



SAY *that* **TO ME**

SMALL-TOWN GOSSIP

ABBY KNOX

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SAY THAT TO ME

Small-Town Gossip

Book 2

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Say That To Me

A SMALL-TOWN GOSSIP ROMANCE

J.T.

Whenever that pushy crime reporter comes around, I can't think straight. Franny's good at her job, but man, she makes it difficult for me to do mine. To make matters worse, she needs my help. There are so many things I can't say to her, but "no" is not one of them.

Franny

All J.T. ever does is glare at me, and occasionally grunt one-word answers to my questions. That's fine. I'm used to people not liking me; it's the nature of this job. Now, however, I have a unique problem with my story, and J.T. is the only person who can help. He may not say much, but his actions speak volumes.

Chapter One

J.T.

I AM IN THE ZONE. Or maybe I'm in the flow. Are they the same thing? I don't know, but whatever it is, I am in it.

To some people, it's nothing more than a high school soccer story that ended in a tie, but I'm giving people something good to read on a Thursday morning with their coffee and toast before they get on with their day. I care about that.

Searching for a word that escapes me, I look out my office window onto the sleepy downtown street in Darling Creek.

Big mistake.

A certain short brunette in platform shoes rounds the corner, headed straight for the newspaper building. Franny. My colleague is as distracting as always.

Her shapely legs look incredibly curvy today in navy tights with her matching pleated skirt and fitted cardigan. My favorite outfit of hers. The way the pleats move when she moves does something to me. Not wholesome things.

She's 23. You're 30, and she's 23. She's not interested in you.

And just like that, I'm out of the flow.

Dammit.

Franny has no idea she does that to me. She barely knows the first thing about me because I get cotton balls in my mouth whenever I'm around her.

Story of my life.

My dad's a charismatic politician, and my mom's a successful interior designer—both great with people.

Me? I'm better on paper.

That's fine; sports writing is my calling.

There's not much wild content to write about in a no-Starbucks town in rural Montana. Sure, we've got our fair share of mountain lion sightings. We've got the occasional police blotter full of arrests after drunken brawls at Willie's Bar & Grill.

What *do* people subscribe to the paper for? High school sports, mainly. These are the articles that proud parents cut out and laminate. My byline will be in scrapbooks passed down for generations. That's my legacy, and I plan on making it enjoyable to read.

My desk phone rings as I try to get back into my zone. Whoever called the front desk used enough intimidation on our receptionist to get their call put through to my office; there's only one person with that kind of pull in this town.

"Hi, Dad," I say tersely, putting him on speaker.

"Son, you need to have a sit-down with that so-called crime reporter you work with and tell that little lady how things work in this town."

Edward C. Holmes III, my father, adopts that condescending tone whenever anybody pokes around for information he doesn't want them to have. Usually, these problems don't concern me. But since Franny decided crime was her beat, this tone has been my dad's *modus operandi*. "What did Franny do?" I emphasize her name. I like saying it, and I enjoy irritating the old man.

Dad replies, "She's been bothering Doris for days, trying to get me to talk about a case I know nothing about. And on

top of that, she's also harassing Gladys."

Doris, my dad's executive assistant, guards access to the man like he's the freakin' pope. Gladys is the nearly 100-year-old county clerk and keeper of Darling Creek criminal and civil court records.

I doubt Franny has been "harassing" any of these people who kowtow to my father.

"Could this be a case of a reporter doing her job?"

Dad chuckles. "I knew there'd be no talking to you. You've been working at that newspaper for too long."

"That's how stories happen, Dad. Reporters show up and ask questions."

"The person who had that job before Francine never bothered me with questions about the police blotter."

I suppress a snicker. *Francesca* indeed asks a lot of questions. I like that about her.

"Just give her a minute of your time and let her have her story; it looks worse for you if you avoid her."

Dad goes on to grumble about wishing I'd quit sports writing, go to law school, and get a "real job." Or, some version of that sore point. I'm barely listening because I'm also typing and need to concentrate.

Down the hall, the sound of one feminine voice on the phone diverts me away from my work. I pause and listen.

"Yes, hello. This is Franny Burns calling to see if Mr. Holmes is available yet...yes...yes, I know I just left his office, but I just need to quickly speak to him about...yes...okay but please stress that it's essential that I hear from him...thank you."

What's this? A perfect opportunity to talk to her without looking like a mumbling idiot?

"Dad? Hold on one second. I have Franny right here," I say, parking him on hold and leaping out of my office chair so

fast it rolls away, clanking against the bank of archival microfiche cabinets in the corner.

Ignoring my sudden burst of energy that has all the grace of a train derailment, I lean out into the hallway and scan the newsroom. Franny smooths her shiny brown hair, glaring at her phone and muttering to herself.

“Um,” I start.

Her brown-eyed gaze is blank. “Yeah?”

“Dad,” I blurt, my mouth parched.

The look of confusion on her face has me silently chastising myself.

“I have a dad,” I say, my tongue refusing to talk right in the face of her brown eyes.

“Huh?”

“Phone, he’s on the phone,” I say, scowling.

Understanding brightens Franny’s face. “Oh, your dad’s on the phone. Perfect! Just transfer him over.”

For the life of me, I’ve never understood this antiquated phone system.

I wave my hands like a loon, gesturing for her to come to me. “In here,” I say.

Franny reluctantly jogs over to my office. “Alright, fine. Bossy.”

She nudges me playfully with her elbow as she brushes past me and picks up the phone, jabbing the only lit line.

“Hi...oh...well, shit.”

She sighs, then plonks the receiver down. Turning to me with a frown, she says, “He hung up. But thanks for trying.”

I grunt, “Jerk.”

“Excuse me?”

Cursing, I swipe my sweaty palms against my pant legs. “Not you. Dad. My dad.”

What the hell is wrong with me?

Humph. For starters, I'm living under the shadow of my father. I need to get out of this town and start fresh, where nobody knows my family.

The one problem with that plan: a five-foot-four ball of energy with gorgeous brown hair, soulful eyes, and a relentless mind. I've been pining for Franny for months, and I need to shoot my shot and get over her quickly. Age difference be damned.

She gives me a sympathetic look, then sighs. "You tried."

It bugs me that Franny can't get a quote from my dad, but there's not much I can do about it unless I physically restrain the man. He barely has time for his wife these days, let alone a pesky reporter.

I blink at her. "I wish I could help," I manage to say, then return to my desk, focusing on the screen and silently kicking myself for not being more useful. Or witty. Or charming.

Franny goes to the window, lingering in my office while I try to finish writing this article.

"Hey, Holmes?"

My hands freeze at the keyboard. Sometimes my coworkers call me by my last name, like we're in the military.

"I don't mean to bother you, but I need some advice."

She sidles up next to me and leans her bouncy little ass against the edge of my desk, her scent of vanilla mixed with coffee hitting my nose and making me hard. Franny idly picks up a stack of multi-colored Post-It notes from my desk and runs her thumb over the corner. And suddenly, the sound of flipping paper is erotic. Everything she touches, I want to rub up against it.

I can't see her smiling eyes, but I know she's waiting for me to meet her gaze.

Nope.

I won't look at her. I can't. I have to finish my work. Whenever I stare at her up close, I can't concentrate. I can't think. I can't eat. I can barely breathe.

This is why my stories are routinely late. It's not because I'm a tortured artist, as everyone assumes.

I miss deadlines because I'm distracted. Obsessed.

She can ask away, but I won't look at her.

I won't.

I refuse.

Chapter Two

Franny

WOW, this guy hates my guts.

Jason Thomas Holmes is our award-winning sports reporter and thinks he's too good to talk to me.

I don't know if he dislikes me because I'm a female reporter, because I'm younger than him, or because I constantly harass his dad, the county attorney.

It's fine. I'm used to people disliking my persistence.

But he did try to get his dad on the phone for me. Was that an olive branch, or an attempt to get me to leave him alone?

"I...what?"

J.T. gets out those two syllables, then stares at me like a piece of gravel in his shoe.

I repeat my question. "How does your dad take his coffee? What's his favorite donut?"

"Uh..."

This is how it goes. I talk. He grunts.

His ice-blue gaze cuts away from my face and lands on my fingers that fidget with his pad of sticky notes. I don't know why I'm holding the thing. I tend to mindlessly pick up items and play with them when I'm full of nervous energy.

What am I nervous about? Keeping my job. The gruff county attorney who won't return my calls.

"It's so quiet in here. It's weird," I comment. "How do you get any work done in this silent office?"

Those ice-blue eyes don't seem to register that I'm teasing him. The man is a shark.

A handsome shark who fills out a button-up white shirt better than anybody else in this podunk town.

Lord.

"Anyway...your dad's coffee. Sugar? Cream? I'm not above bribery. I've been dogging that man for days. Do you remember the drug bust photo the police sent over?"

J.T. gives me a slight nod and a barely audible mumble. "Yeah."

"Well, I found discrepancies among the photo, press release, and police report. The chief is referring everything to the county attorney's office. I need to talk to your dad, but he won't return my calls."

Again, I get the stare that only J.T. can give. Although my insides are jelly under his gaze, I arch a questioning eyebrow.

"Coffee? You want..." Clearly confused, he trails off.

The only sound is my absentminded flipping. I'm bothering him and ruining a stack of perfectly fine sticky notes.

"Never mind," I say with an undefeated grin. "I'll figure it out. How's my lipstick? Does he dislike looking at too much makeup? I hate the misogyny, but at this point, I'll do whatever it takes to win points and get a five-minute sit-down with the man."

I peel off the orange sticky note at the top and use it to dab my lips.

"I wouldn't know," he says. Wow, a whole three words! I've been blessed.

"Better safe than sorry, right?" I say with a wink.

Somewhere in the distance, I hear a growl. But that can't be right. "Did Donna bring her terrier to work again?"

"No," J.T. says flatly.

I adjust the bag on my shoulder. "Huh. Thought I heard something. Anyway! I'm out of your hair. Gonna go sit in the lobby of ol' Ed's office until he gives me that quote. You have a trash can in here?"

"Trash? No. Yes. I'll...I'll get that," he says, taking the orange sticky note from me with my lipstick on it.

Before I leave, I realize why it's so quiet.

"You don't have a police scanner in your office, Holmes. That's why it's so quiet! Weird."

A forced, awkward smile pulls at his lips, and I see J.T.'s teeth for the first time. I'm rooted to the spot.

I don't know what to do but stare at those pearly whites, noting how they are as bright white as his shirt. Like a complete fool, I curtsy. My face floods with heat, and I whirl around, scurrying out of the newspaper office, feeling some kind of way.

That J.T. either can't stand the sight of me, or he's a total weirdo. He needs to make up his mind about whether he wants to help me or not. Reporters should help each other; that's just my way of thinking. Jessica and Meredith have been super helpful since I started working here, and I've tried to help them in return when they get stuck.

I make my way up the street toward the municipal building, stopping briefly to pick up three coffees.

The barista, Nathan, smiles when he sees me, but he's looking past me to see if my coworker Meredith is with me. The two of them have been dating for about three months and are so in love that it's nauseating.

"The usual, Franny?"

"Thanks, Nate. One for me, and I'll need a cinnamon latte as well. And in the third one, let's do half-and-half with Splenda."

It's a shot in the dark, but everyone's dads of a certain age seem to like something close to that combo.

J.T. Holmes? He's probably one of those guys who puts butter or protein bombs in his coffee. The man is low-key jacked. Probably does keto and CrossFit when he's not working. Ugh. This job is trying enough; why a sane person wouldn't spend their free time spread out on the sofa with pizza and hard liquor is beyond me.

So, it's probably a blessing that J.T. doesn't talk to me, because I don't want to hear sermons about carbs.

Not that he would ever take the time to talk to me.

"Here you go, Doris." I carefully extend the drink carrier toward the receptionist at the municipal office. The middle-aged Doris lifts her chin, eyeing me suspiciously, but then takes the cinnamon latte.

"Why thank you, Franny! How did you know my drink?"

"I eavesdrop," I tell her. And that's the truth. She chuckles, then takes a sip.

This lobby doesn't exactly hum with activity in Darling Creek, so I listen whenever I camp out here, waiting for public figures to show up.

"Anything juicy going on in there?" I ask, gesturing toward the frosted glass door.

"Been pretty quiet since you left 45 minutes ago," she says with the tone of a martyr because clearly, she feels like she's babysitting me.

"Good, then he should have plenty of time to give me a quote," I say, winking.

And I have plenty of room to spread out on the long wooden bench that spans the wall adjacent to the office of the man who's been dodging me for days.

I set down my laptop, digital voice recorder, reporter's notebook, pen case, and headphones.

On my phone, I pull up the photo from the drug bust—the same photo that’s been bugging me for days. The cops said they arrested that man for intent to distribute, and the amount of narcotics was just above the threshold for that charge. Like, one pill over.

And also? Those pills in the little raggedy bag don’t look like what the officers described in the police report.

I’m just now remembering that I have a cousin back home in Pennsylvania who’s a pharma rep. She doesn’t particularly like me, but the feeling’s mutual. Still, she might be of help.

