



LOVE *that* FOR ME

SMALL-TOWN GOSSIP

ABBY KNOX

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LOVE THAT FOR ME

Small-Town Gossip

Book 3

ABBY KNOX



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Love That For Me

A SMALL-TOWN GOSSIP ROMANCE

Alex

No reporter has ever busted my balls quite like Jessica at the Darling Creek Daily News. As a tech billionaire who takes calls from CNN regularly, that's saying something. She makes me sweat. I can't stop thinking about her, and I don't know how to walk the fine line between professional and personal. so I'm just going to go all in and be clear about what I want. All my money and success mean nothing to me if I can't share it with her.

Jessica

A tech titan is taking over my town, and I don't like it. Perfect angle for a news story, right? There's just one problem. Despite relishing the idea of holding a powerful man's feet to the fire, I find myself drawn to by his smile, dreamy eyes and overwhelming presence. I know better than to cross that line. Besides, the entire town is watching every move he makes. If I step over that line, it could be the end of my career. His sneaky generosity is testing my resolve, however. I might just have to kiss the bejeezus out of him, and let people say what they will about me.

Chapter One

JESSICA

YESTERDAY'S INTERVIEW left me in a sour mood.

Then, the overdue notice on my apartment door turned my mood from sour to downright ornery. I know my rent's late. Also, my car is in the shop, and my student loan payment is in default. As my grandmother would say, I have to rob Peter to pay Paul, but Peter's pockets are emptier than my cheese drawer.

I'm always grumpiest in the days leading up to payday.

At least the sun is shining in the big Montana sky, and I'm caffeinated thanks to a free coffee from Nate, the barista who's dating my coworker. And I may not be able to drive to work due to a bum transmission, but I'm walking to the office with my favorite people. We all have our moments.

"So let me get this straight," I say as my coworkers and I stop and stare yet again at the dilapidated downtown movie theater. "A billionaire tech geek can get permission to build an enormous, soulless hub here that he'll probably abandon in twenty years, yet the coolest building in town is left to rot because there's no money to fix it up. Make it make sense."

"Sounds like a juicy angle for your story." Meredith steps off the sidewalk and into the shade of the marquee advertising *Jurassic Park*.

More accurately, the marquee advertised *Jurassic Park* over 30 years ago. Since then, the letters have been comically rearranged by unknown pranksters. According to locals, the mysterious miscreants ran out of ideas about a decade back, and the sad marquee has spent the last ten years urging folks to come in and see something called “Arss Pick.”

Weird that the town just left it like that.

I sigh. “Sure. The perfect story angle to give Donna hives.”

I know I’m behaving like a baby. My first interview with tech guru Alex Martin left me irked.

The oh-so-precious genius agreed to speak to me after his handlers put me through more hoops than the people who approved my one-time White House press pass.

When I’d finally gotten Alex Martin on the horn, he spoke to me for all of three minutes.

First, he’d wasted thirty seconds of the interview apologizing for not being good at interviews, even though he’s given dozens, if not hundreds of them. That aw-shucks-ness might work with the average female T.V. reporter. But not this bitch.

Then, he’d wasted even more time flirting with me. *This may be out of line, but you have a very soothing phone voice, Jessica.*

Please.

I’d popped off one question from my list of nineteen.

What sort of incentives did you get to build here?

Mr. Martin then spent what remained of the interview babbling in tech-speak about servers and things no one understands. By the time he took a breath, one of his crew had cut me off, saying he was needed elsewhere.

Clueless. Tacky. Out of touch.

Though, Mr. Martin did have a sultry phone voice, one he cut out that phony awkward shit. I’ll give him that.

Doesn't matter. It was a terrible interview, and the bottom line is I blew it, and I might never get that chance again. Martin FutureTech will build its servers and satellite campus on the outskirts of town, but the man himself would never deign to show up here. Certainly not for a cheesy small-town groundbreaking ceremony.

Franny, our crime reporter, sniffs. "Donna's old-school," she says, stepping past the barricade and toying with the flimsy one-by-two boarding up the front entrance to the theater building. "She should be all over our butts to find out what the mayor promised ol' Alex Martin to seal the deal."

Franny's not wrong. Donna should be all over this angle, yes. Our editor loves us to dig up dirt on the rich and famous.

However, Alex Martin, billionaire that he is, is single-handedly keeping the *Darling Creek Daily News* afloat. Donna might have a problem with a story that could put an advertiser in a negative light.

I hope not, though. I am curious about what perks the town leaders dangled in front of Alex Martin. This man is putting our tiny ranching town on the map, and I want to know why he picked it.

"I'll just bet he's got ideas to build a crypto mine in the mountains or something worse," Franny says, testing out how much of her torso can fit in the gap.

"God, I hope not," I say, wincing. I love this town, love the scenery, the peace and quiet. It's been good for me. If Alex Martin starts fucking around with our serenity, I'll scream. However, that's just Franny postulating with nothing to base that on.

Meredith touches a hand to her stomach and looks wary. She's doing that absentminded stomach-touching thing a lot now that she's beginning to show. "The wood is there for a reason, Franny," Meredith warns. "Let's not mess with it."

I agree. "The building is a hazard," I say.

"Then it needs better security," Franny counters, jiggling the board.

Holmes, our sports reporter, usually doesn't tag along on our morning coffee runs, but today he's here for...some reason. From the looks of it, his mission is to glare at Franny.

I can't blame Franny for her curiosity. It's a beautiful old building.

"I don't think I can fit," Franny says. "Meredith, come on over here. You're teeny."

I scoff. "Sure, send the pregnant lady into the dangerous, abandoned building," I say sarcastically.

Meredith laughs. "Don't worry, I'm not going in there."

At least we're all here together in case Franny gets herself into trouble.

The three of us watch Franny as she gives up on the boarded-up doors and instead wipes the grime off the glass-windowed ticket booth with the elbow of her coat. "Maybe there's something in there we could use to pry it open."

"Hey, crime junkie, that's called breaking and entering."

Meredith and I suffer whiplash from turning to look at Holmes so fast, both of us surprised to hear actual words come out of the reticent lone male reporter.

"He's right," I say to Franny.

"You guys are no fun," she grumbles.

I sigh. It would be nice to see this place cleaned up at some point. "The paper has archival photos of this theater packed to the gills back in the 1940s. Can you imagine? The velvet seats...the old romantic movies...."

Franny mutters and dusts off her coat. "Guys, there could be a drug den or dead bodies in there. Do the cops even check on it?"

I draw my lips into my mouth, stifling a snort. A subtle elbow to my side tells me Meredith is also on the verge of laughing.

"Drug dens and serial killers are probably not the threat here as much as black mold and mice infestations. But go on

and get hantavirus if you want,” I say.

“Lead. Asbestos.” Holmes is back to blurting out nouns while not-so-subtly going around Franny to block the entrance with his body. Good man.

Despite the lack of verbs, I know what he’s getting at. “And you wanted the pregnant lady to go in there?” I ask.

Franny shakes her head. “No, not anymore.”

“Good,” I say.

“I’ll come back later with my favorite crowbar to get my story.”

“Have to work. Can we go now?” Holmes mutters. Does he not realize he can leave us behind whenever he wants?

Meredith and I glance at each other. “Favorite crowbar?” Meredith mouths as we make our way back to the office.

“That implies she has multiple crowbars,” I whisper as we walk side by side.

Meredith snickers.

When we arrive at the newspaper office, a stretch SUV limousine is parked out front along the street.

My stomach lurches. That’s an unusual site for our sleepy little town. It couldn’t be Alex Martin, could it?

Chapter Two

Alex

DID I ever fuck up an interview this bad before?

Talking to journalists doesn't usually make my armpits sweat, but Jessica from Montana made me forget what year it is.

What was my motive for building in this particular tiny town in Montana?

No, the word she'd used was *incentive*. I know she's talking about tax breaks.

What immediately came to my mind was nothing about my bottom line. The motivation was personal.

And I'm the only person who knows my motivation. If I'd spoken my reasons out loud? Hell. My advisors, publicist, and board of directors would have me committed.

But I know I'm right.

As a person of science and business, I rely on data and market research. We don't make decisions based on our emotions.

Yet that's what I did, and then let my feelings run amok in that phone interview.

I'd made some idiotic comment about how I find her phone voice soothing.

The reporter had played that off, then asked a straightforward question, and I rambled on about how our servers work. She doesn't care about any of that.

Why couldn't I have just said something in plain English? As in, I've known for a while I needed to build a server in that region of the country. That's it. That's all I needed to say. Instead, I spewed out a bunch of tech gibberish. All true, but still nonsense to the average person.

Okay, that's all a half-truth.

When I'd had my team scout locations, I also did my own research. As brilliant as everyone says I am, doing my own research was not the best idea.

I was vulnerable after spending too much time alone in my office. Writing new code, practicing speeches, and writing a book. I haven't had a minute of fun in years. So considering how starved I am for companionship, I should not have done what I did.

While pulling up articles about the mountainous areas of western Montana, I came across Darling Creek, population 2,000. That led me to *The Darling Creek Daily News*. That led me to articles by someone named Jessica.

And then, I clicked on her name, which took me to the staff bio page.

When those brown eyes looked back at me, I'd dropped my bubble tea and ruined a pair of brand-new Italian shoes.

When I read her bio, I knew all bets were off.

“Jessica Miller came to the *Daily News* from *Phoenix Sun*. She likes writing general news but hopes to write a fashion column for the *New York Times* one day. She spends her spare time looking at clothes she can't afford, thrifting for the designer pieces she can, and drinking box wine with her cat, Sophie. That wasn't a misplaced modifier; the thieving, freeloading Sophie gets into the merlot every chance she gets.”

That was it. I was done looking.

I had to build in Darling Creek, and I needed to meet Jessica.

At first, I thought it might be fun to fish, snowboard and ride horses with some of my L.A. friends at their Montana vacation homes.

But now things have changed. I'm not just building a hub here; I might be building a life here. If I don't mess it up.

Chapter Three

JESSICA

DONNA IS on her way out the door when we arrive. “Don’t bother going inside, crew; we’re all going to the groundbreaking.”

I let out a quiet groan of displeasure. I really dislike covering these orchestrated events.

“We are? Why?” Franny asks.

Donna gestures to the other side of the street to the stretch SUV. “Because if Alex Martin insists on sending a limo for a reporter and me, I’m taking everyone with us.”

Holmes declines and heads into the office to work, probably looking forward to an hour of silence.

My reporter’s notebook comes out of my messenger bag, and I write down a few thoughts. After all, it’s me who’s been saddled with the Alex Martin coverage for whatever reason.

I scribble: *The billionaire businessman decided it would be a good idea to hire a limo from the city to come all the way to Darling Creek to transport this reporter one mile out of town to watch him turn over one golden shovelful of dirt. Doesn’t sound like good business to me.*

Not going to lie, though. The inside of this ride is pretty sweet.

Franny presses all the buttons and looks through every nook and cranny like a child in a candy store. Meredith raids the built-in snack cooler like a raccoon. Donna sits in the front seat and chats up the driver because she wants everyone's life story. As for me? I'm sinking into the buttery leather seats and pasting on a calm face while my stomach cartwheels.

Why the anxiety? Because as much as I don't like him, I'm anxious to meet the man Alex Martin. Who wouldn't be? The man has more money than Bill Gates. On top of that, he's not just the handsome man he appears to be on CNN. The anonymous people on Reddit who claim to have dated Alex Martin readily report that in person, the billionaire is "so hot it hurts to be around him, like staring into the sun."

When the limo pulls up to the site of the new satellite campus, Caterpillars and earth movers dotting the landscape, it looks like the entire town has turned out to watch. Despite this, I immediately spot Alex Martin. From twenty yards away, it's easy to see who he is, even if I wasn't following him on Instagram and knew his appearance. All the town leaders are there in their best pressed denims. The mayor, Violetta, wears the same practical navy pantsuit she always wears, topped with a yellow hard hat. She's opted out of her usual high heels in favor of steel-toe boots. A little over the top for the photo shoot, but that's our mayor.

And in the middle of the group is a man who looms at least six inches over everyone else, his broad body clad in an exquisitely tailored, buttoned-up gray suit, his face calmly amused as the mayor excitedly bends his ear.

He's the only man not wearing a cowboy hat. Woof.

I don't mind cowboys, or their giant belt buckles, Wranglers, and Ariats. It's just that most of them never give me a second glance because I might as well have "high maintenance" stamped on my forehead. It's apparent that I am not built for hard outdoor labor or domesticity. Dating dry spell aside, it doesn't hurt to ogle Alex Martin. Seeing a man in a suit—any suit, at any price tag, and one he wears because he clearly likes it and not because he's on the way to a funeral—is incredibly refreshing these days.

As we pile out of the limo, Alex smiles warmly at Violetta, politely excuses himself, and makes a beeline for our group.

My heart jumps.

That suit is Brioni, or I'll throw my pawn-shop Jimmy Choos into a fire. Now that I think about it, designer heels might have been a poor choice for standing in a field.

I am what my grandmother liked to call "champagne taste on a beer budget." She was right about me. I love fashion. I devour it.

My talents lie in writing, though, and not in sewing or drawing. So, as I studied journalism, I worked my way through college at a men's formalwear shop. That experience whetted my appetite for finer things, which is some kind of masochism for a girl whose only talent is scribbling words in exchange for wages that barely pay rent.

"This must be the esteemed press. So glad you could make it," Alex Martin says, flashing a laid-back grin on a clean-shaven face. Nice teeth, I note. Good haircut and impeccably trimmed sideburns and nape lines.

Remember he tried to sweet talk you on the phone, Jessica. Don't trust him.

My eyes travel down his body, taking in the sheer acreage of virgin wool it took to cover this man's nakedness. A strong, veiny hand unbuttons his jacket, pulls it aside, and then fiddles with the bottom of his silk tie. I spot the cufflinks. Subtle. Not flashy, but expensive. That hand goes up to self-consciously rub the side of his neck, and I recognize that shy look he gives the pretty anchor on CNN whenever his company is in the news.

And it's always in the news.

Is anybody buying this bashful boy-genius act?

