



ENEMY'S
Second Chance

TONIE ROSE

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A Brother's Best Friend, Enemies to Lovers
Romance

Tonie Rose



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ONE

JACKSON

“YOU’RE WHAT?” I ASKED my assistant, Olive, staring at her. This was not the Monday I expected at all, and she grinned at me.

“Kyle asked me to marry him, and he’s joining the army. So we’re moving next week. He’s got an apartment near training, and we’re going to go ahead and settle in early,” Olive told me while I tried to remember if she’d mentioned Kyle before now.

I was always work-minded, running this construction company, and not much else stuck in my brain. I just knew that Olive was the best assistant I’d had in years.

“Oh. Well, congratulations,” I offered as she clasped her hands together, showing off the diamond on her left hand. That was something I’d never considered before.

Well, not completely.

“Thank you. I’m going to stay through Friday, but we’re leaving on Sunday.” It was Tuesday. That gave me exactly ten days to find an assistant. “Do you think you’ll be able to find someone?” Olive asked me, and my head throbbed.

We lived in a small town in Montana, and Cold Creek wasn't big enough to just call a temp agency to fill the position.

"There's nobody that comes to mind now, but it'll be fine. I'll find someone," I assured her as Olive looked worried.

I wouldn't give up this job to get married but to each their own. My family and friends teased me about being married to my job since I hadn't had a lot of long-term relationships.

There was Alexa, but that fizzled after a few months even if everyone in town deemed us the perfect couple. People needed to get a fucking life.

She went back to her desk, and I stared through the window at the mountains for a long moment. I needed someone capable of handling this fast-paced business who could be in tune with me.

Where the hell would I find that?

My best friend met me at the bar in town later that night to talk.

"I heard Olive is getting hitched," Aaron said as soon as he sat down, making me roll my eyes.

"That didn't take long," I replied, gesturing to the bartender for two beers.

"What are you going to do about it?" he asked, and I just wanted to put the subject behind me for the night.

"Not sure yet. I'll look into some options tomorrow," I replied and looked over to see him grinning with a twinkle in his blue eyes that scared me.

"You don't have to. Lila just got back with her bachelor's in business management, and she'd be perfect for the job. She needs something anyway because she hates relaxing. You don't ever do that at work—or ever," Aaron told me, and I paused for a moment.

He didn't know I'd hooked up with his sister a few years ago, and there was no fucking way I'd work with her. He could never find out, but how the hell was I going to get out of it?

I needed someone, and she was a smart girl. There was no doubt about that, but I'd pushed away my feelings for her for so long, I didn't know what might happen if I saw her again now.

"Come on, Jackson. You know it's a great idea," Aaron told me, and I met his eyes. "She's not that annoying little kid anymore. I even enjoy spending time with her."

She stopped being that annoying little kid around the end of her high school years, but he could never know that.

"That's a good point. If she needs something to do, she could fill in for a while." I held back the reluctance from my voice and reached for my beer. "How is she after college?"

"Still an asshole, but she's great. I think she had fun there, but she's also way into work or school, depending on the moment. I know she stayed home studying a lot," he replied, waving the bartender over.

I couldn't help but chuckle at his words, even through my discomfort. Aaron and Lila had a loud relationship based almost completely on sarcasm. I knew they loved each other underneath all that, especially since he was so protective of Lila. He'd been insane when she was in high school, and guys wanted to date her. I shuddered inwardly at the thought of her letting loose in college.

Our night had been hot enough, but that would forever be a secret from Aaron. He'd fucking kill me.

"Have her call me, and we can sit down and talk," I offered, wondering if I'd regret that. "I still have Olive for two weeks, but it would be good to

give her time to train.”

“She just got back last week, but I will. Mom is over the moon to have Lila home, and they’ve been spending a lot of time together. Lila is even living there for the time being though without a job. She doesn’t have much of an option there.”

Aaron had a house on the edge of town, but he worked at the local law firm that covered all of Montana and beyond. He could easily afford it. I was a little surprised he didn’t insist his sister live there, so he could monitor her—but they also needed some space.

Aaron was also well known for dating around this town and the others nearby. Hell, I was too. We were single and young and spent most of our time working, so we deserved to have a little fun. It wasn’t like we told anyone they would get a relationship out of it and lead them on. I’m sure he appreciated living alone.

Aaron ordered some of our favorite appetizers to eat with the beer and looked up at the hockey game playing on the TV. I also noticed him checking out a local girl in the corner, who we both knew.

She was a pretty blond, but the idea of Lila being back distracted me from her. Even her two friends didn’t hold my attention tonight.

We talked about the normal stuff throughout our easy meal. There wasn’t a lot going on here in Cold Creek. It made me grateful for my work trips around Montana and some of the other states—just to get away and see something different. I didn’t have to travel to get hands-on at a site unless we were short a guy or two, but I liked to check on the progress myself.

I ran a strong construction business that had a good name, and I needed to keep that going. Because we had incredible ratings, I went to each site to clean up any details and the guys knew I wouldn’t hold back my thoughts.

I also had a spacious five-bedroom house backing the woods, just enough out of town to offer me some privacy. There were acres of grass and trees on my land to explore when I needed the peace, and I had fully renovated my house since I bought it to fit my bachelor needs.

This was what I worked for when I followed in Dad's footsteps before he passed from a heart attack five years ago. I'd worked at his construction company since I was little and learned everything I could, turning it into something more for me and expanding our travel zones a bit.

Mom still lived in their house in town near friends and everything she knew and loved, and I kept a close eye on her. My little brother moved to Idaho for college, but he'd graduate next year and maybe come back home. He was always welcome to work for me and promote the company with his degree in graphic design.

I had a good life, and nothing would keep me from working hard to keep it. Even if that included hiring Lila James to work for me.

We finished out the night, and I chuckled when Aaron went home with a different woman from the group of locals. I waved the girls off, just wanting to be home alone and think about the changes I'd be facing.

Olive had worked for me for five years and knew her shit. She came here right out of high school with the skills to keep up with me, and I'd never considered the thought of her leaving.

I also never thought about mixing pleasure and business at the office. Dad taught me that was a bad idea from the start, and I stuck to it, although Olive never gave me any vibes she wanted more from me.

I guess she was really into this Kyle. I had never really been into her since I considered her a little young for me to begin with.

Lila had been eighteen when we hooked up. I was such a hypocrite.

Olive worked hard for me the rest of the week, making me grateful for that. She was still easily excited when she started talking about getting married and moving, but she did her work. I had told Aaron to have Lila get a hold of me when she was ready and didn't mind if she took her sweet time.

Maybe she wouldn't be interested at all. It would fuck me over a bit if I hadn't replaced Olive by the time she was gone, but it was almost worth it. I could always have one of the guys fill in for me even though that would mean pulling someone from a site.

Worth it?

I usually took weekends off along with the crew unless we were under a tight deadline. I paid them well and didn't often complain about any overtime, but I knew they needed their downtime as much as I did.

Olive scampered out of the office Friday night to pack for the move the following weekend, but she didn't usually work too much overtime.

I went to Mom's house on Saturday in the late morning to catch up with her. The house was an older ranch style with four bedrooms and several acres in the back, but I kept it in good shape just like Dad had all the years we lived here as a family.

Knocking on the door after looking over the front yard, I waited for Mom to answer. She called something out, and I opened the door, wanting to tell her to always lock it. Again.

"Hey, Mama. How are you?" I asked, walking into the kitchen to see her baking what looked like cupcakes. "What are you up to in here?"

"Baking for my friend's granddaughter. It's her birthday party tomorrow afternoon and she loves my cupcakes," Mom said, sliding a tray into the oven as the scent of chocolate filled the room.

She was keeping herself busy.

She offered me one of the frosted cakes and some coffee and sat down with me for a break.

“Olive is leaving next week,” I told her, and she frowned, her matching brown eyes meeting mine. I looked a lot like Mom but had Dad’s height at six foot three.

“What are you going to do? She’s been there for years. Why is she leaving?” Mom had always been here in Cold Creek, and she’d never leave. So she didn’t completely understand people that made that choice.

“She’s marrying an Army guy, and they’re moving,” I replied, pulling off a chunk of the cupcake. “This is amazing.”

“Thanks.” Mom beamed with pride before her face turned thoughtful again. “What are you going to do?”

“Aaron said Lila is back from college and might be looking for a job,” I said, keeping my tone casual.

“She was always a sweet girl, wasn’t she?” Mom asked, and I fought the urge to roll my eyes. Lila just knew how to win parents over she didn’t live with.

“Sometimes. She might do a good job. I’m waiting to hear from her.” Mom nodded. “I know she has a business degree, so that helps.”

We ate a quick lunch, and I left content, knowing Mom was happy. But that all changed when my phone rang, and I looked down to see a text from an unknown number.

It was Lila setting up an interview.

TWO

LILA

I WOKE UP AND looked around my childhood bedroom, missing my apartment with Tasha in Colorado more than a little.

I could have stayed there and gotten a job, but I had some pull back to Cold Creek. Maybe that was just Mom asking me to come live in the house until I got myself settled or maybe I missed the small-town feel. My university was too close to Denver to have that.

I took a deep breath, smelling coffee and breakfast. I smiled, knowing Mom made breakfast for Dad before he went into work at the vet clinic. That meant I was up early, but so be it.

I was hungry.

I rose and went into my attached bathroom to clean up and pull my hair into a messy bun. I already wore leggings and a tank top to sleep in, so I just pulled a university sweatshirt over my head and trudged down the hall.

“You are a site for sore eyes. Hungry?” Mom asked, and I nodded with a smile. She piled scrambled eggs and bacon onto three plates, adding some fresh-cut fruit.

I went to get coffee so I could form words. I'd become an addict in college and knew I was in for life.

Dad walked into the kitchen dressed in a casual button-up shirt and slacks for work, sticking to the small-town life. He smiled at us and reached for his coffee, taking a long sip.

"It's nice to have both of my girls in the kitchen," he noted before sitting down to dig into breakfast. "How does it feel to be home, Lila?"

"It's so weird not to have a class or something due," I replied, marveling at the few days I'd been home. "I can just be me."

"You worked hard there, and I'm proud of you. What do you think you'll do?" Dad asked, and I shrugged.

"I don't know." I didn't line up a job when I returned to Montana, figuring I'd get something in town or even work from home. I really wanted to own a business of my own but also wanted to get some experience under my belt before I took that on. "I thought I'd look online and see what I came up with. I know I'll get something."

"I'm sure you will." Mom smiled, grabbing a slice of bacon.

"I just need some experience, so I can open a business." I wasn't even specific about a certain kind. Helping someone with theirs would feel rewarding to me for a while, if that's where I ended up.

I knew Dad had a full staff at the vet, and Mom stayed home. She had ever since they were married and raised us.

"You'll get that." Dad kept eating, looking at the clock on the stove. I bit into a piece of bacon and looked out of the front window of the house at the mountain range just past our front yard.

Montana was beautiful. I enjoyed Colorado as well, but this place was home.

Dad left for work, and Mom cleaned up the kitchen while I pulled out my laptop. I sat at the breakfast bar to search Indeed and jotted down some jobs, interrupted by my phone.

“Aaron?” I answered, surprised to see it was my brother. He was at work and usually busy.

“Hey, Lila.” Aaron covered the phone and spoke to someone, proving he was at work. “What’s up? I talked to Jackson last week and just got around to calling you, but he’s looking for an assistant. His quit on him to go get married,” Aaron said, as I sat in silence.

Jackson Rollins. He’d been Aaron’s best friend for years since elementary school, and he was gorgeous. Jackson was also a former fling, though my brother would never know about that. I knew he ran a successful construction business in town he took over when his dad passed away, and he could be on the arrogant side.

But still so gorgeous.

Would working for him be hard with our past?

“What do you think?” Aaron asked me, and I came back to the present.

“About the job? I can call him. When is his leaving?” I asked automatically.

“She has one more week left.”

“What’s his number?” I asked, jotting it down on the notepad beside me.

“Thanks, Aaron. Have a good day.”

I set my phone down and sipped my fresh cup of coffee thoughtfully. Was working for Jackson even a good idea?

I hadn’t seen much of him since the night we hooked up at the party for my graduating class at one of the local mansions in town. God, that night

would forever be burned in my memory. We were both just buzzed and got to talking, leading to making out in the backyard.

We ended up in the basement bedroom together and had sex, and it had been incredible. I'd wanted it again, but we knew that had been risky and agreed to never speak of it. Aaron would murder one—or both—of us since he deemed it his duty to protect me from the world.

If he knew about it, Aaron would never suggest this job to me. There was that.

There was one person who knew about Jackson, and she lived in Colorado. Tasha stayed there near her family, but we knew everything about each other.

I looked into the kitchen to see that Mom was gone and sighed. This was a topic I needed to discuss.

I left my laptop on the counter and walked back to my room. It was in the back of the spacious house and offered me a lot of privacy, so I closed my door and went to sit on the bed.

This room was a mix of past and present. Mom couldn't stand changing things, so I took some stuff down and upgraded my first few days here. I figured I'd live here until something else came up that might work, but that required a job.

Tasha.

I dialed her number, resting against my pillows.

"Hey, bestie. I miss you," she told me, sounding sad.

"I thought that very thing today when I woke up. I miss the apartment," I confessed, knowing she'd moved out to live with her parents for a while. We'd had a couple all-night movie nights with wine and snacks before

leaving to commemorate the end of a great four years there, and I'd never forget them. "How's everything going?"

"It's fine. I'm settled in the old room for now and looking for a job, probably just like you. Life after college is weird." Tasha sighed, and it made me smile. "Can we just go back for a while to when we needed to worry about classes?"

"Sure. I'm in," I agreed easily since I didn't want to think about working with Jackson. "I got a call about a job here."

"Anything interesting?" Tasha asked with interest, making me sigh.

"Remember Jackson?" I asked, and she cooed at the other end of the line.

"Brother's gorgeous best friend, and the man you spent an incredible night with? Tell me more," she said, and I could picture her sitting forward, ready for a story, her green eyes bright with interest.

"The same," I replied, thinking about the lack of interesting men at college after Jackson. "His assistant just quit on him, and my brother suggested I fill in. Jackson owns his business, so it would be in my field until I can figure out something else. The job also sounds busy, and I love that idea."

"Is the pay worth it?" Tasha asked, and I knew I'd have to contact Jackson in person for that.

"I need to call or text him and set up an interview. That's where I'll get all the details," I admitted, though I assumed the job would pay well. I knew the nature of the business, and he kept himself busy. Aaron said he was out of town a lot at job sites.

Did the assistant travel with him or stay back and man the office? I thought about a hotel room with Jackson and shivered.

It's been years. I needed to let that go. It's not like he slept with the last assistant if she's getting married. At least, I hoped not.

"Well, you live in Tiny Town, USA. It's worth looking into for now. Maybe you can save up for something of your own while you're living at home," she suggested, making me laugh.

"You're right. That happened years ago, and we're different people now." I agreed, knowing she had a good point. It might send me into the future I dreamed of if I worked locally and saved money living here. "Anything look good for you there?"

We talked about her possibilities and ended the call half an hour later with promises to visit as soon as we could. Tasha really wanted to see Cold Creek and Jackson, though I wasn't sure which one she was more interested in.

I sighed and rested against my pillows, staring out of the window at the forest behind the house. This was such a great location just out of town, and I soaked in the surrounding peace to make up for my pounding heart.

I came home to get a fresh start. Knowing this was Cold Creek and small, it wasn't like I'd have a dozen offers, and Jackson's company would be a perfect first job.

I went back out to the laptop and spent some time looking just for good measure. There were remote jobs I could handle, but I was so hands-on with life. I'd interned at school as much as I could to learn the ropes, and that's what I wanted.

I needed to be in an office learning everything.

Over lunch with Mom, I mentioned Jackson and his offer. Well, not an offer yet, but it would probably lead to that.

“I think that would be perfect, Lila. Jackson’s a good guy, and he’ll take care of you. I know your brother will be happy with it,” Mom encouraged me with a smile. “Good experience for you.”

“I think so.” I sipped my tea. “I’m going to send him a message about an interview and see where it goes.”

“Good. If it keeps you here, I am all for it,” Mom agreed, making us both laugh.

I helped her clean up and thought about my next move. The job was available, and I hadn’t heard about anything else, so I needed to reach out to Jackson. How would I explain it if I didn’t go for this?

It was later that afternoon when I decided to just send a text message to Jackson. It would put off talking to him as long as possible, and I’d be trying.

Me: I heard you have a job opening from Aaron. If you’d like to talk, I am back in town now, so shoot me a message.

I read the message a few times to determine how casual it was. This wasn’t someone I didn’t know, so I shouldn’t be too formal. Right?

I sent it and stared at the screen, seeing that Jackson read it.

This could be the beginning of the end, and I set my phone down, knowing I might see Jackson soon.

He sent a message back in a couple hours asking me to meet him for lunch on Monday to go over the job. I agreed to be at the local diner at noon and closed my eyes.

This could be a perfect job and beginning for me, and I needed to see this through.

THREE

JACKSON

I CHOSE MY BEST jeans and a green and brown flannel for work, knowing I had lunch with Lila in the afternoon. I wasn't the man to wear a suit to work, but I could look good. Would Lila appreciate my effort?

Shit. That didn't matter.

I ran a hand through my damp hair, knowing there wasn't much hope for the tousled waves unless I went to get a haircut soon. It didn't make a difference in my life. I didn't worry about it too much and headed to the office.

Olive buzzed around the office all morning, catching up on things from the weekend while she prepared to leave after this week.

"Have you looked into a replacement?" she asked me from her desk across the hall, and I glanced at her.

"I'm having lunch with an old friend to talk about it today," I replied, and she smiled. Was Lila an old friend? "I think it'll work out well."

"Good. You need someone to help you around here. It's been a great job." She looked around with a wistful expression. "I'll miss it."

"You could stay," I joked, and she laughed.

“This is a new start for me. It will be good. Some people need to leave Cold Creek, right?”

We worked through the morning, and I swallowed nervously as I glanced at the clock. It was time to head to the diner, and it surprised me how nervous I felt about it.

“I’ll be gone for about an hour. You want me to bring something back from Joe’s?” I asked her, and she looked up from her computer.

“Can you bring me a chicken salad? I am really going to miss those.” Olive smiled. “Good luck!”

“Sure thing,” I assured her as I left the office and walked to my new Tundra, taking a deep breath as I started the engine. My car had all the bells and whistles, and it made me smile to know I could have all this, thanks to my hard work.

I pulled out of the parking lot and made the ten-minute drive to the diner. It was a simple walk, but I got an office located just out of town for privacy. I didn’t feel like trekking through the country into town, and I wanted to drive the truck. I’d only purchased it two weekends ago in a bigger city.

I got out and shoved my keys into my pocket before I made my way to the glass door. It was easy to see inside, and there she was, sitting in a booth looking over the menu.

Fucking hell. Lila only grew more stunning over the years. I pressed a hand to my chest and walked inside, seeing her jerk her head up to look in my direction. Something passed through her eyes as she locked gazes with me and forced a smile to her face.

“Lila. Welcome back,” I greeted her as I walked up to the table.

“Thank you,” she replied as I sat down, taking in her conservative pale pink blouse. “I forgot how wonderful everything smelled in this place.” She

inhaled, giggling as I watched her.

“How was everything at school?” I asked her, curious to know how she enjoyed living away from Cold Creek. Lila had had a solid life here but had been eager to leave—and that was before we slept together.

I let my eyes trail over the pale skin of her neck, remembering how she trembled when I kissed her there.

Down, boy.

“It was great. I got an apartment with my best friend there. The town was bigger than this and close to Denver, so a unique experience for me.” She smiled at the server as she brought water, placing an order for a bacon cheeseburger with fries and a Coke.

I asked for the same, reaching for my water.

“You came back,” I observed, and she smiled.

“I missed Cold Creek and the family. It seemed like a good idea to give things a chance here.” Lila shrugged, and I nodded, taking in her pale skin now tinged with blush. “Tasha, my roommate, was from Colorado to begin with, so she stayed there. I guess it isn’t too far.”

She seemed to miss this Tasha by the look in her eyes and the sad smile on her face.

“Not a bad trip at all,” I agreed, and she glanced at me. “Business management?”

“I did that and accounting as a minor. It seemed like they went hand in hand to me,” Lila replied, and I knew she’d be perfect for the office. Lila could also pick up so much more about the business on the road. There was a pinch in my chest. “I want to own a business of my own down the line but need some experience before that happens.”

“That’s what Aaron told me. It’s well worth all the effort,” I assured her, and Lila smiled. The way my heart was beating, there must be some lingering feelings pushed way down. “How do you feel about assisting me for a while?”

We went over the details over lunch, including the generous salary and the hard work that came with it. I explained she could travel with me to get more experience in the field to see actual builds, though the idea of being out of town with her unnerved me. Olive preferred to stay in town with her boyfriend most of the time.

“I like the idea of being busy,” she replied, making me chuckle.

“I remember all the clubs in high school because Aaron had to pick you up a lot,” I reminded her, making Lila roll her dark sapphire eyes.

“Poor baby. Like he had a life,” she said, and we both knew he arranged work around those rides when her mom still helped at the vet with their dad. She still did, but he had a great staff there. And Irene spent a lot of time volunteering around town now. “I have his old car now, so he doesn’t have to worry about me.”

Her eyes drifted to the windows that lined the street.

“Nice truck, by the way,” Lila said, making me realize she’d seen me arrive.

“I just got it. I have been upgrading over the years, but she’s a keeper.” The black vehicle caught the sun’s rays with a smile. “It doesn’t kill me in gas for the trips and has everything I need and more.”

“It makes more sense than Aaron’s Mustang,” she offered, and I barked out a laugh. I thought the same thing when my best friend bought the car, but he had enough sense to have a truck for the winters.

“I may have a car or two tucked away for the good weather,” I hinted, and she looked at me. “That one is for advertising.” I’d added the magnet to the back of the truck and the promotion seemed to get a few calls, according to Olive. “Do you want some more downtime or do you think you can train with Olive this week?”