I text her the photo of the drug bust loot with the question, “Our tiny town had a tiny ol’ drug bust. What does this look like to you?”

Pam doesn’t reply immediately, and I don’t expect her to, so I fill my time with work. I send Jessica the link to the town’s environmental impact study of a new tech hub being built here for a story she’s working on. The study hasn’t been released to the public yet, but I have a source at the town hall. I file a fluffy story about some fancy new equipment obtained by the volunteer fire department, then answer questions from Meredith as she proofreads it.

Hours pass.

“He’s not coming out if he knows you’re here.”

I look up at Doris and nod solemnly. “Ah, but he has to go home to his wife at some point.”

Doris bristles at that. Huh. Strange.

I check the time on my phone: six p.m. I missed lunch by a long time. Again. Also on my silenced phone are four messages from Donna, my editor.

I call her and brace for impact.

“Where is your story?”

“I’ll file it as soon as I get the quote I need.”

“You’d better file it right now; I’m not getting into another brawl with the press crew. They’re union, you know.”

I am aware.

“Donna, the story isn’t a story without this interview.”

“Have you ever been shouted at by the president of the Teamsters Union?” Donna asks.

I roll my eyes. Here we go. “No. I’m 23; why would that even be a question....”

“Well, I have. Two different ones. Those people will make you shit your pants, change your name and leave the state. And lemme tell you something else: they’ve got nothing on the press union.”

I sigh. She’s hitting the sauce already. The stories from her glory days grow more vivid when she nips at the bottom-desk-drawer bourbon. “But Donna...”

“Get me the story!” Donna hangs up.

That’s it; I’m knocking on the county attorney’s locked door.

I rap my knuckles on the glass. No answer. On the other side, feet scuffle, and a door opens and closes.

“He’s leaving through the back,” Doris announces blandly, as if that’s a thing I already know exists.

“Excuse me?” I stare agog at her while fiddling with the immovable doorknob.

Doris is filing her nails. “I’m sure in your eavesdropping, you must have heard about the back door. It’s not a secret. It opens to the carport out back. Better run around the building now if you want to catch him.”

I continue to gape at her, but it’s like I’m not even in the room. “You can’t just, like...open that door for me? As a favor?” I give her a pleading look.

Oh, but no. She’s got this job for a reason. So, why’d she even tell me that much? Is her job that boring? Was it the coffee? I may never know.

Forsaking all my supplies but my recording device, I dash out of the building and hoof it around the perimeter.

Thank god I didn't wear a pencil skirt today. If I'm going to run like a lunatic, at least I have a fighting chance.

Chapter Three

J.T.

THE ORANGE sticky note stuck to the side of my computer monitor sparkles with the imprint of Franny's lipstick. The sparkle is barely visible, but whenever the sun hits it just right, I can see the outline of her mouth.

I'm never throwing that sticky note away.

Shit. I'm in deep shit.

I read Franny's articles every day. She takes the boring police blotter to a level that this town has never seen before.

Especially in the face of that new local gossip website, *The Drop*. The shitstain behind it, Charlie Walters, outed himself after publishing some garbage about Meredith, Nate, and Nate's stepmom. Charlie's fortunate Nate's dad only broke his nose and didn't sue him into oblivion.

That's the thing about Darling Creek. People don't settle disputes with lawyers. They use their fists, often fueled by alcohol.

It's only a matter of time before Charlie publishes some crap about the most powerful man in Darling Creek, whom everyone low-key knows is cheating on his wife. Yeah, that would be my dad.

I finally send my story to the "Copy" folder for Meredith to read over, then I space out and stare some more at the

imprint of Franny's lips, glinting in the summer evening sunlight near my window.

That's when something Meredith said finally hits me.

If I can't talk coherently to Franny, maybe I can help her get access to my father.

I check the time: 6:13. He'll be leaving the office in two minutes. He will exit through the back door if he knows Franny is waiting for him.

I can stall him if I run.

Not waiting for the inevitable editing questions about my story, I'm out the door, sprinting like hell to my dad's office.

Chapter Four

Franny

I'M SHOCKED by two things when I arrive at the back of the building. One: how out of breath I am. Two: both Holmeses are here.

I find both Ed and J.T. Holmes standing at the older one's truck in a heated discussion. Ed looks extremely annoyed and antsy, trying to open the door to his flashy, oversized pickup. J.T. is talking and holding the door closed with his butt.

"We've already settled the matter; it's over," the older one is saying.

"Tell her, or I will."

"I never thought my own son would"

The two of them cease speaking because I'm not very stealthy in my blocky Mary Jane heels.

There's a strange look on my colleague's face, but I take no time to analyze it. I have one job.

I try not to sound too giddy at finally tracking down the county attorney as I rush toward the Holmeses, my hand thrust out. "Mr. Holmes! Hello! Franny Burns from the *Daily News*. It's nice to finally speak to you in person...or at all..." I chuckle lightly, just to let him know I don't take his dodging of me personally, even though I was totally starting to take it

personally. “I wonder if I might have one minute of your time.”

“I’m in a rush to a meeting,” he says.

“Sixty seconds, sir, that’s all I ask.”

He gives a condescending laugh. “Young lady, I know how many seconds are in a minute. And I do not have any to spare.”

Recording device ready, I’m about to jump in with my question when my coworker blocks the truck’s door handle with his body. J.T. crosses his arms in front of his chest and says, “Mom invited me to dinner, and she just texted me; it won’t be ready for another twenty minutes. I thought we could ride together.”

Those are the most words ever strung together by
J.T. in my presence.

I beam at him when I realize he’s doing this to help me.

My colleague glares at me, his brows knit together. Oh, no. It’s still the J.T. I know. The one who hates me.

“Sir, could you tell me more about the Harvey Simms case? Specifically, why the initial court appearance has been pushed back three months?”

Heaving a dramatic sigh, the gray-haired gentleman cocks his head. “Young lady, I’m sure you know in your vast experience of following criminal cases that court dates get pushed for various reasons. Authorities need time to gather more evidence. I assume you know how investigations work? They take time.”

Good heavens, what crawled up this man’s ass? The apple doesn’t fall far from the tree because it looks like both of the Holmeses hate me.

“Then could you explain why Mr. Simms’ truck had already been returned to him when I checked the impound lot? According to the police report, the drugs were found in the truck. If a suspect is believed to be trafficking drugs, wouldn’t

the detectives keep his truck in evidence until the case was resolved?”

He blanches and repeats hastily, “The investigation is ongoing.”

I push on. “So, do the police think there might be more people involved? And as far as I can tell, he was charged but never transported to jail. Isn’t that a little lenient for this sort of thing? Are you thinking of dropping the case altogether?”

There is brimstone in the older man’s eyes now.

“I don’t presume to know what the police think, but it doesn’t matter. The police departments, the county sheriff, all of them answer to me. If you print all of these implications in that paper of yours, we’re going to have a big problem,” he says, puffing out his chest.

I blink at him innocently and smile. “We already have a problem. You don’t return calls, you won’t take meetings....”

“Alright, fine, fine!”

The older man shouts so abruptly that I take a step back.

He goes on, “You want a quote for your article? Here it is. The investigation is ongoing. I have no further comment!”

“The police chief said the same thing. I might add, I’ve never seen the chief act so twitchy about a case. He doesn’t seem like a cop who’s proud of getting drugs off the street. Would you have any idea why he’s scared to say anything?”

“Young lady.”

“Let me help you with that,” I say, tugging loose a business card I always keep in my cardigan pocket. “I may be young. I may be a lady. But my name is Franny, and I’d love a proper sit-down meeting with you. No recording devices. Off the record. Just to get to know you.” I hand him the card.

J.T.’s eyes bore into me, but I ignore him. I know he hates that I’m taking the inch he’s given me and running a mile with it. But I do not care.

“I’ll have Doris set that up with you,” the older man says, turning and motioning his son to move away from the driver’s side door of the truck.

J.T., bless him, isn’t budging.

“Oh, nice try. No, we’ll set that up now, or I’ll be printing an editorial piece about how the county attorney is stonewalling the press, and I’ll be sure to mention your salary. I’m sure the hardworking taxpayers in this county would love to know.”

The hairs on the back of my neck stand up as my coworker continues to stare me down. I’ve never been so unable to ignore someone giving me foul looks.

“Fine,” Ed grunts. “Next Thursday at 9 a.m.”

“Tomorrow.”

“This is not a negotiation, young...Ms. Burns. I do have the public’s business to attend to.”

I smile even more brightly. “We have that in common. Tell me, what was your cost of living raise last year?”

Did I hear J.T. chortle? I don’t dare look in his direction; I will completely lose this facade of bravery I’ve put up for this encounter.

“Tomorrow, Eight a.m. My office.”

“Tomorrow. Eight a.m., Bean There. I’ll treat you to coffee,” I counter.

Ed turns away with the expression of having sucked a lemon, muttering about stinking Joneses taking over his town.

“I’ll take that as a yes,” I chirp.

He doesn’t reply, only heaves himself behind the wheel and drives away, leaving his son standing there.

J.T. and I remain there, watching him go.

“I thought you two were riding together to have dinner with your mom,” I say after a moment of strained silence.

J.T. turns to me, his mouth a flat, humorless line. But his eyes say something else. Something sad.

“That was a lie,” he says. “He’s not going home to my Mom.”

I don’t understand...until I do.

Oh.

I’ve overheard gossip about the county attorney being a philanderer. But everyone says that about politicians, don’t they?

Seeing my coworker’s face right now, I realize the gossip might be true.

Oh, no.

“J.T.? Is your dad...” God, I don’t want to say the word “cheating.” It’s so stark and utterly life-altering.

I swallow. “Is he...”

My words catch in my throat as his face switches from sad to angry again. His legs rapidly eat up the distance between us.

My brain tells my feet to back away as he comes closer. But I don’t. I pause and stare at how the sun glints off his short-cropped hair and the scruff on his flexing jaw.

“Is he seeing someone he shouldn’t?”

J.T.’s eyebrows knit together as he looks at me sternly.

“Shut up,” he grinds out before those firm-set lips capture my mouth in an angry, forceful kiss that melts my jellied insides into hot liquid.

Confusion rockets through me. Is this the man who hates my guts?

The man who can’t be bothered to utter anything but a grunt in my direction?

His lips, though, tell a different story. He angles his face, slanting his mouth over mine while his open hands span either side of my face, cupping me firmly like he’s scared I might run

away. Meanwhile, his tongue urges my mouth open, and I part my lips for him, letting his tongue surge into me a fiery kiss.

I feel his lips down to my core.

I'm so taken aback by this that I don't know what to do with my hands, and I drop my recording device.

It clatters to the ground, probably broken, and I squeak in dismay.

J.T. pulls back, still cupping my face, his eyes wildly intense.

My nipples tighten at the sight of his heaving chest straining against the buttons of his shirt.

There's a slight flash of remorse in his eyes, and for some reason, that makes my lizard brain rage. I don't need him to apologize. I don't want him to apologize.

“Franny, I...”

“Shut up.”

Gripping the collar of his shirt, I pull him down for another kiss. Harder. Fiercer. Wetter.

Chapter Five

J.T.

I WAS surprised when Franny hadn't slugged me the second I kissed her.

But I'm shocked when she drags me back for more.

I've been thinking about what it would be like to kiss her all day.

I feel as if a dam has broken.

Franny's shoulder-length hair feels satiny against the backs of my hands as we kiss, and I give in to the urge to knot my fingers into that softness.

Franny's mouth tastes like cinnamon, coffee, and all things sweet, and I'm driven by an overpowering need to keep kissing her, exploring this attraction between us.

Her lips are delightfully sticky with her gloss, the same shimmery stuff she wiped on my stupid orange sticky note, which I'd stuck to the side of my monitor like a lovesick schoolboy.

God, her lips. How often have I sneaked glances at them during meetings in the conference room? I'd even invited myself to staff meetings where I wasn't needed, just to be in Franny's presence. Just to see her face.

Franny's breath in my mouth makes my cock jerk. A primal urge demands that I seize her hips and grind her body against my dick. So she can grasp an inkling of what she does to me.

I don't do any of that. Not now. Too fast. Too eager.

Her warm tongue plays against mine in a frantic and delicious kiss. Franny lets go of my collar, sweeping her hands down to my stomach, where she snatches a fistful of my shirt. She tugs the fabric, hauling me against her with surprising strength.

I stroke my tongue into her with slow licks that signal a silent promise: *One day, I'll kiss you everywhere like this. Everywhere.*

Franny receives the message and responds with a soft whimper into my mouth.

I capture her pouty bottom lip between my teeth and suck, drawing out a gasp and a needy moan from her throat.

I'm aching for her. I want to touch her everywhere. Inhale her scent. Take her home and rip her clothes off, lose myself between her—

A voice cuts me off at the knees. It's a familiar one and belongs to the older generation of folks in Darling Creek who have been snitching on me to my dad since I was knee-high to a grasshopper.

“J.T.? What are you doing out here?”