What does he have to be bashful about? His Fortune 500 company? His genius brain? His rise from a childhood in subsidized housing into the country's wealthiest bachelor? His billions of dollars? His stylist? His beefy biceps that could crack walnuts?

Spare me.

Giving Alex Martin a quick once-over while Donna makes introductions, I'd say that's a 17.5 neck, 35 waist, 36 chest, and 38 inseam. The suspicious bishes on Reddit said he was tall but also had enough meat on his bones to make sex extra fun. That's the other thing keeping me from swooning—he's been with enough women to earn him that sort of chatter on Reddit, and I don't like that much.

Not because it makes me jealous.

I have to admit; his Instagram feed does not do him justice. With most people using filters these days, that's saying something. Alex is unreasonably good-looking. His clear skin and long lashes are enviously perfect. The cheekbones could slice through a ream of newsprint faster than a machine, and his clean-shaven face shows off a pair of full lips built for sin. A pair of tortoiseshell eyeglasses make him look smart, outlining deep-set gray-green eyes and highlighting dark eyebrows.

Staring at Alex Martin is indeed like staring into the sun, which gives me all the more reason to gawk at that suit instead of his face.

I wonder what it feels like. My eyes travel down and stop at his thighs. Tonight, I will be dreaming about that fit, about the muscle bulge on the outer quad, my brain filling in the question of whether or not his thighs are hairy or smooth.

“Jessica?”

“Huh?” A man's hand is right in front of me. Oh god, I've been staring at Alex's thighs and tuning Donna out while she was introducing me.

Recovering, I blurt, “Jessica Martin. Miller! Jessica Miller!” My face is on fire because of that flub, and on top of that, I'm shouting. Franny snickers as I slip my hand into Alex Martin's big mitt. But as soon as that warm skin surrounds mine and his eyes squint at me with amusement and curiosity, I forget to feel embarrassed.

He chuckles, smiling at me, gently squeezing my hand. “So, we’re probably not related after all. What a relief.”

Did he just make a joke to make me feel better? Aw.

Nope, not going to swoon. This is the time to be professional.

“I’ll leave you to it,” Donna tells me, herding the rest of the staff over to the snack table. The chamber of commerce went all out with this event. There’s wine, cheese, fruit, gift bags—the works. The last time the chamber summoned a reporter to anything, they served lukewarm punch and stale store-bought cookies, then spent thirty-seven minutes searching high and low for giant ceremonial scissors.

I can’t help but notice an equally smartly dressed man and woman hovering nearby, watching Alex nervously. His handlers, probably. Also skulking a little farther away are two gigantic men dressed all in black. They look at me like I’m a stalker, even though I’m wearing a press badge and have been previously cleared to meet the man.

“Do you want to go to my trailer?” He points his thumb over his shoulder toward a double-wide trailer parked just off the lane where we’re standing.

“Uh...”

He notices the wary look on my face. “The construction trailer. To do the interview. It’s quiet there, and I wouldn’t want to get mud on your pretty feet. Shoes. Shoes. Last year’s Jimmy Choos, if I’m not mistaken.”

Ouch.

I swallow, building the courage to dismiss his offer.

“Out here is better,” I say, pulling my head out of my ass and moving forward with the hard-hitting questions. Alex Martin may have just propositioned me and insulted my shoes, but I can shake it off for the moment.

Clicking my pen, I ask, “What sort of tax incentives did the city offer you to locate a hub here?”

“Getting right to the point, I see. None,” he says, smiling.

That's some freeze-dried bullshit. I can verify that easily enough later, though.

“Why did you choose a tiny town in Montana?”

Alex shrugs. “I like to ski, I like to fish, and I wanted a place close to my buddy....” Here he name-drops a wildly famous Hollywood actor who owns land about twenty miles up the road from here.

Figures. The über-rich love pretending the mountain states are their own personal backyard playgrounds.

“So you'll be living here permanently?”

“No, building a vacation home.”

Thought so.

“And which of your many residences will be your primary residence? What state will you be paying income taxes to?”

He smiles. “Permanent residence, California. Born and raised. State income taxes: several,” Alex says with a rueful laugh.

Of course, he's resentful over paying his fair share. What else did I expect?

“Do you have plans to buy up properties for mining endeavors? Any plans for NFTs?”

He looks at me as if I've lost my damn mind. I might have.

“You know that's not what I do, right? Like, not even close. I'd hate for you, of all people, to think I'm one of those guys.”

Huh. Okay.

“I've heard you plan on hiring three hundred workers for this hub. How do you respond to concerns that the town cannot support hundreds of new residents? Have you considered housing, utilities, emergency services, or entertainment?”

“We're prepared to address that in the coming months.”

“How so?”

“Can’t disclose that yet.”

“Why not?”

He laughs. “Wow, has anyone told you you’re kinda scary for a news reporter?”

I bristle. “Print folks are built differently than the smiley cable T.V. folks. Moving on...”

Alex’s gaze slips down and back up, quick as hummingbird wings. “I’ll say you are.”

I nervously flip through my notebook as the wind has made me lose the page with questions.

I narrow my eyes. “Back to my question. If you can’t give concrete examples of how you plan to address the burden of hundreds of new residents on the town, how do you entice workers? There’s no housing for them. The nearest entertainment is an hour’s drive away.”

The man replies, “Well, now. You seem like a girl who wouldn’t stay somewhere if there was nothing fun to do, so there must be something keeping you happy.”

“I’m a woman.”

“Very much so.”

“And I don’t do fun things; I work.”

He deadpans, “Then I guess I can cross that huge entertainment complex off my list.”

“So you intend to work your people to the bone with no personal lives until they burn out?”

Alex snaps back with a playful look. “Oh, you mean like you?”

“I have a life,” I shoot back.

“Of course. Boyfriends take up a lot of time.”

“I don’t have a boyfriend.”

Why am I letting him bait me? I have a fulfilling life as a single female totally on her own. Apart from my job, I have friends who are...well, my only friends here are my

coworkers, but those count, don't they? It has to count in a town where most people are married or retired. Ugh, whatever. Alex Martin is clearly trying to rattle me.

“Girlfriend, then?”

“No, and I'm the one asking questions here.”

“Yes, ma'am.”

I glare at him. I don't like being called ma'am, girl, or anything other than my name. And he's being far too familiar with me.

I clear my throat. “How do you respond to concerns that half the historic buildings downtown are infested with squirrels, and yet the town leaders handed this parcel of land to you for a song?”

Alex blinks at me. “Squirrels?”

Okay, that's an exaggeration bordering on a lie. Maybe I saw a squirrel perched on a bench outside the old movie theater.

“Yep! Squirrels.”

“Huh,” he says thoughtfully. “I guess my response is, allow me to fund the humane relocation of all these scallawag rodents you claim to be taking over the town.”

“Good luck with that because they are really settled in there. In the walls and stuff.”

Look at me, getting all strident and defensive over some shit I totally made up. Oh lord, I need a vacation.

But still, this man is turning out to be a royal pain in my ass.

“Do they have swords?”

“What?”

“The squirrels that are taking over your town. I assume some sort of weaponry is involved. Is it teeny tiny swords?”

He's calling me on my bullshit. My brow furrows. “Machetes.”

“Ah.” He grins. That curve of his mouth unsettles me. I don’t like it. His full, kissable lips slightly purse in amusement, making him look ten years younger. He could be the incorrigible yet irresistible bad boy in a teen rom-com.

“I thought I saw a half-decent coffee place downtown. How about you let me buy you an espresso, and you can return the favor by showing me these bloodthirsty squirrels tearing up the town?”

“I can’t accept gifts from a source. But I can buy you coffee, and you can let me look at your plans and blueprints for our town and your gigantic workhouse in the middle of the mountains.”

I look up from my scribbling and watch Alex’s eyes darken. I know that look; he’s spoken too soon, realizing I plan to print every word he says. His expression changes from flirty and friendly to downright stony. “I shouldn’t have said anything about that. The plans are not complete. Don’t print that.”

I blink up at him innocently. “I think I have everything I need. Enjoy your groundbreaking.”

Chapter Four

Alex

“WAIT, CAN I GET YOUR NUMBER?”

Jessica pauses in her size eight heels and does a double take. A small dimple appears on her cheek.

Can I get your number? Wow, good work, Alex. Now you're flat-out trying to pick her up, which couldn't be more obvious.

While I wait for her to dig out her business card, I slip my glasses off and dab my sweaty eyebrows with the back of my hand. Smooth. Real smooth, Martin.

She holds the card out to me with an expectant look.

“Thanks,” I say, ignoring the rush of energy at the point where her finger brushes against mine as I take the card.

“Usually, I get a number from a source, too,” she says.

Oh, that.

I fumble for my phone and awkwardly send my contact info to hers.

She stares at her phone. “Is this...is this your direct cell number?”

“Yeah. Is that a problem?”

She chuckles. “I can’t believe I’m sabotaging this sort of access, but the one time I interviewed Zuckerberg for five minutes, I had to arrange everything through an assistant to an assistant to an assistant.”

“No takebacks,” I reassure her, immediately cringing inside. Did that sound like I just gave her a gift? Like my phone number is some prize? At best, I sound like a child.

I am sweating through this suit like I just ran a half-marathon.

If I’d been trying to colossally fuck up a conversation with the press, I succeeded.

What sort of a troglodyte allows himself to get distracted by a pretty face and gorgeous hips?

No reporter has ever had this effect on me. I’m a professional, dammit. And so is Jessica.

The board of directors saw fit to keep the nerd who started this company as its public face because I’m good at interviews.

Today, though, my brain saw those huge brown eyes and went on autopilot. As a result, my mouth spewed absolute bullshit.

Every time she broke eye contact with me, I took the opportunity to gawk at her while she took down notes. While she scribbled, I stared at the subtle highlights in her hair. I tried to guess how old she was by staring at the furrows on her forehead. I studied her outfit, noting how the vintage Dior skirt and blazer somehow worked with the statement necklace from Target. Smart. Funny. Good taste. Total ballbuster and a knockout to boot.

She must think I’m a bumbling idiot or a liar.

Women I’ve dated in the past have never made me sweat this much. Maybe that’s because my last serious relationship was in college over fifteen years ago. Since then, it’s been one short-term relationship after another.

It's not like I can put up a profile on a dating site to find a wife. I tried, but my publicist about had a coronary when she saw it and promptly made me take it down.

But Jessica...Jessica makes me want to circumvent the entire vetting process and run away from all of this.

I've never had that before with anyone.

Until now.

Two problems. One, I'm pretty sure she hates my guts. Two: I'm a big fat liar.

Jessica mentioned the town had no housing for the workers, and I panicked. I have people who are supposed to research that shit but apparently dropped the ball. So to save face, I blurted out lies.

And on top of all that, I insulted her shoes. I meant to show off that I recognized what designer they were from, and I thought she'd be impressed by my keen eye for fashion. Instead, I sounded like a snob.

"Sir, they're ready for you."

That would be my publicist, Andrea.

Right. I have a groundbreaking to do. Hands to shake. Photos to pose for.

I turn and face my publicist and personal assistant. "Andrea, make sure Ms. Miller has everything she needs for her story. Chapman, please get Ms. Miller some wine and something to eat."

They both look at me as if I'm talking about a ghost.

"Who?"

I turn back to point out Jessica, but she's gone.

It feels like an eternity of chatting with one person after another before I can take the time to compose an email to the address on her business card. When the event is over. I stalk to the trailer and retype it, then send it.

TO: JessicaM@darlingcreekdaily.com

From: AMartin@MartinFutureTech.com

Subject: Let's try that again

Hi. I would start by saying I'm much better over email, but that remains to be seen. I might make it weird here, too.

I ENJOYED MEETING YOU TODAY. I'd love to meet for coffee just to talk one on one. Unfettered access. No publicists, assistants, or anyone else to witness me struggle for words while talking to a beautiful woman. All except for my bodyguards. Those, apparently, are necessary. You get used to it.

IF IT SOUNDS like I'm hitting on you, that's because I am.

MAYBE I'M NOT the sharpest tool in the shed when it comes to walking the line between professional and social relationships. But when I feel something is right, I go after it. I don't ask what the rules are before I jump, and I only ask for forgiveness later if I truly fuck it up.

I TRUST you'll let me know when I do.

Chapter Five

JESSICA

TODAY'S BEEN TAXING, and I'm beat.

As if meeting Alex Martin wasn't enough thrown at me, I had to endure a school board meeting because Meredith had a doctor's visit.

I hadn't checked my email until after I filed my stories later that night, and that's when I saw the email from Alex. He's just blatantly asking me out now.

I, of all people, know better after everything that happened to me in Phoenix.

And now, under the wing of Donna, I've got a second chance. Sure, it feels like I'm starting all over at 26, but it's not too late to salvage my career.

After all, my Gran did not raise a quitter.

When I came crying to her after that front page disaster, Gran handed me a tissue and let me blubber in front of Netflix with pints of ice cream for three days. Then came the pep talk and the tough love.

I keep going because of her, even when I don't like my job so much.

Today was one of those days.

So imagine my surprise when I arrive at my apartment to find a huge bouquet of flowers on my kitchen table, a box of those giant chocolate-covered strawberries, a bottle of wine, and a small wrapped gift.

Sophie, my orange tabby, noses the bottle of wine. Little weirdo.

My stomach groans in hunger. I gently herd Sophie off the table, then dive into the berries.

Company policy says we must declare any gift over \$5 from a source. But I'm starving. And technically, I don't know where these gifts came from. And I'll never know if I perhaps absentmindedly toss the little card into the trash.

I make a pornographic noise as the juicy berry explodes in my mouth with the chocolate. Heaven.

The flowers aren't your typical long-stemmed red roses. It's an arrangement of tulips, peonies, daisies, and lilies, taking up half the space in my tiny apartment kitchen.

After I gorge on a few berries, I clean my sticky hands and carefully unwrap the box. Inside is a Sephora skincare gift set.

I'm drooling over it, yet I wonder if Alex is trying to send me a message. Does he think my skin looks dry? And how does he even know my skin type? Is he that good at guessing?

But wait. No, I don't officially know where any of this came from.

And neither does my neighbor, Alexis, most likely the person who let in the flower delivery.