“I’ve had enough of that. I could come in tomorrow and just shadow her so I can learn as much as possible before starting on my own.” Lila looked at me and our eyes locked again, and my heat washed over my skin. “What time does the shift start?”

With that, Lila got hired, and I tried to relax as we finished lunch. I knew she’d be close to me for the next week and then some, starting at eight o’clock tomorrow morning. I told her to dress in a casual business style since people did sometimes stop by the office to ask questions or make appointments.

“Like slacks? Jeans without holes in them?” she joked, looking over my chest with amusement in her eyes.

“Either works. You can dress down when we travel since that’s in the middle of a site,” I told her, and she nodded.

Well, shit. I had an assistant that I needed to keep my hands off of now.

The next morning, Olive greeted Lila warmly, setting up a seat for her at the large desk. Lila wore gray slacks and a soft green blouse this time, and we barely greeted each other as she rushed to Olive.

I felt my assistant looking at me a few times as she trained but made myself too busy to get involved in what they were doing. I was always checking on guys around the area to make sure they were running things smoothly.

If I wasn't there in person, I'd be calling them. My dad built a great business, and I made it even better being more of a hands-on boss than he was.

I didn't have a wife and kids at home, so I was married to work.

I fixed a few problems over the phone and glanced at Lila as I leaned back. Her brow furrowed in thought as she watched Olive explain something while pointing at the screen, and her eyes darkened with her focus.

I knew what else made them go dark and shoved the memories away. This was a terrible fucking idea, but I'd already dug that hole. I just needed to stay in control.

Olive trained well. She was thorough in her explanations, and Lila picked it all up, taking notes and meeting my eyes a few times.

They stayed there too long most of the time, and I'd have to shift in my seat, feeling my body react in ways it shouldn't.

Friday, I took the girls to lunch at the cafe in town to celebrate Olive and all she'd done for me over the years.

Olive took the chair across from me quickly, leaving Lila to sit beside me. I resigned myself to having to smell her incredible mango scent for at least an hour before grinning at Olive with forced cheer.

"This is it. Off to California," I told her, and Olive looked sad for a moment before she smiled.

"It's such a good thing, but I'll miss it here. There's nothing like a Montana mountain range." Olive sighed, and Lila nodded in agreement. "You came back from Denver, so you get it."

"I sure do, but California is exciting!" Lila told her, and Olive smiled. "You'll be right there on the ocean."

“That’s true. I can’t wait for that part.” Olive grinned at the server as she approached us. We placed our orders, and Olive sipped her wine. It was a special occasion, and it wasn’t like we planned to get drunk.

I wanted to celebrate Olive after her time with me.

“I think you’re going to do great,” Olive told Lila, making her smile and blush. “You’ve picked up so much already and taken all those notes.”

“I love having something to refer to,” Lila admitted, shrugging. She had wine as well, and it made me wonder how much she partied in college for a moment. The idea of her at a frat party filled me with rage, but Lila wasn’t like that.

Was she?

That idea haunted me through lunch, and I was grumpy when we went back to work. When I realized next week was a travel one, my mood grew darker.

It would be our first one together, assuming Lila wanted to go. I made them as quick as I could, so we could be in town. And I forwarded all calls to Lila’s work cell, so she could stay on top of things.

If she went on the trip at all. As my assistant, she should, but being in a hotel out of town with her sounded dangerous. I was far too attracted to her to deal with that, but I hired her.

And she needed to do her job.

FOUR

LILA

OLIVE WAS AMAZING AT training me before she left and sweet to boot. With Jackson's bad mood, it made me wonder why she stayed here as long as she did. He didn't say much at all after I started working in the office and left us to it.

I chalked it up to living here in Cold Creek.

I saw him looking at me a few times, and I'd love to say I didn't look back. But those eyes still captivated me.

He took us to lunch on her last day and tried to be cheerful, but I watched Jackson's mood change before my eyes. What was he thinking about?

Monday, it was just the two of us and felt different to me. I greeted him with a smile, and Jackson mumbled something back to me as I walked into my office.

Olive took everything of hers out on Friday, and it was a blank slate for me. I missed her sunny personality and sat down with a small sigh. If I looked back at my notes, I could get by on my own since it didn't appear Jackson wanted to even talk to me, much less help me.

I pulled up what I needed on the computer, and the calendar was last. I noticed Jackson was supposed to be out of town the last three days this week. Would he want me to go with him?

Olive told me she didn't always go because she'd wanted to be in town. She'd handle everything from the office, and he'd do the out-of-town business. She was also in a relationship when I wasn't.

I didn't have to stay here, but did I want to travel with Jackson? The idea of being at a hotel with him and eating with him when we just worked together all day sounded like a lot to handle.

"I noticed you're going to Mason on Wednesday," I called out to him, needing to deal with this.

"Yes. I'll be leaving in the morning. Did you want to see the process for checking job sites?" he asked me, meeting my gaze.

"Should I?" I pressed, and he stared at me. "Who stays at the office?"

"I have a girl that comes in to man the phones, but everything else can be done on the road with the laptop. I think it's a good experience to see what happens out there for you. It's a good way to get to know the team, too."

"Sure. I'll go. What hotel are you booked at? I'll get a room." The thought of being in a room with Jackson and repeating our night together flashed through my mind, and it took all my strength to hold back the full-body shiver.

Mason wasn't too much bigger than Cold Creek, but buildings were going up as it slowly grew. Still, he was at Comfort Inn, and I booked a room for myself, checking out the amenities.

Free breakfast was always a good thing, and they had a gym that Jackson would surely use. He took care of himself, and I pushed away a dirty thought that crossed my mind.

I packed a small bag on Tuesday evening, choosing casual clothes. We'd be at a job site, and I assumed they got dirty out there. Lots of jeans and T-shirts with a jacket just in case because I didn't think there would be any formal dinner.

"Your first trip. Are you excited?" Mom asked as she came into my room and surveyed my progress.

"I think it will be good to see the guys at work and understand the process," I replied after a moment. I didn't tell her that Jackson had been acting sullen since I started working for him because I always tried to think positive thoughts. "It's not like we're going to New York or anything like that. I don't think Mason is too much bigger than Cold Creek."

"It's the fastest-growing city in the state, so that might change," Mom remarked, and I glanced at her. "Have you been learning a lot at the office?"

"Olive was great before she left, and I can handle most things on my own. That's a good thing because it seems like Jackson does a lot of checking in on the teams. He's a hands-on owner." I respected that and could see why the business had been so successful. He could just be a bit of a jerk about it, and we were already easing into our sarcastic ways when we spoke to each other. "Tough, but I suppose you need to be to keep things going smoothly."

"When you have teams on the road working without supervision, I can imagine it's easy for things to go wrong. It's a rough business." Mom pointed out, and I nodded as I folded a sweatshirt. "You have a food budget, right?"

"Yes. Jackson made sure I knew all that. I won't starve, Mom." I smiled at her, loving her so much right now. "It won't be your cooking, but I'll survive."

I talked to Tasha that evening, and we discussed my concerns about this trip. She teased me about getting one room and having to sleep in the same bed, but I assured her that wouldn't be happening.

"Things already feel weird with us. We're talking and generally giving each other a hard time like we used to, but there's just something extra there," I explained with a frown.

"Sexual tension," she said, and I laughed. "He can't stop thinking about you."

"Tasha, you're awful. My brother would kill us," I hissed, and we both laughed. "I need to focus on the job, not the boss."

"If you say so," she told me, and I realized how much I missed my best friend.

The following morning, Jackson picked me up at the house. Mom walked out with me to give him the basket she prepared for us, filled with snacks for the week. She also had two big travel-size cups of coffee, and Jackson smiled at her as he thanked her.

A genuine smile.

Mom told him to drive safely, and I waved at her as she walked back to the house.

"Your mom is the best," he told me, and I nodded as we pulled away from the curb.

"She is." I looked at him, seeing the scowl back on his face as he headed towards the freeway. I sipped my coffee and thought about what Tasha said, struggling not to laugh and almost spit out my coffee.

Jackson frowned at me after I regained my composure.

"What was that all about?" he asked, and I took a deep breath.

“Nothing, you had to be there,” I told him, remembering how much I used that phrase when I was younger. It drove him crazy, but it was something I used with my then-best friend all the time.

“Still with that phrase?” he sighed, and I chuckled. “Do you still talk to your friends from high school?”

“Not really. Some of them went to Europe for college and apparently stayed there,” I replied, thinking of how dramatic my friend group was in high school. “I’m good with it. Tasha is amazing.”

“She’s back in Colorado?”

“Yes, but she’ll visit soon. She wants to see Cold Creek.” I left out that she wanted to see Jackson, too.

“There’s not much to see. Why did you come back?” Jackson pressed, and I stared at him. He was so chatty today.

“I missed the family and I guess the town. Colorado is beautiful, but this is home.” I smiled, feeling his eyes on me as I stared forward. I couldn’t meet his gaze right now because I felt some sense of nostalgia I wasn’t ready to deal with.

I missed him.

We chatted more on the two-hour drive, and it felt like we broke down a wall. When I was younger, I acted like more of the pesky little sister to my brother and Jackson. That changed as I got older and once I slept with Jackson. I knew there was a fire that wouldn’t burn out for me.

“We’re here. Let’s check in and get settled, and we’ll go to the site in an hour,” Jackson said once he’d parked the truck I’d been admiring the entire time. It had everything in the car and some of the stuff I wouldn’t even know how to use.

“Sounds great.” I hopped out of the car and grabbed my rolling suitcase I got when I went to college, following him inside. Jackson was all business again, even when the girl behind the counter flirted with him. She shot me a dirty look, likely thinking we were here together.

At least, until she handed him two key cards with a bright smile.

He handed me one, and we quickly determined they were just down the hallway from each other. Granted, this was just a two-story hotel and not The Ritz, but two doors between Jackson’s and my hotel room didn’t help my attraction at all.

I let him have the first one since he had that key anyway, telling him I’d be out in an hour. I opened my room, and while it was simple, it was all mine. My first hotel room for a business trip.

I smiled and took my bag to the large bed, opening it to unpack since we’d be here through Friday afternoon. When I finished, I checked the mirror to make sure my two braids were still in and added a layer of mascara to my eyes.

I pulled on a college sweatshirt when I left the room, since there was a breeze outside today with it being close to Fall, and made sure to lock the door behind me. Looking forward, I saw Jackson leaning against the wall staring at his phone and paused.

He was so hot. He glanced up and read the words on my sweatshirt with a smirk on his face.

“Want lunch before or after we go?” he asked as we reached the truck, and I considered the question, looking around.

“After. Mom made breakfast,” I replied, and he opened the door for me, eliciting a surprised look from me.

“Of course, your mom made breakfast,” he murmured as I slipped into the cab, watching him inhale though he tried to play it off.

The job site comprised of ten men building a small restaurant. They all straightened when Jackson got out of the truck, and I knew I was in for an adventure.

He checked the plans carefully and walked the perimeter, checking everything. Every last detail. Jackson was a tough boss and made it clear he wasn't there to socialize—and practically ignored me. The guys didn't even look twice at me, even when he barked out an introduction.

And it was hot as hell.

I knew what he paid them as the assistant, and it was more than fair. Jackson had the right to demand excellence, unless he acted that way toward me.

We were there for a few hours, and I took notes on everything as Jackson watched me. When we finished, he asked what I wanted to eat, and we grabbed burgers.

“What did you think?” he asked as he reached for a fry.

“It was so clean there, all things considered,” I replied, and he gave me a shrewd look. “Your doing, obviously.”

“A messy site is dangerous and a place where people don't get the job done right.” I nodded. “They know I'll be checking up on them and stick to the rules.”

We went back to the hotel, and he told me he needed to make some calls by his door. Jackson told me to check emails and get back to anyone if it was important. Then his eyes rested on my full lips for a moment before I finally turned to walk away.

My body went into overdrive until I closed my door behind me.

FIVE

JACKSON

I WATCHED LILA WALK away to her hotel room, hating myself for checking out her perfect ass.

Why did I look at her mouth like that?

She looked far too good to go to a job site with her lips glossed pink the way they were, and I knew I sent out a vibe to the guys to not even look at her for too long. It worked since I could be an asshole anyway, but they got the message through my curt introduction to Lila. The braids and her girl-next-door look could get her in trouble in a place like that.

After walking into my room, I grabbed some water from the small fridge and sat down on the bed.

I focused on making some calls to a few clients for the next few hours, watching the sun go down through the window. I had plans to be at the site early tomorrow, but after I ended my last call, boredom set in within an hour.

I checked the clock, seeing a few hours had passed since our late lunch.

Grabbing my phone, I pulled up Lila's number and cursed.

Me: Want to grab dinner before it gets too late?

Lila: I was just thinking about that. Sure. I'll throw something on and head over.

Was she not wearing anything? *Fuck me.*

I heard a knock ten minutes later and opened the door, shrugging into my Dickies jacket. She wore a denim jacket over a pink t-shirt with her jeans from before and smiled at me.

"I saw there's a pizza place a couple blocks away. Have you been?" Lila asked, and I nodded,

"It's good," I replied, and we walked to the lobby. "Did the emails go smoothly?"

"Yes. I sorted through them, and I caught everyone up." She nodded as I opened the door for her. That damn mango scent filled the air, and I struggled not to breathe in deeper.

I closed the door and walked around to my side of the truck, cursing in my head.

Hiring Lila was a bad idea.

We went to the restaurant and got a booth in the back as she read the menu. Lila always looked curious, like she was learning something through every experience in her life, just like when she was a kid. She must have loved college, and I glanced down at the beers offered for a moment.

Lila ordered one with the pizza and appetizer we agreed upon, surprising me.

"I'm twenty-four, and I can drink legally," she told me, and I shook my head.

"I know that. You drank before you were twenty-one, but it's something to get used to when you order at dinner. They checked your ID and everything," I replied, and heat flooded her pale skin.

Shit. I referred to the night we hooked up without realizing it and looked down at the table. Not that she'd been drunk by any means, just buzzed on whatever sweet drink the guy made her. I'd never take advantage of Lila that way.

"Everyone in a small town drinks before they're of age, don't they?" she asked lightly, thanking the server when she brought our drinks.

"Pretty much," I agreed, remembering how protective Aaron had been of her at the local parties. How did he not know about us? "Was college wild?"

"We went to a few parties. It was college, you know? Nothing too crazy for me. Tasha was a little more into it than I was," Lila replied, and I felt a sense of relief. I wanted to ask if she dated since she'd clearly been sexual when she left, but I held that in.

We fell into a silence as we waited for our food, and I looked around the room. I noticed a few of the guys from the site across the room, laughing together, and glanced at Lila. What would they say about this?

It would keep them away from her, and that's a good thing. My crew was mostly older, in their mid-to-late twenties, and they'd jump at the chance for a night with Lila. She was gorgeous, and she was comfortable, sassy, and smart. I saw how quiet she'd been at the site, just taking notes as she followed me.

That's how I wanted it.

Olive didn't come too often on trips, and when she did, they all knew not to flirt with her. Work wasn't there to meet women, at least when I was there, and I made that clear.

It was a distinct feeling with Lila, but that was my fault.

She loved the pizza and the wings, and I remembered she wasn't afraid to eat. Her mom often fed me at meals, and I suppose Lila had to be quick to

get seconds of Irene's incredible food.

There were three slices left when we finished, and she told me to take them into my room. Lila wanted to get some ice cream at the grocery store to eat, making me chuckle.

I would hit the gym to make up for this dinner and the way I was feeling about my assistant.

We drove to the store, and she grabbed one of the small containers of ice cream and a box of plastic spoons, checking out herself. Lila was confident now, and it looked good on her.

She wasn't a kid anymore, and it bothered me.

We headed back to the hotel and walked inside, making our way to the rooms. Lila paused in front of my door, smiling up at me, and I knew I didn't want to sit alone in my room.

Something had been simmering at dinner, and I met her eyes, watching her stare back. This trip should have been a month from now, like I'd hoped it would, so we could've settled in.

"Enjoy the ice cream." She looked down at the container.

"I'm going to find a movie and kill this ice cream. I haven't had space to myself in a long time." She smiled, and her eyes dropped to my mouth. "What time are we heading over tomorrow morning?"

"I'm thinking ten. The guys get started around eight, and we can watch the progress for a while. I'd like you to see more of that process and get to know the guys better," I said, and she arched a pale brow at me.

"They barely spoke to me."

"I just want you to get to know them in terms of area. This group lives close to here since I employ teams all over Montana, so I try to be fair and

keep them close to home. Not many of them have families, but it's nice to go home if you can," I told her, and Lila nodded.

"I saw them last night having dinner." She pointed out, and I nodded. "Do you ever hang out with them?"

"I keep it at a business level with the guys. It might blur the lines if I turn into a friend." I wanted her to be so much more than a friend right now, and as I stepped closer to Lila, her eyes widened. We hadn't been working together that long in terms of time, but the attraction hit me hard when I saw her again.

It was all so wrong, but I watched as she licked her lower lip, showing she felt nervous. I knew Lila's tells well.

"You should get to that ice cream," I told her, and she looked down as if she forgot about it. "I'm sure it's melting."

"Yeah." She blinked and looked up at me with dark blue eyes. "Good night, Jackson." Our eyes locked again, and everything inside of me screamed to kiss her and drag her into my room and make up for lost time. Instead, I turned to open my door and scanned the card, grateful when it lit up green.

I walked inside, closing it behind me without knowing if Lila was there. I just needed space and walked inside, running my hands through my hair.

Fuck. That was so close, and we were not even a month into this job arrangement.

My phone rang in my pocket, and I grabbed it, almost hoping it was Lila. It was Aaron.

"Hey. What's going on there in Cold Creek?" I asked as I answered, sitting on the bed. I almost kissed his sister, and he calls me now?

“Raging,” he told me in his usual dry tone. “How did Lila do on the road?”

“Good. We weren’t at the site too long today, but we’ll be there longer tomorrow. She’ll really get to meet the guys then,” I told him. “We just grabbed dinner and got back.”

“Is her room close to yours?” he asked me, and I rolled my eyes.

“Yes, but what does that even mean? She’s twenty-four, Aaron. She could go out on the town on her own tonight with one app,” I told him, hating that idea.

“Hell, no,” he growled, and I felt his pain.

“I will not guard her door, Aaron. I’m taking a shower and getting some sleep,” I said, thinking about what I planned to do in the shower.

I was such an asshole.

“You could,” he suggested, and I barked out a laugh.

“Let her grow up,” I urged him, knowing she grew up years ago—in part, thanks to me. “She went away to college, Aaron. You can’t protect her like you did in high school.”

“I wish I could,” he sighed.

“She’s in her room eating ice cream and probably watching a rom-com right now. Everything’s fine,” I assured him, hoping that was the case.

Aaron didn’t know she needed protection from me right now, and if he ever found out, our friendship would be over. The way I took her in that basement was so much more than I expected, especially when she asked for me to go harder. I could tell Lila wasn’t a virgin that night, but it was still something I didn’t like to think about.

We chatted for a few more minutes, and he told me we’d have a beer when I got back this weekend. I agreed, hanging up as guilt weighed

heavily on my shoulders.

I stepped into the shower, missing my luxury one at home as I realized I was too tall for this one. I rinsed off, finally reaching down to stroke my cock when it only got harder with my thoughts of Lila.

I needed to go home and hook up with someone when I had drinks with Aaron. Doing anything more with Lila was out of the question, and I leaned my head back as I came against the plastic wall of the shower.

I finished up and dressed in shorts and a T-shirt. Settling on the bed, I turned on my TV and scanned the limited cable channels, missing my streaming service at home. I missed everything about home tonight, but this room felt so empty.

I thought about Lila down the hall, sitting on her bed in the room that mirrored mine. Did she finish the ice cream? Was she under the covers watching a movie?

I reminded myself it didn't matter and settled on a sports channel to check the scores of the day. Aaron was the sports fan out of the two of us, but I checked them out here and there.

I finally slipped under the covers and got ready to go to sleep, really wanting Lila beside me tonight. We didn't spend the night together before, but now there was a part of me that wished we could have.

How the hell was I supposed to keep my hands off her?

I set the alarm to get up and head to the gym early. I blew it off tonight, but I needed so much more than just a shower right now.

SIX

LILA

I LEANED AGAINST MY door and closed my eyes. I almost kissed Jackson tonight, and electricity still rushed over my arms at the thought of it.

Well, kissed him again.

I hurried into the room, setting my ice cream down on the table beside the bed. I hurt my hand the entire time I held it, but I didn't want that moment to end.

Today showed me so much more about Jackson. The site looked so professional and clean, unlike some builds I used to walk through in the neighborhood with friends when I was little.

Those were accidents waiting to happen.

Everything had had a place today, and the men had worked hard, though I suspected that had a lot to do with Jackson's presence. He'd been in a mood once we got there, and it made me curious since his team had barely spoken to me once we arrived.

I looked at the ice cream, knowing I needed to eat it. I could think then. Slipping off my jacket, I hung it over one of the chairs and kicked my shoes

off. I looked through the window for a moment, thrilled I was out of town on my own for work, all over again.

I went to sit on the bed and eat the half-melted ice cream, turning on the TV. It was the most basic of cable available, but I found a rerun of my and Tasha's favorite show, so I left that playing.

I went over every detail of the day. There had been hints of friendliness on the drive here, and we even went back in time a bit. There were so many memories involving Jackson, but of course, the one that took the cake was when we'd slept together. I knew there was a softer side to him underneath his tough exterior, and I'd seen that today.

However, that changed when we went to the site. They all seemed to work just a little harder, even though it was easy to see they were already doing an incredible job. Jackson didn't miss a beat and checked everything there, but he'd been so tense.

Anyone could see that he ran a great business. There was progress on the site since I knew when they started the build and deadlines were being met. I wondered what tomorrow might hold, assuming we'd be there longer, and things might be a bit more relaxed. I wanted to know the crew as Jackson's assistant, but not in any kind of way beyond professional.

Was he worried about that?