Chapter Six

Franny

I REMEMBER where I am as the cold voice of Doris douses this surprise kissing session with metaphorical ice water.

My body stiffens, and I push at J.T.'s shoulders; he releases the kiss with the world's loudest suctioning, smacking noise.

A part of me feels like J.T. did that on purpose to show off.

"Hi, Doris. This is exactly what it looks like. I'm kissing Franny Burns behind the town hall."

I gape at J.T., in awe of how easily that sentence came out of him. Confident. So matter of fact.

Who is this man?

"Shit," I breathe, trying to edge away from him, but J.T.'s arm is a solid cage around my middle.

"Ms. Burns," she says. "Oh my, I had no idea you were... well, I must say, that's one way to skin a cat."

My hand automatically goes to my lips, touching the sensitive swell there. He kissed me so hard. I liked it. I liked it so much I could have stood there all night and kissed him for hours.

But what does Doris mean? "Skin a cat?"

Doris eyes me as if I should know exactly what she means.

She looks like she wants to say something, then turns her attention back to J.T. and sighs. “Like father, like son, I suppose. Careful, kiddo.”

What in the world is she implying? Is J.T. secretly a ladies’ man?

Extreme hotness aside, I doubt that.

“Did you need something, Doris?” J.T. asks.

“I was just coming out here to tell Ms. Burns that I’m locking up, and she probably doesn’t want me to lock up her, ah, campsite.”

Nodding, I peel J.T.’s hands off my waist. “Sorry...thank you...I’ll go get my things.”

In some burst of chivalry, J.T. says, “I’ll come with you.”

I turn and shoot him a smile. “No need. I’m just gonna grab my stuff, finish filing my story, and head home. See you tomorrow at work.”

J.T.’s face is unreadable as I turn away and head through the open steel door, brushing past Doris.

Since she seems to know J.T. pretty well, I’d assumed she would stay out there and chit-chat.

Instead, she follows me through Ed Holmes’s office and to the lobby, where I gather my things.

“I never thought you’d be the kind of woman to try to gain access to a source by seducing the source’s son. But I suppose I’m behind the times.”

My face heats, and with my back to her, I shove things into my tote bag faster.

Her statement contains so much to unpack that my brain buffers.

Seducing J.T.? Hardly. He kissed me first.

The words that tumble out of me don’t help the situation.

“I didn’t...I don’t...that’s not what’s happening... J.T. and I are not....”

Like an angel of mercy, or more like a screeching banshee, my phone erupts with noise—Donna’s ringtone.

Right. Gotta file that story.

I bolt out of there with my proverbial tail between my legs.



THE FOLLOWING day on my way to my meeting with the county attorney, I spy Meredith and Nate smooching and speaking in hushed tones behind the counter at his coffee shop, Bean There.

The lull in the morning rush has evidently given these two an excuse to canoodle, with Nate’s hand perched lovingly on Meredith’s gradually expanding stomach. I blush, feeling like I’m intruding on an intimate moment.

However, the gorgeous aroma of roasting beans roots me to the spot.

Reporter need coffee, grunts my morning cavewoman brain.

I wait, and finally, Nate looks up and sees me standing there.

“Hey, you two,” I say, grinning at them. If I didn’t appreciate Meredith’s friendship so much, they might make me barf.

“What can I get you?” Nate asks.

I give him my order, and Meredith emerges from around the counter to chat with me, dressed in a cardigan with the bottom three buttons undone.

“You’re really showing now!” I exclaim.

She nods. “I’ve been hiding it pretty well until recently. Nate’s been telling me to stop hiding it and that I should be exploiting the attention for all its worth.”

I smile at her and admire her glow, whether it's those pregnancy hormones or the radiance of being in love doing that to her face.

“He's sweet.”

Nate has started my drink and looks up as the doorbell chimes, greeting the new customer.

I turn, expecting to see the older man I'm here to interview.

Instead, it's my coworker, and I freeze.

Meredith eyes me. “What's wrong?”

I clear my throat. “Nothing...nothing's wrong. Why would there be anything wrong? Can I buy you a tea, Meredith?”

She narrows her eyes. “Why are you acting so weird?”

“Weird?” I ask, trying to sound genuinely puzzled but not pulling it off, not by a long shot.

I saunter over to the “pay here” section, feeling J.T.'s stare with every step.

Meredith follows me. “Are you okay?”

“Fine, I'm fine.”

“Is it J.T.?” she asks in a whisper only for me to hear as the men are occupied with the coffee transaction.

“No, why would you ask that?”

Meredith tilts her head as if talking to someone behaving like a loon, which I am. “He doesn't hate you. He's in his own little world sometimes.”

I laugh awkwardly and lie, “I don't know why we're even talking about this.”

Nate rings me up, but J.T. steps forward and hands his debit card to Nate.

Nate immediately takes the payment before I can protest.

Meredith looks just as surprised as I feel.

We both turn to J.T. “You don't have to do that,” I say.

He says nothing but lets his gaze land on my mouth.

I self-consciously chew on my bottom lip, remembering how he tasted when he ate my face last night.

“This isn’t one of those pay-it-forward situations, is it? Because if it is, and you pay for mine, then I have to pay for yours. I’m not doing that, okay?” I say with a nervous laugh.

J.T. simply says, “It’s not that.”

“Oh,” I reply, aware that Meredith is eyeballing us. She’s waiting for me to give him shit about something, but we both stand here like silent statues.

“Here you go,” Nate says behind me.

Before I can turn to grab my coffee, J.T.’s big body brushes past me.

His woody scent tickles my nose, and the barest touch of his shoulder against mine makes me ache in inappropriate places.

Wordlessly, he picks up both cups and hands one to me with a brush of warm fingers against mine.

My nipples prick at this touch, and thank heaven, I’m not wearing a tight sweater that would make this evident to the whole world.

“Thanks,” I squeak.

J.T. is all too close as he looms over me, his eyes on mine. He takes a sip, then lets his gaze fall to my mouth again, then lower, eyeing my button-up shirt.

My skin blooms with heat as if J.T.’s stare is physical contact.

“See you at work,” he says huskily, then leaves.

I am determined not to watch him go.

Nope, not going to do that while I take my first sip of coffee. It’s too early in the day to be thinking about his ass.

Okay, maybe a quick peek.

The door chimes just as my eyes dart over, checking out how the rounded cheeks fill out his trousers as he walks away.

“Officially, both of you are weirdos.”

I look at my short coworker’s wide eyes.

And I have no witty retort to that because every word is accurate.

Chapter Seven

J.T.

I CAME ON TOO STRONG, and then I embarrassed her.

Last night, alone at home, I had thought everything through. I had

resolved to dial everything back and start over. Instead of attacking her like a freak, I'd decided the best course of action would be to invite her to lunch to talk about what happened.

And, after that reasonable decision, I'd jerked one out in the shower. But pleasuring myself to the recent memory of Franny's mouth, her scent, and how she felt in my arms left me feeling cold and empty of emotion.

I'd resolved to approach this whole thing more carefully.

But this morning, a strange instinct took over when I saw Franny at Bean There.

I took one look at her and loomed over her like a psycho, staring at her lips, her tits, her ass...her everything. I bought her coffee without asking. No conversation. It came off as territorial, and it made her uncomfortable.

That was not the plan.

Franny is her own person who can pay for her own coffee. She doesn't need me to put on a possessive show.

And now, after that unfortunate display, I'm seated across from her in this stifling conference room.

I should go to my office and work, yet I'm here, like a moth to a flame.

"No surprise, the county attorney stood me up this morning. But I did some digging, and I have a pharma rep saying that photo the cops sent us after the drug bust is of Tylenol with codeine, not fentanyl. Are they lying, or do they not know that? And if they don't know, what made them think it was fentanyl?"

Donna shrugs. "Could have been a clerical error."

Franny scoffs. "Pretty major typo, in that case."

I sneak a glance across the table at Franny. She's so damn pretty that it makes my chest ache.

Dad makes marriage seem difficult. He acts put-upon with every question and every request from my mother. But my mom is easy to please. Dad's attitude toward her never makes any sense to me.

Looking at Franny, I feel how easy it would be to love her. She might be a handful, with her unstoppable energy and incessant questions. But I like that; everything about her warms me down to my soul.

Franny catches me staring, and I don't look away.

Her cheeks glow a deep pink, and she rubs her delicate fingers over her neck. Am I making her nervous? Whatever she feels is not half as nervous as I feel most days around her.

Donna has moved on, droning about something major happening in the advertising department, and I could not care less. Neither could Franny because she's not listening.

"...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."

Jessica makes a strange harrumph sound and closes her laptop. 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 summer dry spell, so consider everyone’s Christmas bonus when you give him a hard time.”

With that, Donna turns and opens the conference room door.

“Alex? We’re ready for you.”

Jessica mutters something about “the pompous, presumptuous Silicon Valley putz.”

Seconds later, an enormous bodyguard enters the room, along with some other folks who look like handlers or hangers-on, followed, finally, by Alex Martin. A second bodyguard brings up the rear. Well, shit. We’re in the presence of a bona fide celebrity.

“Los Angeles, actually,” he corrects Jessica with a smile. “Too casual in Silicon Valley for me. I like to dress up for work.”

Jessica snorts, but she’s one to judge. I don’t know anything about fashion, but she’s dressed to the nines for work every day. I figured she would appreciate someone like tech billionaire Alex Martin.

None of my business, though.

I’m too busy rudely ignoring whatever this Alex guy is talking about and staring at Franny’s lips, how glossy and full they look this morning. Or at the faint shadow between Franny’s breasts, visible in her shirt that’s partially unbuttoned to display a pretty beaded necklace. Or the lock of dark hair that she twists around one index finger, looking over at me and away again.

“...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 don’t know where this L.A. rich guy thinks he’s going to treat everyone to lunch besides burgers at The Corner Cafe or deep-fried lake trout at Willie’s. I’m morbidly curious to see a

guy like that in either setting. Greasy spoon diner or cowboy bar? Not exactly Los Angeles fare.

“I’m on my way out to interview the new hockey coach.”

Everyone turns and stares at me, and I realize how weird I sound. “So, I won’t be able to join you all. I’m sorry, and thank you.”

This is a bald-faced lie. I already have that interview scheduled.

I tortured myself for an hour in the conference room, gazing at Franny. If I have to stare at her at lunchtime, it might end me. If I can’t be normal around her, I’d rather be weird and alone with my thoughts.

Chapter Eight

Franny

WHAT AM I DOING?

I don't want to go to lunch.

I want to get back to the office and track down the defense attorney for the Simms case.

At the risk of appearing ungrateful, I make this excuse just as we're all seated at Willie's.

The brisk walk back to the office helps me clear my head.

I've been feeling strange since the kiss yesterday. I know in my heart that what Doris said to me was untrue, but that doesn't stop those words from messing with my head.

At some point, J.T. and I need to talk about what happened.

And really talk. Not sitting across the conference table, suffering furtive glances.

I can't sit still at my desk, so I pace around the cubicles while calling and leaving messages with every public defender I have in my contacts.

On my third orbit, I notice J.T.'s office door is open, so I decide to go in there and sit by the window.

Five minutes later, I'm enjoying his cushy office chair, my sock-covered feet propped up on the window sill, the sun bathing my legs as I work.

This sleek, expensive-looking desk will make going back to my sad, gray cubicle pretty depressing.

Casually snooping, I peruse the scribbled notes on his desk calendar, the sticky notes stuck to his walls and to his computer monitor. One that's blank, which is strange. The man is an odd bird sometimes, though, isn't he?

But wait. This sticky note is not blank. The sunlight picks up a smudge of some kind. I lean in and peer at it closer. My irrational heart hammers.

No, that's not...that cannot be the discarded sticky note I used to blot my lips, can it? J.T. tossed that out.

The ghost of my shiny lips stares back at me. He didn't toss it away.

As strange and weirdly flattering as this is, guilt floods through me. I'm intruding.

"What are you doing in here?"

The brusque, gravelly voice startles me so severely I yelp. The office chair spins, dumping me onto the rug.

Before I can come up with an excuse, J.T. is hauling me to my feet as if I weigh nothing. His eyes rake over me with a look of both irritation and concern. "You hurt?"

"Only my ego," I say. "I was just using your office because I thought it would be nice to sit by a window. And you weren't here, so...."

We're both standing behind his desk now, and I see his eyes cut toward his computer monitor. I never knew the man could blush or feel anything but silent anger and irritation, but his ears are pink.

"I didn't see anything," I blurt stupidly.

"You want an office with a window? It's yours," he says, his hands still holding my upper arms—not a severe grip, but a

steadying one.

That is not what I expected him to say. Not even close. It's such an absurd suggestion that I laugh.

"Don't be silly. You have it because you're the most senior reporter, and sports is its own department."

He lets go of me gradually, then turns away like he's afraid of catching something. He scrubs his face in apparent frustration, and I notice he has just the right amount of soft, light brown hair on his forearms. The sight of it does crazy things to my imagination...does he have that same hair on his chest? His stomach? Lower? Is it a smattering, or does it swirl in some way? Oh, the swirling. I will swoon so hard at swirly chest hair.

