

A man with a beard and a woman with long blonde hair are embracing on a balcony. The man is wearing a light blue shirt and the woman is wearing a floral lace top. The background is a sunset sky with orange and purple hues.

Love, Canadian Style

CANADIAN

Whiskey

HALEY TRAVIS

CANADIAN WHISKY

LOVE, CANADIAN STYLE

HALEY TRAVIS

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Excerpt

Also by Haley Travis

CANADIANISMS:

Toque = wool knit cap, beanie

Loonie = the one dollar coin (it has a loon on it)

Toonie = the two dollar coin (with no loon, but it rhymes)

Serviette = paper napkin

Parkette = a tiny park, with trees and benches

Stompin' Tom Connors, aka Stompin' Tom = Canadian country music legend. At every hockey game in Canada, there are two songs played without fail: The national anthem and *The Hockey Song*.

Whisky = spelled without an E up north

Eh = an all purpose interjection/intensifier, added at the end of a sentence

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W *hatever can go wrong, will.*

Murphy's Law may as well be tattooed on my forehead. Does go wrong, has gone wrong before, and definitely will again. *Argh.*

I stare up into a thick bank of uninspiring, grungy clouds and hope as I always do that today will be better.

The past few weeks have been a slog of working on my grandparent's house and searching for jobs that don't involve working with people who already know me.

When my family moved away from the small town of Port Hope, they made a big point of telling anyone who would listen that it was beneath them, and they've always been big city people at heart. Pretty insulting to the folks who love it here.

Toronto was interesting enough for a few years, but I jumped at the chance to come back. However, it's proving difficult to find work when a rumor has spread that my parents and sister are raving assholes.

Okay, it's not a rumor.

At least everyone still loves Nana and PopPop. Once I tell people I'm living in their house, the stench of hatred toward my parents dissipates somewhat. But I think it would be a lot easier to find work with total strangers.

This is why I'm walking over to the new Carmichael's Distillery. It was known as Ray and Duke's for ages, but I

never went because I was too young to drink, and wasn't going to start with whisky.

Now that it's been purchased by some rich guy it sounds like they're expanding, and need to hire "a general assistant and creative person"...whatever that means. If I can score this job, I would be working incredibly close to the house, which would be great. I have moldings to patch and sand, walls and ceilings to repaint, and flooring to...well, *floor*...so I need both time and money.

My nicest boots make a clomping sound on the sidewalk as I take the long way around instead of cutting through the abandoned lot. Half a block down, I see a man jump out of a roofing truck and walk into an old house.

Perfect! I pull out my phone to take a photo of the name and number painted on the truck's door.

"Did he hit your car or something?"

I spin toward the gleaming black vehicle that somehow snuck up behind me with its low purr and understated European styling that whispers *expensive*.

Then I look into the striking brown eyes of the driver and nearly jump back. He's gorgeous. The kind of handsome that almost makes me nervous. Thick brown hair, cropped on the sides and longer on top to balance a short, tidy beard framing a rugged jawline. A casually elegant vibe, as if he isn't even aware of how gorgeous he is. His hand is draped on the steering wheel, displaying a flashy watch.

Is it too much to hope that today actually is the day that my luck finally turns around?

"Oh! No. I need a roofer, and he looked trustworthy."

The man looks at me as if I've just spoken an alien language filled with clicks and beeps. "You can't hire someone based on just their face. You'll check the online reviews, right?"

Something about his slightly fussy vibe makes me put on my best straight face. "Nah. I'm going to cross my fingers and

hope that he's an axe murderer. I figure we need some excitement around here."

He stares at me, unblinking. Then he laughs – a rich, deep chuckle that shakes his broad chest. It gets me thinking about how that chest under the perfectly fit gray shirt might look. There's a slight twinge in my lower belly. This older man is *sexy*. Wow, I've never had someone's appearance affect me like this.

"You." He stabs his finger in my direction, still grinning. "I'll be keeping an eye on you."

I want to ask if that's a threat or a promise, but another car is coming, so there's no time. Instead, he flashes me a huge smile and drives away.

And there it is: another low-key hit of Murphy's Law, yet again. I run into the most gorgeous guy I've ever seen, and he drives off without a second glance.

As I continue walking toward my job interview, I laugh out loud at the mere idea. With dark sunglasses and most of my hair hidden by a toque, no man is going to look at me today, even if they don't know that I'm "one of those snotty Mitchell people".

That's fine. The last thing I need right now is a guy in my life. All I need is a new roof. Okay, and some updated plumbing. But first I need a job to get some money together to pay for all that, not to mention food.

I have no idea how much it costs to keep my grandparents in Shady River Seniors Home, probably a lot, but they absolutely adore it there. Nana needs physiotherapy every day, and PopPop is a complete social butterfly, who loves being a five-minute walk from dozens of friends. Apparently he's the pool shark of the place already. I can just picture him in his worn gray cap, shaking the other little old men down for a loonie or toonie a game.

Maybe I should buy a lottery ticket. If I won, I could buy the house from them. It's the only place I've felt truly at home.