"I can pretend I have a secret admirer and toss the card in the trash, right, Soph?"

The orange demon is making slow figure eights around my ankles, buttering me up to let her at that wine.

Nice try, cat.

Right. Throwing that card away now.

I pick it up and head to the small trash bin under the sink. But then I pause, and look at the small blue envelope.

I change my mind and toss the card in my junk drawer, unread.

Am I tempted to read it?

Sure.

Will I? Not if I want to keep my job.

After I change into my comfy leggings, I spread out on the sofa in front of the show I'm currently binging, along with the wine and the rest of the strawberries. Sophie purrs on my lap, sniffing the air every time I take a sip.

Stomach sated and head buzzy from the wine, I open my phone.

My finger hovers over Alex Martin in my contacts.

Now would be a bad time to text him. It's after 10 p.m., and I'm not sober.

Ah, what the hell.

ME: Coffee. Tomorrow. But I'm buying.

I WAIT for the three little dots to appear, but instead, my phone rings.

What the hell?

Chapter Six

Alex

ALL DAY LONG, I've thought about how I should never have sent that email.

If Andrea sees it, she'll shit a brick.

My staff has put me up in a hotel in Bozeman, a whole one-hour drive away from the building site. I hate that it's so far away.

Gunther, my head of security, insisted that a chain hotel was more secure than a bed and breakfast in the quaint little town. But I'm about to climb the walls as I stare at my email, hitting refresh.

I take a break from staring at my email account and click over to do some internet research on the town. I have to take my mind off this woman for tonight; there's nothing to do except wait for her to make the next move.

Through scrolling, I land on an odd website I hadn't noticed before when I had initially looked into where to build my hub.

The Drop.

See what's making ripples in The Creek.

From what I can tell, it's a local gossip site about the town and surrounding area.

Scrolling down, nothing looks interesting because I obviously don't know anybody here. Scrolling farther down, I run across an announcement that the independently owned site is seeking advertisers.

Huh.

This could work in my favor. My company's already bought up a considerable amount of advertising in the *Daily News*. If I take out an ad in the competition, it might make me appear less biased. I forward the address to my vice president of marketing and let him handle it.

And now I'm alone with my thoughts again.

More specifically, my thoughts on Jessica.

I know damn well I never should have sent that email. Gunther is always warning me about transmissions being intercepted.

My god, though. I'm a touch-starved man whose schedule is predetermined weeks in advance. I have meetings, appearances, and keynote addresses every minute of every day.

It's exhausting.

I want more.

I want Jessica.

As if I conjured her with my mind, my phone pings.

JESSICA: Coffee. Tomorrow. But I'm buying.

I FEEL like the clouds have opened up, and I'm bathed in sunshine for the first time after a long cold winter.

Screw texting.

Maybe it's presumptuous to call on the phone these days, but that's what I do.

"Hello?"

“It’s Alex Martin.”

Her small laugh makes my chest ache. “Yeah. I know. Do you always respond to texts by calling people on the phone?”

I don’t tell her that I prefer phone conversations over text because, as both my publicist and security guards have warned me, anything written can be hacked into, stolen, shared, subpoenaed, or used against me by anybody. That’s a bit much to share with Jessica at this point.

“What can I say? I’m excited about our date tomorrow,” I reply.

She huffs. “I can’t have a working relationship with someone who’s hitting on me.”

“Why not?”

“Company policy? Common sense? Because it will look like you’re trying to influence the press to write articles that paint you favorably.”

“Ah, you’ve discovered my nefarious plot. Tried the strawberries yet?”

“I don’t know what you mean,” she says.

My stomach drops. “Did you not get—”

“I did not receive any strawberries today, nor did I drink an entire bottle of wine just now, nor is my apartment reeking of pollen from a billion flowers, nor is my skin lubed up with a hundred bucks worth of skin care products. Because if a source did give me any of those things, I would have to report it to my boss.”

I pause, mulling this over. “So don’t report it,” I say.

She responds sharply. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. There’s nothing to report because the card was missing.”

Oh. Okay. This woman is already steps ahead of me, and I like her more every second I talk to her.

“Got it,” I say.

“Got what? There’s nothing to get.”

Hmm. “Jessica, what do you earn in a month?”

“Excuse me?”

“What does the paper pay you?”

She goes silent for so long that I know I’ve overstepped my boundaries.

“I can’t decide if you’re trying to embarrass me or offer to keep me.”

“Keep you?” Like a pet? “I’m confused.”

“Like a kept woman. With you as the sugar daddy. Is that what this is? Because I have my pride, sir.”

This has me truly flustered.

“Can we start over? Hi. I’m Alex. I really like you and would love it if you’d go out with me. You don’t have to answer me now, but think about it.”

“Thirty thousand.”

“What?”

“That’s my salary.”

I do some quick math. “That’s not acceptable.”

“Oh, but we don’t do this for the money,” she says.

“I detect sarcasm.”

She snorts.

“You should consider another career,” I add.

“Careful, buddy, you’re gonna make me swoon.”

“I am fucking this up left and right, aren’t I?”

“I’ll let you quit while you’re still somewhat ahead. See you at coffee tomorrow. Try to play along.”

She hangs up, and I’m left with so many questions. What am I playing along with?

I SOON LEARN what she means when I spot her at Bean There the following day.

Customers turn to stare at me. That happens when I have two scary-looking dudes everywhere I go, one standing outside the door and the other hovering a few feet away at all times. It's tiring, too, but I can't give them days off on a whim—they just find replacements.

I catch Jessica's eye as she delivers a coffee to her pregnant friend. She goes from smiling to a forced, curt nod in my direction.

My palms damp, I swipe them on my pant legs and cross the room, ignoring all the stares and whispers. I slide into the empty chair next to Jessica at the table, nodding at Meredith. The pregnant woman stares at me with wide-eyed interest, and I can't help but notice the barista is watching her watch me. This is...awkward.

Just for the record, I'm not complaining that I can't just, like, grab a coffee or go to the grocery store like an average person without a lot of rigmarole. Once in a blue moon would be nice, though.

Jessica's tone is business-like as she announces, "I asked Meredith to sit in on our meeting to help ease the tension here. We got off on the wrong foot yesterday."

"I don't know about that," I say. "I thought your article on the groundbreaking was great."

She shoots me a glare, then I remember. Play along. She said to play along.

I clear my throat, and Meredith and Jessica stare expectantly at me.

"But clearly, it left a lot to be desired," I quickly add. "She doesn't understand the basics of reporting on tech."

The air goes cold around us.

Uh, I might have gone too far.

Meredith visibly winces as if my insults are causing her physical pain. “Wow,” she breathes.

Jessica uses the tabletop to click her pen five times, fast and loud, then clears her throat. “Right. I’m just a dumb girl. Anyway...”

Everyone is silent for several moments.

“No, you’re not,” Meredith says quietly.

“It’s okay, Mer,” Jessica says, then turns to me. “So let’s talk about the other builds you’re planning that haven’t been announced yet. What are the plans, specifically? Apartment complexes? Fast food chains? Have you thought about how the sudden arrival of fast-food chains and franchise stores will affect the downtown area? And how do you plan to address the lack of available child care for your workers?”

At least I don’t have to pretend to react to these questions. I shouldn’t laugh, but it escapes me before I can stop it. I angle my chair to look directly at Jessica without straining my neck. “Let’s not get ahead of ourselves,” I say.

Her brow furrows. “These are real problems you will encounter, and the public needs answers.”

Now my blood pressure is up. “Listen,” I say, perhaps a little too sternly.

Her eyes widen, and I regret my tone but continue, “I write code. I would rather be in an office thinking up the next product to improve people’s lives. Child care and Chuck E. Cheeses are not in my wheelhouse. If you have concerns about that, maybe you should put that in an opinion piece on your editorial page instead of conjuring up disaster scenarios before we’ve even begun hiring workers.”

I immediately regret how all of this sounds. I do care about workers. I care about the cost of living and child care, but I need a minute to breathe and meet with advisors. That’s what I should have said. Instead, I reacted, and now I fear I’ve fucked up yet another interview.

Jessica's eyes are full of hurt, masked by coldness.

"Fine. Maybe I will," she says, gathering her things and marching out of the coffee shop, leaving me alone with Meredith.

"Wait," I try, but she's already halfway out the door.

I stand, but then remember, I'm supposed to play along. We're keeping people off the scent. I didn't realize I'd be acting out an entire skit to accomplish that goal, but here I am.

"It seems we got off on the wrong foot. Again." I slump back into my seat and take a sip of my coffee.

The barista is now swooping over to our table with a plate of muffins. To my left, Gunther takes a step forward. To do what? Do jiu-jitsu on the coffee man? In a move that is both territorial but sweet, the coffee man kisses the top of Meredith's head and rubs her back. "Can I get you anything?"

He doesn't address me.

She smiles up at him and touches his arm. "Besides the muffins? No, we're good."

The barista looks at me, then heads back to fuss with some machines behind the counter.

"Can I speak boldly?" Meredith asks.

I unwrap the paper from the bottom of one that looks like banana nut, my favorite. "Sure."

She takes a giant bite of a blueberry muffin, and I wait for what she needs to say.

"Both of you talking over each other and not really communicating."

She doesn't know how right she is.

"Meredith, what would you do if you were me?"

She runs her pregnant belly and stares back at me with big eyes. "If I were...you?"

"If money were no object and you wanted to do something nice for J...for the town?"

“Oh, I can’t tell you what to do with your money.”

I laugh, “This might be your only chance to tell someone like me what to do, Meredith. Take a shot at it.”

Something clicks. “Oh! I’d buy the old movie theater and fix it up.”

My thoughts go back to yesterday when Jessica mentioned the decrepit old buildings downtown.

“Empty movie theater?”

She nods. “It’s over a hundred years old, and it’s been sitting empty for decades. Pretty sad. Jessica’s in love with it. She stares at it longingly every day on her way to work. If I were you, I’d do it soon before Jessica takes it upon herself and goes into financial ruin on the mold removal alone.”

Interesting.

I thank Meredith and the barista, and politely excuse myself.

The first order of business today will be to call my realtor.

Chapter Seven

JESSICA

I ARRIVE HOME to half a dozen packages on the welcome mat in front of my apartment.

My stomach lurches at the sight of them, wondering if I drunk-ordered things from Amazon.

I haven't been drunk in the last few days, so my credit card is safe. Ish.

My brain feels like mush after spending all day on the phone chasing down anyone who can tell me about the tax incentives offered to Alex Martin. The mayor, the town council, the economic development director—nobody knows anything.

And I know from the minutes of all the city meetings that nothing was voted on. Only to approve the tech hub's plans and study the environmental impact.

It seems too good to be true that he wasn't given one tax break or any incentives other than buying the land cheaply.

After coming up with nothing, I ended up banging out an opinion piece about everything I've been trying to get Alex Martin to answer for. I turned it in to Donna, who looked it over, laughed, and handed it back to me.

"You raise valid questions, but let's not make him an enemy just yet," she says.

“So you do want Darling Creek to be overtaken by fast food litter and cheap housing for workers who spend their weekend money in Bozeman? You want this to be a bedroom community?”

“People already go to Bozeman to spend money,” she said. “Go home and cool off.”

I drag the mysterious boxes inside and shut the door; I don’t have the wherewithal to open them. Sophie gave me enough trouble while I was shoving the boxes around; I don’t want to deal with her attacking boxes and boxes of packing peanuts.

I flop down on the sofa and go through my mail, idly wondering what to make for dinner tonight: mushroom ramen or chicken ramen?

Yuck.

I better call the landlord and ask him to extend my grace period. He answers on the first ring, which is unusual for him.

“Hi, it’s Jessica Miller, and I’m sorry to ask this, but could you give me another week? Things are really tight at the moment, and I’m really sorry.”

The man gruffly replies, “Ma’am, are you okay?”

“What do you mean?”

“You paid your rent.”

I hardly feel like arguing if this guy made a clerical error, but my curiosity gets the better of me.

“I did?”

“Yes, ma’am. You paid this month’s rent and the next.”

“I did?” I sound like an idiot robot on a loop.

“I have to ask again, are you okay? Did you mean to do that?”

Sophie nudges my hand, wanting a petting session, but I’m frozen at the moment.

I pause and think. “Did you get checks from me?”

“Nah, it was a bank transfer. Not your usual payment method but not like I’m gonna dispute it.”

“What bank?”

“I dunno. Chase, Bank of America? One of those big ones, I don’t remember. I can look it up if you want.”

I don’t have an account with a big bank; I bank solely with the tiny Darling Creek Bank, so I can talk to humans if I have an issue.

I thank the landlord and hang up, wondering what happened.

As soon as I hang up, I get a call from the body shop and prepare for the bad news. “Yeah, that Camry you dropped off? Someone came and paid for the new transmission, and they want to buy it.”

“They what?”

Am I living in a bizarro world where everything is mysteriously good all of a sudden?

Then I think about it. The dozen boxes by my door. The flowers and candy, and wine yesterday.

Alex Martin is doing this. No, that can’t be. Why would he?

Maybe because he can? But how?

“What did the man look like?” I ask.

The mechanic grunts and finally says, “I dunno. Suit. Bossy. Do you wanna sell it or not? You have to bring the title. Doesn’t matter to me, as long as you pick up the other car.”

My stomach lurches. “What other car?”

He sighs. “The one that same guy bought for you that we had for sale on the lot. A brand new Subaru, four-wheel drive. Nice and safe for a young lady like yourself. You two really need to have a conversation.”

I would if I knew who was doing all this.

Oh, but I know.

“Thanks,” I say dumbly because I’m still in shock. “I... guess I’ll be by in the morning, and then I’ll be out of your hair?”

Click.

Now that I suddenly have money to pay down my student loans, I figure I’ll take care of that.

But when I log on to my student loan account, the balance is zero dollars.

“Okay, now I’m just a little freaked out.”

Sophie meows in response, and I appreciate the rare moment of empathy from the orange feline.

I stare at my phone, but he hasn’t communicated since he was so mean this morning. And now he’s paying my bills and buying me cars...and what the hell?

It has to be him, doesn’t it?