I was much too into Jackson to even think about that, but more than that, this was a job. I took that seriously and knew that work wasn't the place to hook up with a man.

Wait a minute. Was that the case when I was obsessing over almost kissing my boss?

I messaged Tasha as I ate, telling her everything about the day. When I finished and that container was empty, I felt as full as I'd ever been and

called her.

“So, you really almost kissed him?” she asked me, and I smiled.

“There was that feeling in the air, you know?” I asked and heard her sigh.

“That buzz. I love that feeling, and it’s so hard to find.” She giggled.

“Why did it not happen?”

“He told me to eat my ice cream. I think it was his way of pushing me away,” I replied, rubbing my full stomach. “He’s been a little back and forth this trip.”

“I think he’s confused. Tell me everything in person again.”

I did. This was our way, and even though we weren’t together, Tasha was my rock. One thing that stood out so much to me was that I praised Jackson for his work ethic throughout the entire conversation.

He was more than just a pretty face and built something with that company. That’s something I found so sexy, and it made my situation even worse.

By the time the conversation ended, I’d kicked off my jeans and switched to cotton shorts, leaving my shirt on for bed. It was already dirty anyway, and I had fresh clothes for after my shower tomorrow.

I took in the room’s quiet as the TV played on low volume. I slipped under the covers and was ready to sleep but still felt adrenaline as I thought back to the night. The way Jackson made me feel was beyond anything I’d felt with anybody else, and I closed my eyes, not knowing where it could even go.

I turned to my back and slipped my hand over my stomach with a long sigh. This feeling wouldn’t go away on its own, and I trailed my fingers over the lace underwear, wishing Jackson had seen them tonight.

No. Bad idea.

I touched myself, feeling the heat from my pussy as my body responded. Every part of me was ready to go right now, and I stroked myself harder, knowing just where to go. I wasn't a stranger to this route since seeing Jackson for the first time again, and I moaned as my clit tingled under my hand.

My hand slid under the material on its own, circling my sensitive nub as I panted. I arched and closed my eyes, moving faster.

"God. So close," I whispered in the room as I imagined him over me as Jackson had been years ago, taking me hard and fast. I slipped two fingers inside of myself, needing something to make me feel that way again, thumbing my clit as I moved.

When I came, it felt good, but it wasn't enough. It never was.

I woke up in the morning from a dream about Jackson, gasping his name. Rolling over, I grabbed my phone and saw that it was just past seven in the morning.

"Damn it." He would haunt me, and so I cursed softly. I also knew that I could sleep in some more, but once I opened my eyes, that was it.

I was up for the day.

I took a shower and dressed to go down and enjoy the complimentary breakfast. I decided on clean jeans and a college sweatshirt since there seemed to be a chill in the air and figured I'd wear it all day.

I left the room, shoving my key into my pocket and wandered towards the lobby. I could already hear the voices, and a little thrill zipped through me.

I was here all on my own.

That quickly went away when I saw Jackson sitting at a table on his phone. He had a plate of food and coffee in front of him and looked freshly

showered.

I paused, thinking about last night and the dream and considered coming back later.

It was too late when he glanced up and saw me. I offered him a small wave and made my way in to see what the offerings were and fixed myself a plate. I poured some coffee and fixed it to perfection, turning to look over the small dining room.

Jackson gazed back, and I assumed it might be strange to not sit with him, as much as I didn't want to.

"You're here early," I told him as I sat down across from him after carefully setting my things down. "We're not working for a while."

"I got up and worked out this morning. Getting up early is normal for me," he said, looking at me. "Why are you up?"

"I guess I'm the same way." I'd never admit what really woke me up. "Morning classes were much more my thing than night ones. Those dragged on forever."

"Sleep well?" he asked, and I reached for my coffee cup.

"Hotels are always weird at first, but yes. I have never stayed in a room alone." As he looked at me, his gaze was sharp. I played back my words and realized how that sounded.

Whatever. I was twenty-four, and I wasn't completely a nun after our night together. Jackson could think what he wanted. I meant that I had always had a friend or family member with me and not a boyfriend, but he didn't need to know that.

I focused on sipping my coffee and digging into breakfast, finding some joy in his scowl as he did the same. Jackson set his phone down and asked me if I'd checked emails yet this morning.

“I planned to do that in the room until we left later. I sorted through a lot yesterday, so it should be fine.” He stared at me. Wasn’t there a temp back home for emergencies that she’d forward to him? “I got through everything yesterday afternoon, Jackson. It’s good.”

“Yeah. I know.” He sighed, and I tilted my head at him. “We’ll have plenty of time after breakfast. The site isn’t far away.”

I rushed through the meal, finding him tense and getting grumpy. Jackson didn’t need to be with the team for hours today that way, and I told him I’d be at his room at ten o’clock. I refilled my coffee and took it back to my hotel room, sitting down at the small table to do my job.

“Told you,” I muttered, seeing that there were just a few to respond to. Too bad Jackson wasn’t here in the room to hear me. I took care of them and watched the local news before making my way to his room. I’d put on a little makeup and glossed my lips, but my hair remained in a ponytail as I’d worn it earlier.

I got chapped lips easily.

We finished the week, and I got to know the guys. They were nice as they relaxed around Jackson, and even though he watched closely, I took notes on where each guy lived and their family status. I wanted to work with their individual situations as much as possible.

Some of them low-key flirted with me when their boss wasn’t around, but I’d never complicate things that way. It was already hard enough, and I packed my things to leave for home with a sigh of relief.

I couldn’t decide if we were better than before the trip during the drive home. There was some conversation, but Jackson seemed to be distracted. So I just answered some emails as we finished it out.

I walked into my room to unpack when my phone chimed, and I hoped it was Tasha. We needed to talk after the last few days of sexual tension between Jackson and me and the mood swings he experienced.

“What the hell?” I asked when I saw a text from my ex-boyfriend from college. Matt was in Colorado last I heard, and I didn’t think he’d pop up. When he told me he was here in Cold Creek and wanted to have dinner, I sent Tasha a screenshot immediately.

I broke things off with Matt toward the end of my first term of senior year. He was nice enough but needy and didn’t seem to understand I needed time to study. We’d only been dating for around six months, so it didn’t seem like a big deal—and he’d move on.

He was a good-looking guy, though no Jackson.

Tasha and I talked about it, and she told me to just tell Matt there was no reason for him to be here. That sounded easy, but by the time I unpacked and felt a little settled in, my brother called me.

“I heard some guy is in town looking for you, Lila. Who is it?” he demanded, and I hated this side of him for the millionth time.

“My ex from college. He just wants to have dinner. It’s not a big deal,” I assured him, but Aaron let out a huff.

“The clingy one Mom told me about?” he asked, and I closed my eyes. Why were we so close? I did indeed tell Mom that when I announced the breakup.

“He could be a little needy, yes. I’ll tell him to go back home. It’s nothing.” I hoped that was the case, but worry flooded my brain for a moment.

An idea hit me, and I smiled for a second. Was it crazy?

Yes.

“Better yet, I’ll make him think I moved on,” I said thoughtfully, as a plan formed in my head. That may lessen the amount of discomfort I’d feel telling him there was nothing between us. I mean, he was here, and that was big.

“Moved on?” Aaron asked, and I let out a sigh.

“Jackson. I’ll make Matt think we’re dating, and he’ll leave town.”

When Aaron agreed, shock flooded me.

What was I doing?

SEVEN

JACKSON

WHAT A LONG FUCKING week.

I unpacked in my room, grateful to be home and back to normal.

Whatever that was with Lila back in my life.

A few hours after arriving back, Aaron called me and sounded worked up.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, knowing we lived in a place without a lot of excitement.

“Lila’s ex from college is here in town. Mom told me that my sister ended things with him because he was so clingy, and he showed up here looking for her,” he told me with tension in his voice. Nothing got him more worked up than his baby sister. The words sank in, and I stood up straight.

“Is he a stalker?” I asked, and worry filled me. It’s not that she went to college all that far away, but why was the asshole here in Cold Creek? It wasn’t a big enough town just to visit out of interest.

“Not sure,” he barked, on edge. So was I, at this point.

“So, what’s the plan? Is she going to let him down easy?” I asked, walking into my living room to sit down, so I didn’t pace the entire house.

“She came up with something else. Lila thinks that if this guy thinks she’s with someone else, he’ll get the message and leave—if her telling him isn’t enough. I’m all for it.” He explained, and I frowned.

“Who is the guy? You?” I asked, worried about his actual answer.

“Gross. No. I love my sister, but that’s not happening—and small town. Remember? I don’t need that out there.” Aaron assured me in a shocked voice. “It’s you.”

“Me?” He had to be fucking kidding me.

“Yeah. You go out to dinner a few times, and he sees you. Word might get around town.”

“Word that I’m dating Lila? I work with her, Aaron,” I reminded him and closed my eyes. “I have a reputation, remember?” Dating women I worked with was not a part of that.

“It’ll die down once he’s gone, and you stop the act. I don’t think anyone will believe it in the first place if they know me well enough.” Aaron laughed, and I silently agreed. “If he sees her with both of us, that should scare him away.”

We always were the guys not to mess with in Cold Creek and hoped that was true. This didn’t make sense, but I could try for the sake of my best friend.

It had nothing to do with the fact I was wildly attracted to his sister and had been for years.

I was in close contact with Aaron for the next couple of days as I rested after the trip. Lila spoke to this guy and explained they were over, even mentioning a boyfriend. His response was that he wanted to move here and

work on their relationship. His name was Matt, and I already didn't like him, maybe even more than Aaron.

"Let's all have dinner tonight. He's bound to find us, and I'd like to see him in person." Aaron suggested, and I reluctantly agreed. It was Sunday, and we returned to work tomorrow. So maybe we could end this situation and start a fresh week.

The nicest place here was a steakhouse, and I dressed in jeans and a thick green Henley for the evening. I didn't know where this might go but dreaded it all the same.

When I pulled into the small parking lot, I spotted the two cars I was looking for.

Of course, when I went inside, Lila was sitting across the booth from Aaron with a free spot beside her. She looked beautiful in a pale peach sweater, and her hair was loose around her shoulders. I tried to read her face for her emotions but just felt attraction when she met my gaze.

"How's it going?" I asked as I slid in beside her. I assumed we were putting on a show and slipped an arm around Lila, feeling her warmth against my body. "Is he still here?"

"Yes. He's been calling a lot," she said, and dread filled me.

"Did this guy hurt you when you were together?" I demanded, feeling her still against me. "Stalk you?"

"No, he was just clingy. It took him some time to get over the breakup, but then we graduated. I thought it was the end. I am as surprised as anyone else," Lila sounded defensive as she spoke in a low voice. "He lives in Colorado and has family there."

"You think this will work?" I checked and felt her look at me. "This was your idea?"

“Yes. It just hit me, and I figured why not?” she asked me, and I looked down to meet her gaze.

“It’s nothing fancy. Just dinners,” Aaron added gruffly, and I glanced at my best friend. The hard look in his eyes told me he could never know about Lila and me. I just nodded.

“Of course,” I agreed, and we looked at the menu. I could feel eyes on us and assumed people were talking about how close I was to Lila.

Outstanding.

We chatted about the following week and the next time we’d have dinner after work over the meal. I told myself we’d do that plenty working together, and it wasn’t a big deal.

Why did it feel like it was?

Lila seemed relaxed at the office, but I was there, keeping an eye out. She still worked hard and didn’t miss a detail, making me wonder if work distracted her the way it did me. Maybe this wasn’t anything to worry about.

After work, we went to the diner in town for our second meal out. We sat beside each other, acted like it was a date, but talked about work.

When we finished, Lila told me Matt walked by and looked inside at us while we were eating. She followed me after I paid the bill and called my name.

“I am following you home tonight, and I need you to stay there. I’d also like to pick you up for work tomorrow if that’s okay with you?” I turned to look at her, and Lila arched a brow at me. “I don’t want to take any chances here, Lila.”

“He’s gone,” she told me, looking around. “I live with my family, and Dad has a lot of guns, most of which I know how to use. You’re acting like

my brother.” She frowned, and I stared at her in silence.

“You invited me into this situation, so let me help.”

I watched as she got into her car and followed her, stopping in front of the house until she was safely inside, looking around the whole time. I knew Aaron told her parents what had been going on, so her dad surely had things handled inside the house. Lila was the baby of the family, and everybody looked after her. It surprised me when she went away to college in another state.

I went home and had a restless night, trying to figure out what this guy wanted. Aaron called, and I explained what happened, getting his approval when I explained I’d be keeping a closer eye on Lila, along with everyone else.

Lila was quiet when she got into the truck in the morning.

“Did you hear from him?” I asked, and she sighed.

“He sent a message asking about you, but I was already asleep. I said you’ve been my boyfriend since I got back into town.”

“Good.” I pulled away from the house and across town to my office. I checked around before we got out of the car and, when satisfied, followed her into the building. “How did you meet this guy?”

“In a class we had at the end of junior year. Like I said, it didn’t last too long. It wasn’t love at first sight or anything like that.” Lila walked over to the new coffee maker she got and slipped a pod in. I wanted to ask her if she slept with him but held back.

I didn’t want to know, and I’d sound overprotective, just like Aaron.

She settled at her desk with her coffee and got to work. I noticed she had a good relationship with the team she met through their feedback and knew

she should meet the others. They'd get the same warning everyone else did, but it helped for them to get along with my assistant.

Lila was a great worker, and I hated this weird thing we had going on right now. I felt much more involved in her life than I had any other employee, but she was Aaron's sister. That was to be expected, right? She was in a bad spot, and I was helping.

Nothing more.

She mentioned her parents were having dinner at a friend's house in the afternoon. Rather than have her alone at home, I decided we should have dinner again. I knew Aaron was working late tonight, so Lila wouldn't have anyone at the house with her.

"Again?" she asked, staring at me. "I can lock my door. Remember, I know how to use a gun, but it would never get to that to begin with."

"I taught you how. Remember?" I thought about the day when Aaron and I took her to an outdoor target practice we set up when she had to be about ten years old. We taught her the smaller guns that day, making sure she took every safety measure—we taught her twice. Lila was a natural.

"Yeah. I do." She smiled as I looked over to see her. "I went to a few places in Colorado to stay fresh on it. I made Tasha go with me."

"Impressive," I complimented Lila, making her smile. There had been a lot of tension between us over the last week, but it felt like things were better.

She suggested hitting a grocery store on the way home, and she'd cook me dinner to thank me for everything I'd done for her. There were only so many restaurants in town, and we ate out so much for work already.

I agreed, and we stopped for the ingredients to make her mom's chicken marsala, which was a favorite of mine. Lila grabbed everything quickly, and

I watched her.

“Did you cook at school?”

“Yes. We had a schedule and ate at home five nights a week. The apartment wasn’t much, but I could work in there,” Lila told me, reading something on a package. She set it in the cart. “We could both cook enough to stay fed and not eat out too much.”

I insisted on paying for the food, and she nodded after a hard look in my direction.

Once I was inside the house, memories flooded me. I didn’t spend as much time here now as an adult, but there had been many family dinners with them growing up.

Lila got to cooking, and the house filled with an amazing scent. She looked like a natural in there. We sat down to eat, and the conversation was friendly throughout the meal.

The old feelings came back as she smiled and laughed, seemingly comfortable in her house. I helped her clean up and looked at the clock. I didn’t want to leave until someone was home, so we watched some TV on the couch.

Memories of being a kid in school and trying to sneak kisses from girlfriends in their homes played through my head, making me chuckle.

The thing was, I wanted to kiss her. All this time together only made that stronger for me.

Lila went to the kitchen for some water, and I looked at her as she walked back in. She was gorgeous, and the years had been good to her.

“What?” she asked, pausing in the middle of the room.

I stood, unable to fight it any longer. The emotions of the last few days had been eating away at me, and I walked to Lila to cup her face. Our eyes

locked before I kissed her, knowing this den was private unless someone was in the house.

We moved back to the couch together, and Lila fell against me, pushing me into the cushions as she straddled me. Our mouths crashed together hungrily, tongues dancing as I pulled her closer to me.

Now that I was drowning in her, I didn't want to stop.

We heard the garage door open, jumping apart as she fell to the floor.

"Are you okay?" I hissed, helping her up.

"Yes," she assured me, sitting beside me as we made our best attempt to look innocent to her parents.

"I have cake from the neighbor's house. Want some? It's chocolate," Irene called from the kitchen, and Lila told her yes, buying us some time.

That couldn't happen again, and I caught my breath as I waited for her parents to walk into the room.

EIGHT

LILA

I CRAWLED INTO BED later that night, feeling the shock of kissing Jackson again. I felt his body and all the hard lines and muscles pressing into me as he pulled me over his lap.

So hot. I don't know how I ate cake and talked to my parents about their dinner, telling them about mine afterward. Did they know? They walked into a heated moment, but we had time to regain control.

I walked Jackson to the door, and he told me he'd be by to pick me up as our eyes locked. We both wanted another kiss, but that had to stop as hard as it was for me to think about.

"Lock the door." He called to me as he walked to his truck.

Matt was the furthest thing from my mind as I replayed the kiss in my mind, comparing it to the last one.

There was some kind of connection here for me and Jackson I'd never forget, and I shivered under my covers.

The next morning at work. Jackson looked at me with tired eyes.

"I can't believe that fucking happened last night. I felt like a teenager all over again," he told me, running a hand through his hair.

“I know,” I agreed, heading into my office.

“That was amazing, Lila. Kissing you is just like it used to be, and I can’t stop playing it through my mind.” I looked at him. “I don’t think I can stop this time.”

“Aaron can’t find out, Jackson. He would kill us,” I reminded Jackson, and he nodded slowly.

“He won’t. This is between us.”

We didn’t want to stop, but Aaron was a major issue. He couldn’t find out, especially worked up about Matt the way he was. Without meaning to, Dad taught Aaron that no man was good enough for me. It’s just the way he was. Since Aaron knew Jackson well and that he wasn’t into commitment, there was no chance in hell we could tell him about this.

That’s part of why I went to Colorado. I needed space to live my own life, make mistakes, and work through them.

Matt was the biggest.

I wanted to get over Jackson and hoped I’d meet someone who made me feel the way he did, but it had never happened.

Matt seemed to get that I was with someone now and acted like he was just going to leave. I told him it was best, but nothing slowed down with Jackson.

We made out at work in his office as often as we could, getting hot and bothered on the couch but never taking it further. When we saw Aaron, we acted as though nothing was happening between us, even though we were technically still fake dating until Matt left town.

It got so complicated, and then there was the next business trip to a town at the very edge of Montana, giving us miles and hours’ worth of space from the world.

I nervously made the reservations, selecting a hotel that was a couple of steps above the last one at Jackson's suggestion. This town was bigger and offered more choices in food and things to do. I asked for adjoining rooms, wanting to be close to him, even though I didn't tell Jackson that.

I was playing with fire.

"I didn't realize Jackson traveled so much." Mom sat in my chair and watched me pack the Sunday before we left. I'd already packed the sexy things and covered it all with T-shirts and jeans, making sure she couldn't see inside.

"I think it depends on how many teams are out there. It varies," I lied, knowing he planned this trip for us to get away. Of course, we'd go to a site that was local for work, but Jackson confessed on his couch in his office this was his best team.

"Maybe that's a good idea since everything seems to be dying down with Matt." Mom looked worried as I glanced at her with a reassuring smile.

"He told me he's leaving, Mom. There's nothing for him here." Jackson had really been the factor in my ex wanting to go home. Thinking I had a boyfriend and seeing what big men he and my brother were seemed to sway him.

"The boys helped you out there. I need to have Jackson over for dinner," Mom declared, and I nodded.

"Good idea," I replied, going to add a couple of sweatshirts to the suitcase. She was right, but she had no idea that Jackson had gone above and beyond his role. I hated lying to Mom, but she knew as well as I did my brother would lose his mind—or whatever was left of it after the last few weeks. I didn't want her to have to hold the secret in like I had been.

I finished and zipped it up, setting the suitcase on my wide dresser.

“Now, I just have to shower tonight, and we’ll take off in the morning,” I told her, stacking my clothes for tomorrow. Leggings for the four-hour drive and my most comfortable sweatshirt sounded perfect.

“You’ll be gone for the week?” Mom checked, and I nodded, looking away from her.

“Yes. I’ll be home sometime Friday evening, depending on how everything goes,” I assured her. We used the excuse of it being so far away and losing travel time.

The lies just piled up, and I lost track of them. I pinched the bridge of my nose for a second and took a deep breath.

“Are you okay?” Mom asked, and I realized I forgot she was here at all.

“Just a small headache. It’s been a little chaotic lately, and work is busy. I think getting away might be a good idea for me,” I shot back, hoping I didn’t sound defensive. “I can just relax alone in a room at night and decompress.”

“You feel safe going away?” she asked me, and I nodded.

“Matt is just a lonely guy holding onto something I don’t think ever existed. He’ll be gone before you know it, and Jackson is always close by there. I think he’s worse than Aaron in some ways.” I laughed, trying to make her feel better. Matt wasn’t a crazy stalker, but it took him seeing me and Jackson out a few times to make him see we didn’t have anything.

Now that was supposed to end, but I didn’t want it to.

“I am going to finish dinner up. Your brother is coming over, so I made meatloaf for him.” She stood, and I nodded, smiling at her.

Just a few more hours and I’d be waking up to get away with Jackson.

I got through dinner with my family, letting Aaron talk about his job through the meal. He felt better about Matt knowing that would end soon

and be safe with me being with Jackson for the next week. I needed him to keep thinking that way and take this week to figure out what to do.

In the morning, I rose and braided my hair before changing into my clothes. I was so excited about this, even knowing it was wrong—but I'd be alone with Jackson.

One hundred percent away from family and anyone here in Cold Creek. There would be his crew in Balto, but they would just be on the site.

"There's a great steakhouse we should try for dinner in Balto. A coffee shop you'll love for breakfast," Jackson told me the week before we left, talking like it was a vacation.

"You do know this is a work trip, right?" I asked him with a smile.