"I don't care about having an office." The more dismissive his tone, the more my blood pressure increases while other parts of me grow lusty.

I can't believe my mouth is watering just from staring at those forearms. I swallow. "You win the awards. You're the reason people subscribe to a daily paper that has no business being a daily. It's your office. You need it to concentrate, to write all the pretty words."

J.T. makes a noise between a scoff and a snort. "Can't concentrate anyway. Not with you here."

Now we're getting somewhere. "Because of the kiss?" I grip the back of the chair.

"It was more than one kiss," he says, his voice prickly.

For some reason, this blows my lid off. I've been friendly to this man, and this terseness has finally made me lose my temper.

"You are the most confusing person! You acted like you could not stand me for months and months. Then last night, you grabbed me and kissed me! And you follow that up by paying for my coffee and bolting like you're allergic to me. One minute you have me thinking you like me, but all you do here is glare at me in staff meetings."

J.T. huffs a laugh, and an infuriating smile pulls at his lips. “That’s an accurate rundown of events, except for the parts where I glared at you. I didn’t know I was glaring. And I don’t hate you.”

I won’t argue whether he’s been giving me dirty looks. Some people can’t help what their face does when they’re not smiling. And J.T. doesn’t smile a whole hell of a lot.

“Can we talk about the kiss, then?” I ask.

“I’m listening.” The stern look in his eyes doesn’t change, but I believe him.

“Last night, Doris said something....”

J.T. raises his two hands in the air and looks at me gravely. “What she said about like father like son...I’m not like that.”

I chuckle. “That’s not the thing I was going to talk about, but I appreciate knowing that about you.”

“Oh,” he says with a worried look. “There’s more?”

“Lots more,” I say, then spill the beans. I tell him word for word what I remember Doris saying last night about me using him to get to his dad.

“And?” J.T. asks.

I stare at him agog. “And...and I’m not a user. I wouldn’t use you to get to your dad.”

“Why not?” J.T. asks with a shrug.

Is he serious? “Because that would be a conflict of interest...I think.”

“Huh. Maybe.”

“At the very least, I don’t want to seem like I’m taking advantage of you. I don’t want to make you uncomfortable at work, J.T.”

He steps closer to me. “You already make me uncomfortable in every way possible.”

I shift my weight from one foot to the other, processing his words. “Gee, thanks,” I splutter. If that’s how he’s going to act,

then maybe I won't be bothered with him again, except that he's blocking the path to the door. His eyes drift down to the top button of my shirt, and my awareness of his gaze makes my nipples prick in response.

"Far be it from me to make you uncomfortable," I say, pushing past him, knowing how ridiculous that sounds when in fact, all I've done from day one is bug this man. Waltz in and out of his office, tease him for not talking to me and ask him relentless questions every time I have to proof one of his stories.

A hand grabs my arm above the elbow as I approach the doorway. I gasp at the strength and speed at which J.T. turns me around to face him.

"Franny," he grits out. "That's not what I meant."

This is the first time I've heard him say my name out loud. He says it like a man at his wits' end, and I feel that frustration down to my core.

I huff, trying—but not really trying—to tug my arm from his grip. "What the fuck did you mean, then? I'm a little tired of the mixed s—"

His mouth descends on mine in a claiming kiss. Not as angry as last night, but full of the same raw emotion. Hunger.

I feel his full passion with every slide of his mouth over mine.

"...signals," I breathe, finishing my thought. His lips feel somehow more assertive, more possessive than last night. The kiss turns my insides to lava, and I want him on me, over me on this desk.

J.T.'s brows knit together. He grunts. "I mean," he says, planting a series of hard kisses to my lips with every phrase he utters, his knuckles skating over my face, cheekbones, and jaw.

"...I can't work...."

"...I can't write...."

"...I can't fucking think...."

He finally clutches my face in both hands and emits a frustrated groan that disappears into my mouth.

“...when I’m near you.” He finishes that thought and rests his forehead against mine.

I pant, catching my breath.

“Maybe I should transfer to another paper then, so you can get some work done.” I hate to suggest it because I’m rapidly becoming addicted to how J.T. kisses me. Also, who would I poke and tease and try to make smile every day?

He crashes his mouth against mine again with a snarl, capturing my bottom lip between his teeth.

“Fuck that,” he growls. “I need you here.”

Those words shouldn’t make my ego swell as it does. “Holmes...you like me?” I ask breathlessly, barely spitting out the syllables because J.T. is everywhere. His mouth owning mine over and over, his hands dragging downward to cup my neck, down my arms, forcefully hooking my arms around his shoulders.

To answer that question, he grips my hips and pulls me tight against him, his hard length jutting against my hipbone.

“I thought it was obvious. I wanted you since day one.”

This feels too good to be true, and I need to be sure we’re on the same page. Does he just want sex? I don’t fool around just to get a person out of my system.

“I thought you hated me.”

He groans again and fixes his big arms around my back, tugging me closer and squeezing.

I’m being hugged. J.T. has me wrapped up in a big, all-encompassing bear hug, and I fucking love it. My heart hammers wildly.

“I don’t hate you. If I look angry, I’m upset at myself for not finding the right words to say. If I act like I want to get away from you, it’s because I need to splash water on my face to get control of myself.”

Why is that so hot I might pass out?

While still in the hug, J.T. buries his face next to my throat and sighs. The warmth of his breath runs all over my skin, warming me down to my toes.

“You don’t seem at a loss for words right now,” I say, teasing.

He hums against my throat, and the vibration is so delicious that I shiver. “Touching you makes me feel...better.”

This feels strangely powerful.

“So, what are we? Are we friends with benefits?”

The growl in response tells me he does not like that idea. “Fuck that noise.”

I bite my lip nervously. But staring into his icy blue eyes settles my racing thoughts to just one. I want him to kiss me again.

I dare to reach my hand down to his hard stomach.

His mouth suctions to my neck, just below my ear. His warm wet mouth there makes my body thrum with need. He’s going to leave a hickey there, but I do not give a shit.

His teeth nip against my throat, then he licks the bite.

“J.T.,” I rasp, biting back the moan that wants to come out.

“You smell good, Franny.”

I can feel him taking a long, deep whiff against my throat, and my imagination runs away again. I picture this man collapsing in exhaustion on top of me, burying his face right there, saying my name, kissing my sweaty skin lazily after splitting me the fuck open.

I need to start bringing extra panties to work, because I cannot handle how wet this man makes me, doing the things he does with his mouth.

“What do you want from me?”

He gives me a heated look, and I drag my hand lower, mauling his cock. It twitches against my touch.

Finally, with a fiery furnace in his eyes, he replies, “I want you to close the door, Franny.”

Chapter Nine

J.T.

HERE AND NOW MAY NOT BE THE best time to make out.

But I do not care about propriety at the moment.

I fit my mouth against Franny's, sliding my tongue along the seam of her lips. She opens to me, and I slick my tongue inside into the warmth of her sweet mouth. I'm lost in the taste of us together, the shared breath, the sultry dance of tongues, driving us well past the point of office decorum.

Franny has been driving me crazy for so long, and I've gone off the deep end. I want her, and now I have her. How did this happen when I can barely say three words to her on any given day? Did I fucking manifest this? How in the world is this happening?

Franny moans into my mouth, making me ache for her more intensely.

"Talk to me, J.T. Say something."

I pull away and cup her face in my hands. "You're... perfect."

Not my best work.

It's hard to know what to say on an average day, but with her hand rubbing my cock, over my trousers, words are next to

impossible.

“Hardly perfect,” she laughs, the heel of her palm doing evil things to me.

I kiss her hard and then rasp, “If you don’t stop that, I’m going to explode.”

She smiles. “Don’t threaten me with a good time.”

Her sass mouth makes me want to bend her over the desk. Yet still, I can’t stop kissing her. Her pretty, full, pouty lips are my addiction. “I have to interview the hockey coach in thirty minutes.”

“Wait,” she says, confused. “You said you had a lunch interview with the new hockey coach.”

“I lied,” I mutter the words between wet, licking kisses down her throat.

Franny asks, “Why?”

I groan, sucking her earlobe into my mouth, noting her reaction.

“Oh...that is...wow...”

She likes that? Good. I’ll do more of that.

“W-wait... why did you lie to get out of lunch?”

With a frustrated growl, I press my forehead against her collarbone, gathering the words. I want to rend the front of her shirt and send buttons flying everywhere.

“I ran home to jerk off,” I rumble.

Franny gasps. “You did?”

“Surprised? I couldn’t stop staring at you.” I squeeze my eyes shut tight.

There’s a smile in her voice when she says, “You didn’t have to come to the meeting.”

“You were there. I had to.”

There’s a pause while she considers this.

“J.T.,” she whispers, her soft hands going to my nape. “Is that why you attend all the newsroom meetings when you don’t have to? That’s incredibly sweet.”

“Or creepy,” I laugh.

Franny makes a sweet humming noise, idly rubbing the bristly hairs on my nape, a touch that could make me come on its own. “You went home to take care of business. And yet... you’re hard again?”

“Guess it didn’t stick,” I say. “It’s never enough for me, Franny.”

“We don’t have much time, then.” Franny presses more firmly against the underside of my cock, dragging the heel of her palm up slowly from the root to the tip. Precum seeps out of me. Shit.

“Fuck, Franny. Not yet. You first.”

She pouts, and I catch that bottom lip again and suck on it.

“But...”

“I said, you first.”

Her eyes flash as I gently push her onto the desk. My hand finds the hem of her skirt, fitting my palm over the soft skin of her thigh. Her cheeks blaze pink.

My hand moves up her thigh, finding its way to her damp heat.

She twitches when I find the wet gusset of her panties, dragging my fingers over it.

“J.T.,” she breathes, her eyes closing.

“Good?”

She nods, biting her bottom lip.

I massage her there for a few seconds, gauging her reactions before pulling the material aside. Franny’s lips part as I soak my fingers in her sweetness. She’s drenched.

My greedy mouth slants over hers once again, driving my tongue into her with slow, wet kisses, showing her how I plan

to mouth her pussy one day soon. How I plan to take my time with her and savor every drop.

At the same time, my forefinger sinks into her wet opening, tight and so warm.

Franny moans, pulling away from the kiss, panting.

I want to tell her how pretty she is, how she takes my breath away, and how I can't wait to watch while she comes on my hand, but the words catch in my throat.

A smile spreads across Franny's face. "Could you do me a favor?"

"Anything."

"You might not like it," she says.

"Try me."

Franny looks hesitant. "I have to whisper it in your ear."

I lean forward, angling my ear, even with her mouth. Her words waft over my skin, pushing me further away from my sense of self-control. "If you want me to come fast and super hard, call me a slut."

That...was not what I expected to hear with my hand inside her panties. "Call you a what?"

She laughs softly. "It's okay. Trust me. I like it."

I have feelings about this I can't unpack right now. "I...I need a minute to think..."

I'm neither a celibate monk nor a prude. I know people can get off by calling each other names. It's a thing. It's just that I've never done it before, and although Franny has a way of pulling me out of my head and into the moment, I'm still maybe ten percent up in my own head at the best of times. I want to say it. I want to do this for her.

She shakes her head, smiling. "You know what, forget it. It's fine." She grabs my free hand and places it on her breast. "We can just fool around for now. No orgasms required."

Her impish smile is so charming I'm willing to put the "slut" thing aside for now. I need time...time to mull that over.

Her breast overflows my hand, and I tease her nipple between my fingers. I kiss her fiercely, frustrated by the layers of clothing between us. Still, I squeeze hard, drawing out a sharp gasp from her.

Every sound, every reaction pushes and pushes me closer to the edge. I don't want to come first. It feels selfish.

Yet she's bringing me there, fisting the front of my shirt and moving her hips, slowly riding my finger that's sunk deep inside her. Franny is so warm and wet that I will not be able to hold back much longer.

"God, that feels so good, J.T."

All this frantic touching can only lead to one thing, and it's coming fast.

"I'm not gonna make it, Franny. I'm gonna come."

She hisses, "Let me pull it out. I want to touch your skin."

"Do it. Ugh, dammit, you need to come first."

"Don't worry about that now."

With a grunt of resignation, I slide my hand free of her gorgeous pussy as she works frantically at my belt and zipper. She shoves my boxer briefs down my hips, and I watch her eyes widen while I use my slicked hand to lube my cock.

"I want to make you come, J.T."

"I'm gonna make a mess on your pretty outfit."

"Then rip my panties off."

"Franny."

"Do it," she says, her hands returning to my nape, lightly rubbing.

My god, all I want to do is take my time with her, but I'll take this moment and lock it away in my spank bank forever until I die.

I snake my hand back up her skirt and curl my fingers into the waistband of her panties. I tear them off with one firm tug.

My body stiffens over her as she circles her hand around my dick. My eyes roll back at how unbelievably good her soft, slick hand feels wrapped around my wet cock.