I should call him. No, I should track him down and thank him face-to-face. No, I should slap him because how dare he access my accounts.

And yet, I’m too tired to get up off this sofa.

What does get me up off the couch is the doorbell ringing.

My heart stutters as I scramble to my feet. Sophie dashes away, and I sprint to the door. Another delivery has arrived. No more flowers, thank goodness, but one of the high school bag boys from Trudy’s supermarket stands at my threshold.

“Hi, Miles,” I say, confused. “What’s all this?”

“Groceries,” he says with zero irony.

Okay then.

“Uh, I didn’t order any groceries, Miles.”

“Someone did. That’s your address on the slip, right?”

I check the slip stapled to the outside of one of the overloaded bags in his arms. Yep, that’s me.

Carefully and still confused, I take the bags from him and move them to the counter in the kitchen. To my surprise, Miles follows behind me with two more bags.

“What the...”

The kid ignores my questions and keeps unloading bags into my kitchen until my tiny countertops are packed, and he’s forced to set the rest on kitchen chairs.

“Who sent all this?”

“Dunno,” the kid replies. “The only time I’ve seen this many groceries delivered as a gift, it’s because someone is really sick or a family member died.”

He pauses and looks at me straight on. “You’re not sick or dealing with funeral stuff, are you?”

I shake my head and reassure him that I’m neither of those things.

Besides, I’m sure I know who sent all this food. Not officially, but I know.

Scrounging some folding money from my purse, I tip the kid. I attack the groceries like a starving raccoon before the kid is out the door.

Cooking isn’t my favorite, but I know how to do a few things my grandmother taught me.

Alex, or “whoever,” must have cleaned out every shelf at our tiny supermarket because my kitchen cabinets are choked with pantry items. I forgo cooking myself a meal and instead fill bowls with the assortments of snack foods: Oreos, pretzels, and mixed nuts. The man did not skimp.

I almost feel bad about walking out of the coffee shop in a snit earlier today.

Ugh. Fine.

ME: You didn’t have to do that, but thank you.

Alex: Do what?

Me: Send a half-dressed hunky UPS worker.

Alex: What?

Alex: Half dressed? What the hell?

Me: Oh, you mean you weren't setting me up on a date? Was I not supposed to give him my phone number?

I DON'T ACKNOWLEDGE ALL the other stuff, such as paying my rent, because I don't officially know the truth.

A soft knock on the door nearly has me jumping out of my skin.

Alex stands on the other side when I open the door, a strange look on his face.

“Are you messing with me?”

“What are you doing here? Someone will see you!”

He doesn't answer, so I look past him and see no sign of the usual bodyguards. Uh, okay.

“Are you messing with me?” he repeats.

Alex's face looks worried. He's in the same suit as this morning, not as formal as yesterday's for the photo op, but still looking like he walked out of the pages of a magazine. His hair is slightly disheveled, like he's been running his hand through it. There's a bit of dust on his shoulder and a smudge of dirt on his cheek.

Huh. Maybe he likes to get his hands dirty at the job site in a three-piece suit. Why is the thought of that so damn endearing?

“About the UPS guy? Yes. I wasn't even here when these boxes came. But I did give the bag boy a nice tip.”

I watch his face as he bites back something. “I'm not like this. I don't get obsessed or jealous. And I don't show up at a woman's house unannounced without my fucking annoying entourage.”

“And yet, here you are.”

My face remains passive, but inside, I'm screaming. The more words he says, the more out of sorts Alex seems. He's always so put together, but something is bothering him.

"I'm not like this," he repeats through gritted teeth. "When I want to date someone, my team picks them up and brings them to me. It protects both of us from the press, from the public taking videos."

I don't ask why he didn't do that for me, but I wonder. Not that I need his protection, but I have to believe this spontaneity is not because he doesn't care about my reputation.

"Is something wrong, Alex?"

He briefly closes his eyes, his jaw ticking. Oh yeah. Something is wrong.

"You'd better come in before someone sees you," I say, reaching for his necktie. "Where is your security detail, anyway?"

"Is that what you want to talk about?"

I step aside and wave him inside.

Does he realize it's already risky to date someone in a small town, even for an average person? Everyone knows everyone's business.

Are we dating? He said the word "date."

Dating a billionaire in Darling Creek? Oh boy. This is going to get really messy, really fast.

But maybe I don't care.

Alex Fucking Martin is in my apartment.

Chapter Eight

Alex

“WHAT ARE YOU DOING?”

I came here to talk to her, to tell her I can't stop thinking about how we left things this morning.

And yet she's scurrying around the apartment, turning on music, adjusting lighting, cleaning up.

“It just occurred to me,” she pants, looking over her shoulder at me as she tosses a bunch of clothes into a hamper, “that I have a celebrity in my studio apartment, and it's a mess.”

I scoff. “You should see my bedroom in L.A.”

She turns and gives me a look. “Your bedroom in your mansion in L.A. the day before the maid comes?”

I eat up the distance between us, and when she turns around from picking up whatever the hell is occupying her, she yelps in surprise to see me standing right there.

“Crap!”

“Stop cleaning up. I don't have a lot of time.”

“For what?” Jessica asks.

“For my security guards to figure out where I am,” I say.

She stands there with her mouth hanging open, eyes wide in shock. “Wh-why did you ditch them?”

I take the laundry basket, set it on the floor, and close the final few feet between us.

Jessica looks up at me with an expression like she doesn’t know she already owns me, body and soul.

I lean in, and our lips connect. She gasps in surprise but then blows my mind by kissing me back. Yes. This was a good idea. The best idea.

She melts into the kiss, and my heart batters my ribs.

I tease and play first, covering her soft mouth with short, sweet kisses, testing her reactions. Jessica’s dazed expression urges me onward, and I capture her lips between mine, feeling her gentle sighs all the way down to my cock.

My hands curl around her jaw, angling her just so, allowing me to taste, nip, and explore every inch of her perfect, pink lips. She smells like honey. I salivate as my mind races ahead to thoughts of putting my mouth between her thighs, seeking out the source of that honey scent.

Jessica’s soft moan against my mouth might be the end of me. Her exhales are quickly growing ragged, matching my need for her.

I tease my tongue over the seam of her lips, testing her limits but not pushing. Jessica’s mouth opens and draws me in, her tongue stroking against mine in a flirtatious dance. So warm and sweet, Jessica tastes like red wine and cocoa.

I pull back slightly. “You’re not drunk, are you?”

“What? No,” she breathes. “But you shouldn’t have sent a whole case of wine if you’re concerned about my drinking habits.” She gestures to the box clearly marked with my vineyard’s logo.

I press my forehead to hers. “I’m not concerned; I just don’t want to take advantage if you’re tipsy.”

Her hands go to my suit coat lapels, and she draws me down for another kiss, this one more forceful than before. As I

taste and savor her lips, Jessica's breath comes in short gasps, and her hands flutter over my chest as if she doesn't know where or how to touch me.

She moans into my mouth, and I want to pump my fist.

I pull away from the kiss to look at her face.

"That's a good noise, right?"

She blinks up at me, smiling. "Yes. I just...it's you...this is crazy..."

I give her a dark look. "Do you want to stop?"

Heat spreads over her cheeks, and she shakes her head no. "I don't want to stop until they catch up to us. I want to thank whoever paid my rent...."

A teasing kiss.

"Whoever bought me a new car...."

A hungry, licking kiss...

"And whoever paid off my student loan...."

She cups my dick, and it jerks, straining against my zipper.

"But I don't officially know who did any of that," she whispers.

Growling, I circle my arms around her waist and lift her up for another kiss, her feet coming off the floor. Everything feels better with her at the same height. I can kiss her deeper and explore more of her sexy mouth. Her arms tight around my neck make me feel like a boyfriend.

Am I?

We can discuss that...later.

Jessica's legs scramble for purchase, so I hoist her thighs around my waist.

It feels so good to hold her like this and kiss her, my hands gripped tight to the backs of her curvy thighs.

"Whoever did all of that didn't do it to get kissed by you. For the record," I say.

Jessica smirks. “Sure. But let’s pretend they did. It makes it that much dirtier.”

Oh my god, I love this woman. Love, love, love her.

With our lips locked in a bout of wet, fervent kisses, I move us as one over to the bed in the corner of her tiny one-room apartment.

I release her onto the bed, where she kneels before me, her face eager and wanting, her hands fidgeting with my belt buckle.

I slide out of my suit jacket and chuck it on the floor. Jessica shrieks. She moves to pick it up.

Boldly, I grasp both her wrists in my hands and give her a stern look. “Leave it,” I grit out.

Her eyes flash, and my mouth is on hers again.

She whimpers when I run my hands up the outside of her thighs and smooth my palms over her ass on top of her skirt. No lines detected.

“No panties? Good girl.”

“It’s a thong, genius,” she whispers. “Do you think I’m going to go commando at work and just rain all over my skirt, thinking about the flirty, presumptuous billionaire I’m writing about?”

My arousal launches into orbit.

I kiss Jessica again, this time hungrily, and gently push her onto her back. I’m over her on the mattress, my hand working its way up her skirt. I find the heat between her thighs, the dampness making me weak. And thirsty.

“Feel how fucking wet you are....”

Jessica makes little noises at my touch, licking the inside of my mouth.

Enough soft moaning; I want to make her wake up the neighbors. I cover her throat with wet, claiming kisses, blazing a path to the open neck of her button-up shirt.

“Alex,” she whines.

I nip one button with my teeth. “Say the word if I’m going too fast.”

She rasps, “How much time do we have?”

“Until they find us? About fifteen minutes.” I tug at the crotch of her thong, trying to decide if I’m going to ruin it.

She groans and rocks her hips upward as my hand explores her folds, fingers dipping into her heat and glazing my skin in her wetness.

“If you came all this way for a fifteen-minute tryst, I hope you brought a condom.”

“I did.”

“Fucking confident, aren’t you,” she laughs, following that with a shocked cry as my fingers slide deeper, and my thumb strokes her taut clit.

“No, just hopeful,” I say, nibbling open the next button, letting the material slide away to reveal a lacy pink bra underneath. I curse at how pretty she looks with my hand between her legs and her shirt disheveled, revealing so much untouched skin.

I lean down to kiss and rub my face over the heaving swells that spill over the edges of her bra.

“So soft. So...fucking perfect.”

Jessica yips in surprise when I dip lower to mouth one breast through the lacy material, and fill my free hand with her other breast. She moans and pushes against me, grinding against the hand that claims her pussy.

I strum her hard clit faster at her urging until she comes against my hand, her fingers fisting my shirt. I toy with her through her orgasm with sweeping touches to her clit, and firmly sucking one nipple.

Once she’s sated and I finally let go, she watches me lick my fingers clean, savoring her taste.

She reaches for me. But I forgo a cuddle and opt instead to quickly help her shed her skirt and discard the thong. I need room for what I'm about to do.

Chapter Nine

JESSICA

I FELL to pieces when Alex went two fingers deep into me, making me come faster than ever before.

The shattered pieces of my arousal quickly get put back together while watching him work fiercely to get rid of my skirt, ripping my thong, knowing what comes next. Even before my first orgasm is completely finished with me, his face is between my thighs.

The sweep of his tongue against my folds is almost too much, yet I pant for more, knowing we're short on time.

“Alex!”

“Good girl,” he murmurs between wicked licks of his tongue. “My good girl is so wet for me.”

My fingers knot in his hair, wishing he would shut up and fuck me with his tongue but also loving what his words do to me. Every word makes me melt deeper into this moment until everything is a haze of pleasure.

The taunting preamble over, Alex spreads open my folds and dives in like a man on fire.

I come up off the bed, electricity arcing through me.

His hot breath, his panting mouth between tastes, the scrape of whiskers on his chin, the sounds of his tongue inside

my hole, it's all too much and not enough.

I'm a mess and only getting messier. I lose myself in the moment.

And then, he suction his lips around my clit. The noise I make is inhuman.

It would be embarrassing with anyone else, but Alex only gives a satisfied hum as he sucks, licks, and teases my clit. He's fucking proud of himself for turning me into a cat in heat.

This man.

Just when I thought this was it—that now I continue to lose myself in the moment and wait for my orgasm—he breaks my brain. Alex's two big hands come around and grab two handfuls of my ass, lifting my hips off the bed and devouring me at a whole new angle.

I shout his name as he pushes me over the edge, my second orgasm shattering through me harder than before.

He insists on kissing my thighs throughout, prolonging the release that pulses through me.

To my dismay, he rolls away from me while I'm still in the grip of my second orgasm. I turn to cling to him until I realize he's putting on a condom. His belt clatters to the floor as he drops his trousers and briefs.

I want to pout at not getting to see him naked. I want to scratch something in frustration for not getting a good look at his equipment. But the pouting turns to panic at a loud knock on my door.

I gasp.

"Fuck," he says.

That's it, then. I say, "We can try again later if you...."

My words cut off when Alex is over me on the bed again, his mouth on mine in a heated, angry kiss.

He pulls back, and, both of us breathless, he notches the tip of his sheathed cock inside my entrance.

And oh my god, whoever is knocking at the door will have to wait.

“Alex, you in there?”

He lets out a tight grunt as if trying to keep quiet.

“Be right out.” He throws the words over his shoulder, his annoyance clear.

“If you need to go....” I whisper.

He turns his face back to me, looking confused.

“I don’t need to go anywhere but inside your hot little pussy, baby.”

I almost laugh. For someone who says the wrong things when confronted by a reporter, he’s pretty decent at dirty talk.

More than decent. I’m astoundingly wet once again.

I run my hands over his shirt, wishing to strip him down and feel his skin.

“Soon,” he says, kissing the tip of my nose. “Soon, we’ll be able to take our time.”

Another knock at the door. “Alex!”

I nod and whisper, “If we’re gonna fuck, then let’s fuck because the more I hear someone else talking, the faster I’ll dry right up.”

Alex groans and laughs against my throat, and the sensation is perfection.

He pushes in all the way to the hilt, and his thickness makes me feel split open in the best way possible.

He pulls out and smashes back in, firing off sparks of pleasure throughout my body, down to the tips of my toes. I feel him everywhere.