"Yeah, but why not make it fun?" Jackson asked, leaning back in his office chair. "I haven't enjoyed these trips like this before."

"It's the place where we can be away from everyone here. We'll still need to be careful, but we can relax a little," I agreed, walking over to kiss him. I checked that we were alone as always, closing my eyes as he slid his hand into my hair.

I loved these moments so much between us.

Mom made up a snack basket for our long drive, giving us both hugs before I buckled myself into the truck.

When he pulled onto the main highway, I let out a breath.

"I feel bad lying to your mom more than anything, I think," Jackson confessed, and I thought the same thing. "She's such a good human and would want the best for you."

"She wouldn't kill you like my brother, but it would be a lot to ask her to hide this like we are," I reminded him, and Jackson groaned. "We just need

to act like we work together and this is a business trip every time we're out in public."

When we were about an hour and a half away from Cold Creek, Jackson seemed to relax. He held my hand as we drove, and I tried to find something to listen to. I'd eaten breakfast, but we stopped for lunch at the halfway mark and ate fast food.

He kissed me in the truck when we were supposed to leave, and I leaned into it. It felt good after a few days of not being together, and the hotel room flashed through my mind.

"I guess we should hit the road and get to Balto. I think we have work to do." Jackson murmured, and I pecked at his lips again. I settled back and buckled my seat belt, watching as Jackson did the same.

He was a gorgeous man. Jackson worked hard and put everything into his business and staff, thinking of them as much as he did the money he brought in. I knew he could be arrogant on the outside, but working with him showed me the little pieces of Jackson that other people missed.

We pulled into the city, and I looked around. Balto wasn't the largest place I'd been, but it had a lot more to offer than Cold Creek and was also beautiful. The team was working on building a hotel here, and it was a long job. Jackson wanted to check in and help if needed.

The hotel we went to was owned by the Hilton, which surprised me. We checked in, and it felt every bit different this time, even though I didn't touch Jackson. We needed to still be work associates, and I took the keys he handed me with a nod. Our rooms were on the third floor, and when we walked into our rooms I gasped. It was like an office and bedroom with a kitchenette, and I looked around the large space.

“Like it?” Jackson asked as he opened the door between the rooms. “I’ve stayed here a lot. They have room service in case you don’t want to go out to dinner.”

“It’s gorgeous.” I told him, looking at Jackson. Our eyes locked, and we moved forward, meeting by my door before he pulled me into his arms. I kissed him hard, missing him over the last few days and knowing we were alone.

Jackson carried me to the bed, setting me down and leaning in for a deep kiss. I watched as he stood straight, staring at me for a moment.

“We’re barely checked in, and I can’t stay away from you,” Jackson muttered, and I smiled. I scooted back to the pillows on the large bed, kicking off my shoes as he followed suit.

Jackson joined me there and pushed me to the bed as he kissed me. It wasn’t rushed like at the office. We weren’t waiting for the chime to indicate someone was walking in, and we needed to separate quickly.

The kisses were deep, and our bodies melted together. I’d been thinking a lot about the past and what happened between us. When he slid a hand under my shirt, I shivered.

Jackson moved, and we pulled off my sweatshirt, leaving me in a T-shirt and lace bra I’d worn just for him. I took it one step further and removed the only shirt I had on, and he yanked his Henley over his head.

Jackson dove for me with dark eyes, and I laughed as he pinned me to the bed. I ran my hands over his bare back, loving the sight and feel of him again. He kissed me, and I felt something between us break as if we’d been holding back all this time.

I suppose we had been for a few weeks.

I felt how hard Jackson was as he pressed between my legs, his cock and jeans hitting me where I needed it the most. His hand slipped into my hair, and I moaned, feeling the other hand slide between my breasts. I cried out, and he unhooked my bra, letting it fall open before he pulled away from my mouth and took a nipple into his mouth.

Fuck. This was amazing.

Jackson sucked me into his mouth as I arched into him, holding his head closer.

“Do you remember the last time?” I whispered, and he groaned.

“I can’t fucking forget it.” Jackson told me, leaning back down to bite my nipple. His hand moved between my legs over my pants, proving he knew how I liked it.

I closed my eyes to enjoy every second of this, rocking against his fingers.

NINE

JACKSON

I WANTED TO DEVOUR Lila.

This felt as good as before and better as I sucked her needy nipple between my lips and teeth. My hand worked her pussy, knowing how hard she'd come from this. I moved my hand under her pants needing to feel her bare.

It had been so long.

I let the past and present blend together in my mind, but Aaron was always there. I'm supposed to be protecting Lila, not sleeping with her the moment we're alone in a hotel.

Lila was so wet and ready for me, and I worked her clit as I nipped at her left nipple.

When I slid a finger inside of her tight heat, Lila cried out and flooded me with her release as I kept sucking. I wanted to see her, but I knew we probably weren't leaving this bed soon.

I pulled my finger out, sticking it in my mouth as she watched me.

"You are still so beautiful," I told Lila as she flushed a deep pink.

I stood and kicked off my pants after I took the strip of condoms out of my wallet. I came prepared for the next four nights, assuming she wanted this too.

One look at her told me she did.

Lila slid her pants down, revealing herself to me as I watched in awe. No other woman felt like her. Ever. I chalked it up to a night together, and that was all. But I knew that wasn't the case now.

I dropped the condoms to the bed, leaning in to kiss Lila again. She ran her hands over me, stroking my naked skin as need flooded my body. I could take her right now, but I wanted this to be special.

Our last time had been rushed and in a basement of a house at a party. Lila deserved better, and this week, she'd get it. We'd figure everything else out later.

She reached down for me, and I dodged her hand, knowing if she gripped my cock, I'd be done for.

I pulled back and kissed down her body as slowly as possible, hearing her moan my name. I knew her taste, and I couldn't wait to get my mouth between her legs again.

When I was there, she gripped the comforter and rocked into me. I ate her like I was a starving man, making her cry out my name as I licked and sucked her pussy. I lost myself in it, making her come for me again as she flooded my mouth.

"Was it always that great?" Lila panted, and I pulled away, resting my head on her stomach.

"Yeah. I think so." Slowly, I caught my breath. I knew it was more than a physical connection between us, and that scared me. I wasn't willing to let her go.

We rested a while, and I moved up to the pillows to lie beside her, slipping an arm around her flat stomach.

“You want to do this?” I asked her, wanting to make sure. There was no turning back once I got inside of her again. I watched as Lila turned her head toward me with a smile on her face.

“Yes.” She assured me, and I leaned in to kiss her. I knew her taste was on her lips, but Lila didn’t mind, kissing me back. Things intensified again, and I pulled her into me, turning Lila to her back as our tongues moved together.

I grabbed the condoms from the bed, blindly opening one while the others fell somewhere to the floor. I pulled back to sheath myself, positioning myself between Lila’s legs before sliding inside of her again.

My assistant.

My best friend’s little sister.

I sucked in my breath and met her confident eyes, telling me she had no doubt about this. I looked down, watching as my cock slipped into her and feeling her wrap around me.

Fuck. She was amazing.

I moved slowly so she could adjust to me, not knowing how long it had been and not wanting to ask.

She rocked into me, and I stilled as her hands dragged down my back. We moved together easily, finding a rhythm as our bodies crashed together. She wrapped her legs around my body, and I took her harder, driving Lila into the mattress.

Everything shifted between us as I made love to her, knowing that was what this was. Lila cried out first, and I took her even harder and deeper, feeling her tighten around me before I finally let myself come.

I dropped beside her on the bed, panting as she slumped down.

Fake just became real, and I opened my eyes to look at Lila. She looked back at me, flushed and smiling, and I returned it.

“Are you supposed to be at the site today?” she asked me, and I remembered we were here for work.

“I left that in the air. We’ll spend the next few days there, and you can see a bigger build. You’ll like these guys, but not too much. Okay?” I asked, and she chuckled.

“You have nothing to worry about.”

We showered in my bathroom and dressed to get some dinner. I took her to a seafood place, choosing black slacks and a white button-up shirt with a tie for dinner. Lila put on a deep blue dress and heels after fixing her hair, and we left together.

I knew we shouldn’t be too affectionate here, just in case someone from the team saw us. It felt like I’d lose respect if any of the guys found out I was sleeping with an employee, not to mention someone else might find out.

Lila shouldn’t be a dirty secret, but I didn’t know what else to do.

We drove to the restaurant, and I asked for a table for two. The hostess led us to one near a window offering a view of the mountains, and Lila took it all in for a moment. This is what it should be like with us, but that couldn’t happen in Cold Creek.

I took the time to enjoy being with her on this level. We talked more, and I respected her for her hard work. She told me she felt the same way.

We took a walk around the shops after dinner, still not holding hands, but close together. I kissed her by the big lake in town as we watched the sunset, amazed at the woman Lila had become.

Knowing how much she liked ice cream, we bought some on the way back to enjoy in my room, just leaving the door open between them. Undressing, we slipped underneath the covers to watch TV and make love again before falling asleep together.

Aaron called me in the morning, telling me he ran into Matt at a bar and told him to get the fuck out of town. There was a minor scuffle, but the bartender threw Matt out. Aaron heard he checked out of the hotel in the morning, and I let out a sigh of relief.

Of course, I listened while indicating that Lila stays silent so we could hide the fact she was in my bed.

I relayed the news to her when the call ended, pretending I needed to go knock on her door to do it.

We needed to face reality and went to get breakfast downstairs, sipping coffee and catching up on emails over the meal. Nothing got done last night, and I pushed away the thought working together might not be a good idea.

I was addicted to Lila.

When we finished, we went back to get ready to go to the site.

I drove us there, looking over the progress as we parked in the lot where the cars were. I needed to turn into the Jackson these guys knew and cleared my head as we stepped out of the truck.

Lila walked beside me, and I focused on everything about the build. It looked like everything was on schedule, and I nodded at the head of the team.

“Bossman. How are you?” he asked, shaking my hand as I walked onto the first level.

“Great. Everything looks great here. This is my new assistant, Lila.”

They shook hands, and I watched him smile at her, knowing he was a happy family man. We made our way through the building, and she met all twenty of the guys, constantly taking notes on the tablet.

I didn't touch or even look at Lila too long while we were there. In a bigger build, there was a lot more details to check on and levels with this hotel. Lila soaked it all in, nearly going to the top but stopping four floors up.

Knowing how scared of heights she was, going up at all impressed me. I shut that down and turned into the boss again, asking what was left on the build.

This was a huge client for me, and they wanted more hotels built if things went well. So there was no other option. My head of team went over everything as Lila took notes, listening to every detail.

She got to know the guys, so she could remember all their names. She'd get to know them and their lives and add that into scheduling like she did the last team. I watched her through the day but focused back on what I was here for, telling myself to save it for tonight.

I saw the look some of the men gave me and all but ignored Lila from there.

When we left, I felt good about everything. I did my job, and the guys were doing their jobs. Lila and I were starving, so we went to a deli someone recommended, getting the food to go.

We ate it on her bed in our underwear, and I asked her what she thought about today.

"Just as clean as the other site and so much bigger. How do you manage that?" she asked, looking at me.

“I talked to them from day one like my dad did with his guys. It’s a dangerous job. There have been accidents, but I’ve never lost a guy before. They’ve all made it through. I remind them as often as I feel I need to be safe.” I blinked. “I have come to sites that weren’t that clean or safe before. They’ve been shut down, which makes all of us lose money, and some guys lose their job. It’s not good.”

“Did your dad lose anyone?” Lila asked, and I gazed at her.

“One. It was a hotel build, and he wasn’t safe on one of the upper floors.” Her face paled, and I shrugged. “It was on him, but everyone went through hell for a while. That’s when Dad cracked down harder, and I do the same.”

“Wow,” she said, reaching for her drink. “I’m glad you’re not up there.”

“Sometimes, I am. They’re short a guy? I go. The job needs to get done.”

The nights were spent in bed together, making love and falling asleep. We spent the days at the site where Lila handled emails from the makeshift office while I helped the guys. She was good at what she did, and I respected that.

“So. Lila.” My head of team said one day as I helped on the highest floor. “Is there something there with you two?”

“No. We’re old friends, though,” I told him, focused on my task, so I didn’t lose it. “I snatched her up when she graduated and came back to Montana.”

He seemed to accept that, but it made me realize I might not be hiding this as well as I thought I was.

When we got into the truck to go home after enjoying our time away, Lila gazed at me.

“Are you good, Jackson? Something seemed to change this week,” she pointed out, and I started the engine. “It was a good week on all counts. I

liked it.”

“I just don’t want to go home,” I replied, pulling out of the parking lot. I knew we had to be careful, and I felt like I was on the verge of losing control.

TEN

LILA

WHEN WE PULLED UP to my house, I sighed.

Back to reality.

I looked at Jackson, reaching over to touch his arm in the dim evening light.

“I had a great time.” He smiled at me as I told him. “Get some rest this weekend.”

“You, too.” Jackson opened his mouth like he wanted to say something else, but remained silent.

He helped me with my suitcase, getting it to the door and inside of the house. Jackson stayed to chat for a minute but claimed exhausted and left.

I took my suitcase to my room to unpack, methodically separating my clothes into piles as Mom asked about the trip.

“Well, it was a hotel and so much bigger than the restaurant. There’s a lot of detail in it, Mom,” I told her as I added a shirt to the dirty pile. I looked down at the sexier items on the bottom, sighing since I knew I had to hide them.

“I would imagine,” she told me, and I wrapped the bras and underwear in a shirt to hide them behind the dirty pile. “What kind of boss is he to the men?”

“Tough. He doesn’t want anyone to get hurt on the job,” I replied, adding some jeans on top of everything so she wouldn’t see. “It’s cleaner than this house, Mom. I’m not even kidding.”

“I don’t know about that.” She laughed since she’d kept this house clean for years now. It wasn’t the type of clean where you felt scared to mess it up, but she just stayed on top of it. “Are you hungry?”

“I am.” Jackson and I had had lunch at the halfway mark again, choosing a bistro to spend some time together. We’d let it drag out, which was why we were late.

“Finish up, and I’ll heat some stew for you.” Mom stood to leave, and I took that time to get everything in the hamper to wash over the weekend.

When I finished eating and washed the dishes, I went into my room to call Tasha. There had been texts this week, but I was never in a room on my own to talk.

“Tell me everything,” she ordered when she answered the phone.

“It’s crazy. We had the best week, Tasha,” I told her in a low voice from my phone.

“I gathered as much when I didn’t hear from you. No room to yourself this time?” She chuckled, and I closed my eyes.

“We just bounced between them.” Thinking about it, I wasn’t alone at all over the week.

“You did work, didn’t you?” Tasha teased me, and I played back the days at the site. Did we act the right way? Would any of the guys suspect anything?

“We were at the site three days. I was everywhere. I took notes about the process of a bigger build, personal stuff about the team, and just watched everything around me. Jackson got right in and helped them, and it was sexy, Tash.” I sighed. “It isn’t like construction sites I pictured. Everything was clean and safe, as much as it could be.”

“There have been some horrible accidents over the years. They must be that way.” I thought about what Jackson told me about his father’s experience and the look on his face. It affected everyone, and he didn’t want that to happen again.

“Yeah. You’re right,” I agreed, moving on to tell her about the dinners we shared and how much fun we had.

“So, how is it being home? Matt left, right?” she asked me.

“Aaron told him to leave town at a bar, and they got into a small fight. He said that Matt checked out of the hotel the following morning,” I replied and Tasha breathed a sigh of relief. “So, I don’t have to fake date Jackson, but it’s already more than that.”

“Yeah. I’d say so,” she agreed, and we were both quiet. “Are you falling for him again?”

“Again?” I asked her, and she laughed.

“I could see it in your eyes when we talked about him the first time.” Tasha told me, and I closed my eyes. “You’re vulnerable with Jackson. Be careful.”

“I know,” I told her.

We chatted a while, and I ended the call, taking a shower before bed. I climbed into bed, feeling alone. I’d been sleeping in Jackson’s arms for the entire week, and I wasn’t sure how to sleep alone.

Was that bad?

Aaron came over for lunch the next day, and we caught up. He seemed so proud that he got Matt to leave, but I knew it wasn't Aaron alone. I let him think that just trying to focus on hiding what was happening with Jackson from my brother.

I took the weekend to sleep and think about everything. Would we continue on Monday at the office, or would Jackson want things to end? I knew he acted strange the last couple of days of the trip, but I had no idea why.

When I drove to work on Monday, I was worried during the entire drive. I'd done my homework and knew Matt had left since I confirmed he returned to Colorado—so that was in the past. Now I just needed to see what happened with Jackson.

When I walked into the office, Jackson was in his office.

“Good morning,” I greeted him, and he looked up from his coffee cup.

“Good morning,” Jackson told me, and our eyes locked. “Did you have a relaxing weekend?”

“I did. Caught up on some sleep. How about you?” We both knew we didn't sleep a lot last week. Maybe that was what had been bothering him on the way home.

“Same,” he told me, and I went to make some coffee.

There were emails to catch up on and the phone calls were constant. I kept busy that way, and we didn't have much of a chance to talk too much, focusing on work.

Jackson ordered lunch to be delivered, and we sat in his office to eat the Indian food.

“I missed you this weekend,” Jackson told me, and I glanced at him. “I thought about last week, and while I know I shouldn't keep seeing you, I

don't want to do that."

Relief flooded me as much as fear about hiding our relationship.

"That's what I wanted you to say," I told him, and we locked gazes for a moment. "It's going to be harder here, Jackson. The town is so small."

"We'll have to go to my house and be careful. I'll just keep better track of Aaron." He looked nervous and reached for a chip. "That means we have to take another trip soon. Those will be the times we can be free, at least in the hotel. When we're here, we need to focus on the business. I can't lose sight of that."

"Did something happen?" I asked, leaning forward.

"No. I just don't want it to," he assured me, looking and listening for a moment before kissing me slowly.

I lived for those moments when we had a moment together while trying to concentrate on running a business. On top of that, we needed to hide it from Aaron. We weren't fake dating anymore since Matt was gone, so we resorted back to sarcasm and joking, like we used to do when we communicated.

That's just who we were in the old days, and we couldn't reveal who we were now.

Jackson and I had dinner together sometimes when work ran late. We sat apart and didn't pretend anything other than the fact we wanted to make everybody disappear.

The talk about us dating died away once a few weeks passed, and people put two and two together when Matt left. The fight spurred a lot of those rumors, and we just let it go and kept working. Jackson and I both grew up in this small town and knew how it worked.

We also didn't want anything else going out there about us and played the role of semi-friends and coworkers when we had to. In his office, we'd touch as much as possible.

I went to his house for the first time when Aaron worked late at his office, and we'd be alone. Jackson thought it might be best to drive me to his house and back so my car wouldn't be seen in his driveway. It was so risky, but we couldn't keep stopping at work. We went right to his bed, making love for hours.

Jackson made us some sandwiches to eat when we took a break, and we both knew I should leave. There was no reason I should be here if Aaron came over, especially wearing one of Jackson's shirts on the couch. It just felt so natural to be here for me, and I let myself imagine a future where I could be for a fleeting moment.

We made love again before he took me back to the dark parking lot of the office, kissing me before I slipped into my car. Mom was awake, and I made up a story about getting a coffee and then going to the bar to hear a local band.

All lies.

My parents weren't the kind to worry if I wasn't home every night, but I told them I worked late sometimes. I said we grabbed a late dinner other times after work and they were in bed before ten o'clock during the week.

Since we went the extra step and went to his house, things heated up at work. We'd still take our lunches and make out for most of the time, but Jackson enjoyed it when I wore skirts to work. He'd get me off with his hand as we listened for anyone walking in and even locked the door at night a few times to go down on me.

We even made love a few times when we thought it might be safe. I hated rushing, but I needed Jackson too bad to turn him away. We couldn't go to his house every week and needed to save those times for nights when we knew my brother would keep busy.

Stolen moments that kept us going until we had real time alone was all we had.

I was excited when we had a quick trip to a town just a couple of hours away. We'd be there for two nights and spend a full day at the store build.

I booked the rooms beside each other with a grin on my face and counted the days until we left.

We didn't go to Jackson's house before that since we'd have some time to ourselves, and I made it through.

When we left in the truck in the morning, I smiled at Jackson.

"Finally." I said, and he offered me his charming, crooked smile. "I am not going to be sarcastic to you at all these next three days."

"Good," he said as we drove towards the freeway. It was a brief trip, and we settled into the hotel upon arrival, immediately falling into bed.

I couldn't get enough of Jackson. At the site, I did my usual routine of getting to know the team and taking my notes on them while keeping up with the emails. Jackson looked over the details and helped them where needed, and we caught up at night after dinner. Those nights weren't long enough, and the day we drove home, I sat in the passenger seat quietly.

We planned a night at his house on Friday the following week, not able to wait. I took my car and risked getting caught, but Aaron told Jackson he'd be out with friends. He gave him shit for not hanging out as much, but Jackson kept busy working and spending time with me, so there just wasn't time.

I knew it stressed him out, and we ate dinner on his couch when we got to the house, talking through the meal. Jackson led me to his room, and we released our stress together, hard and fast, in his bed. I let him control it, going with his guidance and getting everything out of it I could.

We were close to falling asleep, and I dropped to the bed. I tried to not make that a habit since Aaron dropped by a lot, but tonight, I drifted off.

Jackson woke me up later.

“Oh, my God. Did I fall asleep?” I asked, looking around.

“Yeah. Aaron is headed over in a cab, Lila. He wants to stay here tonight and have breakfast tomorrow.”

“Shit.” I jumped out of bed and dressed hurriedly, grabbing my purse, and running out front. Jumping into my car, I started the engine and drove home safely and quickly.

I realized I didn’t even kiss Jackson goodbye, and that hurt a little, reminding me of what we had together.

I rushed into my house, thankful nobody seemed to be awake as I rushed to my room and jumped in the shower.

What if Aaron didn’t call and just showed up at the house?

