I don’t know what’s wrong with me. I know I love him, and we should want all the success in the world for the ones we love, right? I *should* be happy for him. But apparently, I’m a selfish bitch, and I don’t want our new life together to change. Not when I just got everything I’ve ever wanted.

It’s all my own fault. If I hadn’t uploaded that first video, none of this would be happening. But then again, if I hadn’t, our lives might look completely different right now. This is the path I put myself on, and now I have to see it through.

Bram deserves this. And I refuse to stand in his way.

I pick up my phone and look down at it so he won’t see the sorrow in my eyes. Pulling up the message from the music label, I send a reply, giving them Bram’s phone number and telling them he’s excited for their call. Then I compose myself and look back up at him with a smile.

“Okay, it’s done.”

“Thank you,” he says, leaning over to give me a quick kiss. “I’m going for a short run. I’ll be back soon.”

I watch him as he heads out the door, and as soon as it closes behind him, my smile drops. I need to get it together. It’s in Bram’s hands now, and whatever he decides, I’m going to have to accept it. And try to be happy for him.

I stare at the phone still gripped in my tense fingers and make a decision. Tapping at the screen, I pull up my group text thread with Willow and Keegan.

Me: *Do you guys have a minute? I need you.*

Keegan: *What's wrong? Are you okay? Did something happen? Should I call?*

Me: *I'm fine, I promise. Bram decided to talk to the music label guys.*

Keegan: *Oh. Well, that's great, isn't it?*

Willow: *Sorry, I was with a customer. Just catching up. That's awesome for him, Press!*

Me: *Am I a total bitch because I don't want him to do it?*

Keegan: *First off, you're not a bitch.*

Keegan: *Secondly, why don't you want him to do it?*

Willow: *You could never be a bitch, Pressley. What are you worried about?*

Me: *That everything is going to change. I just found my happy place here with him, and I don't want to lose it. But I also don't want to hold him back. If he wants this, and I think he does, I'll support him, of course. I just hate feeling so miserable over it all. This is a big deal for Bram, and I care about him. I should be happy.*

Keegan: *Have you talked to Bram about this?*

Me: *Of course, not!*

Keegan: *Why not? You guys are together now, and his decisions affect you as much as they do him. It's better to talk it through now than to resent him for it later when he has no idea how you really feel.*

Willow: *I agree. You guys should be equal partners. At least if he knows your worries, he can help you figure out a solution that works for you both.*

Me: *I don't know. I'd hate for him to pass up a great opportunity just because I'll feel left behind. It feels selfish to even risk it.*

Keegan: *It's not selfish, Press. It's only human.*

Me: *I'll think about it.*

Willow: *Don't procrastinate too long. If you wait until after he accepts the deal, it'll only make things worse.*

Me: *I won't. Thanks, guys.*

Keegan: *We love you!*

Willow: *Yeah, we do!*

Me: **heart emoji* I love you both!*

Setting my phone aside, I stare at nothing while my mind goes over the conversation again. Part of me knows they're right. Bram and I are in a relationship. We're living together. We're both adults, and the grown up thing to do would be to discuss my fears so we can work out a plan.

But the mere thought of initiating that particular conversation leaves my stomach tied in knots. Though I've worked really hard at taming my people-pleasing instincts, I'm still me. And there's no one in the world I want to please more than I do Bram.

Not even myself.

How can I express doubts about the amazing future that's falling into his lap? How could I possibly put a damper on his excitement? His joy?

I don't think I can do it.

I've been Bram's biggest cheerleader from the moment I first heard him play and sing. My own actions put us on this path. I'm the one who wanted the world to hear him. I'm the one who helped get him on the label's radar. And I'm the one he depends on for support, no matter his choices.

And I will continue to be that cheerleader, that source of unconditional support...even if it breaks my heart in the process.

CHAPTER

THIRTY

Bram

“Mr. Baker, thank you so much for taking my call.”

“It’s my pleasure, Mr. Jakowski. Thank you for reaching out.”

“Please, call me Shane.”

“Only if you call me Bram.”

My nervousness over the call fades a bit as we get through the pleasantries. Shane Jakowski may be a high-ranking record label exec, but he’s also just a man, and I’ve never had trouble talking to people before. It’s a big part of my job, and I channel the bartender in me for the rest of the conversation.