Alex’s hips jerk erratically, and I don’t try to match his rhythm. I just wrap my legs around him and hold on.

His face is strained as if holding back the need to go faster, harder.

I reach up and touch his face, and it softens. “Do what you need to do to me, Alex. I can take it.” As my thumb brushes his bottom lip, he takes it into his mouth and nips it playfully. The scrape of his teeth and tongue makes my tight muscles looser and wetter. He feels it too, and groans my name.

The moment feels too much like lovers savoring each other and less like frantic sex.

At my verbal cue, he pulls out. My body screams at the loss, but then Alex is flipping me over and railing my pussy from behind.

I yelp as he enters me much more forcefully than before, his hands on my hips guiding me.

“Fuck, that feels good,” he rumbles, teeth nipping my shoulder blade.

Indeed. Alex is everywhere, it seems. Inside, over, around, and even under me, with one hand gripping my tit, the other controlling my movements, clapping our bodies together at a furious pace.

His breath comes in short, ragged bursts, and he’s not even trying to be quiet. I know Gunther can hear precisely what’s going on in here. He has to know, and yet he’s still knocking. Harder now, and shouting.

“Alex, this isn’t protocol!”

He says it like his boss ran out to pick up ice cream without security clearing the area first.

It’s insane to know I’m getting fucked within an inch of my life, and there’s a bodyguard out there itching to pull Alex off me.

Well, fuck it. I don’t care.

I didn’t have “getting fucked from behind by a billionaire” on my life’s bingo card, but here we are. When am I ever going to get this chance again?

The knocking and shouting continue, and it seems to somehow drive Alex to thrust harder, faster. He moves inside

me at an insane pace, meanwhile tweaking my nipple so furiously that I squirt.

Nothing would surprise me anymore. Alex has given me so much, and now he's taking. And I'm here for it.

Oh my god, he's good. Every pinch, every squeeze, every word from his mouth makes me wetter.

The knocks on the door grow even louder, the shouts more urgent. "Goddammit, this is not how we do this, sir!"

The combination of "sir" with the angry cussing amuses me, but I cannot form words as Alex slams into me again. The metal legs of the bed scrape against the cheap linoleum. He moves in me so hard I nearly collapse onto my stomach. I would have if his grip on my hips wasn't keeping me up on my knees.

He blurts out a string of curses as he explodes into me, filling the condom with his spend. The cursing, straining, gurgling—all the crazy noises would be embarrassing if it didn't somehow make me hornier.

What's actually awkward about this moment is him saying my name the way he does.

"Jessica," he murmurs, kissing up my spine.

Alex massages my ass, gently pulling out, his breath still ragged.

"Jessica." His kisses are sweet and languid, like a lover's.

My name on his lips squeezes my heart, and I have to check myself.

This isn't your boyfriend, Jessica. This is Alex Martin, post-orgasm.

I, for one, can stay in this delirious moment no longer, what with the banging and the knocking on the door.

Sophie skulks out from under the bed, shoots us a disdainful look, and slinks off to her perch by the window.

This was reckless, what we just did. The cat knows it. I know it.

“Where did the cat come from?” Alex asks, half sitting up in bed. “Please tell me she wasn’t watching.”

How did he know my cat’s a she? I shake my head. “She hides under my bed whenever I have visitors.”

He groans. “And now that I’ve traumatized your cat, I’d better be going.”

Alex studies my face as I roll over to watch him get dressed.

“Don’t get up.”

I laugh. “Couldn’t if I wanted to. Pretty sure my legs are cooked noodles.”

He pads away to my tiny bathroom, presumably to chuck the condom. When he returns, my eyes feast on his still-half-mast hog before he tucks it into his briefs, then tugs his trousers and does up his belt.

He laughs, then leans over the bed to kiss me again.

He whispers in my ear, “Open the fucking boxes before you go to bed. Whoever sent those wants photographic proof.”

I sigh and give him my uncharacteristic doe eyes. “Bossy,” I say.

Chapter Ten

JESSICA

THE PHOTOGRAPHIC PROOF I send to my bossy billionaire fuck-buddy includes the following:

1. A photo of my sad bathtub, lined with boutique candles filled with dried flowers and scented bubbles from Paris. With a jealous Sophie perched on the ledge.
2. A stack of the fluffiest white towels made with organic cotton.
3. My sagging mattress now covered with high-thread count designer sheets.
4. Me in my new designer pajamas, which I happen to know are a well-kept secret of that clothing brand by those twins who used to be childhood actors.

I TEXT all of this to Alex with the stupidest smile on my face.

He texts back a goofy emoji of the disco-dancing man.

ME: My tiny studio apartment now requires renters insurance because the items contained within cost more than my rent.

Alex: Fine. Send me the bill.

Me: Alex.

Alex: Don't do that. Don't waste my time by resisting me.

Me: That sounds super dirty when you say it like that.

Alex: I'm glad you're using the stuff I sent.

Me: Ah, but you didn't send those things. I have no idea who sent any of it. Remember?

Alex: Right. That.

Alex: Listen, I'm taking the newspaper staff to lunch tomorrow. Try to act like we don't know each other so... intimately.

Me: I don't know you that intimately. But I understand. Not a problem on my end.

Alex: It's a problem for me. I'm...I like you, Jessica.

Me: Then why bother taking the staff to lunch? Why risk being found out if you're going to stare at my tits the whole time and make me blush?

Alex: Because I want to see you for more than a fifteen-minute fuck. I want to have lunch with you, and this is one way I can see you out in the open.

OH. Wow.

I have to check myself and keep rechecking myself with this man. Sure, he likes messing around with me. He likes buying me things. It's the same thing as his projects. Once he's got what he needs, he'll move on.

ME: People will know we've been fucking. You can just tell.

Alex: I don't know about that. But I'm sure people will be able to tell that I have feelings for you.

Me: What kind of feelings?

Alex: The kind of feelings that make sex not enough. I want to wake up with you next to me. I want to take walks outside where everyone can see us. I want to share meals with

you. I want to know what books you like, what movies, what music. I want to know about your childhood. All of it.

I PAUSE, praying that this isn't going where I think it's going. I've had guys shame me for going too fast before we've gotten to know each other, as if that's my fault alone.

ME: Are you regretting what we did tonight?

Alex: Not at all.

Me: Me either. I worry because some people lose interest after the physical stuff.

Alex: Then those people are dumbasses. If anything, I'm more interested.

Me: But for how long?

ALEX PAUSES AT THAT. I watch the three little dots appear and disappear a few times, then drop off.

It's fine, I tell myself. I can't be putting demands on a billionaire's time. People clamor for his attention everywhere he goes. He guest-lectures at MIT, Cornell, Harvard. He attends summits of world leaders, testifies to Congress regarding internet security, and god knows what else.

The man doesn't belong to me. He may like me, but he's not in love with me.

And that's all fine. It's all fine as long as I guard my heart and enjoy the ride.

I chuck my phone onto the mattress and slide under my new sheets and blankets. I have to smile at the irony of having ultra-luxury pajamas and bedding but no quarters to wash everything first. I can hear my grandmother now: "Don't put that on before you wash it; you don't know where it's been!"

Well, she wasn't wrong.

Tomorrow, I'll ask Alex to spot me some quarters for the laundromat. I can't wait to see his response to that.

Chapter Eleven

Alex

“BUT FOR HOW LONG?”

I repeat the words out loud to no one as I sit in the back of my car next to Gunther.

“What does that mean, ‘for how long’?”

It’s a long, boring, quiet ride back to the hotel in Bozeman. Per my security protocol, Gunther insists I travel with him rather than use the round-trip Lyft car I’d pre-paid for. So, I’d tipped the driver and faced the fallout with the people I pay to protect me.

Gunther doesn’t say much. Mostly he spends his time eyeballing our surroundings.

He knows I don’t need to be reminded of what a terrible idea it was to use other transportation or wander around in public, no matter how much I compensate people to keep silent. I know it was reckless, but I keep returning to one certainty: none of this will matter a year from now. None of it will matter when Jessica and I are married.

I wish I had someone to talk to about all of this. My brother died as a teenager. Parents? Not the best relationship. Friends? Sure, I have a lot of friends in L.A. Dinner party friends, weekends-in-Malibu friends, friends from the gym,

buddies who I see court-side at Laker games. But no one I can talk to about what I'm going through.

There's the actor who owns a ranch not far from here — that wasn't a lie when I mentioned him to Jessica the other day — but he's on location in Croatia or somewhere, shooting a TV show. He's not the kind of friend you bother when they're working.

And this is how I know I've done it all wrong.

I've surrounded myself with security guards, handlers, assistants, and the occasional date for special events, but no friends.

All the money in the world, and there's no one I can talk to about Jessica.

“Gunther,” I try.

“Yeah, boss,” he says, his eyes trained on the darkness outside the vehicle. What he could be looking for, I have no idea. He's the only one on my crew who will give me a straight answer, which is why I like him the best.

“How did you know you met the person you would marry?”

He makes a noise, huffing out a rough laugh at some memory I'm not privy to. “I didn't know when I met her. She didn't much like me, and the feeling was sorta mutual.”

“Then how did you get to know her? How did you get from point A to her marriage?”

“She was a job.”

I take a beat to translate what that means. “You worked for her?”

He nods. “Sara was a young animal rights activist. Her uncle happens to be well-off, and when he got wind of what she was getting into—breaking and entering animal testing labs—he hired my firm to low-key keep an eye on her. She figured it out quickly and was not a fan of me tailing her. But over time, things got heated. Someone snitched on me, of course, and I got fired. But by then, I was already helping her

with her bunny problem, so I didn't have much time for anything else. Nothing left to do but get married, I figured."

"Bunny problem?"

He laughs. "She showed me her storage locker, illegally full of bunny cages. And I knew then I had to marry her."

I don't say anything but stare at him for the longest time.

He sees me staring and shrugs one of his massive shoulders. "You had to be there."

That seems like a lot more chaos than Gunther would put up with.

"What if I told you I'm going to marry Jessica?"

"I'd say congratulations," he says. "She seems like a good woman."

"Okay, but here's the problem. I don't think she thinks I'm serious. She keeps saying stuff like, 'you like me for now.' What do I gotta do?"

Gunther laughs and says, "Can I be frank, boss?"

"I wish someone would be."

"You just have to tell her exactly how you feel. You're Alex Fucking Martin. You're not just any Joe Blow off the street. She'll listen if you make it perfectly clear what you want."

Back in my hotel room, I type out my feelings six or seven times before my eyelids begin to droop.

My king-sized hotel bed in Bozeman isn't half as cozy as Jessica's creaky full-size.

A part of me wishes I'd told Gunther to hit the bricks and let me stay there all night.

But I know that's now how things work. He was doing the job I pay him to do.

Tomorrow I'll have Gunther move me to a bed and breakfast in Darling Creek. If I'm going to be seeing Jessica, I need to be closer.

I'm going to have to tell her. That much is true.
But it's going to be in person and not over text.

Chapter Twelve

JESSICA

MY RESOLVE TO keep our relationship a secret is tested at our staff meeting the next day.

Donna is talking, but all I can think about is his face, his kiss, the way he made me come twice in fifteen minutes, then dicked me through my janky old mattress.

What will he be wearing today? Focus on that.

“...I know you all saw Jessica’s story about the company breaking ground for its newest hub here in town. Alex Martin is also taking out a two-page full-color spread in the Sunday issue and sponsoring the town’s summer carnival this year. Mr. Martin is here now and wants to meet the rest of our staff, so I hope you’ll make him feel welcome.”

Oh, right. I’m supposed to act like I don’t like him, to throw everyone off the scent.

I make a noise and close my laptop a little too forcefully.

Donna says, “Jessica, I know the two of you got off on the wrong foot. But his company is saving our advertising budget during the upcoming summer dry spell, so consider everyone’s Christmas bonus when you give him a hard time.”

For good measure, I throw in a heavy sigh and mutter, “Oh yay, the pompous, presumptuous Silicon Valley putz is here.”

Meredith shoots me a quizzical look, and I train my face not to crack a smile. Alex is not the only person who overcompensates under pressure.

Seconds later, Gunther enters the room, and I feel my face turn crimson.

Andrea and Chapman enter the room, looking bored as always. I'm not ready for Alex.

Today he fills out a linen suit like a goddamn golden god.

Holy Moses on the mountain, the man glows. He fucking glows when he looks at me.

We are so busted.

“Los Angeles, actually,” Alex corrects me. “Too casual in Silicon Valley for me. I like to dress up for work.”

I snort over-dramatically, then catch myself staring at the bulge at his crotch.

“Thank you all for letting me crash your daily meeting. I don't want to bore you to death, but I'd love it if you'd let me take the staff to lunch so we can all get to know each other.”

“I'm on my way out to interview the new hockey coach,” Holmes says. “I won't be able to join you all. I'm sorry, and thank you.”

That leaves Franny, Meredith, Donna, and me catching a ride in yet another stretch SUV, this one taking us to Willie's for lunch.

“Not exactly the L.A. food scene you're used to. Unless you like fried lake trout, onion rings, barbecue ribs,” I say as we enter the large, dark dining room that serves decent bar food during regular hours and doubles as a sometimes rowdy honky-tonk at night.

“Sounds perfect,” he says, humoring me, holding open the door. I blush when he pulls my chair out, and Donna looks at me in surprise.

She's about to say something when she's distracted by a text on her phone. “Oh no,” she moans, bolting to her feet.

“It’s the press manager. Something’s broken down, and he says they won’t be able to print the paper tonight. I’m sorry, everyone. I have to call a backup printer in the next town and see if they have an open slot. It’s a long shot, but I won’t be able to join you all for lunch.”

She dashes out of the restaurant, leaving the rest of us looking shocked. “That’s never happened before, has it?” Meredith asks.

“I’ve only been here two years, but in that time, no. I’ve never heard of that happening.”

As the server hands us our menus, Franny begs off, saying she just remembered she was waiting for a call from one of the public defenders for a story she’s working on.

This would not be an issue except that Franny was sitting between Alex and me, and now I have no buffer. As predicted, Alex scoots over and takes over the seat next to me.