I stepped out of the shower and pulled on pajamas, wondering if Aaron got there okay. I wanted to text but didn’t, knowing Jackson didn’t need to be caught answering something from me this time of night.

When I tossed my clothes into the hamper, I realized I left my sweatshirt at the house that boasted the name of my university in Colorado.

ELEVEN

JACKSON

AS SOON AS LILA was gone, I quickly checked the house for anything she might have left behind. Sleeping with Aaron's sister was fucking stupid, and I searched around the living room with wild eyes.

Just as the doorbell chimed, I saw a sweatshirt on the couch. Walking over, I saw the name of Lila's college in the front and picked it up, chucking it into my office before closing the door.

Aaron never went in there. I glanced over my clothes to make sure I looked like I'd just been sleeping since I threw them on after I woke Lila up.

I walked over and opened the door, rubbing my eyes.

"Why so late?" I asked, trying to sound sleepy. I'd been doing anything but sleeping today.

"I'm just awake and drunk. I thought I'd come by and watch some TV and crash on your couch, so you'll buy me breakfast tomorrow." He grinned and walked inside, heading right to the couch. "Were you sleeping?"

"Yeah. Catching up from the week. You're an asshole," I joked, knowing he did this sometimes when he didn't want to go home to an empty house or

deal with a woman there. Bringing Lila here was risky as fuck, and I should have never done it.

I glanced at my phone, wanting to check if she made it home safely. Maybe when Aaron fell asleep, I could do it.

“Beer? Water?” I asked, looking at my friend. I was jittery and nervous and wondered how long I could do this.

“I drank so much tonight. Water sounds great,” he told me, turning on the big screen TV that took up my entire wall.

I grabbed us each a bottle with shaking hands and walked over, dropping to the couch as he settled on one of our favorite movies. I should sleep but planned to take the weekend to rest after a busy week.

I also felt too restless to relax enough to sleep now. My heart hammered in my chest, and I was out of breath, forcing myself to calm down. Aaron didn’t need to suspect anything.

“What did you do tonight?” Aaron asked, and I thought about what I could say.

“Just made some dinner here instead of getting takeout and crashed early. Where did you go?”

Aaron told me about the bar crawl to the two bars in town and how many people they ran into. I’d been invited but spent the night with Lila, though that was cut short.

“One of your girls asked about you.” I glanced up at him, coming back to reality at the mention of an old fling.

“Which one?” I asked casually, and he sipped his water before naming her. She didn’t matter to me at all.

“I think she’s missing you. Get your ass out of the house or your office and have a life again,” Aaron teased me, chuckling as he glanced over.

“Make my sister work a little harder.”

I thought about how hard she had already worked and forced the thoughts away.

“She’s doing great. I think she just went home to rest tonight, but I’m not sure.” What the fuck? She lived with her parents. I looked at Aaron to see if he reacted, and he didn’t seem to pay attention to what I’d said. This was fucking getting in my head, and I needed to stop.

I couldn’t lie to Aaron, and risking getting caught all day exhausted me. Fucking up at work wasn’t making my life any easier, although I’d fixed everything until now. They’d just been small mistakes so far, but what if I did something worse?

“No idea. I didn’t talk to anyone, but I’m going there for supper on Sunday. You should come,” Aaron said, focused on the movie.

“Yeah. Maybe,” I said, trying to sound casual. The idea of dinner across the table from Lila with her family made my stomach hurt. After about an hour, I told him I was tired and to take his usual room. After a moment of thought, I suggested a late morning breakfast and headed back to bed.

The room smelled like Lila’s perfume, and her scent from everything that happened in the room. I didn’t mention any woman and worried that Aaron might do the math. I worried about that for a few minutes before vowing to never see her again outside of the office.

Luckily, I was usually up early and beat Aaron to the kitchen for coffee. I barely slept as it was, worried he’d come to my room and figure things out.

“Jesus. You went to bed ten minutes ago,” Aaron grumbled, walking into the kitchen. “How do you do it?”

“Don’t know,” I replied, fixing my cup of coffee. I felt exhausted and didn’t want to go to breakfast.

I sent Lila a message asking if she got home okay and still hadn't heard from her. That didn't help.

"How did you sleep?" I asked, pouring Aaron some coffee. My house was like his second or third home if you added work to the mix—he'd even decorated his room.

Why was I sleeping with his fucking sister?

"Pretty good. Last night was wild by Cold Creek standards," Aaron said and took the coffee. "You missed it. Thanks." He fixed his cup and took a sip. "This is good."

Why was I still easing away from the party life and Aaron still thrived on it? Was that because of Lila?

No. It couldn't be since that wouldn't happen anymore. We were just older now, and the mornings just got earlier every day to me. I worked a lot and traveled for business. There had to be so many reasons.

I took a shower and dressed for a casual breakfast in town, driving so Aaron could pick up his car at the bar. When he got into his Mustang, my phone vibrated in my pocket. Glancing at Aaron to make sure he was leaving the parking lot to head to the diner, I grabbed it and read Lila's message on the screen.

L: I got home just fine. Just got up. Did A see my sweatshirt? I realized I had left it there last night when I got home.

J: I found it and hid it. I'll bring it to work on Monday.

I took a moment and swallowed the lump in my throat.

J: I don't know if we should do that again, L. It's too risky.

L: I worried about it all night. You might be right.

I knew I had to get to the diner and told her as much, driving out of the parking lot. Aaron was at our table and flirting with the server, so he didn't

seem to care it took me a few minutes.

“Hey, Suzy. Can I get some coffee?” I asked her, and she nodded with a smile. Aaron already had a cup, and I wondered how long I took. It didn’t feel like too much time.

I looked at the menu even though I had it memorized, just so I didn’t have to look at Aaron.

“Did you work in the parking lot?” Aaron asked me, making me jump. “You okay, Jackson?”

“I must be tired. Yeah, I checked my email,” I lied, and he chuckled.

“Always working. Do you make Lila do that from home, too?” Aaron teased, and I forced a smile.

“No one needs to do that as much as I do,” I said, letting my eyes look over the breakfast platters again.

We had breakfast, and Aaron went home to take a nap. I headed home and tried to take care of some work from my laptop, with the TV playing faintly in the background. I’d need to make another trip within the next couple of weeks and considered having Lila stay in town.

How could I keep my hands off her if we were in a hotel together?

I didn’t talk to Lila all weekend and came in to find her making coffee on Monday morning.

“Morning, Lila,” I greeted her, and she smiled at me. She looked incredible in black slacks and a cream blouse, and I let my eyes drag down her body, seeing her blush. This was not how I planned to start the day, and I walked into my office to work.

Although we tried to keep things professional, I kissed Lila when she was in my office. I told myself it was the last time, but as she slid into my lap, I felt like I couldn’t give her up. Something had to give here.

I had something when we walked out to our cars that evening. Not that I felt excited about it, but my ex-girlfriend waited for me by my car. I had dated Alexa for several months. She'd left for a job, and we'd ended things easily.

I hadn't thought about her since then.

"Hey, stranger," I called out, refusing to look at Lila. I assumed Lila had heard the gossip since everyone pegged me and Alexa as some sort of power couple. She was a pretty girl with highlighted brunette hair and bright blue eyes, but compared to Lila, I felt nothing for Alexa.

"I'm back in town, and I thought we could have dinner." Alexa sauntered across the lot to me, throwing herself into my arms as if Lila wasn't even there.

"Dinner?" I repeated, hugging her back automatically.

"Yes. I have missed the burgers at the diner so much, and I want to catch up," she told me, pulling back with a familiar smile on her face. I knew I should take this away from Lila and swallowed the lump in my throat.

"Let's do it. I'll meet you there." She grinned wider after I said that. I watched her bounce back to her luxury SUV and then looked at Lila. "I have to do this, Lila. We're digging our own grave if we keep this going."

Lila blinked as if she might cry, and I felt like shit inside.

"You're probably right. We already said this needed to end," she agreed in a low voice, and I just wanted to pull Lila into my arms.

Eating dinner with Alexa would start the rumor mill going again with our past, but maybe that was for the best. I needed to separate myself from Lila and make it a business relationship again. Continuing what we've been doing will get us caught, and I didn't want Aaron to find out.

I got into my truck and drove to the diner, knowing I'd just hurt Lila badly. We'd agreed to end things, but I'd just kissed her in my office, wanting so much more. I considered standing Alexa up, but I needed to see this through.

I parked at the diner, watching through the windows as Alexa talked to everyone from a table in the front where we'd be seen. By tomorrow, everyone would talk about how we were back together.

Fuck. I got out of the truck and headed inside, greeting everyone as I sat across from Alexa. We ordered, and she told me she was back for a while to help her mom out since she'd been sick. My heart sank, and I asked her about the job.

"I can do it remotely, so I spend some time at home working. It's perfect. I loved living in Boston, but it's just too far from home. And Cold Creek has a special place in my heart." Alexa gazed at me, obviously meaning more than just the town. "How's your business? I see you have a new assistant."

"It's good and busy, as always. I am still traveling a lot to the other sites, and I think it works for everyone." I sipped my iced tea. "I have a new staff member. Olive left to get married, and my best friend said his little sister was back in town. It was good timing."

"That's Aaron's sister? She's a grownup now," Alexa gasped, and I nodded with a small smile.

I knew that more than anybody.

"Yep. She's doing a good job," I replied, keeping it casual. "How is your family, apart from your mom being sick?"

"Great. Dad's working hard at the bank, so I am the one home with Mom." Alexa was wealthy through her dad's bank in town. She grew up

with everyone here, and I knew she'd be talking about this dinner, since being with me seemed to raise her popularity.

We were in our thirties now, so I didn't understand it.

I got through the meal and gave her a hug when we parted, knowing we'd be engaged come morning when everyone started talking about us.

It was a long night for me.

TWELVE

LILA

I WATCHED AS HE walked to his truck, started it, and sat for a moment. He must be making sure I got home safely, so I walked to the car, started the engine, and pulled out of the parking lot.

He was having dinner with his gorgeous ex, and we were just kissing in his office. Kissing after we agreed to end things, but it still hurts.

I drove home, while my mood sank along the way. I was so jealous of Alexa, but I couldn't be together with Jackson out in the open. When we were supposedly together, it was fake.

A part of me hoped Alexa would hear about it.

I walked into the house and helped Mom finish dinner after I got everything put away in my room, feigning cheer.

"How is Jackson?" Mom asked, and the knot in my stomach twisted harder.

"He's good." Aaron mentioned he'd invited Jackson to family supper on Sunday, but his best friend had declined. I might be the actual reason, but he claimed he wasn't feeling good. "He doesn't seem to be sick, so maybe it was just one of those brief things."

“I hope so. There’s a nasty cold going around town, and I don’t want it in this house.” Mom wrinkled her nose as she stirred the sauce and meatballs on the stove.

“I think we’ll be fine,” I assured her, taking the garlic bread from the oven. She drained the pasta, and I cut the bread up before Dad joined us for dinner.

It was hard to focus through dinner, but I forced myself to stay in the moment. Jackson was a separate issue I could deal with later in my room. He’d always be a part of this life—that was a reality I should face and just move on.

When we cleaned up after the meal—that should have been delicious—I went to my room and let the emotions of the day wash over me.

This was good because I was falling for Jackson. Again? Did it matter? It wouldn’t work between us.

I called Tasha and told her everything since she was still the only person who knew. She knew it was the right thing and assured me of that, but this was going to take a minute to settle in. It just felt good to talk about it and let some of the weight off my shoulders.

I had trouble sleeping that night thinking about Jackson with Alexa. I’d been at college when they were the big couple but heard enough to know that everyone loved them together. Small-town Cold Creek would eat it up that they were back together, assuming she was here to stay.

Fuck. I hoped not.

In the morning, I showered and dressed for work. This wasn’t going to be the best day, but I’d make it work—I needed the job. Jackson’s truck was parked in front of the office when I pulled in, and I looked it over.

I walked into my office and saw my sweatshirt folded up on my desk. Why did that make things feel so final? I placed it on a chair and made coffee quietly, not knowing what to say.

We spoke little throughout that day and the week, but I had a lot to do. There were builds planned, and I looked over the schedule to know who would be free for them. I tried hard to get the guys something that worked well for their situations.

I thought about all the guys on the teams and tried to figure out if anyone of them stood out to me. There wasn't anyone in Cold Creek I wanted to be with, but a little long-distance fling with an out-of-town guy wouldn't be the worst thing to do. Plenty of them were good-looking and single and great to talk to, from what I'd seen.

I glanced at Jackson, seeing him look away.

He'd hate it, and I wasn't one to do something out of spite. I never had been, but there was a chance I'd click with someone. It wasn't news to me that the population was small in Cold Creek, and I wouldn't meet a lot of new people when I came back.

I just wasn't supposed to fall for Jackson, and Matt moving here for me was not an option.

So, I worked and went home most evenings to enjoy dinner with my family. I tried not to think about Jackson and Alexa, even though I heard about the dinners they shared when I'd go to shop. According to my friends there, it was back on with them, and everyone seemed thrilled by the news.

Good for Jackson.

On Friday, I looked forward to a weekend away from Jackson. That was the day my phone chimed with a text from Aaron, and I groaned before checking it, noticing that Jackson picked up his phone at the same time.

A: Hey, you two. Want to meet up for dinner tonight before I meet the guys for drinks? You're welcome to join us if you're not busy tonight.

I looked at Jackson to see the scowl on his face. We couldn't say no since we were just coworkers, and it might make Aaron wonder what was going on. I also knew my parents had dinner plans tonight, and this was a natural answer to that.

L: That sounds good if we go to the new place. I love their salmon.

A restaurant opening here was a big deal, and the new steak place hit the spot sometimes.

The guys agreed with it, and I resigned myself to spending a few more hours with Jackson.

Going over the schedule, I noticed it was around time for him to travel since a site was on a strict deadline. The city was one of the places further away, meaning about a week away, and I wondered how I'd get through it.

Wait. Would we even travel together anymore?

I looked at Jackson, who was involved in a phone conversation. He pinched the bridge of his nose as he leaned forward; he was tense about something. He might just have a headache.

Why did I care?

I moved on to another task and played a podcast low on my computer to distract me from my thoughts. There was nothing like some true crime and scary stories to make me think about something else. That was something I got introduced to by Tasha when we had some downtime, and I loved it. Those were memories I'd always cling to.

I glanced at the clock at one point to see that we were off in thirty minutes. Jackson ordered delivery for lunch, and I told him what I'd like when he asked. But we ate in our separate offices. I hadn't been in there at

all this week, and I assumed he was respecting Alexa and whatever it was they had.

I still thought about the last kiss in his office as he dragged his hands down my back.

When he locked the office, Jackson glanced at me.

“Want to drive together?” he asked, and I shook my head.

“Not if you and Aaron are going out after dinner. I’m fine driving,” I replied quickly, walking to my car. He made his way to his truck, and I started my car and pulled out first, dreading this dinner.

It was just a meal. We would eat and then leave to go our separate ways.

I parked in front of the small, intimate restaurant and looked around for my brother’s car. He was here, so I got out and headed inside, greeting the hostess I went to high school with. She’d just gotten engaged to her long-term boyfriend and acted thrilled when she showed me the ring. I gave her a hug and congratulated her.

Did I blow my chances of that by leaving the bigger town of Aurora?

I got away from her when another couple came through the door and walked over to Aaron, feeling someone behind me. When I slipped into the booth across from my brother, Jackson asked me to scoot over.

Seriously?

I did, moving against the furthest part of the seat and giving myself some space. I placed my purse between us and looked at Aaron.

“How was your week?” I asked my brother with a forced smile.

He told us about his job in between ordering drinks and dinner, making me long for something alcoholic. I drove, so I stuck with Coke—but I wanted something strong. Maybe I’d have that rare glass of wine when I got home.

“So, I’m hearing that you’ve been seen with Alexa?” Aaron said, smiling at Jackson. “Is that back on now that she’s back in town to stay?”

Back in town to stay? I needed something more than wine now.

“Nothing’s official,” Jackson replied, sipping his Coke after the server set it down. “We’re just hanging out.”

“Good. Come out for drinks with the guys then. We miss you,” Aaron told him, and I glanced beside me to see Jackson looking at me. “Bros before hoes.”

“Aaron!” I snapped, frowning at my brother.

“It’s just a saying, Lila. Calm down.” He rolled his eyes and then looked at Jackson. “Even if you are with her, you need to get out on your own.”

“I’ll go for a while,” Jackson told Aaron, and I focused on my drink, thinking there were too many ice cubes in it. My friends had asked me to hang out since I got back, and I’d passed. But maybe I needed some close people beyond Tasha in my life.

I let the guys talk as I mulled that over, focusing on my salmon and veggies that were on the way. I wished I could take the plate to-go to make Aaron pay, but I knew he enjoyed catching up with Jackson and me.

Since we were nothing more than friends, there was no reason it shouldn’t happen.

The food came, and we dug in, chatting between bites. It tasted amazing, and I lost myself in that for a moment, glancing up when I felt the guys watching me.

“You always enjoyed food more than any girl I knew,” Aaron told me with a warm smile.

“I appreciate that about her. Alexa only eats salads unless it’s a special occasion,” Jackson agreed, and I looked back down at my plate. Any joy I

felt was gone, and I went back to eating, though it didn't taste as good this time.

We finally left, and I almost ran to my car after Jackson covered the bill. The server stopped me on the way out to tell me she and some girls were getting together the following night for wine and movies, asking if I'd join them.

I told her I'd call her and walked with the guys to their cars.

Aaron hugged me and held on a little longer than needed.

"You seem distracted, Lila. Is everything good?" he asked me, looking into my eyes when he pulled away.

"Yeah. Yeah, it's fine. I just had a message from Matt earlier, and he annoys me," I blurted out, regretting my words. Anything would have been better to say than that.

"Is he bothering you again?" Aaron stood up straight, and I shook my head.

"Just a text message. It's fine, Dad," I joked, and he looked at me with hard eyes. "Down, boy. He's not back in town."

"Let me know if he is?" Aaron checked, and I nodded, offering Jackson a wave before I walked to my car.

"Have a good time, and be safe," I told them before slipping into my car. I cursed to myself as I started the engine. Why would I say that? Obviously, the truth would not have worked, but bringing Matt up was enough to make my brother crazy with worry.

I drove home, ready for that drink.

THIRTEEN

JACKSON

I SAT AT THE table with the group of four guys who were my best friends in high school and still were in a lot of ways.

We ordered beers, and I looked up as Aaron said Lila's name.

"If that fucker thinks he's coming back for her, he'd got another thing coming," Aaron threatened, and I frowned at him.

"What do you mean?" I asked, and he looked at me.

"Lila said Matt sent her a text. He'd better not be thinking about coming back," Aaron said, looking irritated he had to repeat it.

"Hell, no. Did she talk to him?" I asked, sitting straight as that feeling that only came from Lila flooded me.

"I don't think so. She's not stupid," Aaron muttered, and I hoped he was right. I couldn't believe I had to wait until Monday to talk to Lila about this. I didn't want to reach out to her with the weird feelings between us, but fuck. I didn't want Matt getting any ideas.

I drank too much, and Aaron came back to my house with me in a cab, giving me an excuse to tell Alexa she couldn't come over. She tried a few times, but I always came up with a reason for her to stay home.

Being seen with her stirred up rumors, and by all accounts, we were back together. I didn't correct anyone one way or the other and just let people think it. If Lila heard that, she might move forward herself.

I didn't want her out with the wild girls from her graduating class, but she was an adult.

What I also didn't want was Matt back in her life. I told Aaron I felt tired and needed some sleep, going to my room that had been cleaned of anything Lila.

I changed into pajama pants and a T-shirt before sliding under the covers, both tired and restless at the same time. My phone vibrated on the table beside me, ignoring it since it was more than likely Alexa.

Again.

Aaron hung out all weekend, and we had some guys to the house Saturday night, all of whom asked when Alexa would come over with her friends.

Fucking small towns.

I told them she had plans and wouldn't be by this weekend, leaving out the part where she wouldn't be over any weekend.

Since I needed to get ready for my week, I was alone on Sunday. I needed to plan a fucking trip for work and hadn't brought it up yet. Did I take Lila or leave her behind? It wasn't like I needed her to go to the sites with me, but I enjoyed myself with her.

I enjoyed myself with her before everything happened. Olive stayed back a lot for the trips, and there was no reason Lila couldn't do the same thing.

I walked into the office Monday morning, trying to keep my cool. Lila was a big girl, and she could handle her shit. But I wanted to know if she went out and more about Matt's message.

She walked in after me, setting her purse down on her desk. Lila made some coffee, and I stared at her until she looked back at me.

“Good morning,” Lila said with a question in her voice.

“Morning,” I shot back, and her eyes narrowed before she turned around. “What’s this I hear about Matt texting you?”

“I knew he’d tell you. Was it on Friday night?” Lila demanded, stirring something into her coffee aggressively. “How did you hold it in this long?”

“Is he trying to get you back again?” I asked, standing and walking to my office door.

“If so, I guess you can’t step in, since you have Alexa back.” She slammed her cup on the desk and stared at me. “You sure moved on quickly.”

“This can’t happen, Lila. You know that,” I told her, and we stared at each other. “I shouldn’t be looking forward to the next trip to get you alone again and be away from all of this.”

“Trip?” She gazed at me in surprise. “You need to go to another site?”

“I always have to go, but I want to leave you here to run the office. We shouldn’t be involved,” I repeated and ran a hand through my hair. “That isn’t what I wanted to say.”

“Is that why you’re asking about Matt?” she stepped closer, and the need to pull her into my arms grew stronger. “He didn’t send me a message. I just needed a reason for Aaron to think it distracted me, but we’ll make that our little secret.”

“Thank fuck,” I breathed, leaning my head forward. “I’ve been thinking the most violent thoughts all weekend.”

“I have been thinking about you with Alexa,” she responded in an even tone, and I let out a sigh. “Are you back with her?”

“I should want to be since it would make more sense, but no. I’ve spent time with her, but we’re not at the level she’d like to be at. I have just been letting everyone think otherwise, so you would think I was.” I lifted my eyes to look at Lila. “Nothing has happened with us, Lila. I can’t stop thinking about you.”