We kiss with fervor, teeth clacking as she pumps my length. On and on she strokes, my body tense and hovering over her on the desk. I want only to touch and taste her, to take my time to make her feel good. To make her mine. But Franny owns me in this moment as my one hand grips her torn panties, and the other holds me up to keep from crushing her. I'm nothing but furiously thrusting hips and a surging tongue.

"I'm coming," I grit out, sucking in a deep breath as my body smashes involuntarily into her grip.

Franny bites down on my earlobe as she rips her panties out of my fist and wraps them around my dick.

"Franny. Fuck!" I clench my jaw and drag out the last word, spraying hard and fast into her used panties.

Small spasms burst from me in quick succession. I go limp but resist collapsing against Franny as she lies underneath me.

"Hi," she says, smiling, pulling me down, stroking the outside of my hip with her thigh.

"I have an interview," I say.

"I know."

She chuckles and kisses me on the nose.

"This is not how it usually goes. I prefer the woman to come first."

She arches an eyebrow while she plants kisses over my face. "You fuck around with a lot of women, do you? You a fuckboy?"

God, no. "I'm not like that. I'm not a fuckboy," I grit out.

"Teasing."

I peel myself off of her and pull her to her feet. "Tonight."

“Huh?”

“Can I take you out?”

She pouts. “I’d love that, but I need to do some leg work for my story.”

“I’ll tag along,” I say, helping her smooth her skirt as she adjusts her top.

“It’ll be boring for you.”

“No, it won’t. Not if you’ll be there. And I can help.”

Franny tilts her head. “Would that be ethical? If you’re helping me investigate something that might look bad for your dad?”

I nod. “It’s extremely ethical. What would be unethical is if I were to use my position to shield my family from the press. Also, I don’t want you doing leg work alone at night.”

“You’ve never offered to be my bodyguard before,” she teases, lifting her chin.

“Well, you’re stuck with me now.”

She hums thoughtfully, then whirls around, swishing away to my office door.

I watch those fleshy hips sway out of my office, promising to pay her back for all her teasing tonight.

Somewhere, somehow. When the work is done, it will be just the two of us, and there will be none of this quickie business.

She’ll get it slow, thorough, and multiple times over.

Chapter Ten

Franny

MY HEAD STILL IN A DAZE, I head back to my cubicle. One of the public defenders with whom I've left messages calls me back.

It takes me a minute to get into work mode.

An irrational part of me wonders if this person on the phone can tell what I was up to just a minute ago.

"Oh! Hi! I mean, hello," I breathe, smoothing my hair down. Get it together, dummy. "I was calling about the case against Mr. Simms. Last night the county attorney indicated that the initial hearing was pushed back because the investigation was ongoing. Do you have a response to that?"

"A response?" she repeats back to me. Ms. Stone is one of the few public defenders in the city who occasionally takes cases in our far-flung mountain town, so I know I only have a few seconds of her time.

"I just wonder if there's something strange going on. The pills in the photo are not what is listed in the charges. It's also odd that it's exactly one ounce over the amount to warrant a charge of trafficking. The police aren't talking either."

The public defender pauses and then says tersely. "Obviously, I can't talk about the case details outside of the

fact that my client has a clean record and the charges are unfounded.”

My brain is screaming at me to come up with a good question. The kind of question that gets an interesting answer.

“If Mr. Simms wasn’t transporting pills with the intent to sell, then where was he taking them?”

It’s the kind of question meant to trip someone up into admitting something, but it doesn’t work.

She laughs. “Nice try.”

“Hey, I’m desperate,” I say with a smile.

Ms. Stone sighs into the phone, and I can almost see her pinching the bridge of her nose. “All right, look. Off the record? That same bag of pills has been around the block several times.”

Uh, what? Did I hear that right?

“Are you implying that the cops planted an old bag of pills in Mr. Simms’ truck?”

She pauses, then says carefully, “I didn’t say anything about the police. Just so we’re clear. I’m saying his HVAC truck is parked outside his house every night and is pretty recognizable. I’m also saying that everyone has a Ring camera these days.”

I am salivating now. “Are you saying you subpoenaed the Ring camera footage from everywhere he goes?”

“That’s not what I’m saying because the investigation is ongoing. Gotta run.”

Click.

What. The. Fuck.

I hang up the phone, my brain scrambling for what to do next. Call the police chief for a response to this? All he does is refer everything to the attorney’s office.

I have to talk to Simms directly. But obviously, he’s not returning my calls either. At least no one at his house is.

Donna's gravelly voice behind me has me dropping the phone receiver as I'm about to try calling someone else. "Franny, can I see you in my office, please?"

My heart leaps into my throat, and I set down the phone receiver.

I never get called into Donna's office.

When I enter, J.T. is already there.

This cannot be good.

Donna follows me in and closes the door. "Have a seat," she says.

Examining her face, she looks strangely disappointed. And now I'm worried.

"What's going on?" I ask, sitting on the edge of the leather chair adjacent to the one that J.T. sits in.

Donna busily types something out on her laptop, pauses, purses her lips, and swivels the device around so I can see the screen. "Would you two care to let me in on what's happening here?"

My stomach flips over as I see the photo and headline on the local gossip website, *The Drop*.

I gape, then slam my mouth shut because I think I'm gonna throw up. Accompanying a grainy photo of J.T. and me kissing behind the municipal building is an article titled: "Amateur Sleuth Using PDA to Get Her Way?"

Cheeseball headline plus the insulting label aside, I'm affronted by everything it implies.

More importantly, why in the world would Charlie from *The Drop* follow me around, anyway? This is hardly what I would call hard-hitting gossip. Why would anyone care about who I kiss?

"Donna," I say. "That's...I'm not...we're not..."

My editor sighs and sits back in her chair, arms folded. "Just tell me if you two are in a relationship."

In a bona fide relationship? No. Messing around and seeing what happens? Yes, totally. But I'm not going to say that out loud in front of my boss.

"We're just...what that photo doesn't show..." God, I sound like an idiot. Angry with myself, with that asshole Charlie at *The Drop*, and at Donna for assuming the worst about me, my face reddens, and my eyes begin to sting. Ugh. I hate it when I angry-cry.

"I'm not using anyone to get my way!" I blurt like a child.

J.T. sits forward. "It's my fault. My dad kept her from doing her job, so I went to stall him before he could flee his office. And I'd do it again. Franny didn't do anything wrong."

Donna's eyes flick between the two of us. "You know this looks bad. Franny, this makes it look like we're in the pocket of the county attorney."

"It's nobody's business but yours if I'm dating a coworker, Donna," J.T. replies.

I turn and look at him and his reddening ears. "Dating? Are we officially dating now?"

He turns to me with a frown and eyes that could shoot an arrow straight to my heart.

"I thought that was clear," he says. "Yes. You're my girlfriend."

"Who says?" I ask defiantly.

"What do you think we were doing in my office today? I told you I'm a serious person. I don't mess around with random people."

I am simultaneously mortified and pleased.

Donna mutters something about having lost her patience about a mile back down the road with all of us. J.T. stares at me, his top lip curling like a naughty little kid. I glare back at him. I'm aware of almost nothing but his face and the noise of Donna opening and closing her drawer.

“Here,” she says, shoving a piece of paper across her desk toward me. Tearing my eyes away from J.T., I pick it up and read: *Disclosure of employee/employee relationship*.

I scoff. “It’s not illegal to date a fellow employee, and there’s nothing about this in the company handbook.”

Donna lifts her chin and looks down at me. “It’s not illegal, but if your relationship can be seen as helping you perform your job, then I need you to sign a statement.”

I spin the paper back onto her desk. “I signed your journalistic code of ethics when you hired me. That should be enough.”

“Under the circumstances, people are going to be asking questions. Especially with as often and in myriad ways you’ve hounded the county attorney. If I have a signed statement from you two that your relationship isn’t influencing the news reporting, I can keep our reputation from tanking.”

“I see. The problem is, I *will* let our relationship influence the news.” Both Donna and I gape at J.T., astonished.

“What?” I ask.

He lifts one shoulder. “Of course, I’m going to help my girlfriend gain access to my dad. With all due respect to the man who sort-of raised me: fuck that guy.”

I look from J.T. to Donna and back to J.T. Well, well, well. This man is now talking a blue streak.

“J.T., come on,” I say. “How are we going to handle this? What do we do next?”

He snorts. “We’re not handling anything. And you, Donna....” J.T. points at Donna. He fucking points. The man finally finds his tongue, and he’s suddenly unable to shut up. “You won’t have to handle anything. Ignore the gossip, and it will all go away.”

“Our reputation is at stake here. I have advertisers to think about,” Donna insists.

J.T. has lost his goddamn mind. He leans forward and plants his elbows on his knees. “Donna, this is why you need

to dig into your deep pockets. Stop trying to do everything. Hire someone to handle the advertising and keep it separate from editorial. If you weren't being pulled into two directions at once, you'd probably realize that a new tech hub isn't going to give two shits about the integrity of our newspaper."

I narrow my eyes at him. "How do you know that?"

J.T. looks at me. "I read *The Drop* too. Scroll down and keep scrolling."

I lean forward and tap the down arrow, again and again... until I come to a paid advertisement from Martin FutureTech, Inc.

"Shocking," I say, feeling not at all shocked.

Donna curses, opening the bottom drawer of her desk. She pulls out a handful of plastic cups. Ugh. Time to go.

My butt is barely three inches off the seat when Donna tells me to sit my ass back down.

"Let's drink a toast," she says.

"To what?" I ask.

"To not giving a fuck how we get the story, as long as we get it," J.T. says.

Donna groans but cheers us anyway. As we leave her office, I spy her downing a bottle of antacid.

Chapter Eleven

J.T.

KNOCKING on the doors of strangers was not on my date night bingo card.

But I'm invested in Franny getting her story.

More specifically, I'm invested in Franny, period.

I don't ask questions. Mostly I try to pay attention.

One minute, we're knocking on doors, then the next minute, we're on the sidewalk in a residential area, with Franny squeaking loudly while re-examining the drug bust photo.

She looks at me with a fierceness that is beyond arousing.

"It's not only codeine, but that number on there is a date. I just finally recognized Gladys's handwriting!" She shows me her phone, and I zoom in on the photo of the little baggie.

I don't know the court clerk's handwriting, but I do know the court clerk. She's been to our house for more dinner parties than I can count.

"And the date matters because...."

"Because," Franny continues, "this means that the pills the cops used in the photo spread, the ones they allegedly found on Simms, are six years old."

Finally, I think I'm catching on. "Are you saying those are old pills someone took out of evidence?"

She nods, her eyes wide. "They've been around the block. That's what the public defender said." I ask, "But who took them out?"

"This is a tiny town," Franny says. "There's no crime lab, and this is the first drug case in Darling Creek in over five years. Is there even an evidence locker anywhere around here? And who's minding it at"—she checks her phone—"8:15 at night?"

The wheels of my brain turn. "Nobody, but..."

"But what?"

I change my mind. No way my plan will work. "Nothing. Let's keep looking for someone with Ring camera footage or a neighbor who might have seen something."

Franny bites her lip. "I'm sorry."

"For what?" I ask.

"Come on," she says, shaking her head. "I'm dragging you around on this mission that I don't know will go anywhere. A romantic sunset is all around us, and we're not even enjoying it."

I laugh. "But I am enjoying it. All I want to do tonight is spend time with you."

Franny shakes her head, then looks off into the distance in the west. The enormous sky is exploding with reds and purples reflected in the clouds. The red horizon peeks from behind the line of mountains in the distance.

"Wow," she breathes.

I rest my arm around her shoulder, and Franny tucks in next to me.

"This is what clinched it. Everyone back in Pennsylvania thought I was nuts to move across the country for my first job out of college, but this is why," she adds. "Look at that."

“I’m glad you did. Now I have a reason to stay, despite all the small-town gossip and bullshit,” I say.

She looks up at me. “The sunsets?”

I laugh. “Yeah. The sunsets.” I close the distance between us with a tender kiss. As much as I want her, crave her, I want Franny to know that I care. That I’m falling for her. Fast.

The kiss is warm and sweet and achingly perfect. It must be magic because what follows this is nothing short of miraculous.

“Hey! Are you the lady asking to see porch cam footage?”

The voice comes from a middle-aged man in a tee-shirt, sweatpants, and five days’ growth of scruff.

It seems we’re fated to have romantic moments interrupted.

On instinct, I press my hand to Franny’s lower back, letting her know I’m there if this goes badly.

“Yes,” she replies as the man approaches, his worn house slippers scraping on the sidewalk.

“Here,” he says, thrusting his phone in Franny’s face. Without a second thought, I snatch the phone away from him and look at it first. How do I know this guy isn’t a random freak?

Of all the freakish things I was prepared to see on this man’s unlocked phone screen, nothing prepares me for watching a clear black and white video of my dad, Ed Holmes, walking up a residential street at 4:15 p.m. on a Tuesday two weeks ago, turn into a driveway, then disappear off the screen.

“What...what is he doing there?” I ask no one.

“Fast forward 27 minutes,” says the owner of the phone. I do, then see my dad leaving, walking two houses down, getting into his car, and driving away.

I hand the man his phone, stone-faced.