Oh no. He’s so close I can smell his cologne. Dior? No, that’s...that’s just him. His natural scent, and it’s so, so good I have to cross my legs under the table.

Meredith is the next to leave, making up some excuse about a forgotten appointment at the OB-GYN.

And now, it’s just the two of us.

I scan the room and finally notice that there’s no one else here except Alex’s entourage.

I turn to him. “Did you clear the room just for lunch?”

“I didn’t. That would be Gunther. He takes his job very seriously.”

Everyone leaving almost at the same time seems too coincidental. “Did you somehow orchestrate all of that?”

“I can’t take credit for Meredith or Franny leaving. That was just dumb luck.”

“But...” I press, giving him a stern look.

“But what?” Alex responds with faux innocence.

“There’s no emergency in the press room, is there?”

“Maybe there is, and maybe there isn’t.”

Alex sips the glass of water our server just delivered, and his face is inscrutable.

“Teach me your ways, Alex Martin. I’d love to know more about how to make bosses disappear.”

Alex chokes in laughter and splutters water down his chin. It’s so adorably human that I almost, maybe, fall in love with him a tiny bit.

“So. Is this our first official date?”

“I wasn’t planning on it as such, but yes, I suppose it is.”

I frown. “Not fair. You didn’t give me a chance to decide what to wear. What does one wear to a date with a billionaire?”

“Ideally, nothing.”

I playfully swat his knee under the table, and he laughs.

Alex is much more relaxed around me today. I like him like this.

“I was hoping our first official date would be Napa,” he says, perusing the menu.

I’d been sitting forward, leaning into him, but now I sit back in my chair. “You want to take me to Napa. California. For a date.”

“Yeah. Ever been?”

I can taste the wine already. Feel the California sun on my skin. “No. I’ve never been able to afford a trip like that.”

“You would love it. Hell, let’s go right now. Can you beg off work for the rest of the afternoon?”

I would swat him again, but he’s dead serious.

“Come on, Alex. Not everyone can just hop on a plane whenever, wherever.”

“I can. And you’re with me. I’ll have you back in time for work in the morning if the date goes well,” he says with a wink, as if he’s suggesting nothing more extraordinary than ordering fish instead of chicken on a wild impulse.

This is too perfect. Too sudden, and too good to be true. I can’t put my finger on it, but it feels like he’s showing off what his money can do, and I don’t know if I like it.

The gifts, the rent, my student loans, my car—all of it felt like he was taking care of me. It felt good. I loved it. This feels...different. Splashy. Like the sort of thing people on reality shows do to show how kooky and spontaneous they are, when the truth is they can do these things solely because of money.

“I can’t just do that.” I give him an incredulous smile, letting him know I still can’t believe he’s serious.

“Why not? Come on. Let me take you to my vineyard for dinner,” he says.

I can’t believe I’m about to say this, but the word comes out automatically.

“No.”

Chapter Thirteen

Alex

“NO?” I repeat back to her.

Jessica shakes her head.

Well, shit.

“Oh. Okay.” Shot down in my prime. Just when I thought things were going well. Gunther said I needed to show her I’m serious, but that didn’t work.

“Too forward? Too much too soon? Too...irresponsible?”

At this, Jessica rolls her eyes. “Of course, I can make up an excuse to leave work. I can text Donna and let her know you agreed to an exclusive interview. It’s just that...well, I hate to say this at the risk of pissing off the world’s most eligible bachelor....”

“Please. I hate that. I’m just Alex.”

“...But it’s a suggestion that feels a little out of touch. Look at it this way: A fashion magazine gives you the more affordable look of something a celebrity wore, which still feels way out of my price range. Do you get the comparison?”

Did she just tell me I’m out of touch? Am I out of touch?

“I get what you’re saying, but this is different. I’m treating you to something fun because I’m crazy about you, and I want to do crazy shit with you,” I reply. “Besides, you deserve it.”

Jessica blinks at me, hesitating to come back with a retort. “I do deserve it,” she replies with a wry smile. “But think about what you’re asking me to do. You live in a different reality than I do.”

I fall silent, and think.

Am I a different person than I used to be? Did I lose my soul along the way?

Memories come back from childhood...being yelled at when I asked my mother if she was going to order school photos...having to line up for free lunch and getting mocked by other kids...

These are memories that kept me grounded for so long. A part of me got lost along the way.

“I hear you,” I tell her, my ego fighting with the need for a moment of self-examination.

She goes on. “Besides, those private planes are terrible for the environment if you use them willy-nilly to jet back and forth on a whim. I get why a guy like you would need one. And it’s tempting. But for a one-day trip? No,” Jessica says.

I blow out a breath. “You’re not wrong. So, as this is our first official date, what do you want to do?”

She grins. “Talk? Get to know each other?”

Right. That would be the more reasonable and less insane option. Or we could go back to her place and...no. Not yet. She wants to talk? We can talk.

The food here is alright, pretty good for how strongly Jessica undersold it to me.

But all of it is made better by the company.

She asks, “Favorite episode of *The Office*. Go.”

“That’s easy. The one where Dwight lies about going to the dentist.”

“Good one,” she says.

“And yours?”

“Gossip. The one where Michael says a bunch of lies to distract people from him telling everyone Stanley is having an affair.”

“Top tier.”

The conversation ebbs and flows, and I feel more at ease the longer we talk.

We discover we have way more in common than we thought, including growing up with little money.

Of course, because of her research and things that have been common knowledge to the public, Jessica knows I grew up in subsidized housing with parents who didn't bother to parent my brother and me.

But she doesn't know this tidbit. “One time when the power was cut off, and we didn't know where our parents were, I sliced my hand while trying to open a can of Spaghettios. A neighbor cleaned it up and bandaged it for me. I begged her not to tell anyone. But it got infected, and she took us to the emergency room. That's how we ended up in foster care. That's the worst thing that ever happened. That's a story I never told anyone.”

Jessica's fork clatters to her plate, then she looks at me over her folded hands pressed against her lips. She says nothing at first, just blinks at me, and I begin to wonder if I overshared.

Dammit, I wish I knew how to do this.

Finally, she reaches over and rests her hand on mine. “I'm so sorry that happened to you, Alex.”

I shrug and turn my hand over, pointing to the scar across my palm.

She gasps, then traces a finger over the tissue. “You were nine?”

I nod.

“Oh my god, I was going to tell you my sad sack story, but it doesn't even compare.” Jessica lets go of my hand and wipes a tear.

“Hey, it’s okay,” I say.

“And I called you an out-of-touch snob. A Silicon Valley putz. I’m so sorry,” she murmurs between sniffles, dabbing her nose and scrambling for napkins from the dispenser on the table.

“Hey,” I say, rubbing her back. “It’s fine. Don’t cry over me. I turned out mostly okay, didn’t I?”

For some reason, this makes her cry more. “I just keep seeing you as a little boy with nothing to eat....”

Ah, shit. I have to get her out of here.

I flag down our server and order two desserts to go.

I was going to wait to show Jessica my secret project. I wanted it finished first.

But now seems like the perfect time.

Chapter Fourteen

JESSICA

ONCE I STOP my silly boo-hooing, Alex tells me it's time for phase two of our date.

I have no problem texting Donna that I'll be spending the rest of the afternoon with Alex.

She approves. I'm way ahead of schedule on most of my articles, so there's nothing I'm neglecting.

Alex guides me to the back alley behind Main Street with his entourage close behind.

"Where are we going?"

"You'll see."

Bodyguards or no, if this were any other guy, I would assume nothing good comes from walking down alleyways with a man alone.

We stop at the back of a three-story brick building with nothing signifying where we are. There's a noisy construction crew nearby with machines cutting tiles and wood, but I have no idea what they're doing here.

Alex motions to a set of metal double doors propped open, where burly guys haul out old smelly carpets, curtains, and other items.

"This way," he says.

“Sir.” Gunther steps ahead of me.

We wait on Gunther to clear the area, and I feel guilty that work has to come to a screeching halt just because we’re here.

It makes me a little sad if this is how Alex’s entire life is. And I understand why he sneaked away from his security detail last night. I don’t know how much of this I could take if I were in his shoes.

“You’re free to go inside. But put these on.” Gunther hands Alex and me bright yellow hard hats and safety glasses.

“Should I be worried?” I ask Alex, who helps me adjust mine before putting his hat on.

“If something falls, I’ll cover you,” he says, smiling down at me.

I laugh. “You look like Bob the Builder,” I say, remembering one of my favorite childhood TV shows.

“If you’re trying to make me feel old, it’s working,” he snorts.

“Please,” I chide him as he takes my hand and leads me down a dark hallway that smells like a combination of sawdust, sweat, and dirt. “I’m 26; you’re 38. We’ll have some pop culture gaps, so you’d better get used to it now.”

For some reason, this makes Alex squeeze my hand.

Moments later, we enter an enormous room with a vaulted floor that looks like it recently contained rows of seating bolted to the floor. All around us is scaffolding, behind which I can see ornate Art Deco crown molding and carvings on plaster walls.

My heart does a cartwheel when I realize where we are.

“Alex. This is the old movie theater,” I breathe.

“It is,” he says, spreading his jacket on the floor.

“What are you doing?”

He sets out our takeout dessert containers, then crouches down to sit on his jacket that I know costs more than my rent.

“Having dessert. Come on.” Alex reaches his hand out to help me sit with a modicum of grace.

“Your jacket...”

“Can be dry cleaned. Relax. Sheesh.”

I can’t eat at a time like this. I need answers. “Alex, what did you do? How? When? Why?”

Through a mouthful of apple crumble, he smiles gleefully. “Remember when you said there would be nothing for anyone to do here? Workers would move here, but there’s no entertainment?”

I nod. “And you said you had plans in the works but couldn’t tell me about them.”

“That’s right. Well, that was a lie.”

“Alex!”

He grins wider. “Meredith told me you loved this building, so I thought I’d start here. The good news is you’re not lying to Donna. I’m giving you an exclusive tour, one-on-one.”

I just stare at him and watch him eat his crumble without a care in the world. “You lied to me?”

“Yeah. Sorry.”

“And then you, what? Bought this building to try to make your lie the truth?”

He shrugs. “Yes, but also...you liked it. And I wanted to do something nice for you.”

“Why? You’ve already done so much. My rent, my car... why would you commit to a project like this just because of me?”

He sets down his demolished apple crumble and looks at me thoughtfully. “Because I love you, Jessica.”

I don’t know whether to shake him because it’s too much, slap him for being sneaky, or start crying again. It’s the nicest gesture anyone has ever done for me.

He points to my dessert and gives me a questioning look. “You gonna eat that?”

With a frustrated scoff, I launch myself at him.

Alex laughs in surprise, then pulls me into his lap.

Bodyguards be damned. Publicists, personal assistants, and whoever is hanging around be damned.

This is my guy.

I’ve been wondering whether this man was just into me for the moment. I’ve been wondering how much I would hate myself later for allowing us to have a fling, then watch him move on to the next beauty that catches his eye.

But this is not that.

He’s mine.

I’m going to kiss the bejeezus out of him, and I don’t care who sees it.

My mouth descends on Alex’s deliciously full lips, and he tastes like sugar and apples and him.

Our kiss is heated but tender. A kiss of gratitude, and a kiss that promises so much more as soon as he can break free of all the watching eyes.

Alex breaks the kiss to angle his face to capture my lips, brushing his tongue along the seam.

My hands brush the back of his head, and at my touch, I can feel the twitch of his cock against my thigh. Oh, I like that reaction.

Who needs dessert when I have this beautiful man feeding me his tongue, his breath, and the gentle nips of his teeth?

When Alex pulls away, we’re both panting, and need throbs between my thighs.

“Are you ready for phase three?” Alex asks.

I murmur only loud enough for him to hear. “If phase three involves a bed, I’m there.”

“A bed, a shower, and the bed again. How does that suit you?”

Laughing, I tell him my creaky old bed might break under all that jostling. The memory of my bed scraping across the floor last night makes my muscles flutter in the innermost places.

“We’re not going to your apartment. I moved to the bed and breakfast in town,” he says.

I throw my head back and cackle. “All the other guests are going to hear us, genius.”

“What other guests?”

“You didn’t book the whole place for yourself. Tell me you didn’t.”

He lifts one shoulder again. “You want me to keep lying or tell the truth?” Alex nuzzles his nose against mine.

“Truth. Always tell me the truth.”

“I love you, Jessica.”

“I...” It’s so fast, so soon. “I just don’t know if I can say it back. Does that bother you?”

His hand rests on my thigh, his fingers pressing gently into the muscle there. I wouldn’t accept anyone else putting on such a possessive display in public with me. But this feels right.

“No. If anything, it keeps me grounded. Thank you,” he says.

I don’t know why he should be thanking me, but I accept his thanks when he follows that up with a kiss that reveals all the passion simmering under the surface.

I accept all of Alex Martin.

Chapter Fifteen

Alex

JESSICA'S HAND feels good in mine.

We leave the theater on the street side and step out into the sunlight.

This brazenness turns out to be a mistake. Waiting out front, under the marquee, are half a dozen paparazzi.

Jessica squeaks, "What the hell?"

On instinct, I place myself between her and those snapping pictures on the sidewalk. The questions come as quick as the camera shutters.

"Alex, who's your girlfriend?"

"Tell us your girlfriend's name?"

"Are you dating? Who is she?"

From behind me, I hear her whisper, "Alex?"

She's scared. Of course, she is. The first time this happens is utterly terrifying.

I let Gunther and his men clear our path to the car that waits for us on the street.

Once inside the car, Jessica's hands are shaking, and she looks as white as a sheet.

“Baby? What’s wrong?”

The driver interrupts us. “Where to, sir?”

I growl, “I don’t care where we go. Lose those idiots.”

Turning back to Jessica, I take both her hands in mine and squeeze. “Jessica. Jess...it’s okay.”

Her lip trembles. “I don’t think we can do this.”

I chuckle and press a kiss to her forehead. “Get away from them? Don’t worry about them, baby. This happens all the time. You get used to it. I’m sorry; it just caught me off-guard. You make it easy to forget who I am to the outside world; it’s one of the things I love about you.”

Jessica shakes her head. “No. I mean, I don’t think we should see each other.”