“I know the feeling.” Our eyes locked and held as need and emotions flowed between us, twisting together as I clenched my hands into fists. I cursed, and she chuckled, shaking her head so her hair moved over her shoulders.

Lila made her way towards me, and I backed into my office, cupping her face before I kissed her.

“We can’t go to my house. I know there aren’t a lot of options, but we cut it too fucking close the last time,” I told her before claiming her mouth in a harder kiss.

We did that too long before parting, as if we remembered where we were. Lila smiled and stepped back, licking her lips slowly.

“You know where we need to go?” I asked her as she moved to sit at her desk.

“Yeah. I saw the schedule,” she replied over her shoulder as she reached for her coffee.

“Book a week next week. It’s a sports complex, and we’re working with another team to finish up. It’s a big site and a critical one that’s going to make all of us a lot of money.” I made my coffee, feeling sated now that I’d kissed Lila again, which wasn’t the way I needed it. “There’s a Westin there that has comfortable rooms. Book something for us that’s attached.”

Lila stared at me. I nodded, and she went on her computer, typing and opening her drawer for the company credit card. It took a few minutes, but

when I heard my email notification ping, I sat down with the coffee and looked at the reservation she'd sent me.

We had rooms on the fourth floor that connected by a door in a great part of the city. There were some great places to eat and hang out when we weren't working, though I knew I wanted her in my bed more than anything.

We worked a lot, and there wasn't the same tension between us as there had been last week. We got along and laughed a few times at stories we heard from a site and had lunch in my office.

I'd been getting food delivered more these days since I didn't want to go into town to eat. That involved a lot of talking to people and dodging questions about Alexa, who I was trying to see as little as possible. It just didn't feel right spending time with her and probably leading her on, since I couldn't tell her there was someone else.

I kissed Lila at work during those lunches, carefully listening for the loud alert I added to the door to know if anyone came into the office. Luckily, Alexa respected I was at work and didn't bother me there in person. But she showed up by my car again on Friday to see if I wanted to have dinner with her again.

I took her with the purpose of letting her down easily, feeling Lila's eyes on me as I walked to my truck. Alexa greeted her, but I knew it was hard for Lila to talk to her. So I got us out of there quickly.

"I've been trying to pin you down, Jackson. It's so good seeing you again," she told me across the table at the steakhouse. Alexa tried hard tonight, and I'd give her credit. She looked beautiful, and I knew a few men in the room appreciated that—but I wasn't one of them.

“It has been good, Alexa. I just think we’re on different pages.” I gazed at her. “I don’t want to get back together.”

“You don’t?” she whispered, and I shook my head. “Is there someone else?”

“No. Nothing like that. I just don’t feel that way about us now.” I kept my voice calm so she wouldn’t suspect anything. “I’m into my job and keeping that going, and I travel a lot. I’ll be going for a week on Monday. You deserve more than that, Alexa.”

I felt like the biggest asshole telling her this, knowing the actual story.

After we ate, I told her I wanted to be friends, and I paid for dinner. I did.

A weight lifted off my shoulders as I drove home even though I wouldn’t see Lila until Monday. We’d be going away to Great Falls, four hours away from Cold Creek. I could pretend she was mine.

We left on Monday morning at eight o’clock, and I hopped on the freeway with a smile on my face. It wasn’t that I needed to be at the site today, but I wanted some time alone with Lila. She had her hair in pigtails today and wore ripped jeans with her college sweatshirt. I could see the extra effort she put in, though she was always beautiful to me.

We sipped coffee that Irene fixed for us and listened to the radio, just enjoying this time. The last week or so had been emotional, and while things weren’t going anywhere, I decided to enjoy every moment I had with Lila.

We were in the clear for now, and I’d ended things with Alexa.

Of course, I’d sent Lila a message after dinner about what had happened, so she’d feel better. Nobody would know about the texts if we were careful about them, so we communicated a lot that way.

When we arrived at the hotel, I checked us in and looked around the lobby, a step above where I usually stayed. Before Lila, I traveled purely for work and nothing else, but now, the place I slept mattered a lot more.

We went to our rooms, and each put our things where we were booked. But I walked into Lila's room within a few moments, needing her.

I kissed her hard, feeling all the pent-up desire flood my body as she pulled me closer. Our tongues danced together, and I let my hands slide down her back, knowing I couldn't wait any longer.

I turned her towards her bed, walking Lila carefully across the room as I kept kissing her, unable to pull away. When I pressed her back onto the mattress and stood, I slid my blue Henley over my head and watched as her eyes darkened.

Lila tugged her sweatshirt off, revealing a clingy tank top underneath. I joined her on the bed, sliding between her denim-covered legs as I kissed her again.

We stripped in between kisses, and I kissed every inch of her body. Lila arched into me when I sucked a nipple into my mouth, rocking her pussy against my hand as I touched her for the first time in what felt like forever.

This was what I needed. I stripped her down, tasting Lila after I made her come and drinking her in when I felt her a second time against my mouth. We made love for hours in her bed, finally coming up for air, when we realized we'd skipped lunch in our haste to get here.

I knew this was wrong, but it felt so right.

FOURTEEN

LILA

THE TRIP WAS AMAZING. We scouted the site, and I could tell it would be an amazing sports complex. The teams were professional and worked well together, though I had trouble keeping my eyes off Jackson most of the time.

Making love after we got to the hotel felt amazing and like something I'd been missing so much. I knew it was wrong but couldn't stay away from him. Once that door was closed, he kissed me as though he'd been feeling the same way. We didn't leave until we cleaned up to go get some dinner at a place around the corner, and it felt like we were in a different world.

There was a moment when one of the guys from the site mentioned seeing us at dinner the previous night. I had to think back and hoped we weren't acting too close after our few hours together in the hotel.

Jackson sounded casual when he told the man we were just catching a late dinner after going over some work stuff for a while. It was an easy lie for him, and I nodded, looking busy as I glanced around at everything.

I just hoped it worked.

I always remained professional with the teams and just tried to get to know them as individuals. On the last day we were there, everyone was going to a place for drinks and dinner, and they invited us to come along.

I knew that wasn't Jackson's usual thing to do. But to my surprise, he accepted and so did I. The place we went to was a chain restaurant, and I made a point of sitting across from Jackson. So we didn't appear to be too close. The guys were friendly and laughing after a hard day's work, enjoying a couple of beers and food.

It was fun. I'd gone out for several meals with Jackson the rest of the time, and we'd taken advantage of the hotel breakfast every morning. This was a great change, and I relaxed as the team tossed jokes back and forth.

The guys beside me lived near the site and were around my age. One of them had gone to college for the same thing as me, but he'd fallen into this line of work. We shared stories about some of the tougher classes. I didn't talk to anyone about college other than Tasha, and it was fun for me.

At least, until I looked across the table at Jackson. He had a scowl on his face and seemed to distance himself from the surrounding conversations. As the boss, that wasn't good, and I tried to shoot him a warning look. Jackson saw me and sipped his beer, trying to calm down.

I was just having a conversation. Maybe his employee wanted more from it, but I didn't—and I'd tell him that if it came up.

When we figured out the bill and stood to leave, the site worker asked me if I'd like to go have another drink with him with a shy smile on his handsome face. I wasn't surprised and told him I was seeing someone back home, so I shouldn't. I appreciated the invitation but planned to go back to the hotel and just get some rest before we made the trip home.

I hoped I pulled it off as I told everyone it was great to meet them before following Jackson to the truck.

“You need to reel it in, Jackson. That wasn’t going to go anywhere,” I told him once the doors were closed.

“I hate watching men flirt with you when I can’t claim you,” he muttered, starting the engine as I barked out a laugh.

“I don’t enjoy seeing you go to dinner with your ex, Jackson. We’re even.”

“I stopped that,” he reminded me, and I leaned back in the seat. He drove out of the parking lot, and I glanced over to see the group of men still gathered in conversation.

“We’re going to have moments like that because we can’t publicly date. There are going to be times it hurts us both, but I handled it. Everything worked out.” The server at the table was flirtatious with everyone. “I’m going back to the hotel to spend the night with you and nobody else.” I thought of something and frowned. “Would any of them have a way of getting back to Aaron about seeing us at dinner?”

“I don’t think so. He doesn’t know too many of them apart from the local team,” Jackson assured me as he parked at the hotel. “That’s why I appreciate these trips so much.”

We went inside, and I looked out over the city view from my window, hating that I needed to go home tomorrow. I closed the curtains and longed for a world where I could just be with Jackson, but there would be so much to deal with.

It was a quiet night, but we spent it together. We just made love as if it were the last time—and it could be with our limitations. We slept together

in my bed for the night and rose for the last breakfast before hitting the road.

The drive seemed fast and tense. I felt like we pulled up to my house in an hour, but in reality, it was the late afternoon. I'd be eating dinner with my family soon.

He told me he'd message me later and helped me with my bags before driving away. Mom invited him to stay for dinner, but Jackson told her he was tired and just wanted to be home.

I unpacked, focusing too much on the laundry pile as I went through everything, since it hurt to think about Jackson. Once that was done, I went to help with dinner after I changed into leggings and a sweatshirt.

"How was it?" Mom asked once we'd piled our plates with pot roast, vegetables, and fresh rolls.

"Great. The sports complex is enormous and will be amazing for the city. Even though it was two different companies working together, they seemed so natural," I replied, trying to decide what I could say. "Great Falls is so much bigger than Cold Creek. Did you ever consider a bigger city?"

"I had my times. I wanted the extra stores and places to eat, but this is home to me. I was raised here, and not that there's more in the surrounding towns, I'm happy to stay here. Are you thinking of leaving again?" Mom asked, and I saw the sad look on her face.

"No, Mom. Just noting the differences." I wouldn't move away from Jackson, even though we couldn't have a future. The idea alone wrecked me. "We all went to dinner together the last night after work, just to a chain restaurant, but it was fun. He has talented teams."

"I'm surprised you haven't met anyone going to these sites," Dad said, and I looked at him. "You're such a pretty girl and so friendly, Lila."

“It’s not that I haven’t had some interest, but we travel far, Dad. I can’t see making a long-distance relationship work,” I lied and glanced at Mom. There was something in her eyes that made my skin break into goosebumps under my shirt, and I pretended to sip my iced tea so I could look away.

Did she know something?

The next day, I got a message from Jackson telling me that news of our dinner together got back to Aaron through the teams being friends. My brother seemed to ask more questions than usual, and I replayed the meal in my head. We weren’t sitting together or being affectionate. That would never happen unless it was like Jackson pretending to date me as he had done before.

We were laughing and enjoying the meal, but it was post amazing sex—and I’d felt so happy.

Jackson told me he made it all sound normal, but at Sunday supper, Aaron brought it up to me. He seemed relaxed but just said the guy told the friend in town we looked pretty close.

“I’ve known him for years. Of course, we’re closer than some people would be. It was great to get out and have a meal after that drive, is all,” I assured him, not sure just what Jackson said.

“It was at ten at night, wasn’t it? Why so late?” my brother pressed, and frustration built up in me.

“I did some work stuff when we got to town and took a nap. You know me and how I try to stay awake when I’m in a car with someone,” I reminded him, wondering how this went with Jackson. “I ended up staying up late watching a movie and messing everything up.”

I sensed I needed to pull away from Jackson a lot. Something seemed to change here, and I wasn’t comfortable with it. That must have been quite

the conversation between the two guys, but it wasn't the first time they had asked Jackson about me.

I thought about it alone in my room as I talked to Tasha.

"I can't be with him publicly anyway, so I should just back off. Right?" I asked her, relaxing against my pillows.

"I'd hate to see you get your heart broken, Lila. That's where this is headed. Maybe take some time and go out with one of the guys for drinks when you are ready. Baby steps," Tasha suggested and sighed. "I need to visit you."

"Yeah. I miss our talks in the apartment." Life seemed simpler then, even though I'd been getting over Jackson.

In the morning, I stopped at my favorite place for coffee. It was rare, but I craved something strong after my long night. Of course, I heard someone talking about Jackson and Alexa having lunch together, which sent me into a worse mood.

He could be doing it to throw Aaron off of our scent, but I didn't care.

I got to the office and sat in the parking lot for a few minutes. This needed to end, so I could have my sanity back.

I sipped my coffee and vowed to pull back. I deserved more than this.

Jackson was in his office on the phone, and I quietly entered my office. I set the coffee down, warming up the computer in between sips.

"You went to Grinds? I wish I knew," Jackson told me, standing at the door of my office.

"Impulse buy," I replied, staring at my screen to avoid that face that haunted my soul. A silence lingered between us, and I silently begged him to just go back to work.

“It was just lunch,” he whispered, and I met his brown eyes that seemed endless right now.

“It’s what you should do, Jackson. We can’t go anywhere,” I said, and pain flashed across his face. “I got interviewed at dinner by Aaron last night, so we’re doing something wrong.”

“What the fuck did the guys say?” he asked the air, and we would never know. “It was the same for me.”

“We need to stop. Go on with your life.” As I spoke the words, I knew I’d fallen back in love with Jackson. It hurt so much to say, but I didn’t know what else to do.

“Lila. I don’t want that,” he told me, and I closed my eyes.

“We can’t get caught, and that’s where we are headed. You deserve better than scraps, and so do I.”

“Fuck,” he cursed, leaning against his hands in the doorway as he stared at me.

I kept it professional at the office all week and the next. We spoke when we needed to, and both left to go home every evening.

What were our options?

When Jackson broached the subject of another trip, I thought about my answer. It was a small site and not too far. I sighed.

“I’m going to stay here for this one. Mom hasn’t been feeling great,” I told him, and Jackson stared at me. She had a very minor cold, but it seemed like a good excuse. I just hoped Aaron wouldn’t correct him because I couldn’t find it in my heart to tell Jackson I couldn’t take being around him. “I’ll run things from the office. Maybe you should ask Alexa to join you.”

I knew they'd been seen, and it was the best thing for both of us. But it still hurt so deeply inside.

Jackson turned to walk into his office, and I fought the tears in my eyes before he looked at me again.

FIFTEEN

JACKSON

LILA DIDN'T WANT TO go with me.

It was just an hour away, and the build was a home. It wasn't anything major, but I wanted her with me. When she asked where I wanted to stay, I told her the best place she could get in town. If I'd be alone, I would live it up. Helena wasn't big, but there had to be a bar I could relax in—if not drink whatever the hotel offered.

I would not be taking Alexa with me, even though she would love the idea. Despite our earlier conversation, my ex was still pushing for us to be together again. She said we could start slow and ease into it, but I told Alexa I wasn't in that place.

Not that Lila gave me a good vibe. She'd been pulling away since we got back from the last trip, and it was no surprise based on whatever conversation Aaron had had with the guys. I knew people embellished stories with more people involved and rumors got started, but Aaron asked me more questions than usual.

We weren't making out at the table, just talking and laughing. Of course, Lila had a post-sex glow that made her look and act a little silly. But could

someone see that from across a fucking room?

I hoped not because that was mine.

When she sent me the confirmation for the trip, there was one room booked under my name. She wasn't going with me. What that fuck was I supposed to do with myself?

Didn't I use to prefer to go alone, so I could get everything done easily and deal with the guys on my own?

I met Aaron for drinks before leaving for the trip and tried to hide the mood I'd been in for a few days.

He took one look at me and asked the server for two beers.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" my best friend asked, and I decided to go with the usual vague excuse.

"Just tired from work. The usual shit. Next week, I need to go on a trip as well. I've heard the weather might get crazy, so I wonder if it's even worth it," I told him, and Aaron looked through the windows of the bar at the skies I knew were clear right now.

I just saw it an hour ago.

"What weather?" Aaron asked, and I shrugged.

"I heard it was supposed to get windy, which sucks for a job site. At least I'll be able to be there and help," I said, reaching for my beer as the server set it down.

"I heard you're going solo this time?" The words hurt, and I kept my face calm and nodded.

"It's a small site and not very far. I'm sure everything will be fine," I told him, glancing at the menu and the appetizers I felt familiar with. I hoped he'd leave it at that because I didn't want to go there with my best friend. I

also didn't mention the thing about their mom being sick in case Aaron completely shot me down. "Just a quick two-night trip and home again."

"She'll handle the office just fine. Her friend is supposed to come from Colorado to visit, so Lila wants to show her around."

"Tasha?" I asked and wondered if I should know that.

"Yep. We've never met her, so it should be interesting," Aaron replied, and I arched a brow at him.

"Don't hook up with her," I joked, feeling guilt wash through me, along with worry. Did I just throw myself under the bus?

"There are so many reasons I'd never think about that, Jackson." Aaron barked out a laugh. "Lila would kill me."

"More than likely," I agreed, seeing the server come by. I asked for some potato skins with everything, and Aaron followed with an order of buffalo wings. We usually split everything. "I know she'll be staying with them at the house and eat at least one meal there. Lila wants to show her around, though."

Lila never mentioned this to me, but she'd said very little.

I missed her, sitting here discussing Lila with Aaron. He knew more about her than I ever would right now, and that bothered me deeply.

Would it always be that way?

I held in my sigh, sipping my beer instead.

"Are you ever going to bring Alexa on a trip with you?" Aaron asked, and I met his gaze. "She's really wanting something from you, J. You were good together."

Until I got back with Lila.

"I don't think so. There's nothing there anymore for me, though I'm fine being friends," I told him, and Aaron frowned.

“You could just hook up with her. I’m sure Alexa would love that.”

“Yeah, and lead her on? No, thanks. She needs to have some boundaries and sleeping together removes any of those,” I argued, knowing I sounded like a different man.

What the fuck was happening to me?

“I guess I see your point. At least you’ll be alone on the trip and able to hook up with someone without it being weird. I’m sure that’s difficult with your assistant with you.” I almost choked on my drink but swallowed it.

“Definitely,” I agreed, thinking how much I’d just like to hook up with my assistant. “We’ll see.”

We ate our food and enjoyed another couple of beers, chatting about the games on TV. When I headed home alone, I let the bad mood wash over me.

I realized I couldn’t talk to anyone about this thing with Lila. That felt fucked up to me, since I wanted nothing more than to confess my feelings for her to almost anyone.

Feelings?

I grabbed another beer from the fridge and sat down on the couch, remembering the times she’d been here. Lila brightened every room she entered, and my house just felt quiet now.

My life felt off.

I left on Monday morning and turned the radio up for some sound. This wasn’t like the last few trips I took at all, and I hated it. When I checked into the single room, I put some stuff away, grabbed lunch, and headed to the site.

They glanced at me with surprised faces since I normally waited until a full day to stop by the site. I hoped it didn’t mean I’d find something I didn’t like and walked over to the group.

“Hey, guys. How are you?” I asked, and the team lead scratched his head.

“We’re great, but you weren’t supposed to be here until Thursday, unless I’m wrong,” he replied, and I frowned. That was a big error, but I could make him forget it.

“Thursday?” I asked, wondering why Lila even booked this for me if she looked at the schedule. “Well, I’m here now. Show me things.”

“You were going to be here the same day as the safety inspector, Jackson. You always are,” he told me, and I realized he was right.

“I’ll be here for that. Let’s look around.”

We toured the space, and I was pleased at how well they were doing. The deadline would be met, and while it wasn’t a top client, I liked everything to work out this way.

I helped them out, staying until it was time to call it a day. I missed being hands-on with the jobs sometimes and went all in the next day I was in town.

When they asked me to dinner, I accepted so I could stall going back to my empty hotel room.

“I heard you have a pretty new assistant. Where is she on this trip?” the team lead asked once we sat down in the diner and ordered our food. I felt my reaction in every part of my body but remained calm on the outside.

“She stayed back this time since she had a friend visiting her. Lila has been to some of the bigger sites, and she’s got a good idea of things. She can handle everything back at the office,” I replied, trying to sound like I was talking about my assistant and nothing more.

Did these guys talk to the other ones and might have heard the rumors?

Fuck. This situation would kill me.

We enjoyed a good dinner, just talking about the build, town, and keeping things light. I reluctantly left for my hotel, finally letting myself feel angry at my mistake.

It wasn't a big one, but something I never fucking did. I'd made countless smaller ones back at the office I fixed, but today made me look bad to my team, like I couldn't handle my own fucking business.

Fuck that.

I thought about it as I relaxed on my bed with something on the TV and grabbed my phone.

J: Did you know I wasn't supposed to be here until Thursday? Why did you book the hotel for Monday?

L: I don't keep that close of contact with your teams, and you always leave on Mondays. You didn't correct me. Did you find a mess when you got there?

Even her tone through a message was formal and felt empty.

J: Hell no. I just didn't realize there was a difference in dates.

I imagined her with her friend back in Cold Creek, going out to eat and drink. They might go to some of the outlying towns and meet some guys, which is where I shut my mind down.

The image of her doing what she did with me with any other man would send me over the edge. Hell, the memory of me and her was well on the way to doing that, and the emptiness of this room made my ears pound.

There was no response from Lila, and I slammed my phone down on the bed, pressing my hands to my head. This was out of control, and I needed to stop it.

I woke up like that the following morning, taking a long, hot shower to wake up. Hoping it would make me more present, I jerked off under the

water with Lila in my mind.

Beautiful, sexy, off limits, Lila.

I dressed for breakfast in the lobby and ate with a plan in mind of skipping lunch. I'd just work at the site and hopefully lose myself in that. Maybe I could hang with the guys after and kill some more time before I went home tomorrow.

That plan changed when one wife dropped food off for the team, and we took a break to eat pasta and bread, sitting where we could.

"Damn. This is good," my team lead said after a bite, nodding at the new guy.

"She can cook. I'll never go hungry in that house," he replied with a smile, and I looked on, never having felt that about anyone.

We finished lunch, and since the guys all wanted to head home, I ate dinner by myself. The sandwich held my attention more than the surrounding feeling of emptiness. I'd never minded being on my own.

I'd craved it.

Women were never a priority to me, though I dated Alexa. I always focused on work above all else, even Aaron sometimes.