“We’ve been watching Miss Glade’s videos of your performances, and we’ve been impressed from the beginning. You’ve got talent, Bram. And Starfall Records can open a lot of doors for you. We have the highest-tech recording studios, and once we have a finished product, our marketing team can get you played on radio stations all over the world and get your music on every streaming service out there.”

“That all sounds...great. What kind of timeline are we looking at? Would I have to spend a lot of time in L.A.?”

“Well, we’d start with a single track. We have some musicians on contract who can help you work out an arrangement that includes percussion, a bass, and some backup singers, at the very least. Your guitar playing is superb, but the rest will make the sound richer and more professional. That

process can take a week or so, at least, then we'd record," he says, and as he speaks my chest tightens.

It's a lot. I don't know what I thought. That I'd just show up with my guitar, sing the song, and then we'd be done?

"After we mix and master it, we'd release the track to the streaming services. If it does half as well as I expect it will, we'll move forward with a whole album. If you don't have enough songs to fill an album, we have writers on staff that can help you flesh it out."

"And how long would that take?"

"It depends, but it could take anywhere from six months to a year."

Holy shit. "And I would have to live in Los Angeles the whole time?"

"That would be ideal," Shane says, his words slow and measured. "But if you prefer to travel home on the weekends, we can work it out."

This is as terrifying as it is exciting. I have no desire to leave Evening Shade. I love it here, and I always have. But at the same time, my music could touch people the way it did that woman I met at the tavern. *Millions* of people.

I could also be a huge flop, and this whole thing would be over after the first single.

I don't know which outcome is worse.

We go over a few more things on the call, including the financial side of things. The label would cover the costs of production, then take a larger portion of the royalties until they recoup the money. My head spins as Shane talks about composition rights and music ownership, and he must sense it, because he tells me it will all be in the contract.

I'm going to have to hire a lawyer to read it over and explain it to me in words I can understand.

By the time we end the call, I'm more confused than ever, but thankfully, Shane tells me to take all the time I need to think it over, and he'll be waiting for my call. I thank him and

when we end the conversation, I lean back against the couch cushions and sigh.

I don't know if this is what I really want. I'm so torn.

And I need to talk to Pressley.

This decision will affect her almost as much as it will me. She's my girlfriend. She lives with me. How will she feel about the extended trips to California? Would she go with me? Stay home and just...what? Wait until I get back?

Our relationship is fairly new, but that doesn't mean I can rush into this without considering her thoughts and opinions. She means too much to me.

As if I've conjured her, the front door swings open and she walks in, carrying an armload of grocery bags. I jump up as she calls out a greeting, and I help her by bringing in the rest of the bags from the car and putting everything away while she chatters about her day.

She seems nervous, and her motions turn jerky and disjointed as we finish the chore. Like she knows I want to talk about my conversation with Shane Jakowski, and she's not sure if she should surrender to it or run for the hills.

Centering myself, I take her hand and lead her into the living room. Sitting on the couch, I pull her down beside me and kiss her before pulling back with a sigh.

"So, the conversation with the guy from Starfall was... enlightening," I say, and she gives me some caricature of a smile that doesn't quite reach her eyes.

She sits like a wooden statue as I go over some of the details, skimming over the technical stuff and focusing more on the timeframe and travel requirements. I watch her closely as I speak, but she doesn't react at all until I finish with a "What do you think?"

"That's amazing, Bram," she says, her tone almost as wooden as her posture. "A once in a lifetime opportunity. You deserve it. You deserve everything."

She tries to inject some feeling into the words in that last part, but I'm not buying it. I search my own mind and heart as I stare at her, and it slowly dawns on me that I'm not disappointed by her lackluster reaction. Quite the opposite.

"Maybe I should tell him no," I say, my words slow and careful as I gauge her reaction to them.

"What?" she yelps, the unexpected statement startling her out of her funk. "You can't tell him no."

"Why not?" I ask, tilting my head.

Her words are saying one thing, but her body is saying something else, entirely. I can see her pulse fluttering at the base of her neck as she puffs out a few harsh breaths. She's practically vibrating. Like she's on the verge of hearing the best news she's ever heard in her life and the anticipation is overwhelming her.

She shakes her head, saying, "You can't just pass this up, Bram. Starfall Records will make you a star. It's every performer's dream."