I can feel Franny’s eyes on me. “J.T.,” she says gently, but I won’t meet her gaze. I look everywhere but at her. I had my

suspicious, but is this confirmation? I need a minute to process this.

The stranger fills the silence. “I had a feeling this might be what you were looking for when I saw your note on my door. I got the same thing every day that week. He showed up at the same time every day and left about thirty minutes later.”

“Do you have any idea what he was doing at your house? And keep in mind this is on the record. May I get your name, please, for the record?” Franny asks.

The man looks at her. “Harvey Simms.”

Franny’s eyes widen, and I see her glance at her recording device to ensure it’s recording. She licks her lips. “And do you know what that man was doing at your house every afternoon that week?”

He snorts. “Yeah. He’s sleeping with my wife.”

I feel Franny’s fingers circle my forearm and squeeze. She’s telling me she’s here, supporting me. But she doesn’t need to be focused on me right now.

She’s got shit to do.

I step away and let Franny interview the man without my interference.

From listening in, I gather what I think has been happening. My dad has been sleeping with Marjorie Simms while her husband is at work. Harvey Simms has been getting suspicious, and the county attorney, my dad, thought it would be a good idea to get Harvey out of the picture for a while. The man thinks my dad gave those pills to Marjorie, who planted them on the truck, then left an anonymous tip with the cops that Harvey was selling fentanyl.

But it all blew up in my dad’s face when Harvey caught him visiting his house daily for a week on video. So now my dad, the most powerful man in town, is hoping everyone forgets the case so he can drop the charges without anyone noticing — and before the pills come back from the state drug lab, which could take months.

Well, shit.

Shocking behavior, even for my dad, the suspected adulterer.

Five minutes later, Franny and I are in my car, headed across town to Darling Creek's one and only gated community.

"Where are we going?" Franny asks. "I have to go to the office to file the story."

I turn to her. "No."

"No?"

"We're gonna get my dad's keys to the evidence locker."

Franny gapes at me. "How?"

"You're going to distract him with an impromptu interview," I say, pointing to her phone. "I mean, he does need to answer for the screenshots you have of him at the Simms' house. Meanwhile, I'll grab his keys."

Franny squeezes her eyes shut. "I don't want to use you, though."

I growl at her. "Stop being so righteous. Besides, you have no choice."

She sighs. "He's going to notice the missing keys."

"If I don't replace them before he leaves for work in the morning, yes. If I don't, so what? He won't show up to work after your story is out. Wait and see."

"This is a terrible idea," she says after several seconds of quiet thinking. She then slides her gaze to me as the barest hint of mischief tugs at her lip. "Let's do it."

Chapter Twelve

Franny

LOOKING FRESHLY SHOWERED and dressed to go out, the elder Holmes is not pleased to see me at his door at 9 p.m. on a Friday. Or to see his son, for that matter.

“Son, what is the meaning of inviting a reporter over at this hour?”

J.T. makes a dismissive noise and scans the room. “Where’s Mom?”

The county attorney answers, “It’s Friday night. Your mother’s at bunco.”

J.T. scans his father’s outfit and sniffs the air. “If Mom’s out, where are you going?”

The man looks guilty as hell. “Nowhere.”

“You’re wearing cologne, Dad.”

“I’m not wearing...it’s your mother’s oil diffuser; she runs that foolish thing all day.”

All this man does is lie all day long. And my heart hurts for J.T. at having to deal with his father’s philandering.

“You could just say you’re going out for a beer with the guys. Going to shoot pool. Out to dinner with friends.”

The man doubles down. “I’m not going anywhere.”

He's growing more agitated, which will not help me get a comment. I rest a steady hand on J.T.'s shoulder. "I've got it from here."

When his gaze connects with mine, something clicks. He forgot what we're supposed to be doing here, but I've got him back and focused on the mission.

J.T. disappears into the kitchen while I stay with his dad in the foyer, casually blocking the front door.

"Some new facts have come to light, and I wonder if you could answer a couple of questions," I say.

"Young lady, I don't appreciate being ambushed in my home. I don't know what sort of hold you have over my son. I didn't want to believe the article on that ridiculous gossip website, but it seems the rumors are true."

Interesting that he's pointing fingers with regard to morality. The bald hypocrisy of the man steels my spine, and I jump right in.

"Are you having an extramarital affair with the woman whose husband you are prosecuting for drug trafficking?"

This might be the craziest thing I've ever done as a reporter. But I'm only 23, so this could be tame for some journalists, I don't know.

The man looks like a mouse backed into a corner, and I almost—almost—feel pity.

I get enough "no comments" out of the man tonight that it looks bad. Really, really bad.

Zero comments about the mislabeled pills, and zero statements about the alleged affair. Nada. But, no denials, either.

After several long minutes of pulling metaphorical teeth out of the man, J.T. gives me the signal that he has the keys.

My guy drives like a wheelman, post-bank heist, while I dictate the story to Donna over the phone.

“But don’t put the paper to bed yet. I have to check one thing, and I’ll have one more graf to end it,” I say hurriedly, feeling an odd thrill, like the first time I saw *Broadcast News* and *His Girl Friday*. Those were the original fantasies, and why I pursued this career in the first place. The fantasies are primarily just that, and these moments are scarce.

“Don’t worry about that, babe. Just go home and put your feet up. Whatever else you’ve got can hold until tomorrow,” Donna said.

“But...”

“No buts. You did good, kiddo.” I don’t know whether to roll my eyes or reach through the phone and throttle her.

“It’s kind of important...about the pills.”

“Yeah, you’ve got it right here in the story about how they were misidentified. You really need to get some sleep, kid,” she replies.

Ugh. “No, no. We think they were stolen from the evidence locker.”

There’s a pause, and then, “Who’s we?”

“Donna.”

“Never mind, kid. I don’t wanna know what you’re up to. Just don’t end up in jail.”

Click.

Donna really enjoys an aggressive hang-up.

Turns out Darling Creek is so small that the evidence locker is not so much a locker but a file drawer in a dusty corner of the county clerk’s office.

It takes J.T. about seventeen tries to find the drawer key amongst the enormous number of keys on his dad’s ring.

When the right one finally clicks into place, the ancient drawer resists, giving in with an obnoxiously loud scrape of metal on metal.

“Geez, I hope there’s no one sweeping up in here tonight because they definitely heard that,” I hiss, holding the flashlight of my phone aloft.

In front of me is a long open drawer that looks like nothing more than five hundred manila folders, each marked with a date in black permanent marker, in large, familiar handwriting.

I flip through to the date the arrest was made according to the police logs but find not a single file folder for that date. Not even a folder for that entire week.

I rummage backward toward the weeks and months prior, but there’s nothing there. Nothing but a whole lot of folders full of documents, drugs, and things that surely should have been incinerated already.

Now that I know the number on the bag of pills is a date, I have to ask J.T. to find the key for the drawer containing files going back to 2019.

“You would ask me that,” he mutters.

This takes another seventeen tries, but eventually, we find the proper drawer. The manila folder marked for that date, the date that the original bag was marked for, is empty except for a copy of a police report that several doses of acetaminophen with codeine were confiscated from a senior at Darling Creek High School—the exact same number of doses in Simms’ alleged stash.

“Do you think if we look through every folder, we’ll find more instances of evidence gone missing?” I say, feeling like I want to throw up. Despite being relentless, I do not enjoy finding out that the people in authority I write about are actually criminals. This sucks and makes me lose faith in people in public service. In all of humanity, in fact.

“I’m game to find out if you are,” J.T. says, his hand on my back.

“It’s your dad we’re digging into here, don’t forget that,” I say, searching his face in the dark for a sign of regret or hurt. As much as I want to put the truth out there, I still don’t want

to keep throwing fuel onto the dumpster fire of this particular father/son relationship.

“I’m done listening to him tell me I’m failing at life by not following in his footsteps. I’m done living in his shadow. This needs to happen.”

“Understood.”

I gaze up at him in the dark room, the light from our phone flashlights glinting off his lips that are far too kissable. Famous people pay good money for fillers to achieve lips like his, and it’s completely unfair.

But not totally unfair, as I get to be the one that kisses them.

“You’re staring at my mouth, Franny.”

“I am.”

“Better stop, or I’ll have to kiss you.”

“Don’t threaten me with a good time.”

J.T. closes the distance between us, slanting his mouth over mine in a tender kiss that turns quickly heated and wet with his licking tongue.

“Always a good time,” he growls low into my mouth.

Why does he have to taste so good at the most inopportune moments?

The sound of soft footsteps in the hallway has us pulling away abruptly from the kiss. Without thinking, I slam the stiff drawers shut on pure adrenaline. The sound is so loud it echoes.

“Burns,” J.T. hisses as he drags me away by the crook of my arm into the stacks. “What were you thinking?”

We crouch down behind a stack of bank boxes set haphazardly in the middle of the aisle of shelves. A doorknob turns, and I get the giggles. I cover my mouth and swallow them back as best I can, which turns the giggles into a hyperventilating fit.

“Burns!” J.T. shakes me, and I’m giggling again.

“We are so dead,” I whisper, near cackling.

“This was a bad idea,” he groans.

We wait for I don’t know how long, J.T. stewing and me trying not to laugh out loud. Hysteria? Exhaustion? Take your pick.

“Wait,” I say, covering his mouth. “Hear that? I think they’re gone.”

J.T. nips my fingertips between my teeth, and I play-swat his shoulder. “What are you doing?”

He doesn’t answer but says, “I just want to point out that this is the best date I’ve ever been on,” J.T. says, his hand going to my thigh.

I make a slight sympathetic noise. “I’m really sorry to hear that.”

“Don’t be.” His hands cup my face, and he pulls me back for more kissing.

This time it’s not gentle. The kiss is hungry and claiming and threatens to make me forget where we are.

He licks into my mouth with a fierce, owning tongue, sending waves of heat down to my core. I can’t stifle the tiny moan of pleasure that comes out as moisture pools in my panties.

He pulls me into his lap, pressing my side against his chest and easing his hand down the neckline of my shirt. My breath catches as he snakes his hand inside my bra.

“Wha-what are we doing, J.T.?” I barely get it out because his hand on my breast feels so damn good, especially his thumb and forefinger tweaking my taut nipple.

“Waiting until the coast is clear,” he murmurs with hot breath against my throat, leaving small, wet, nibbling kisses there.

“Is that what this is?” I ask, panting. “Because it looks like we’re getting handsy in the restricted section of the county

clerk's office.”

“When you put it like that,” he says, squeezing my nipple, making me bite back a yip, “it sounds like we’re doing something we shouldn’t.”

If he stretches out the neckline of this shirt too much, I’ll kill him. And yet I set that thought aside as he tugs the fabric of my bra aside, his wicked mouth closing around my nipple, warm and wet and teasing.

“Oh god,” I whisper. “More of that.”

He groans. His lips pull and suck, shooting electricity through my body.

“We...shouldn’t...have sex...in the county clerk’s office...”

J.T. makes a noise that’s somewhere between a laugh and a grunt. “Why not?”

I huff in protest, but my hands won’t stop encouraging him to keep going. He tongues the underside of one while his fingers explore the other one over the material of my shirt.

“Uh...because... her name is Gladys, and she wears cat-eyed glasses on a chain around her neck”

“That’s hot,” he insists, blowing on my wet nipple, driving me so wild I might have forgotten my own name.

“...and...and she eats cheese curds... and whenever I come in here to ask for files, she offers me cheese curds...and this office will forever be associated with that very specific squeak that cheese curds make in your mouth when you eat them....”

By this time, J.T. has stopped adoring my chest and stares at me in the dark. “One thing is for sure,” he says.

I hold my breath, certain that he’ll call the date off now because I’m rambling about things that are decidedly the opposite of sexy. Or because I’m not focused on him enough. Or because I’m putting up a fight, and he finally sees that I’m too unsure or immature to go through with sex tonight.

J.T. doesn't say any of those things.

“I need to immediately get you out of here and into my bed.”

Chapter Thirteen

J.T.

I DRIVE us back to my small house, the streets of Darling Creek like a ghost town.

We pass the newspaper office, the only building with lights still on.

I grab Franny's hand and see her gazing out at the building. "Don't even think about stopping."

She looks at me and bites her lip. "But what if she has a question? What if my story is too much? What if I'm jumping to too many conclusions? Maybe I should give it a day...let it bake. Talk to more people and see what else shakes out?"

"Trust me. More facts will come to light tomorrow once people read it. You know what people have been saying on the down low about my dad for years. You got a guy on the record saying the quiet part out loud," I tell her.

My desire for Franny might cloud my judgment, but I know I'm right. I heard everything she dictated to Donna over the phone, and she did nothing wrong. She checked and double-checked all the facts. There's nothing in it that could be construed as defamation.

"But it's your dad," she says meekly.

I screech the car to a halt in front of the newspaper office. If she's coming home with me tonight, then it needs to be her

idea. If she has any reservations, then she needs to put that to rest on her own.