What the fuck was happening to me?

I went back to the hotel and tried to take in the luxurious room I'd asked for. There was no place to be but home tomorrow, and I could sleep great tonight and wake up in the morning ready to move forward.

Only that didn't happen.

I tried to turn on the TV and decompress, but the room felt like it closed in on me. I tossed and turned as thoughts mixed in my head, reaching out for someone beside me too many times before I sat up and cursed loudly.

I missed Lila more than I had anybody, much less another woman. Any logical man would think about someone available to him, like Alexa.

I knew I needed to deal with the fact I fell in love with Lila and do something about it. The consequences might not be ideal, but I couldn't go on like this.

I knew I needed to stay in town for the safety inspection, but I could leave on Friday, with any luck. It might be the longest week of my life, but I'd do it.

In the morning, I got a call from the boss out at the site. One of the guys didn't set anything up as a railing on the second floor of the complex, falling and breaking his leg. They're supposed to use something even if it's a sturdy cloth as opposed to something built there.

I cursed the entire way to the hospital. This could be so much worse, but I still felt the stress washing over me since I wanted to go home so bad.

I met with the team in the waiting room, asking for details.

"Don't you remind them about everything they have to do to be safe?" I snapped at their boss, watching him step back. "We have to take every step to keep this from happening. I don't even want to think about the paperwork we're going to have to do."

"Even with every step, this could happen. People trip and fall, Jackson. He's going to be fine," another one of the guys assured me.

"Next time, it might be worse." I walked to the window and looked out at the mountain range, trying to catch my breath. I knew I was coming unhinged and needed to pull it together for my guys.

In the end, the leg was broken in two places, but the man could go home to recover. There was red tape involved in his time off and getting the medical care he needed, but it could have been worse.

Then the inspector came and went at us extra hard because of the accident. I went back to the hotel Thursday night exhausted and dropped right into bed, hating everything about this week.

I checked out of the hotel at six, got some coffee, and drove back home as I made a plan in my mind.

SIXTEEN

LILA

I LEFT TASHA SLEEPING and went into the office, closing my eyes and enjoying the quiet of the space today for a moment.

I missed Jackson being here more than I cared to admit, but I kept reminding myself that space was good. I got a lot of work done being the only person here unless someone came in with a question, and schedules were ahead of time for a change.

I had to feel good about that even though I knew what I was missing being on the trip. I shuddered at the memory of past trips, chanting in my mind why that was a bad idea.

My brother seemed to be happier after the previous calls and suspicions resolved, and it might serve me well to never travel with Jackson again. In that case, I might as well not work here since I learned a lot about the sites and the guys working there, which helped me here on this end.

Why did I live in such a small town where there weren't opportunities around every corner? Tasha would tell me because I left Colorado, and she'd be right. But I'd had it in my head I needed to come home after graduation.

Of course, if someone suggested this would happen with Jackson at nearly any point in the past, I would have laughed at them.

At least Tasha was here for two more days, and we'd had some good time to spend together. My parents adored her, and she got along with Aaron well, though as another little sister. I felt certain my brother wouldn't try to hook up with my best friend as much of a pig as he could be.

He had morals, unlike Jackson and me.

Fuck. I couldn't get him out of my head, and I made some strong coffee to start my day. Glancing at the front door, I considered locking it and just taking calls, but it should be slow. There were other offices in the building that were present if I needed them.

I turned on some music at a low level so I could hear the notification that someone was here and went over some past and current jobs.

I thought back to the text about being on the site early this week, which I noticed on Monday. Jackson oversaw his own schedule and regularly left on Mondays, so that's what I booked. If we were communicating normally, that might not have happened, but it was so tough right now.

Hopefully, he worked it all out and would come home in a good mood in a couple of days. I know Aaron wanted them to go out for drinks and mentioned dinner before, but I hoped I didn't have to go.

I needed space.

I paused for a break a few hours in, messaging Tasha since she was awake now. I couldn't wait for the day to end because we'd planned to go to a barbeque place in the next town for dinner.

I heard the notification sound and sent her something quickly before standing up and peering out of my office to the front desk.

Jackson walked around towards me, and my mouth fell open. He wasn't due back for a couple of days.

"What are you doing here? Is everything okay?" I asked, immediately thinking the worst.

"Since I got there early and finished, why not? I also wanted to talk to you," he told me, and I frowned. He kept coming, so I backed into my office and around to my seat.

"What's with the mood?" I asked, frowning up at him. "You didn't specify when you wanted me to book the room, and you always leave first thing in the week."

"What I wanted was for you to be there with me." His voice rose, and I stared at him. "I hung out with the guys for dinner, Lila. I never fucking do that, but it's better than being in a room alone."

"Jackson, slow down. We talked about this, and it can't happen," I reminded him as he raked a hand through his hair. "You should do that more with your teams. It's good for the relationship."

"That's not the point, Lila. I did it so I wouldn't have to be alone, and that's never been an issue for me. What are you doing to me?" he asked, and I jerked back.

"There are so many reasons this can't happen, and we've been over it. I can't believe you came home to say this to me," I shot back, glaring at him. "Just let it go, Jackson. Think about who this could hurt and how. Aaron is your best friend. He's like a brother to you and would never support this. Ever. Are you willing to risk that for something that might not even last? I don't want to lose my brother."

"I just need to be with you, Lila. We can keep hiding it, but I need you. I am addicted to you." His eyes burned through me, and I scooted my chair

back against the wall.

“Give me some space, Jackson,” I warned him, and he slowly turned and walked into his office.

This was crazy, and I couldn’t believe he came back.

I watched as he made some coffee and sat at his computer, alternating between working and staring at me. It was unnerving, and I was jittery all day. Why I made another cup of coffee was beyond me, but it kept me going through the day.

If this is how it was going to be, then I needed to figure something out. This space was too small for this kind of tension.

I wanted Jackson as much as he seemed to want me. That was the problem because I wanted to keep hiding this and taking any stolen moments we could get.

We were going to get caught if we kept pushing it in a town this small. Aaron knew so much about Jackson’s personal life from stories, whether they were true. Someone would see us or worse—it would be my brother.

I took a deep breath, then another.

“Look, Jackson. My best friend from college is visiting right now for two more days. I am going to focus on Tasha and spend as much time as I can with her. Reel it in for that time and think this through. This could come from somewhere inside, and you’ll change your mind,” I said, and he stared at me in disbelief. “Please.”

“Fine. If you want to take off early today to do something with her, I’m here to cover you,” Jackson offered, and I tilted my head in surprise. “You’ve done a good job here, I’m sure. You deserve to have some fun, and the sooner she’s gone, the faster we can work this out.”

“Really?” I asked, and he nodded. “Aaron wants to have drinks with you, too. Don’t stay all night.”

I didn’t leave until after lunch, since Tasha woke up slowly, and told Jackson I’d see him in the morning.

Tasha ate breakfast, and while I skipped lunch, I waited until the late afternoon to hop into the car and go to dinner.

“Tell me everything,” she ordered once we were alone and could talk instead of message.

“He came into the office two days early, all aggressive today, and barking about needing me or something,” I told her as I drove to the freeway. “He can’t wait for you to leave.”

“I’m insulted. I haven’t even met the man though I want to more now. This new side of Jackson sounds all alpha and sexy,” Tasha teased me, and I groaned in response.

“More like crazy. Nothing has changed to make us more acceptable to anyone. I don’t know what he’s thinking.” I stared forward, thinking of the intense expression on his face when he looked at me. Those eyes, too. Jackson’s brown eyes were so deep and sexy when he wanted something.

“What’s the actual issue with you dating? I am a little confused. You’re adults,” Tasha pointed out, and I nodded.

“That’s true. It’s just that he’s been best friends with my brother since they were really young, and with that comes an agreement not to touch the sisters or an ex. Add that to Aaron’s unnerving protectiveness over me with a splash of Jackson’s past with women, and it’s a bad chemistry experiment.” I sighed. “I’m not thrilled with the past issue either, but he’s older; he’s had more time on this Earth. It’s just such a small town, and everyone knows everything.”

“You two should get together and come to Colorado, where the population is bigger. Nobody cares about anything that’s not a part of their life,” Tasha said, and I considered it for a moment.

“That sounds nice, but we’re both rooted in Cold Creek.” I looked ahead to see the exit as my stomach growled. “I’m so hungry.”

“Me, too. You’ve been boasting about this place for years,” Tasha agreed, making me laugh.

I saw Alexa with her friends when they seated us at a table facing the whole dining room. Jackson’s ex was a beautiful woman, and I wondered if they really hadn’t hooked up once or twice in the last month.

She laughed at something one of her friends said to her, and I blinked, forcing my attention to Tasha.

“What? Who is over there?” she asked me, turning her head.

“Jackson’s ex. She’s been after him since she got back into town, and I can’t help but wonder if something happened between them.” I sighed. “She’s wearing the red shirt in the group of five women.”

“She’s pretty. I’ll give you that, but he said nothing’s happened. Some breakups stay that way for whatever reason. He’d be with her if he wanted to,” Tasha assured me, looking into my eyes.

We focused on the menu and ordered a meal to share that offered some different meats. I wanted Tasha to try as much as she could and still be able to walk out to the car. I told her to order a drink, since I drove.

Looking at Alexa over Tasha’s shoulder made me want to get a drink.

Everything was delicious, as always. We ate until we couldn’t take another bite, passing on their amazing banana cream pie with deep regret.

“I am never eating again, but that was incredible,” Tasha said, leaning back. “I don’t know what I liked the best.”

“Nobody does,” I assured her and looked around the room. It was full of voices and laughter since this was a family restaurant and, apart from Alexa, I appreciated everyone here.

We left, and Alexa saw me walking by, waving me over.

“Lila. Hi!” she greeted me with a smile, and I forced one to my face.

“Hi, Alexa. How are you?”

“Great. Don’t you love this place?” she asked me, and I nodded, making the introductions between Tasha and Alexa, which led to a group introduction.

Joy. I never hung out with those girls and wouldn’t remember their names.

During the conversation, Alexa looked down at her phone.

“Jackson and Aaron are at the bar down the street. We should go for a drink,” she told one of the girls with a mischievous smile as anger flooded my veins.

I had to stop myself from telling her no, and instead, we said our goodbyes and walked to the car.

“See what I mean?” I asked Tasha once we were inside.

“I do, but that doesn’t work on men.” I stared at her. “It doesn’t. They want something or they don’t.” Tasha looked at me. “He’s thirty-two, not a frat boy in college.”

“My brother is that age and still a pig,” I assured her, making Tasha laugh.

“Aaron is charming, and he knows it. I don’t think he’s begging a woman to be his right now, though.”

“You have that right,” I agreed and watched her smile.

“Where is this bar?” Tasha asked me, and I stared at her. “Your friend from out of town wants a drink.”

“Are you serious?” I asked her, and she nodded.

“Let’s just see what goes down. You have every right to be there, too.”

I knew which bar everyone was at and drove there, parking in the back as I looked over a few familiar vehicles. I stared at Tasha again as she glossed her lips and fluffed her hair.

“Let’s go.”

SEVENTEEN

JACKSON

I DIDN'T TOUCH LILA at all at the office before she left for the day, although I wanted to. I'd give her this time with her friend, knowing they'd be talking about me. From what Aaron said, Tasha was a no-nonsense girl, and maybe she'd send Lila in the right direction.

Unfortunately, we ended up going to the same area the girls were in for drinks, so Aaron could hook up with a local there. I took my car and didn't plan to drink much before I learned that Alexa and her friends were having dinner at the same restaurant as Lila and Tasha.

She wanted to come and meet us for drinks. Alexa still reached out more than I wanted her to, and when I mentioned it to Aaron, his face lit up at the mention of one girl she was with.

"Game on," he said, and I stared at him. He knew nothing about Lila, and it had to stay that way.

"Fine," I told Alexa to join us after dinner and considered nursing a beer for the night. I could also do some shots and get a ride home, returning tomorrow to get my car.

Instead, I nursed that beer and left early. Aaron was working on her friend, and I told everyone I needed to get home and get some rest. Alexa pouted, but it did nothing for me. I walked out to the truck.

I didn't like that she had spoken to Lila at the restaurant and wondered what Alexa led her to believe. I knew her too well.

When I got home, I drank some whiskey and tried to make a plan for the future. I knew I couldn't stay away from Lila, and I hoped she felt the same way.

Aaron told me how he left with the local girl that night in more detail than I needed to hear, but that's who he was. I congratulated him and held in all of my thoughts about his sister.

I couldn't wait until Monday and dressed to impress Lila. She liked a certain pair of slacks I wore to the office, and I mixed them with a deep green button-up shirt that brought out my eyes. There was no real reason to dress up for work since a lot of business was done over the phone, but I needed to make her sweat.

I would do this every day to tease her.

Lila took one look at me when I walked in, and I could see her silent groan all over her face. I also saw annoyance and plastered a grin on my face.

"Did you have a good time with Tasha? Aaron really seemed to like her," I asked, and she stared at me.

"It was great seeing her again. Did you have fun on Friday night?" I heard the tone in her voice and knew that Alexa hinted at something.

"I left the bar earlier than anyone else—alone—Lila. I don't know what she put into your head, but I don't want Alexa. I want you," I spoke firmly and slowly, hoping she'd hear me this time.

“How is that supposed to work?” she asked me, and I looked down the hall before walking into her office. Her shoulders slumped, and she sighed. “I know you left early. We were at the bar, but I made Tasha promise not to talk to all of you.”

“We start like this.” I make my way around her desk and lean in to kiss her gently. The electricity was palpable, and I cupped her cheek, moving closer. “You should have come to say hi. I missed you.”

This is all I want. Alexa can fuck off with her efforts.

I pulled away, and Lila stared at me before touching her lips.

“Tell me you don’t miss that,” I challenged her, and she sighed.

“You know I do,” Lila confessed, narrowing her eyes.

It took her a day to cave, but by the middle of the week, we were sharing lunches in my office and running over time, kissing as much as we could.

It was too risky to see each other every day, so we fit in as much as we could at work. The quickies we shared after I locked the front door a few times were not enough for us, and I found a trip to schedule immediately. She agreed, booking the nicest hotel in the larger city. We went with two adjoining rooms but knew we’d stay in just one of them.

We left at eight that Monday morning, in a rush to get through the three-hour drive. Aaron didn’t seem to be suspicious about Lila coming along this time, but he was caught up in his woman of the week.

Lila seemed tense beside me, and I reached for her hand.

“I know we shouldn’t be doing this, but I can’t wait to be in that bed with you as soon as we get there. We have to rush so much at the office, and the one time at your place, I checked the clock constantly,” she complained, squeezing back. “We need to figure this out, Jackson. We can’t sneak around forever.”

“I know,” I admitted quietly. “I just need this week with you.”

We arrived and checked in, barely making it to the room before I pressed Lila to the wall in a heated kiss. I was losing control with the limited contact we’d shared, and she kissed me back in the same way.

We stumbled across the room to the enormous bed, and she lifted her sweatshirt over her head, tossing it to the side. I stripped off everything while she finished, and then we fell back to the bed together.

I kissed her again before moving to her jaw. Lila dropped her head back, and I slid my hand down her body, cupping her breast.

“Need you,” I hissed, and she moaned in return. I stroked her hard nipple as my mouth watered but kept moving my mouth down her neck.

When I kissed between her breasts, I slid a hand between her legs and moaned at how ready she was for me. I touched her, sliding my fingers through her desire as she cried out my name.

As I took her nipple into my mouth, Lila arched against me, and I slid a finger inside of her. She was responsive and eager for me, and I sucked hard just how she liked it while she rocked into my hand.

I stroked my thumb over her clit, feeling her jerk harder and cry out my name. I knew she was close and increased the speed as I bit down on her, sending Lila into an intense orgasm.

She screamed my name as she tightened around my finger, flooding me with her heat. I extended the release as long as I could before kissing down her stomach, ending between her legs.

Lila glistened with desire, and I covered her with my mouth and tasted her the way I’d wanted to so many times. We had nowhere to be until tomorrow, and I wanted to spend every second we could in this bed.

I made her come two more times that way, relentless as she gripped my hair and cried out my name.

“It’s too much,” she groaned when I dropped beside her to catch my breath.

“Really? Want to stop then?” I teased Lila as she barked out a laugh.

She took some time to rest before crawling over my body and making her best effort to return the favor with her mouth, but I told her to get on her knees.

I sheathed myself with a condom, pumping into her just a few times before my release. God, it felt so fucking good.

We went at it all night and ordered room service for dinner.

Lila pulled on a robe when the food came, and we ate on the couch in the living area of the suite. It was late, and we were just too weak to keep going if we didn’t eat something.

“We need to sleep, Jackson. We’re going to a hotel build tomorrow.” She looked at me as she took a long drink of water.

“I wish we were here just for fun,” I groaned, and she smiled.

“I am going to pass out for a week if we keep at that pace,” Lila told me, reaching for a French fry. “That will make me useless.”

We finished eating and crawled into bed to make love one more time, not even bothering with the other room.

The alarm was a nuisance in the morning, and the normal enthusiasm to get to a site wasn’t there. We rose and showered after complaining about it for a few minutes, making love in there before dressing for the day.

Lila walked with me to the lobby for breakfast, and we sat apart from each other, establishing our professional relationship for the day.

The site was as good as any of the ones I visit, but I felt distracted and had to force myself to focus on work too many times that day. I sensed the guys noticed and blamed allergies, as I tried not to look at Lila across the building.

“I’ve heard good things about her,” their team lead told me, and I glanced at him. “Lila. All the guys really like her.”

“Yeah, she’s forming some good bonds,” I agreed, feeling a board that set apart a bathroom.

This was a longer build because of the size, so I’d probably visit more than once with Lila. And I didn’t mind at all.

After a long day, the guys asked us to dinner, and I shared a look with Lila.

“I have to get back and answer some emails and calls I missed being here. Thank you for the offer,” she told the team lead with a smile. “Go, Jackson. I can get to the hotel.” Her eyes pushed me to go, and I stared back at her for a moment.

“I’ll drop you there and meet you. Where are you thinking?” I asked and someone suggested a local bar that was supposed to serve amazing food. I agreed to meet them there in a bit, and Lila followed me to the truck.

“What are you doing?” I asked her in the cab, and she stared at me.

“Working. I did nothing last night when we got here, so I’m behind. Go with them and eat so I can get it done, and bring me a bacon cheeseburger and fries if they have it,” Lila hissed, and I jerked back. “We need to play this the right way for people, Jackson. We’ve already been thrown under the bus.”

Fuck. She was right.

“Okay. I’ll drop you off.” I pulled out of the lot and took her back to the hotel. “I’ll be back soon.”

“Take your time and enjoy yourself. Throw them off the scent if they seem to be suspicious.” There was logic in every suggestion, but I just wanted to carry her to the room.

“Fine,” I told her, and she smiled at me before slipping out of the truck. I took a deep breath and headed to the restaurant.

I brought her food back, and we spent a great night together.

All the efforts to play it off seemed to work at the end, but fate was against us. After a passionate, amazing week away, I had even more trouble keeping my hands off of Lila. Our lunches in the office got even longer when we’d start kissing on the couch, and we’d sneak them every chance we got.

One day, we’d just finished lunch but were still making out on the couch, unable to stop.

“What the fuck is going on here?” I froze when I heard Aaron’s angry voice, knowing this was the end. All the secrets were gone. “How long has this been going on behind my fucking back, Jackson?”

“Let’s just stay calm,” I said slowly, trying to think of a good way to calm my best friend down.

“We’re adults, Aaron. We can make choices for ourselves,” Lila chimed in, and I stared at her as she narrowed her eyes at me.

“We’ve been best friends forever, Jackson. There was one rule, and it was never to touch my little sister. Hell, I know you’ve hooked up with an ex of mine before, but I don’t fucking care. This is fucking bullshit,” Aaron growled, and I held Lila on the couch as I stood up to face him.

“It’s not what you think. I love her, Aaron,” I told him as Lila gasped, and his face turned red.

“What do you know about love? You’ve only hooked up with women just as much as I have. Alexa has been in love with you for years, and she couldn’t pin you down. What’s so different about this?” Aaron demanded, and I clenched my fists. “You’re a fucking liar. I asked you if something was going on, and you told me no. How long have you been doing this?”

“Sit down, and let’s talk about this,” I suggested, and he stunned me by slamming his fist into my face. It hurt, but more than that, it took me by surprise. The guy could throw a punch. “Fuck. We need to talk about this, Aaron.”

“Fuck both of you. He’s just going to rip your heart out like he has every other woman that wanted more from him, Lila. Have fun when you’re on the other end of this.” I sat down, holding my face as warm liquid poured over my mouth, and Aaron walked to the door, cursing.

Lila looked at me and then grabbed a box of tissues from my desk. She bunched some together and held them out.

“Apply pressure to your nose. Is it broken?” she asked me as tears slid down her cheeks.

“I don’t think so,” I mumbled, playing back everything in my head. I held the stack against my nose and waited for the blood to stop. “Is he going to hold this against us forever?”

“No. He can’t because we’re all too close. He just overreacted,” Lila assured me, wiping her eyes.

There was doubt all over her face.

EIGHTEEN

LILA

I WAS NUMB FOR the rest of the day. We pretended we got work done, but all I did was cry about my brother and watch Jackson's face bruise from the punch.

They'd never fought, at least not that I knew of. I'd never completely understood my brother's protective nature over me above being my big brother. I was young and assumed it had to do with it being a small town and knowing everyone.

Was there more?

There was also the elephant in the room I needed to think about.

Jackson loved me. He'd never told me that, so it shocked me. But I didn't know if he was trying to justify this to Aaron. I was too scared to ask, but I knew I loved him.

I texted Tasha about what had happened an hour after the event, and she was just as surprised as *me*.

T: Aaron punched him?

L: Just once. I think he did it before thinking it through since he left right after. I don't know what to do.

T: Jackson really said he loves you? What did you say?

L: Nothing. I'm scared to know the truth because I'm head over heels in love with him. Something changed between us this time.