"That's just it, Pressley. It's never been *my* dream," I say, and as the words pass my lips, something inside me settles. "When I write songs, it's for me. When I perform them, it's for my friends. I've never longed for stardom. Never even thought about, really, until now."

"But you seemed excited when I gave him your number," she murmurs.

"I was excited over the prospect of my music touching people's lives, not over the idea of becoming a famous singer. I've never wanted that," I say, and the tension still hiding in my muscles seems to drain away.

"So, what are you saying?" she asks, and I can't ignore the thread of hope in her voice.

"I'm saying I don't want to do it."

As those words hang in the air between us, I know they're the truth, and I suddenly feel a thousand pounds lighter. I don't

want to change my life. I like it just the way it is. Except maybe...

I meet her eyes, and they're filled with unshed tears as I ask, "Do you think you could help me reactivate and spiff up my BingBang page so I can share my music with the world, myself?"

"I can do that," she says with a relieved laugh, her tears spilling over to track down her cheeks.

"You didn't want me to take the deal, did you?" I ask, and she sniffs and looks down as she shakes her head. Reaching out, I gently lift her chin until she's looking at me again. "Why not?"

"Because I'm selfish, and I didn't want to lose you," she says, her voice so quiet I have to strain my ears to hear the words.

"You're the least selfish person I know, Pressley Glade," I say in a soft, gentle tone. "Why did you think you'd lose me?"

She shrugs. "You'd be in L.A. all the time. There are a lot of beautiful women there, and they'd all be vying for your attention."

"None as beautiful as you," I say, fighting to keep the smile out of my voice since this is something she's obviously been worried about.

Like I'd ever find someone as amazing and gorgeous and sweet as her.

"All that time apart would destroy us."

"I disagree, but just for argument's sake, what if it did?" I ask, then hold my breath.

Her spine snaps into a rigid rod as she looks at me with wide eyes. "I can't bear the thought of losing you."

"Why not?" I breathe.

Her tongue peeks out to wet her lips, and she takes a deep breath before blurting, "Because I'm falling in love with you,

Bram. You're the most precious thing in my life, and I was terrified this would tear us apart."

My heart swells in my chest, warming me all over as I reach over to take her hands in mine. Brushing my thumbs across her knuckles, I blink against the sting in my own eyes as I dip my head and look at her from beneath my lashes.

"You'll never lose me, Pressley."

"You don't know that for sure," she argues, and I shake my head.

"I *do* know. I'm not going anywhere, because I've already fallen. I love you, Press."

"You do?" she squeaks out with a fresh batch of tears.

"I do."

Before she can respond to that, I lunge forward, taking her lips in a long, tender kiss. As I pull away, she stares at me with a tearful laugh, then furiously wipes at her cheeks and eyes.

"Sorry I'm such a blubbery mess," she says with another laugh.

Wrapping my arm around her, I pull her as I lay back. She stretches out on the couch next to me, cuddled in my arms as my fingers comb through her hair. I kiss the top of her head, then turn my gaze up to the ceiling.

"Would you have told me you didn't want me to go if I had accepted the deal?" I ask.

"Never," she replies honestly. "I would've supported you until the bitter end."

I think about that for a moment, examining the way her statement makes me feel. Of course, it's great to have such unconditional support, but at the same time, I'd never want her to discount her own feelings like that just to make me happy.

"Pressley, that's not how this works," I say, and she stiffens in my arms.

"What do you mean?" she asks, keeping her head firmly lodged against my chest.

“We’re partners in this thing. I want to make you just as happy as you make me, and if you don’t talk to me about things that are bothering you, I can’t do my job. We have to be open and honest, even when it’s hard. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

“I think so,” she says. “It’s just hard for me. And I didn’t want to be the reason you turned down such an amazing opportunity.”

“You know if I really wanted to do it, I’d force you to come with me, right? I’d miss you way too much to leave you here.”

“You would?” she asks, the surprise evident in her voice.

“Come on, Press,” I say. “I just told you I’m in love with you. I’ll do whatever it takes to keep you by my side while we both get everything we want in life. It just turns out that this, right here, is everything I’ve ever wanted.”

“Me, too,” she says, tightening her grip around me.

Then she lifts her head to kiss me, and we don’t speak any more words for a long, long time.

EPILOGUE

Pressley

Six Months Later...

I attach Bram's phone to the light ring stand, focusing on the chair he'll be sitting in when he's ready. I adjust the light level until I find the best look, then open the BingBang app to set it up for his livestream.