I pivot toward her in the driver's seat and say probably the most levelheaded thing I've ever uttered. "Yes. This is about my dad. The story makes him look like an asshole and a criminal, and he will be pissed. He should have kept his dick in his pants and treated my mom better, and that's my only feeling about it. I can't tell you to run the story, and I can't tell you to hold the story. Did I give you access that someone would have who was not my girlfriend? Yes. Is that a bit sketchy? Sure. But I'm not going to tell you what to do. *Capisce?*"

She lightly scoffs and shakes her head. "Yes, J.T. I *capisce* you."

The way she says it, I don't think she's saying she understands me. I think she's saying...something else.

Franny finally declares, "It's done. Let's go finish this date."

I lean forward, capturing her soft lips with a devouring kiss, following that with a light, teasing one. "You say that like it's a prison sentence," I tease.

She snorts. "Shut up and drive."

I put the car in drive and speed down to my driveway, which, from the perspective of my painfully erect cock, feels miles and miles away.

Chapter Fourteen

Franny

J.T. PINS me against the front door the second we're inside his house, ravaging my mouth with his lips and tongue.

Finally, we can enjoy each other without interruption.

He devours me fiercely, the door rattling in protest inside its frame. Likewise, I plunge my tongue into his mouth, not knowing what to do with my free hand. He's anchored the one above my head against the wooden door as we kiss. If he's giving me a taste of how he likes to take charge, I am here for it.

I'm soaking my panties all over again at the press of his hand. My back comes off the door, driving my hips forward to feel more of this man.

"More," I gasp, breathless from kissing. He chuckles softly at my greediness, which pricks my nipples. I grasp the back of his neck, shoulders, and shirt. When my fingers skim over his chest, he softly groans against my lips, which pushes me to go lower with my searching hands.

He angles his lips every which way, memorizing and claiming me at once. He loves kissing, and though he's absolutely eating me up with his mouth, he's calculated and deliberate. Not touching my breasts or anything else. Just holding my wrist down and caging me in with his other arm.

The man is taking his time, and my inner slut wants to go faster.

Right. That word. He hates that word.

Well. We have time to work on that.

Lifting up the hem of his shirt, I press my palm against his abdomen, thrilling at all the hard places, the soft places, everything I can fit in my hands. I want to touch him everywhere.

Specifically, I want to touch his cock again and make him feel good.

Just as my hand descends and cups his hard length, straining against the zipper of his jeans, he pulls away from the kiss.

He squeezes his eyes shut and groans like he's working hard to gain composure. His face relaxes, then he kisses me so tenderly it's maddening.

"Shoes," he murmurs.

"Huh...what?" I say, ready to hook my leg around his middle. I swear to god, I could dry hump this man into oblivion.

"I'm...ah...a stickler about outside shoes..." he says sheepishly.

"Oh!" I exclaim, still dazed from the kiss, and from mind-numbing arousal. I look down at the rug, noticing the tidy row of men's size 13 sneakers and boots on the mat where we're standing. "I'm with you on that."

I stand up straight when he lets my wrist go so I can kick off my shoes.

While doing so, I scan the room. If J.T.'s office is blank, his house is anything but.

Everything is tastefully decorated with a mix of classic furniture and sports memorabilia, which is not a thing I ever thought I would say. How does this room even mesh? Yet somehow, it does.

“Are you changing your mind?”

I snap my gaze back to J.T., removing his shoes.

“I’m just trying to figure this out. This room shouldn’t make sense, but it does. And it’s totally...you.”

“This used to be my grandparents’ house, and Mom’s an interior designer...in a town with little demand for it. She loves to come over and change things when I’m at work. It makes her happy.”

What can I say? As much as I am looking forward to crawling all over this man, naked, I’m a little nervous. And when I’m nervous, I create distractions.

“Now, where were we?” His voice is low against the skin of my neck, spreading goosebumps across my shoulders. J.T. gathers my hair and holds it out of his way, allowing him to press soft, sweet kisses along the back of my neck.

I close my eyes and lean into how good that feels. His arm snakes around my waist, then, and he cinches me against his body, his cock jutting hard against my soft backside.

“Such a pretty neck,” he murmurs, then kisses one sensitive spot hard, sucking. He’s sure to leave a mark, and I do not care. His mouth and teeth make me feel too good to care what anyone thinks. And I like the idea of him marking me as his. Despite every ounce of me being an enlightened, modern woman, I love the way J.T. takes control and does what he feels. He’s not shy with my body, and I love it.

Finally, his hand travels from my waist to cover my breast.

I press against him and reach my hand back to touch his face. My fingers run over the stubble along his jaw, the same stubble leaving pink marks along the skin of my collarbone. He moves his head to the side and captures a finger in his mouth, sucking and nipping the tip. His play-biting makes me throb, the small muscles of my sex contracting on nothing. I let out a whimper, and he responds by toying with my nipple through the material of my shirt.

My head lolls back onto his shoulder, and I give in to the moment.

He murmurs next to my ear as he lets go of his grip on my hair, dragging that hand down to the waistband of my jeans. “What do you need, Franny?”

“I ne-need to come,” I stammer.

He unbuttons my jeans, and next, I hear the zipper, followed by the sensation of his big warm hand sliding down into my panties. He cups my pussy, his fingers splitting open my folds.

“Shit, I can feel how wet you are, baby.”

Am I his baby now? While I love that idea, I may need more than sweet nothings.

For now, though, I’m lost in the feel — and the sound — of him wetting his fingers. Every movement of his hand between my folds makes me wetter, and has me panting with need. Finally, he slides a finger on either side of my clit and strokes up and down.

I rasp his name, arcing my hips against his exploring hand.

“You’re perfect...so pretty and perfect...” he murmurs, nipping my ear as he strokes my clit. “And all mine.”

I love his possessive words, and I decide now is a good time to kick it up a notch.

“Am I yours?” I ask, reaching backward and stroking the nape of his neck.

“Mine. Only mine.”

“Can I be your pretty, perfect little slut, too?”

He stills, his hand inside my folds, slowing his caresses but not stopping. J.T.’s groan is muffled by my hair.

It’s okay. He can start small. “Tell me I’ve been a bad girl while you touch me.”

J.T. growls, pinching my nipple with the hand bracing my body against him. He runs his tongue up the side of my neck. “Have you been bad, Franny?”

“Yes,” I breathe.

“Yeah, you are a bad girl, aren’t you? Only the bad ones get this fucking wet.”

I shiver in his arms. Oh my god, he’s doing it; he’s playing along!

The words “I love you” almost leap out of my throat, but I bite them back.

The familiar curl of pleasure tightens below my waist, and I smile, knowing this is happening.

“I’m gonna come,” I rasp. “Keep going.”

“I’ve always wanted a naughty, slutty little plaything, and now I have one all to myself.”

My orgasm snaps through me in the next instant. I rasp his name as I come so hard my knees give out.

Whether J.T. anticipated this or he’s quick on his feet, I don’t know. It doesn’t matter. All I know is that I’m still shuddering as he carries me to the bedroom.

“We can take a break,” he starts as he sets me down gently on my feet when we reach the bedroom. “If you’re tired.”

I lift one eyebrow and tug my shirt off. Then I unhook my bra and toss it aside.

“Tired? No. Orgasms make me more frisky,” I say, dropping my jeans and panties to the floor and stepping out of them.

I turn to J.T. and work the buttons of his fly open, tugging his jeans and briefs down around his legs while he frantically works the buttons of his shirt, then yanks off his undershirt.

“Wow,” I breathe, now seeing the man fully naked for the first time.

“Wow yourself,” he says, his eyes raking over me.

Strange that his eyes roving over my naked body should make me blush, considering all the sins we’ve already committed together, but it does.

I tear my gaze away from his eyes, distracted by his cock jutting out, fully erect, the red tip seeping precum. I salivate at the sight of it.

I step forward, circling my fingers around his length.

“Franny,” he groans, sounding like it’s the first time I’ve touched him. “That feels so good, but slow down before I nut in your hand. I wanna take my time with you.”

I pout, and he laughs, nipping my bottom lip and then licking over the spot.

My sweet J.T. has other ideas, and instead cups my face and sets his mouth on mine in a savoring kiss. One hand goes to my bare breast, brushing my skin and teasing out my nipple as we kiss. His lips paint slow, reverent kisses across my jaw and down my throat, continuing down to my other breast. He nuzzles, licks, kisses, then scrapes his short scruff over my nipple, making me moan. Despite that orgasm earlier, my body aches to feel him between my thighs.

“J.T. Please.”

He looks up at me from where he worships my tits and shoots me a wicked little grin before sucking one tight, aching nipple into his mouth again.

“Please, I need your cock,” I whine.

“I’m gonna give it to you...when I’m done exploring,” he says with a chuckle.

Oh, it’s like that, is it?

I have no choice but to slip my hand between my legs to lube my hand and give his cock one hard pump.

“Fuck, Franny,” he hisses, pressing his forehead against mine, his eyes shut tight when I do just that.

“Get in bed with me, J.T.” Backing away from him, I draw down the duvet, blanket, and sheet because somehow I know he’s bound to be too fastidious for messing around on top of the duvet.

I lie down on my side, propped up on one elbow, and pat the spot where he needs to be.

“You’re making me fall for you, Franny,” he says, his warm body sliding into the bed next to mine.

Gently, I push him onto his back and lick my lips, dopamine still coursing through my body and making me more eager than ever. I crawl down the bed as I kiss and lick my way down his body.

“Franny,” he grits out. “Ah, you don’t have to....”

“Shh,” I say, pressing my finger to my lips and giving him a dark look. “Don’t start with the ‘you don’t have to’ stuff. I’m gonna enjoy this.”

A guttural noise of pleasure escapes him as I kiss and lick lower and lower, noticing how his cock twitches the closer I come to it with my mouth. I’m on my knees at his side, my hair flipped away from my face so he can look down and see everything I’m doing.

I suck the tip in, cleaning off the creamy pearl of precum with my swirling tongue, noting how J.T. sucks in his breath.

I keep going, taking more of his length into my mouth and using my tongue, lips, and hands to pleasure him, all the while noting what makes him curse, what makes his breaths come in rapid bursts, and what makes him reach down at grab hold of one side of my rump.

He fists my hair with his other hand and guides me up and down his length.

He’s so big in my mouth as he glides in and out, warm and throbbing. My body thrills at the hair-pulling, so much so that I’m starting to crave another release. I look into his hooded eyes and make sure he can see me reach between my legs to pleasure myself.

“Shit, oh shit...Franny...”

I moan on his cock, and his entire body twitches.

“Baby, I...I’m coming...”

I slide him out of my mouth. “Say it, J.T.”

I resume my ministrations, giving a slow, wet stroke with my mouth, and push my ass back against his massaging hand.

His hips jerk upward off the mattress. The hot wash of his seed spills down my throat while his rough hand grips my cheek harder, one thick finger slipping inside my anus. I gasp at the sensation of him filling my ass while I swallow down his cum.

“Fra-Fran—”

Out of breath and forgetting my name? I must have done something right.

“My...my fucking beautiful little slut.”

My J.T.

He shudders, spasms, and curses his release as I drain him dry. I let his spent cock fall from my mouth just as my second climax hits me.

I cry out again, rasping through wave after wave of my release. Finally, I roll to the side and collapse onto the mattress.

Two strong hands haul me up, and then I’m tucked in next to him, in the crook of his arm.

He spoils me with a slow, sweet, open-mouthed kiss. It’s not an afterthought, it’s deep and soulful, and I feel it down to my toes.

“Thank you,” I say.

“For what?” His voice is dusky and tired, his chest still rising and falling as he catches his breath.

“I wasn’t sure if you’d want to kiss me after that.”

He shrugs this off like he wouldn’t try to understand why anyone wouldn’t want to.

“Hey,” he says. “The butt thing. I got carried away.”

It’s not an apology, but I don’t really mind. “I liked it. But I appreciate you acknowledging it.”

I like talking to him like this. Almost too much. He's relaxed, happy, and even smiling. I'm not used to it, but I love seeing him like this.

"So, orgasms make you frisky, huh?" he asks, a bigger smile tugging at his lips.

"Yep," I laugh.

"How many until you're worn out?"

I'm not sure what he has planned, but I'm sure I'll like it. "Three," I say with a teasing smile.

"Cool, cool. I haven't missed my window."

I playfully punch him in the shoulder. "Window for what?"

The next thing I know, he's rolling me under him, spreading my legs wide and fitting his shoulders between my thighs.

Chapter Fifteen

J.T.

IF SHE ONLY KNEW HOW my heart pelts against my bones at the thrill of having her in my bed. No interruptions.

Just Franny and me.

I'll do anything to please her, including trying out words I would never typically enjoy saying.

But I thoroughly enjoyed her reaction. Yeah, I got used to that real damn quick.

It's perfect that the "slut"-fueled orgasms made her frisky because I plan on feasting on her body for the rest of the night.

I absorb every sound and every reaction as I memorize her curves.

She urges me to go faster as I cover her inner thighs from inside her knee to her pelvis with teasing, licking kisses. One, then the other. Finally, when she's writhing under me, I kiss every inch of her slit.

"J.T....please..."

"Patience," I whisper.