At the end of the day, we both stood and looked at each other.

"I know we can probably go to my house now that everything is out in the open, but I just need some time, Lila. Is that okay?" Jackson asked me, and there was sadness in his eyes.

"I understand. It was a big day." My heart broke at the flashes of the argument, and I blinked them away. "Call me if you need me."

"I will." He walked me to my car, staring into my eyes. "I meant it, Lila. What I said. I just need a minute."

I nodded and got into my car, starting the engine. Mom probably already knew about this, and I just went home, needing the peace she brought me.

When I walked through the front door, I listened and only heard someone in the kitchen. I set my purse down in my room and went to the kitchen to see Mom starting something in the large air fryer.

"You heard?" I asked, and she nodded as she offered me a sympathetic smile.

"Aaron called. He's not doing well, Lila."

"I know. I feel bad, Mom, but he went crazy. Aaron punched Jackson," I told her, feeling like a toddler telling on her sibling.

"He overreacted. I agree there, but you're his everything. And Jackson is his best friend," Mom told me, and I nodded.

"Is there more to it?" I asked, and she sighed. "Something I don't remember?"

"There was a love triangle back in high school between the boys and an awful girl. She played them against each other and walked away, leaving

their friendship broken. You were young, and we didn't share it with you. I think they made a pact after that to keep women and their friendship separate. I'm not completely sure, but this is a big deal," Mom explained, and my face dropped. "Plus, there's the fact Aaron has always been so protective of you."

"Yeah. That's all I thought it was."

"Do you love him?" Mom asked me, and I looked into her eyes. "You do."

"Is Dad here?" I asked, and Mom tilted her head at me.

"Not yet."

She got us some iced tea, and we sat at the table where I told her what happened between me and Jackson before I went to college. From there, I told her how I never got over him, and things just seemed to happen when I started working for him.

"The trips were more than work then. The call that Aaron got was spot on?" she pressed, and I nodded. "I don't hold any bad feelings for Jackson. He's a good man, but I am not sure about him in a committed relationship. Neither him nor Aaron have ever been in that place in life." She shook her head, and I knew her thoughts about that. "I don't want to see you get hurt."

"I know," I told her, staring at the table. "What do I do?"

"I wish I knew the answer to that." I looked at Mom. "Give Aaron some space and don't flaunt this in front of him. Word about the fight is already spreading through town because your brother is emotional, so it might be a good idea to lie low."

"Of course." A small part of me felt a thrill that we weren't secret anymore, but the bigger part missed my brother and the relationship I shared with him and Jackson.

I helped her with ribs for dinner, finishing the roasted vegetables and setting the table. Dad arrived home, and, with one look, I knew he'd heard what happened.

I couldn't eat and just washed my plate and went to my room. Changing into pajamas, I crawled under the covers and called Tasha. She listened to everything I had to say, even if it was just a rush of words and emotions.

"Have some faith. Give this time and things might work out," she suggested, and I repeated her words in my head.

"I hope so."

I knew my town and the people and stayed home all weekend. A few old friends reached out to me to ask questions, but I told them I didn't want to talk about it. I didn't shower and leave again until Monday morning since I still had a job, but everything felt different there.

Jackson sat quietly in his office, working at the computer. His face looked better, but this was still eating away at him.

"I need to go to a site next week. Do you want to go?" Jackson asked me from his office just before lunch.

"Should I?"

"We still work together, and you do a good job." His eyes suggested it might give us some time alone to sort this out as the thought crossed my mind. "I have to think about the company, and right now, you're a good worker."

I asked him where, and he told me. I booked two rooms just in case we wanted some distance.

Things hadn't changed by the time we left, and it was a quiet two-hour drive. I wanted Aaron to call, and although Jackson and I both reached out to him, he avoided us. Aaron still called our parents but avoided the house.

Leaving was a relief in some ways, and I looked over at the town as we got on the freeway. Was I wrong to come back here?

The hotel was a step down from the last one, and I knew this was a different trip. The rooms I booked were on the same floor but not connected this time. I handed Jackson the key as we reached the first one.

“You’re not next door?” he asked me, and I shook my head, wondering if I forgot to send him the reservation. “It’s been a shit week, Lila. I don’t want to be alone here.”

I frowned at him.

“There’s no reason to stay apart now. I still prefer the teams not know, but the chances of that happening are slim. Can we just act professional at the site?” Jackson’s eyes pleaded with me, and I sighed.

“Fine, but it’s there if we need it,” I agreed, and he unlocked the door, opening it for me.

We spent time together that week and made love in his bed, but the distance grew between us. The way the guys looked at us suggested they knew everything, and it sent Jackson into an awful mood. I spent the last night in my room, picking at my fast food dinner and thinking about everything.

Forbidden relationships usually ended once revealed. Would that be us too?

I understood Jackson and what he was going through. We’d known each other since I was little, and he was honest about what mattered to him.

Right now, I didn’t feel like it was me, and I considered this being the end of us. I loved him, but I couldn’t make this work on my own.

Was it a coincidence that I’d gotten an email about a job that weekend? I didn’t know. It was in Colorado, so I’d have to move. But it didn’t feel like

the worst thing right now. The pay was good, and the benefits were a perk. I'd have to rent a place though. It was a town away from where Tasha lived, so maybe we could work something out.

I wouldn't be moving to a place I didn't know or one I'd hate. Colorado was a beautiful place, and I'd been happy there when I went to college.

Could I make another new start there?

I made a point of calling my brother and talking to him. We needed to clear the air no matter what I decided, and my family meant everything to me.

Mom fixed lunch and left us alone to talk, disappearing into her craft room.

Aaron added some mustard to his sandwich, his jaw set.

"Why Jackson?" he asked me, finally meeting my gaze.

"Well, I am going to put everything out there, so you know. I was with him before I went to college, Aaron. Just once," I told him, and he narrowed his eyes at me.

"You were a kid, Lila." His voice filled with disgust, and I shook my head.

"I graduated high school, and I was on the way to starting my adult life. He wasn't even the first, but that doesn't matter. I felt something then and when I came back to town," I explained, and Aaron shook his head.

"I told you to work there. Is this my fault?" I watched as he took a bite of the sandwich.

"No. It might have happened on its own. Some things do." I shrugged and picked up a chip. "I love that you want to put me in a bubble and protect me, Aaron. You're the greatest brother, but you need to let me grow up."

“I don’t want to. You’ll get hurt, Lila.” Our eyes locked, and he let his shoulders slump forward. “I’m too late for that, aren’t I?”

“Life just hurts sometimes,” I assured him, knowing it was true. The pain related to Jackson was intense and hard to work through, but time healed all wounds.

“Did he hurt you like I thought he would?” Aaron pressed, and I looked down.

“I think we’re drifting apart. You need to talk to him, too. You have been best friends for so long, and he needs you.” I focused on them, and Aaron frowned. “I am more concerned about that right now.”

“He said he loves you. Is that how you feel about him?” Aaron asked, and I closed my eyes.

“Everything is crazy right now. I don’t know, Aaron.” I met his eyes and nodded. “Talk to him.”

We talked more through the meal, and I felt good about us when he left, giving my brother a hug. He and Jackson could talk this out and be okay, especially if they’d already been through hard times as Mom suggested.

I went to my room with a lot less on my shoulders and sat down on the bed. That solved one problem, and now I needed Tasha to talk me through another one.

“Hey, girl. How are you?” she asked when she answered, and I smiled.

“Well, I talked to my brother, and things are better there. Jackson is a mess, and I don’t know where that’s going. But I have options,” I told her, smiling.

“Options? Talk to me,” she said, and I leaned back against my pillows.

“I got a job offer in Colorado.”

NINETEEN

JACKSON

I GET THINGS WERE falling apart with Lila. I was a mess right now, knowing my best friend wasn't talking to me. And I couldn't walk through town without getting stared at or whispered about.

This is an enormous scandal for Cold Creek and probably one of the bigger ones over the years. Everyone knew how much Aaron protected his sister, and the thought of me dragging Lila down was shocking.

I didn't, though. Did I? She was there and willing the entire way. Lila isn't a little girl another person can influence into anything they wanted. She had her own mind.

I knew it was bad when Alexa wouldn't even make eye contact with me in the diner, and I just went home.

When I pulled into my driveway, Aaron's car was there. It had been a week, and I opened the garage, pulling in. I looked in the rearview mirror to see my best friend sitting in his car, surprised he didn't just go into the house.

I watched him get out of the car and did the same, meeting him in the driveway.

“You came,” I said, and Aaron nodded, looking at me.

“You look like shit,” he told me, and I barked out a laugh.

“You think?” I sobered, slumping my shoulders. “It’s been a bad week.”

“Yeah. I thought it was time to talk, and Lila told me as much when we had lunch,” he said, and I stared at him.

“You talked to her?”

“Yeah, and she stood right up to me. Told me she’s a big girl as much as I didn’t want to hear it, and I know she’s right.” We walked through the garage into the house carefully, and I thought he might turn around any time. “Still, Jackson. She’s my sister and against the rules, both times.”

She must have told him about the hookup.

“I know that, and I tried to stay away when she came back. I swear I did, but there was still something there between us. She’s twenty-four, Aaron. She can do what she wants, and I was so happy she wanted to be with me. It’s a lot more than you probably think.” I looked at him.

“You love her?” he asked me, and I sat for a second.

“I do, but she’s pulled away. Not that I can blame her with the way I’ve been acting,” I admitted, and Aaron nodded. I shook my head. “I just need to know that we’re good now. That shit back in high school almost destroyed us, Aaron. I don’t want that to happen again. You’re my brother.”

“I know. I needed some space, but this won’t destroy us.” Aaron nodded, looking at me. “I need to let Lila go.”

We might both need to do that, but I focused on stepping forward and hugging Aaron. It felt good having him back in my life, and I’d push myself through the rest of it.

We had some beers and watched a game, and I felt lucky to have him here.

The next week, Lila was at the office, but she seemed off to me. The work got done, but she was quiet unless she needed to discuss something related to business.

I told her things were good with Aaron, and she smiled, telling me that's the way it needed to be.

"What about us?" I asked, and Lila looked down.

"I think we need a break. Things got so crazy and out of control, and seeing my brother get so angry at you changed me." She blinked and looked into my eyes.

"I love you, Lila." She nodded after I told her.

"I love you, but I don't think this will work. We need to back off," Lila told me, and I frowned at her.

"You're going to keep working here?"

"For the time being." Lila went pale, and it scared me. "I will not leave you high and dry, and I enjoy the bones of the job, Jackson. Everything will get better with time."

She worked but didn't laugh and smile like I wanted her to. Lila kept to herself and seemed to text a lot, more than likely with Tasha. Lila stayed out of town, since the rumors were still going.

Small towns were awful with gossip and made me reconsider living here at all. They had never hurt me this way or made me see someone else hurt this way.

It was the next weekend that I met Aaron for drinks, trying to rise above the gossip. This was my town, and I wouldn't hide from people.

"Did she tell you?" Aaron asked me, and I stared at him. "Lila?"

"She's barely speaking to me," I replied, and he frowned.

“Lila got a job offer she’s thinking about taking. I figured you’d know since you’re her boss.” Aaron sobered. “It’s back in Colorado.”

“Lila is moving?” I asked, sitting up straight. My voice rose, and the room quieted as people stared at me. Needing some space was one thing, but moving out of state was different. She’d be gone again, and there was an ache in my chest as I sucked in my breath.

“Thinking about it, at least,” he said, glancing around. “Maybe she’s not going, and that’s why she hasn’t told you. That’s good.”

“Yeah. Maybe,” I agreed, looking down.

Lila leaving the first time played through my head, and I remembered how much it hurt. I couldn’t see it happen a second time.

“Are you okay?” Aaron asked me, and I looked at him, wondering if I should tell him what I was thinking.

“She’s leaving,” I repeated, and Aaron gazed at me before smiling.

“Is she?” He remained quiet for a moment. “If you love her like you say you do, step in and do something about this.”

“Yeah?” I asked softly, and he nodded.

“I just got her back, and I don’t want her to leave again. You will protect her as much as I would, and I have thought a lot about this, Jackson.” Aaron sipped his beer. “You haven’t flirted with a woman in a while, and I suspect it’s been since you were with Lila. You even pushed Alexa away and that girl will do anything for you. I have watched you change without realizing it, and I believe you. If you want to be with Lila, go get her.”

“I want to be with her.” I stared at him to see if he meant it. “I am going to go talk to her.”

“I’m going to hang back and give you kids some room.” Aaron looked behind me, and I knew there was a woman he wanted to talk to. “I’m good

here.”

“Will you ever change?” I asked as I stood up and he shrugged.

“Not sure.”

I shook my head and walked out to my truck, starting the engine as I thought about what to say to Lila. It felt weird to have and need Aaron’s blessing, but that meant a lot to me. I glanced at the bar, seeing Alexa standing near the door and watching me.

I pulled out of the parking lot and drove to the house, parking as I noticed Lila’s car in the driveway. I walked to the door and knocked, listening for footsteps.

“Jackson?” Lila asked, frowning at me. She wore denim shorts and a loose T-shirt, looking beautiful. “What are you doing here?”

“You’re not leaving,” I said, and her skin paled. “Not again, Lila.”

“Aaron told you?”

“Yes, just now. You’re not just leaving the state with things like this between us. We need to talk,” I told her, looking around. “Let’s take a walk.”

I took her hand, and she stared at me for a second before closing her door. We walked down the side of the hill and into the trees, and I took a deep breath.

“I love you, Lila. It’s the first time I’ve loved a woman, and that includes Alexa. I’ve never wanted someone in my life so much before you.” I squeezed her hand and looked at her.

“Does my brother know that?”

“He gave me his blessing. I never thought I’d see the day.” I shook my head, and she laughed. “We work together, and you help me with that

business so much, Lila. I can't imagine running it without you, and if you'll stay, we'll work something out. I just know I love you."

I felt and probably sounded like a guy in high school with his first girlfriend. I paused and turned to face Lila, cupping her soft face with my hands.

"Stay with me, Lila. Let's give this a chance and try to make a life together. I'll take care of you." I leaned in to press my lips to hers, feeling her heat as she gasped. When I pulled away, her eyes were locked on mine.

"I might want to take care of you, Jackson," Lila said, her eyes strong as she reached out to wrap her arms around my neck, pushing my hands aside. Lila moved to kiss me, and I pulled her closer, tilting my head to deepen the kiss.

When we pulled apart to take a breath, Lila smiled.

"I turned down the job. For a long time, I talked about getting an apartment with Tasha and going. I didn't hate Colorado, you know." She looked at me. "I love Cold Creek even if everyone talks too fucking much. My family is here, and, more importantly, you're here. I love you, Jackson."

"I love you, Lila." I kissed her again, and she wrapped her body around mine as I held her tight, never wanting to let go.

Eventually, we made our way back to the house, and I looked at it. I spent so much time here growing up when Lila was just a kid, and now, she was my girlfriend.

"You'll still work with me?" I asked, and she nodded. "Take trips?"

"Oh, yeah. We're going to have to let the guys know the deal, and they have to respect it. I've had it with gossip." Lila laughed. "Even if I was the one who started it on purpose at some point."

“Want to go to dinner in town tomorrow and set everybody straight?” I asked her, and Lila smiled at me.

“An actual date?” she asked, and I nodded before kissing her again.

TWENTY

LILA

JACKSON TOOK ME TO dinner the next night, and we showed the town we were together. I didn't know where this might go, but I was over the whispers and the rumors.

We ate at the steakhouse and sat on the same side of the booth. With everything cleared between us, Jackson and I got along well. We were finally together for the world to see, or in this case, Cold Creek.

We went to his house after dinner, and I stayed the night there, knowing we weren't hiding from anyone. It was an incredible feeling to make love without worrying about who might come over. For the record, Aaron told us he'd call every time now. While he accepted us being together, the last thing he wanted to do was walk in on us.

I went back to the office with a smile on my face that Monday. We decided I'd be an assistant and ease into a partner over time and just keep dating. I felt like I was waiting for the other shoe to drop, but it was easier than I thought it would be.

We had dinner with Aaron during the week, and I loved seeing them back to normal. Jackson seemed so sad without Aaron in his life those few days;

the fight had broken his heart.

I wasn't sure if I could put it back together before, but now, Jackson was smiling again. He let his guard down with me and showed me and everyone in my family that he wanted to be in my life.

In two weeks, we left for another trip. I booked one room this time and smiled at him as I got into the truck.

The drive was three hours, and I held his hand for the drive, playing music and asking Jackson questions.

"Do you think your dad would like this?" I asked, gesturing between us.

"He would. He never knew you as an adult, not really. He liked your family a lot and considered Aaron a third son." Jackson went quiet for a moment. "I wish he was here to see this. The business going so well, and his son in a committed relationship. He'd be so happy."

"He does somewhere up there." I leaned in to kiss his cheek.

"That's what Mom tells me," Jackson murmured, and I gazed at him.

We pulled into Morton and checked into the hotel, and I looked around the fancy room.

"This is the best yet, I think," I told Jackson, turning to look at him.

"Only the best for my girl," he said with a smile, and I walked over to him. Jackson pulled me into his arms, kissing me so passionately it took my breath away.

We made up for the lost time between us there, making love all afternoon until we ordered dinner.

"So, we're going to tell them tomorrow," Jackson said as he grabbed his hamburger.

"We are," I agreed, and he nodded.

“We’re dating, but you’re also very much part of things, and they need to respect you.” Jackson sounded firm, and I smiled.

“Sounds good to me, but I worked hard to build a relationship with them. I want to take care of your teams while we get the projects done, and that’s why I visited the sites,” I assured him, leaning against the leather couch. “We can be in charge of them and get along with everyone at the same time. I love that you’re strict with them about safety and the right way to work, but it’s okay to have dinner with them after work. Just be one of them.”

“I guess my dad was that way, looking back. I always thought I needed to be harder since a lot of the guys are close in age to me.” Jackson shrugged with a smile.

“You don’t.” I reached for a fry, dipping it into ketchup.

“I love you.” Jackson gazed into my eyes.

“I love you,” I replied, smiling like a fool.

Not surprisingly, the team took the news well and didn’t seem at all surprised.

“You knew?” he asked them, looking around at the chuckling guys.

“It’s been obvious you were sweet on her for a while, boss,” the site manager told Jackson, grinning. “We also heard how well she works with everyone to make things so fair. I’m all for it.”

I laughed as the guys gathered around Jackson to clap him on the shoulder. They congratulated Jackson and then turned to do the same to me.

“Okay, guys. I appreciate it, but this is a professional site where we do it the same as we always have. Sound good?” Jackson asked, and they nodded with enthusiasm.

“This is the best job I’ve ever had. Are you kidding me?” one guy asked, and everyone laughed in agreement.

Things calmed down, and we looked around the apartment building that would be one of many once the project was finished. I got to know these guys just like the others, making notes about them as Jackson helped around the building.

He looked good working, and I let my gaze linger a bit too long, blushing when I got caught by one of the guys.

“He’s happy, Lila.” I smiled at the man. “He’s been lost since his dad passed away, and it’s nice to see that spark back. Keep it there.”

“I’ll try,” I promised and kept working.

It was an enjoyable week there, and Jackson took the crew to dinner on the last night, where we talked over the meal and a few drinks.

When we went back to the hotel, we showered together and crawled into bed. I rested on Jackson’s broad chest and closed my eyes peacefully.

“It was a good week,” I murmured, and he kissed my hair.

“It was. You’re an excellent partner, Lila.” Jackson chuckled. “I’ve been thinking while we were here, though. I enjoy going to sleep with you and waking up with you. It might be a lot working together, but I want you to move in with me.”

I froze, and my eyes popped open.

“What?” I asked, and he stroked my back.

“Everyone knows. I told them before we left.” Jackson smiled. “Aaron knows I’ll take good care of you. We have his stamp of approval.”

“It’s only been a few months since we got together. Are we ready for this?” I asked him, sitting up to look at him.

“We’re ready,” Jackson assured me, and I smiled at him, leaning in to kiss him.

When we got back, Mom helped me pack my things with a smile on her face. I left my furniture since Jackson had everything we needed and just packed what I brought home from college.

“At least you’re not leaving Cold Creek this time,” she told me, placing a folded shirt into my suitcase.

“That’s true,” I replied, adding some socks to another suitcase. “I’m just fifteen minutes away.” I smiled. “I’m moving in with Jackson. I can’t believe it.”

“He’s a good man, Lila. Jackson has more than proved that,” she told me, and we looked at each other. “Aaron even supports this wholly.” I laughed, knowing he did, but had trouble admitting that sometimes.

“Thank God,” I breathed, walking to my window to look out at the view.

Everything felt good, and I took a deep breath. I didn’t move and would live with the love of my life in hours. I had a future planned out, though it wasn’t at all what I expected.

Later that night, after dinner, I sat with Jackson outside on the deck, and we looked at the stars.

“I don’t have to leave tonight,” I told him, snuggling into him in the lounge chair.

“I know it,” he replied, and I smiled. “This is our life, baby.”

“I love our life,” I breathed, kissing his jaw. “I love you.”

“Love you right back,” Jackson murmured lazily, looking up at the sky with a smile on his face.

Afterword

I'm glad you enjoyed this book. It brings me great pleasure to bring you passion driven romance that'll bring you great JOY.

You'll also LOVE 'Billionaire's Second Chance' — Free book for you when you sign up for my newsletter.

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BLURB

Carter took my v-card and decided to break my heart. Now he wants me to marry him.

It's been fifteen years since he ghosted me.

Now he's back with an offer and all his gorgeous looks.

He wants me to play fiancée so that he can get his inheritance, and he'll pay me.

That sounds like fun, but so is slapping his perfectly chiseled face and walking away.

I don't. And now I'm forced to live with him in his penthouse suite.

We're stuck together playing house, and it's the happily-ever-after I've always dreamt of.

I'm sure he'll leave me heartbroken again.

Deep down, I'm terrified to fall in love.

I'm falling... but this deal will make sure my heart doesn't break.

Because a deal is a deal.

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