My blood turns to ice at her words.

“Jess, what are you talking about?”

Her throat bobs, tears visible in her eyes. “I fucked up everything in Phoenix, and that’s why I’m here. It’s not because I love a small, isolated town in the mountains; it’s because I’m a fuck-up. I was working for a big city daily, and I fucked it all up. And I’m doing it again. We have to stop seeing each other.”

One thing I know for sure, Jess and I can talk this out.

“Babe. What happened in Phoenix?”

Finally, she tells me.

“When I wrote for *The Phoenix Sun*, I made a friend at city hall. The assistant city manager. We were just friends. He was a source. Nothing inappropriate ever happened. He never asked to date me, but people wondered. I should have shut it all down as soon as I overheard the gossip.

“But he was a good guy, giving me leads on story ideas. It was innocent, purely professional—until people made it into something it wasn’t. We had a good rapport, and that’s it. We joked. We texted. That’s all. One night, when he met up with me and my coworkers for drinks, our copyeditor made a play

for him. He rejected her. She got jealous because she rightly suspected the guy had eyes only for me. I didn't know it then, but looking back now, I see the signs.

“She went to the office late that night and took a section from someone else's story—a story from an entirely different newspaper—and stuck it in the middle of mine. I was put on leave for plagiarism, and by the time the ethics board completed its investigation, I was toast. I ‘plagiarized,’ and they learned about the rumors. They discovered what some people said about the assistant city manager and me. The damage to my reputation was done. I couldn't even defend myself. I knew I hadn't plagiarized anyone, but I couldn't prove it—my name was on the story. All of my original backup files that could have proven my innocence had been mysteriously deleted. Later that year, my grandmother died. I was still smarting from the scandal, and she died, never having seen me succeed.

“So that's why we can't be together, Alex. It's just like Phoenix all over again.”

Chapter Sixteen

JESSICA

ALEX DOESN'T GET IT.

He scrubs his face in frustration. “You think someone might set you up like that? Again?”

I blink at him. “You’re Alex Martin. Last time I checked, you’re the most....”

“Don’t say it.”

I clamp my lips together and listen.

“Not on my watch. No one is gonna fuck with you on my watch.”

“It’s not that simple, Alex. When Donna finds out we’re dating, that’s it. I’m toast.”

“Then I’ll buy the fucking paper. Who cares?”

“I care!” I say, feeling extremely stupid about the angry tears stinging my eyes. “You still don’t get it.”

“No, you don’t get it. When are you gonna fucking let me do my job?”

I stare at him, confused. “Your job? Oh, I’m sorry. I didn’t realize I was interfering with the job of a foremost internet genius. Driver? Pull over; I’ll show myself out.”

I've got my hand on the door handle, but Alex pulls it away roughly.

Irritation and confusion roil in my blood. And a little bit of arousal at him yanking my hand away from the door, if I'm honest.

"That's not what I meant. My job? I've got people three levels below me at this company who keep things running. They don't need me. You misunderstand me. My job is to take care of you, Jessica. That's my job. Let me do it."

I stare at his intense gaze, those gray-green eyes that make my heart stutter.

He wants to ask me something, but he's holding back.

He wants me to quit my job so we can be together free and clear?

I have my pride. I would never. I'm an independent woman with a career, dammit, and I'll figure things out for myself, thank you very much. I appreciate all his help, but that doesn't mean I won't pay him back every cent.

Alex's hands grip my shoulders, waiting for me to answer.

As I open my mouth, both of our phones begin to blow up with notifications.

He grunts and eases his grip as I reach for my phone.

"Oh, shit," I breathe.

"What is it?"

I show him my phone screen. How long has it been since people were snapping pictures of us holding hands? Five minutes? Ten?

It took less than that for photos of us to appear on the main page of *The Drop*, with the headline: "Internet Mogul Romances Shamed Reporter."

I think I'm going to throw up.

When the inevitable phone call from Donna comes in, I hold my breath and wait for the earful.

The sinking feeling in my stomach is somehow worse when she says quietly, patiently, “Please come in; we need to talk.”

Well, that didn’t take long.

FIVE MINUTES LATER, Alex’s driver is waiting for me outside the newspaper office.

Alex paces on the sidewalk while I go inside and talk to Donna.

“I’m putting you on administrative leave. It’s the only way to make it right,” she says.

She shows me *The Drop* article, TMZ, and half a dozen other disgusting “news” outlets with my photo on the main page.

“They all went and looked up what happened in Phoenix. I just can’t stop getting punished for doing nothing wrong.”

Donna has her hands full today because *The Drop* has another story about the paper, in which Holmes and Franny have been spotted kissing. News to me, but why would anyone care about that?

“Jesus. Why is *The Drop* obsessed with all of our love lives?” I screech.

Donna fixes me with her hundred-yard stare, and I know it’s time to clean out my desk.

I steel my spine and turn back to her before leaving her office. Because as soon as I do that, I know it will feel permanent. I may never go back to newspaper writing again.

And maybe that’s okay. Perhaps I’m not meant for it.

This realization steels my resolve.

“I appreciate everything you’ve done for me, Donna. But honestly, this is utter crap. Someone jealous of me lied about me, and I didn’t stick up for myself. But I’ll do it now. I

repeat: this is utter crap. All you had to do was reassign the story to someone else.”

Who wouldn't blur the lines when someone like Alex Martin is interested? Who could blame me?

I gather my notebooks, photos of my grandmother, and recording devices. I leave the rest. Franny, Meredith, and Holmes? I'll see them again. No need for awkward goodbyes. This is the nature of the business. People come and go.

Maybe that sounds callous, but I have to get through this moment without letting anyone in the office see me break down.

I need to get out of this office, and I need to get out of Darling Creek. Just for a little while.

I pause in the vestibule to text my neighbor, who's fine with looking after Sophie for as long as I need her to.

Outside, Alex is still pacing.

Something about that makes my aching heart happy. He's freaking out for all to see, despite the paps still hovering at a distance.

I walk right up to him, and he stops pacing. His breath heaves in his chest. I smile up at him and put a hand over his heart. “You want to spoil me? Let's see what you got.”

Alex rasps, “Are you okay?”

“No.”

He gives me a thoughtful look. “You don't look like you're in the mood to be spoiled with fine dining and shopping.”

I shake my head. “I just want to get out of here. I want to get out of this town for a while. How about you take me to Napa and fuck my brains out?”

Alex doesn't even blink at that.

“Roger that. Let's go.”

Chapter Seventeen

Alex

I'M OBSESSED with this woman. The way she smiles, her laughter, and the sounds she made on the plane as she slept curled up next to me. The way she keeps me grounded.

The way she loves me without saying it.

And, I'm obsessed with the way she tastes.

Her slick pussy owns me, and gives me everything. The more I taste and lick, the more she drips down my face.

She makes me so damn happy, I can't hold back the things I need to tell her.

"It was you," I say with a ragged breath, kissing her damp petals as she writhes before me on the mattress. I'm kneeling in front of her, taking my time even though my cock has other ideas.

"Wh-what was me?" Jessica squeaks.

No, Alex. Not yet.

There's plenty of time.

Unlike the other night, we have an entire house all to ourselves with no one to interrupt us.

The nighttime security shift has come on and is posted around the perimeter of the vineyard, and there's no way in for

the paparazzi.

My long-suffering publicist and assistants have all gone home. My crew at the job sites in Montana have everything handled.

I'm not needed.

My only care in the world is edging Jessica to the brink.

My tongue eases into Jessica's warm cunt, saving every inch, every tremble, every moan on her lips.

She bucks against my mouth, demanding I take more, give her more, speed up.

But I'm a greedy boyfriend on a mission to memorize every inch of her body, every reaction. So I go slow, sucking on her folds and letting her squirm until she's panting.

That's when I drag her legs over my shoulders, letting her experience this at a new angle. I love how her legs tremble when I suck on her hard clit.

"Alex, Alex!"

"I've got you, Jess."

I back my mouth off of her pussy, and Jessica reaches down and tugs my hair. Her hips buck, and her thighs squeeze my head.

"Please, Alex!"

"Trust me, baby. Let me make you come hard."

Jessica lets out an almost snarl of frustration, making the savoring of her honey even better. I'm tempted to let this go on for hours. Kissing. Licking. Drinking. Nipping. Fucking her hole with my fingers. Watching her squirm when I touch her in the exact right spot that makes her squirt.

The small, hot button feels so good in my mouth, though, so I know this playing and teasing won't last much longer. I suction it between my lips.

Jessica's thighs flex against my ears when she comes, shouting my name, her muscles bearing down on my thrusting

fingers.

I swallow her sweetness and continue stroking in and out of her until she begs me to stop.

“Alex, oh my god.”

I stop when her voice has that demanding edge that makes me insane for her.

I climb the bed, and her legs slide from my shoulders, clamping around my middle.

“Do you have any idea how good you taste?”

Jessica doesn't hesitate but pulls me down for a musky-sweet kiss that leads into a bout of hungry, teasing, exploring kisses.

It's so easy to lose myself in her kiss that I almost forget we're both naked.

Until my Jessica reaches down to palm my dick, making me see stars.

I suck in a breath through my teeth.

“Alex?”

“Yeah,” I grit out, squeezing my eyes shut to concentrate on keeping it together or else come in her hand.

“How do you want me to make you come? Do you want to come on my tits, face, or hand? Or...in my butt?”

Because my sense of humor can be juvenile, I laugh at that last one.

“However you want it. Do what you feel like doing, baby. Trust me, I like all of it.”

With a wicked grin, she rubs up and down on my dick, pausing to swipe precum off the tip.

I curse softly as I watch her lick the cream off her thumb, her eyes locked on mine.

“Hmm,” I sigh, nuzzling her throat. She smells so good here. She smells good everywhere. “That gives me an idea for later. For now, I wanna fuck you face to face.”

I want it face-to-face because I have things to say, and I want to see Jessica's expression when I say them.

I roll onto my back with my arms around her waist, pulling her on top of me.

"Ooh, I like this view," she says.

"Me too," I say, letting my cock nestle in her folds while I palm her bare breasts. She has the prettiest breasts, tipped with dusky rose nipples that prick into hard beads against my stroking thumbs.

I sit up and give each nipple a slow, licking kiss, cupping them in my hands and feeling their weight. Memorizing. Fantasizing about her using them to feed our future babies.

The brief glimpse of the future unlocks a new level of arousal, and I take one breast into my mouth while stroking the other, offering praise before switching to worship the other one with my mouth in the same way.

Jessica's eyes blaze with heat while she locks her gaze on mine, my mouth ravaging her tits.

Slowly, she grinds down, smearing her wetness all over my cock.

I need to put it in. Now.

"On your knees, please," I request.

Her cheeks heat as she rises. She inhales sharply as I notch the tip in.

"Lie back, Alex."

What else can I do but submit to her every whim?

With her hands on my chest supporting her, Jessica lowers all the way down. She's impaled to the root.

So deep. So wet. So mine.

Our hips fused together, she moves on me, gently slapping my hands away as I reach for her clit.

"Don't move, Alex; just let me feel you."

I love watching her use my body to pleasure herself.

“You’re fucking beautiful like this, baby.” Her walls tighten around me as I say this.

She’s a strong, feisty little thing, riding my dick like it might be the last time, her hole sucking me in and spitting me out, imprinting every moment into our shared muscle memory.

The rhythm of her grinding grows fiercer, and I know she’s using me to find that spot inside.

Sure enough, she finds it.

I watch her arch her back and cry out in her release, her spasms milking my cock.

“Baby, you look so pretty when you come. So pretty and sweet.” Every word from my mouth wrings out a string of aftershocks that send her collapsing against my chest.

I roll her under me and move inside, again reveling in her closeness.

With my arms bracketing her head on the mattress, I pump into her while she clings to me.

Nothing beats face-to-face with Jessica. Her legs hooked around my hips. Her gaze on mine. Her soft body yielding as I move over her and in her. Her kiss.

Her sex holds me tight, and I push in and out, gazing down at her flushed face.

“It was you,” I say again.

Her brow knits together. “What was me? What are you trying to say?” she asks between gasping breathes.

“You’ve repeatedly asked me why I wanted to build in your little town. I only told you half of the truth.”

Her body goes still under me. “And what’s the rest of the truth, Alex?”

“You. I found your photo on the company website and knew I wanted to meet you.”

When she doesn’t react, I continue, keeping still.

“Then, when we talked on the phone, it sealed the deal. This all happened because I had a crush on you from day one.”

I wait.

“Are you mad?”

She laughs. “I’m not mad. That story is bananas.”

“Ah. But a good one to tell our kids.”

She rolls her eyes but pulls me tight with her strong, muscular legs. “I’m gonna choose to believe you don’t make every decision with your dick.”

I press sloppy kisses down her throat as I pump into her again, starting slowly and building a rhythm. “My heart.”

“What?”

“I knew in my heart it was right. I knew as soon as we talked that I wanted to marry you. I knew I wanted you to be mine forever, Jessica.”

There is nothing in the world better than locking eyes with my Jessica as we move together, my body surging into hers.

And when I come, my release rips through me hard, so hard I see fireworks behind my eyes.

“I’m yours, Jessica.”

She murmurs something while her body wrings everything out of me.

“What did you say?”

“I said I’m yours, Alex, and I love you.”

“Are you sure?”

She laughs, cupping my face and peppering me with small, sweet kisses.

“I’m sure.”

I tuck her into my side, both of us spent and catching our breath.

Chapter Eighteen

JESSICA

“I DON’T HAVE to spit this out, do I?”

Alex scoffs. “Don’t you dare. That’s about \$400 a sip.”

We’re in an underground cellar, where the really expensive collection is kept.

It was dark when we arrived last night, but this morning, I woke up to find myself indeed in wine country.

Out the bedroom window were rolling hills of picturesque lines of perfect grapevines spreading out for acres and acres.

Today has been the perfect day.

Alex washed my hair in the giant Spanish-tile shower, and then we shared breakfast prepared by his personal chef. He has three. One at his home in L.A., one at the vineyard, and one at his home in Paris. I try not to think too hard about all of it lest my head explode at all the extravagance.