Bram has a new song, one even I haven't heard, and he's insisted on premiering it live.

I can't believe how much has changed in the last few months. Bram's account skyrocketed, and he's sitting at well over a million followers. His videos always go viral, and his livestreams always draw tens of thousands of viewers.

Bram built a small recording booth on one side of the room, and we've started recording his songs and uploading them to streaming sites through a digital distributor. He's getting his music out there in a way that works for both of us. And it's working. His songs get downloaded so many times, bringing in so much money, Bram could quit his job at the tavern if he wanted to.

Of course, he doesn't want to. He loves that job, but he has cut down his shifts to two or three a week.

The door opens, and Bram strides in with his guitar. He's as handsome as ever, but there's a bit of tension in his face. Is he nervous? We've done this dozens of times, and I've never seen him so tense. Not since the first time we went live, anyway.

"You look great," I say as he takes his chair, hoping my calm voice will soothe his nerves.

"Thanks," he says, then looks down at his guitar as he strums it, making sure each string is in tune.

When he looks back up at me, he nods, and I tap the screen to launch the livestream. He starts playing a simple tune, giving his followers a few moments to join before he officially starts. I move over to the side, making sure to stay out of the shot, to sit and watch.

"I've got something new for you today," Bram says, looking at the phone's camera as the tune he's playing changes. "This one is very special to me, and I hope you like it."

The music swells before settling back into a soft cadence, and Bram starts to sing. His gaze moves to me as the words pour from his lips, and I grin and give him a thumbs up. My smile drops, though, when he continues to stare at me. I widen my eyes and point at the phone frantically, but he just keeps singing, his eyes glued to mine.

Then the lyrics start to sink in, and I go still. He's singing about finding the one thing he never knew he needed. Of learning what it means to fall in love, to find that one perfect woman who makes you a better man. Of all the little things that make her so amazing—that make *me* so amazing.

It becomes pretty obvious that this song is about me, and my eyes prick with tears at the sheer beauty of it. The chorus swells with passion, and by the second verse, Bram's voice is cracking with emotion, making the song that much more tender. It touches my soul, and my chest vibrates as I try to

take a deep breath through the tears that are now streaming down my cheeks.

Suddenly Bram stops playing his instrument, singing the last chorus a cappella as he sets his guitar aside. My eyes stay locked on his as he stands, then drops to a knee to sing the last line.

“All I want to know, sweet girl, is will you marry me?”

I’m full-on sobbing by this point, and my gaze drops to his hand, which is holding a small velvet box. Flipping it open he reveals a diamond ring, the stone sparkling brightly in the bright ring light.

“Pressley?” he whispers when I don’t move.

I startle out of the trance I’ve fallen into, jumping to my feet with a shout. Darting forward, I fall into him, knocking him backward as I land on top of him with a shouted “Yes!”

Peppering kisses all over his face, I chant “yes” over and over again until he grips my cheeks to hold me still long enough to plant a firm kiss on my lips. I laugh and climb off him to rest on my knees, and he sits up in front of me, presenting me once again with the ring. Plucking it from the box, he tosses the latter aside before taking my left hand and slipping the beautiful ring onto my finger.

“I love it,” I say, staring at it for a moment before meeting his gaze once more. “I love you.”

“I’ll love you until the end of time, Pressley Glade. You’re it for me.”

He kisses me then, and I want nothing more than to rip his clothes off and show him how much I love him. I start to do just that, then Bram startles me by violently ripping himself away. I look at him with wide, hurt eyes, but he just grins and jerks his head to the right.

I look over, my eyes going even wider when I see his phone still perched on the ring light...and still streaming live.

“Oh. Oops,” I say, a giggle bubbling out of me.

“Sorry, folks,” Bram says directly into the camera as he climbs to his feet and moves toward it. “This isn’t *that* kind of channel. Thanks for joining me for this epic moment and sharing in our joy.”

Then pushing in so his face takes up the whole screen, he adds, “She said yes!”

Then he taps it to end the livestream, closes the app, and turns back in my direction.

“Now, where were we?”

I laugh as he rushes back over and drops to the floor in front of me, pulling me in and kissing me senseless.

I can’t believe this is my life. I never thought I could ever be this happy. This loved. This *in* love.

And with a song, the crooner I’ve always fangirled over made me his, forever.



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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.

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