She cries out something unintelligible, her hips arcing off the bed in an invitation to speed things up.

Slowly I split her open with my thumbs and kiss her there, taking my first taste of her sweetness. I nearly come straightaway.

“Magnificent little slut.”

Franny moans, thrusting her hips, demanding more from my mouth.

I take my time, gradually intensifying my worship of her perfect, wet, swollen pussy. From sweet pecks, to licking kisses, to deep lashings with my tongue.

Every gasp and every moan from my Franny guides me on this exploration; I need her to show me how she wants to be worshiped and adored.

I sink two fingers into her heated center while swirling my tongue around her tight clit. Her breath catches when I twist my fingers, caressing her walls.

By now, I know what she’s begging for.

“Come for me, whore.”

She shrieks my name and clamps her thighs against my ears.

I tongue her through her orgasm. Her sticky sweetness covers my tongue and drips down my chin.

“That’s it. Such a good little slut.” I close my lips around her clit and suck, stroking in and out of her with three fingers.

Her spasms rocket through her as she cries out, her cunt locking down around my girth.

“My Franny.”

I crawl up the bed and rasp in her ear. “I’m gonna flip you over and tongue your sexy ass now.”

Still in the throes of her third and most intense release, she murmurs her consent. Onto her stomach she goes.

And there she stays for now while I make my way to heaven through the back door.

Chapter Sixteen

Franny

I WAKE UP ALONE, but I vaguely remember J.T. said he would run out for breakfast in the morning.

I peek at the window, and it's definitely morning.

From the sounds I hear at the front of the house, he's back with food already, and my tummy rejoices.

Honestly, after last night, I'm overdue for some food. We skipped that part of the date, didn't we?

I tug on my undies and tee-shirt from last night and peek down the hall.

And...that's not J.T.

In the living room, a woman in her fifties is hauling a stack of boxes on a dolly up a ramp set up at the open front door.

I scamper back to the bedroom and try again. This time, I throw on my bra and pull on my shirt again, along with my jeans.

I don't see a mirror anywhere, so I check my face in my phone's camera app and smooth down my rat's nest of hair as best I can.

I creep back down the hallway and go into the living room.

Scattered around the room are several mismatched items—a midcentury floor lamp, an enormous rustic pottery jug, a rolled-up boho rug, and a giant pop art wall clock shaped like a basketball.

“Oh! I saw his car was gone, so I thought he’d be out for the day. I’m so sorry for intruding.”

The woman addressing me is obviously J.T.’s mother. They have the same nose, and her smile reaches her eyes in the same way as her son’s. My stomach flips happily at the thought that I made J.T. smile.

His mother’s hair is short, gray, and spiky, and she wears funky frames and ripped jeans...not at all the sort of woman I imagined to be married to a man like J.T.’s dad.

“I’m Franny,” I say, but I don’t hold out my hand. I know where that hand went last night while fucking around with her son—places they’d never been before. The memory of that makes my cheeks heat.

The woman’s smile falters, but only a little. “Franny, as in the byline of Francesca Burns. From the article this morning.”

She says it not like a question but a statement.

I swallow hard. “Guilty.”

She nods, then lifts her chin resolutely. “I’m Priscilla. Don’t feel guilty about anything, dear. Guilt eats away at us and steals our joy. You were doing your job.”

I wince. “I doubt that’s your husband’s take on it.”

She lifts one shoulder, then goes back to work while talking matter-of-factly. “Eddie has always done everything exactly the way Eddie wants it, whenever he wants. It was only a matter of time. I thought that silly gossip website would catch him in the act first, but it seems you scooped ol’ Charlie.”

My mind reels. Was the guy from *The Drop* following her husband, looking for dirt, and ended up stumbling on J.T. and me kissing? On the one hand, I want to punch Charlie in the face for nearly costing me my job. On the other hand, I’m

oddly grateful he got distracted on his mission to confirm the rumors about Ed Holmes. Me? I don't get distracted. Maybe that's why I'm so annoying to people who fuck around.

"It's none of my business, but what will you do now? Off the record," I ask Priscilla.

She pauses and heaves a sigh. "That's the million-dollar question, isn't it? Sit down; I'll make some coffee."

So the woman whose life I just upended with my story is making me coffee. That's another brick in the highway to hell for me.

Not everyone is this kind to me after unpleasant truths come out in the newspaper.

While I wait, I look around the room and notice more details. J.T. has handmade shelves filled with family photos, what looks like an heirloom upright piano, high-end designer pieces, an enormous tv with multiple gaming platforms, and an autographed and framed Broncos jersey on the wall. And his dining table and matching chairs were made by authentic Amish hands, or I'll eat my hat.

When J.T. returns, Priscilla Holmes and I are bonding over a pot of coffee at the kitchen table.

His eyes are wide and wary as he slowly sets down a bag of food from the Corner Cafe, a box of muffins from Sweetie Pie's, and five copies of the *Daily News*.

"You went all out," I say, standing to help him with his armload of food.

J.T.'s eyes catch mine, and his face relaxes. He leans over to kiss me on the forehead, and I blush a deep crimson.

His mom smiles knowingly and sips her coffee.

"Mom, how are you? Are...are you okay?"

My guy wisely sets the stack of newspapers on the counter before leaning over and hugging his mom.

"No need to hide the paper, son," she says. "I already read it. Good thing I did that before the phone calls started coming

in.”

I rest my chin in both hands and watch as J.T. sits down slowly between us and scrubs his face in anxiety. “Sorry, Mom. I should have warned you this was happening.”

She waves him off. “No need. I’ve suspected for a while, and I think I was waiting for a reason to move out. It’s weirdly a relief that it’s all out in the open and not just gossip around town anymore.”

His mom is a stoic type, a lot like J.T., only a lot more chatty. While I’m glad she’s not having an emotional breakdown in front of her son or me, I would not be surprised if she did.

“So...let’s talk about something lighthearted,” she says, looking from me to J.T. and back to me. “How long have you two been seeing each other?”

I cringe inwardly, not ready for her to see me as a harlot sharing her son’s bed after a first date.

My phone rings in the other room.

J.T. looks at me.

“The ringtone. It’s Donna,” I say. Even though today’s a Saturday, the woman never stops working.

I move to get up, but J.T. is already running to get it for me.

Both of us are summoned to the office.

Chapter Seventeen

Franny

THE NEWS KNOCKS the wind out of me.

“The state attorney general is investigating Ed Holmes for mishandling evidence. They need all your notes and recordings, and you’re going to have to come in to give a statement,” Donna says.

J.T. sits next to me in the conference room with Donna and an attorney from the state AG’s office. I look at J.T., but I can’t read his face as we both take in all of the information.

His father is also going to be investigated for planting evidence, intimidating and interfering with investigators, interfering with forensics...there could be a long list of charges before it’s all over.

My first gut reaction is, how dare they try to take my notes away from me. It takes a minute for my brain to catch up with my ego.

This is a good thing.

Also good, if aggravatingly brief, is the press release on the table in front of me. The police department sent it over this morning, stating that all charges against Mr. Simms have been dropped. I’m happy for him.

It’s almost scary seeing the domino effect of my work. I look over at J.T. again, and correct myself: *our work*.

And this is a bittersweet moment, too.

Everything is changing. For the town, for J.T., for his mom.

I wanted a story, and I sure as hell got it. But at what price? It's too soon to tell.

After that meeting adjourns, Donna orders me to go home and come back on Tuesday.

“You look like shit. Go get some sleep.”

“Gee, thanks,” I tell her.

She gives J.T. a pointed look. “And you. Let her sleep.”

“Yes, ma'am.”

Chapter Eighteen

J.T.

I DO TRY to get her to sleep.

I try everything. Lavender tea. White noise machine. Full body massage.

But all my Franny does is stare at the wall, and I'm worried about her.

I spoon up behind her, even though I'm under strict orders to leave her alone.

"I know what you're thinking, and you have to stop doubting that you did the right thing," I say.

She nods, knowing I'm right.

"But I still feel bad. It's your father, after all. And your mom...I feel bad for her too. This has to be humiliating."

I sweep her hair out of her face. "Not nearly as humiliating as the entire town talking about his philandering. Not as unsettling as my mom feels whenever her so-called friends at the historical society clam up whenever she walks into a room. Now that it's out in the open, he'll pay the price, and everyone can move on. Including my mom."

Franny settles back into me and sighs. "I get that. But my feelings haven't caught up yet."

"What can I do to help?"

My voracious little Franny pushes her sweet ass against my pelvis.

“Baby,” I warn. “We both know that’s not going to help you sleep.”

“Three is the magic number, Jason Thomas Holmes.”

Three orgasms, she means.

There’s no denying my body’s reaction to her rubbing against my cock like that. How can I deny her? If she’s down, I’m down.

I roll away from her and fish a condom out of my nightstand drawer. I quickly unzip and lift out my cock, sheathing it in protection. When I roll back toward Franny, she has her jeans half off and has begun rolling down her panties, her hips squirming on the bed.

I cover her hands with mine. “Wait. Right here.”

She murmurs, looking back at me over her shoulder. “But my undies....”

I answer by tossing aside her jeans, then tugging her panties back up, only slightly, to just below her cheeks. “... will keep you from moving around too much,” I say.

“Oh,” she whispers, shivering. “Okay.”

She understands as I tell her to lie on her side. Her back fits snugly against my chest, her legs opening only enough to let me push into the tight cleft, lubing me with her sweet juice.

“My slut is so wet. How are you so wet already?”

Even as I say it, she grows wetter.

“I...you...just being in your bed makes me wet....”

Without wasting another moment, I ease my aching cock into her tight, damp cunt.

She gasps. “J.T.! That’s so good...deeper. Please.”

“So polite for such a sassy little whore,” I murmur, my hand going to her neck.

Her walls seize around me, and I sputter her name.

“Harder, deeper. I want all of you in me,” her throat raspy in response to my grip.

I spoonfuck her deep, slow, and hard from behind while my free hand travels down her front to strum her clit.

I keep up the dirty comments, the filthy things she likes, going as deep as I can while her underwear keeps her thighs in place. Her warmth against my chest, her damp undies brushing my thighs with every jerk of my hips—the moment hypnotizes me with rhythmic bliss.

She comes hard, writhing next to me, yet my touches are unrelenting, playing, teasing, and coaxing everything out of her. Again and again.

I refuse to come until she’s reached her limit, and eventually, my release blows through me like a fucking freight train.

“I love you, Franny.”

The words fall out while I’m still balls deep, multiple orgasms still rattling through her.

“I love you too,” she says, her words languid and sleepy.

My heart is full, and my heart has found its home.

She turns to me, her brow glistening. “You wanna keep these for your panty collection?”

I laugh as I tug the panties back up her legs.

“No, Franny. You’ll wear these whore undies for the rest of the day.”

My stomach clenches as Franny’s eyes widen. Her lips curl in a slow, wicked smile, and I exhale.

She curls her hand around my neck and smashes her lips on mine. “Delighted to.”

Epilogue

Franny

ONE YEAR later

“ARE YOU READY?” I ask.

J.T. nods.

The two of us stand side by side naked from the waist down, our asses facing the bathroom mirror.

“On three,” he says.

“Let’s do it,” I agree.

The responses were mixed when we told people we were getting matching tattoos to celebrate our engagement.

Jessica thought it was adorable and said she and Alex might steal my idea if they ever get engaged.

Meredith said it was an adorable idea, but she and Nate are about as weird as J.T. and me.

Donna had no response other than to tell some story about how she got an ass tattoo in exchange for an interview with a scandalized Navy admiral during the Vietnam War, but no one is sure if that story is true. I wouldn’t be surprised if it was.

J.T.’s mother was all aflutter about our engagement but quickly became concerned about our plan. We hadn’t meant

for her to find out, but she saw the doodles when she came over to redecorate. Again.

“What will your doctors say when they see that?” she asked. “What will they say if you ever have a baby and all your nethers and whatnot are on display?”

“Probably congratulations,” J.T. replied.

As for Ed Holmes, he’s not saying much to anyone in Darling Creek these days. After the AG investigated him for mishandling evidence and filing false reports, he was disbarred. Having narrowly avoided jail time, he “retired” in Florida, and the last we heard was trying to regain his license to practice law there. J.T.’s mom has moved in with a nice professor from Helena and seems happy—other than about the tattoos.

On the count of three, we peel back the bandages. I squeal in delight at the tattoo artists’ handiwork.

Mine reads, “J.T.’s little slut.”

His tattoo reads, “Franny’s fuckboy.”

“That looks so good!” I shriek.

“We are tacky, tacky people, Franny.”

I wouldn’t have us any other way.

“I love us just the way we are,” I say.

J.T. presses a kiss to my lips—slow, sweet, and stirring all the feelings deep inside the core of me—and says, “I love us, too.”

THE END

THANK you for reading *Say That To Me!* If you enjoyed this story, please consider leaving a review. And don’t forget to check out *Do That To Me* (Nate and Meredith’s story) available now 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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All my books are stand-alone romances, each with its own HEA. No cliffhangers or cheating!

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