I got to see the inside of an empty fermentation tank. I toured the bottling and aging facilities, and saw the machine that crushes the grapes. We tasted wine. Lots and lots of wine. I get a sunburn while hiking out to the farthest edge of the property to dip my toes in the creek.

And now we’re mercifully underground, getting tipsy on a bottle worth more than my entire wardrobe.

“Besides, spitting out is only necessary if you don’t want to get drunk.”

I tease, “So, you’re trying to get me drunk?”

“No. I want you sober because I have things to discuss with you.”

“Sounds serious,” I say.

“It is.”

“Well, spit it out. Not the wine.”

Alex takes a long moment to stare at me, then says, “I need you to help me do something useful with my money.”

That was...not what I expected him to say.

“Like, scholarships? A foundation?” I ask.

He shrugs. “I don’t freaking know. People think I’m super smart about money, but I’m not. I’m smart about coding, search engines, and how the internet works. That’s it. I have money managers, but they’re not idea people.”

I feel his forehead to test if he has a fever. “You know I’m a writer, right? I have no clue what to do with money either.”

“But you have good ideas. And you’re good at holding people accountable.”

I stand up and take one last sip of the wine. The obscenely expensive wine suddenly doesn’t taste as good as it should.

“I gotta say, I wasn’t expecting this to be a job interview when you said it was a serious conversation,” I say.

“I didn’t mean to offend you. Ah, shit, I fucked everything up again, didn’t I?” He stands.

I tilt my head and look up at Alex. I can see he’s sincere. He has the most earnest eyes of anyone with a face this handsome. “If I say no to running a foundation, will you break up with me?”

The noise this man makes. “Fuck no. Shit, I apologize. I was trying to show you how serious I am about you and wanted to see if you were serious about me. All the talk about

love and marriage is not just stuff I say in the bedroom. I'm not only about buying you presents. I want a partner. I want to marry you."

I breathe out a sigh of relief.

"That's very practical," I say, nodding. "And, possibly, the most unromantic proposal story since the days when men would sell their daughters in exchange for goats. But I'm listening. So, keep trying."

Chapter Nineteen

Alex

WEEKS PASS, and we fall into a perfect rhythm. So perfect and peaceful and dreamlike, it feels like we're already married.

We take walks, swim in the pool, drink wine, eat, drink more wine, take the horses out at sunset, and drink more wine. At night we roast marshmallows around the fire pit, shower, and make love. I sleep better than I've ever slept in my life. Then we wake up and do it all over again.

I haven't proposed since that day, but I'm working up to trying again.

I feel a little bad about her cat, Sophie. But Jessica assures me that her neighbor is over the moon to be looking after "Alex Martin's step-catdaughter," as she put it.

Jessica doesn't seem to miss the grind of the newspaper at all, but I do think that, at some point, she needs to write again. She's said before she doesn't want her brain turning to mush, and I support her in that.

Tonight, we're sharing tapas in the tasting room. And drinking wine, of course.

Nothing like a little liquid courage.

"I'm going to work less," I announce, apropos of nothing.

Jessica looks confused, then chuckles, munching on her food. “You hardly work now.”

“True. But I’m going to work even less. I’m going to step down as CEO and let someone else have the job. I’ll stay on as a consultant, but I want to settle down.”

She raises her eyebrows but says nothing.

“I realized when I met you that I was alone. I mean, I was too alone before I met you. Ah, shit, I’m doing it again.”

Jessica presses a settling hand on my arm. “It’s okay. I’m not gonna bust your balls this time. Keep going.”

Her words steeling my resolve, I pour my heart out.

“I feel alone around most people. When I’m with you, I’m happy. I want someone to kiss goodnight, someone to bring coffee to every morning. Someone to walk with, snuggle on the sofa, and binge-watch TV with.”

“And why am I that person?” Jessica asks.

“Because you’re the real deal, and I want to spend my life with you.”

She motions around the tasting room. “This isn’t real life. You know that, right? This is a fairy tale.”

“It doesn’t have to be.”

“Come on.”

“Jessica. I want to be with you because you make me laugh. Because you drive me crazy. Because you’re a good and honest person who’s not impressed or influenced by money but still happily accepts gifts. Because you care about important things and still enjoy talking about shallow shit like clothes and shoes. Because I’d be happy living with you in a palace or under a rock.”

She slowly blinks, and a smile tugs at her lips. “Good,” she breathes.

I pull the small red box from my pocket and hold it open, facing her. “Will you marry me?”

“Yes.”

“Right now?”

“I—what? Now?”

“Yes, right now.”

She laughs. “Alex—”

The conversation ends abruptly when Jessica’s phone rings.

“Ignore it,” I urge. “Finish what you were going to say.”

She looks forlorn at the phone, then at me. “It’s Donna. I’m sorry.”

I remember that I’m a grown-up, and wait patiently while she talks to her boss.

“Hi, Donna...I’m in...well, I don’t need to answer that because I’m on leave, remember? Oh. Really? Just like that? I see...interesting...well, thanks for letting me know I’m not on administrative leave anymore if I call things off with Alex Martin. But I’m afraid you’re just going to have to fire me. No...I understand...no, I don’t take it personally...I’m overdue for a vacation anyway...to think over what I want to do with my life...maybe run a foundation with my fiancé... No, I’m happy you have a replacement in mind, Donna...in fact, I love that...for me.”

My heart is so happy when she hangs up the phone that I’m not ready to be blasted.

Jessica’s eyes blaze as she points at me. “Alex!”

“What?”

“Did you buy that gossip website?”

“Maybe. Okay, yes. Are you mad?”

She thinks for a second. “Yes. No. I don’t know. That guy doesn’t deserve any money, not with all the ways he ruined lives, or almost ruined them.”

I couldn’t agree more.

“You’re right. He doesn’t. But now *The Drop* is no more, and he signed a contract that he wouldn’t start another gossip site in its place, or he forfeits all the money I paid him,” I admit.

Jessica takes a step back from me. “How long has this been in the works?”

“Since the day he published that story about us.”

Her face softens. “The paparazzi will still follow us around as soon as we leave this place. What difference does putting one lousy, tiny, meaningless site out of business make?”

I thought it was apparent. “Because it mattered to you, and it matters to the town you love. Honestly, I’ve taken quite a shine to both.”

She smiles. “That’s sweet.”

“The guy was hell-bent on making a name for himself no matter who he hurt. So, I helped him find a healthier outlet for that. He’s your replacement at the *Darling Creek Daily News*,” I tell her.

Jessica’s eyes widen, and she gapes at me. “He what?”

“And since you don’t work for them anymore, I suspect you might have time to meet with a friend of mine at *Harper’s Bazaar*?”

The scream that comes out of her is so high-pitched I think only dogs can hear it. “You what?”

I hold up my hands. “It’s not a full-time job. It’s just to see if you’re a good fit for the pool of correspondents. You might get one lousy assignment, and that’s it.”

Jessica hesitates, and for a moment, I think I fucked up again.

“Alex. I can’t accept a nepotism job.”

“Jessica.”

She holds up her hand. “No, listen. I’ll meet your friend at Harper’s Bazaar. But I don’t want them to know I’m your girlfriend.”

“Fiancee.”

“Fiancee,” she repeats with a shy grin. “And I’m serious. I want to be considered for a correspondence job on my own merit. I don’t want anyone hiring me because of you.”

God, I love this woman.

“Fair enough. I’ll have my assistant set up the interview, but I won’t say how we know each other, and I won’t hype you up. Will that make you happy?”

She gives a curt nod. “I accept your terms.”

The woman drives me out of my mind with her fierce independence, but I love that about her.

She seems to think about it further, until excitement overtakes her, and I exhale in relief. Jessica attack-hugs me with a ferocity that nearly knocks the wind out of me. “I love you so much, Alex. Can we go now?”

I laugh, squeezing her back, breathing in the scent of her hair. “To the interview or to get married?”

“Both,” she says, her voice muffled in my shirt.

We make love again, like a bookend to this fairy-tale vacation. The honeymoon that came before the wedding.

We pack our things. We brush the horses one more time and promise to be back soon. We say goodbye to the vineyard for now.

And then we board the plane to head back to Montana to tie up loose ends. We have lots to do. Check on the progress of all our projects. Prepare for her interview. Plan a wedding. Build a house.

But all of that will get done in time.

For now, I have her hand in mine, and I’m not alone. My partner, my fiancée, and my friend.

Epilogue

TEN YEARS later

JESSICA

“THIS IS GOOD,” I say on a sigh. “This is so, so good.”

I can barely contain the moan of pleasure at the taste of the latest blend made to celebrate Alex and my tenth anniversary.

My husband shifts his weight from one foot to the other uncomfortably and clears his throat.

We’re in the same spot we haunted ten years ago on our first trip together. The vineyard’s tasting room is empty except for us as we wait on more bottles that the vintner wants us to try before launching it for public consumption.

“What’s wrong? Don’t you like it?” I ask.

Alex has a weird look on his face as he sets down the wine. He’s not gazing at the ruby red special blend, though. He’s looking at me like he wants to devour me.

“The wine is perfect. It’s you who’s the problem,” he says.

If I didn’t know him so well, I might be offended.

“Oh?”

“Yeah,” he replies, leaning into me. “You keep moaning over the wine; I’m gonna get hard.”

My eyes roam down and land below his belt.

He sees the gleam in my eye and rasps. “Jess. What are you doing?”

“I’m setting my glass down,” I say, slinking off my stool at the tasting bar. “...before my elevated body temperature warms up the wine.”

I fit myself between his spread legs and cup his length in my hand.

“You’re already hard, my guy,” I tease, unable to hide the tremble in my voice. I can’t help it. He still knows how to crank me up after all these years.

Ten years have come and gone with lightning speed. Alex and I have managed to set up three separate charitable foundations. At our primary home in Darling Creek, Montana, we’ve restored the old movie house to its former glory, and it now hosts a small annual film festival. I’ve made six trips to Paris Fashion Week for my own vlog, which has over a million subscribers on my YouTube channel, where I upload videos showing people how to thrift for designer goodies on a budget. I would have made it to Paris more regularly, but I was happy to miss it for pretty important reasons.

Even better than foundations, successful vlogs, and wine are the two amazing little ones Alex and I created. At the moment, Freddie and Sonia are spending the week at Disneyland with Meredith, Nate, and their daughter Beth. Nate’s dad, Jesse, and his wife, Mariam, are also there with their kids. The Joneses are our family, and I’m happy our kids will have people to call aunts, uncles, and cousins.

“Babe, the vintner will be back in fifteen minutes,” Alex warns.

“Fifteen minutes is all we need, remember?” I purr against his neck while running the base of my palm over him, just the way he likes it.

“Hey, I’m older now. I have stamina.”

I chuckle, “Except most days, we have to finish quickly before the kids walk in on us. At least Gunther knocks.”

He growls, dragging me against him for a fierce kiss. Alex always gets a little crazy when I remind him of our first time together.

“How about we head back to the house and take advantage of the privacy?” Alex says, running the side of his thumb over my bottom lip.

“What about the vintner? He’s coming right back.”

Alex smiles and gives me a licking kiss. “He’ll understand something probably came up when he hears you screaming my name from here.”

“Is that a personal goal of yours?”

“It’ll be my crowing achievement,” he murmurs, filling one hand with my breast and squeezing a moan from my throat.

Yeah. Time to go.

We leave the tasting room behind, scrambling up the hill to the house along the landscaped lane overlooking the vine-covered hills.

Alex smiles back at me over his shoulder, and I remember, suddenly, something I meant to do today.

“Hold on,” I say, reaching into the pocket of my sundress.

He watches me with interest as I pull out a small, weathered, blue envelope.

“What’s that, Jess?”

Oh god, I’m going to cry. I hold it to my chest and take a deep breath. “Ten years ago you sent me this.”

“I did?”

“With the flowers. The first flowers you sent me. I never read it. I’m going to read it now.”

He’s shaken. “You’ve ... you’ve held onto that for ten years?”

I nod, and open it up, tugging out the card.

I read it out loud:

Jessica,

I would say I'm sorry for calling you scary, but I think you liked it. What I should have said was I like your smile. I hope to see a lot more of you soon. Not in a creepy way. Well, maybe. You know what I mean.

And here I thought I was going to cry, but I'm laughing.

Alex's cheeks are crimson as he scrubs the back of his neck self-consciously, cursing under his breath.

I tug the front of his shirt, pulling him down for an innocent, reassuring kiss. He answers that with a rough, passionate kiss that takes my breath away.

Awkward one moment, intense the next. Never, ever boring. That's my guy.

"Let's go," he growls, gripping my backside once, then sweetly taking my hand again, resuming our uphill journey to our vineyard home.

We might make love all night as we used to do when we first met, or we might pass out at 9:30, tired parents that we are.

Alex sweeps the pad of his thumb over my fingers, and I look over at him and squeeze his hand.

It took me a while to wrap my head around the fact that I'm married to Alex Martin, billionaire, genius, tech titan.

But now, to me, he's just Alex. He's my husband, the father of my children, a philanthropist, and my best friend.

I love everything about where we've ended up. I love it for Alex, and for me.

THE END

Thank you for reading Love That For Me, part three of the Small-Town Gossip series. If you enjoyed it, please consider leaving a review. If you haven't read the stories of Nate and Meredith, or J.T. (Holmes) and Franny, both of their stories are available to read in Kindle Unlimited!



About the Author

Abby Knox writes feel-good, high-heat romance that she herself would want to read. Readers have described her stories as quirky, sexy, adorable, and hilarious. All of that adds up to Abby's overall goal in life: to be kind and to have fun!

Abby's favorite tropes include: Forced proximity, opposites attract, grumpy/sunshine, age gap, boss/employee, fated mates/insta-love, and more. Abby is heavily influenced by Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Gilmore Girls, and LOST. But don't worry, she won't ever make you suffer like Luke & Lorelai.

If any or all of that connects with you, then you came to the right place.

Say hello at authorabbyknox@gmail.com

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The Cowboy Auction of Darling Creek

The Cowgirl's Bid

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Her Forbidden Prize

Holiday reads

Elf—napped

The Halloween Bet

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