Rounding a corner, I look up to see the modern new sign of Carmichael's Distillery.

I've never gone up the long driveway before. When I was tiny, Nana told me there was a guard dog on the property, and that I should stay away. Now that I think of it, I bet she just didn't want me to go exploring for fear I'd get into trouble.

Marching up to the glass front door, I pause just long enough to jam my sunglasses and toque in my bag and fluff my hair with my fingers.

A bell tinkles gently as I walk inside to the long front counter in the lobby. There are several stacks of wooden whisky boxes on either side. It's very quiet, other than a slight mechanical hum coming from the back. A voice calls out, "Coming!"

A man in his late fifties or early sixties comes out and shakes my hand warmly. He's definitely familiar – I've seen him around town. "You must be Matilda?"

"Tilly's fine."

He waves us over to a small bistro table in what seems to be a tasting area. "Ray Thompson. I've run the place for years, but with the expansion it's time for a bit of help."

I nod, smiling, hoping I look appropriately helpful.

Ray looks back over his shoulder, then leans in to lower his voice. "I know you're from around here, so you might already know the story. When my brother Duke passed, I couldn't quite run this place by myself, plus I had to update a bunch of equipment. This Carmichael guy bought me out."

"So you're still doing the actual distilling, but he's taken over the business side?" I murmur quietly. Clearly this Carmichael person is here right now.

"Yeah." He tugs at the neck of a faded t-shirt with the 'Ray and Duke's Old Tyme Whisky' logo. "He keeps talking about a massive expansion, but we just don't have the room. You see how the road and the Ganny box in this area."

He's right. The way the edge of the Ganaraska River twists, it separates some areas awkwardly and has created a mishmash of small properties.

"So you need an assistant to keep things steady? I'm a hard worker. Cleaning, and um...doing whatever it takes to distill things."

"It's a lot of busy work, and I can show you exactly what to do." Ray smiles warmly. "I saw your résumé. Art, marketing, English lit? That's good." He looks over his shoulder again. "Derek keeps saying he wants some fresh creative blood in here."

"Your listing mentioned 'creative brainstorming'."

He chuckles. "The thing is—"

"Well, hello again."

I turn toward the dark-haired man striding toward us. *It's that guy.* I didn't notice it earlier when he was sitting in his fancy car, but he's very tall. At least six foot three. Which gives me that warm, tingly feeling all over again.

It's hard to read his smile. I stand as he shakes my hand. "Derek Carmichael."

He's so...solid. Confident. A jumble of words fills my mind, but unfortunately none of them is my own name. Thankfully, Ray rescues me. "This is Tilly Mitchell. I think she'd be perfect for the assistant job."

"Great. You're hired." His smile is dazzling. "Did Ray explain that we need a creative mind around here?"

"I think he was just getting to that."

Derek waves his hand around the lobby area. "Well, let's put you on the spot right now. We ship a ton of whisky to bars and distributors, but we want more individuals dropping in. I think if we create that personal connection, they'll be more likely to tell their friends and spread the word."

He waves to the north, and I can't help but notice his well-sculpted arm. "With the highway right there, tons of people are passing by on their way from Toronto to Kingston or Ottawa.

They can easily take a half hour stop to do some shopping for something special. We just need to make them stop.”

I walk away as if to survey the space, but really I need a little distance from his huge, muscular body in order to think straight. Did he really just hand me the job? Or do I have to prove myself right now and turn out some creative ideas immediately? Luckily, I’ve always been excellent at thinking on my feet.

“People off the highway...” I trail off, looking out the huge front window and at the parking lot. “There’s plenty of room out front to put a patio, almost like a parkette. Add some plants and things to make the entrance look more welcoming. I’d put photos of that on your website. And you’d need to be doing tastings – though if you’re hoping to attract drivers, there will have to be snacks and water, and you’ll have to keep the whisky samples really small.”

I turn to survey the big wooden wall beside the front door displaying a shirt and a ball cap with the old logo. “If you want people to tell their friends, you definitely need new t-shirts. People ask about the shirt, and it starts the conversation.”

Ray smiles and Derek nods. “I was just about to order t-shirts with the new logo.”

My head shakes. “People don’t want to just wear a logo. They want a cute phrase. Something quirky that tells the world they’re interesting. Like... ‘I survived all five Carmichael whiskies’. Or... ‘Wannabe professional whisky taster’.”

Ray laughs. “I’d wear that to the pub.”

I grin. “‘Modern spirits, the old-fangled way’.”

Derek’s head cocks to the side. “Old-fangled?”

“Hey, if there is a new-fangled, there can be an old-fangled.” I barely suppress my laugh at the confused look on his face. “Everyone loves booze t-shirts, and lots of people love t-shirts with odd sayings. You just have a small, tasteful version of your logo at the very bottom, or on the back.”

Derek turns to see that Ray is jotting down my ideas. “Old-fangled,” the older man mutters. “Love it.”

A timer goes off in the back. “I’ve got it,” Ray says. “It’s the bottle sterilizer.”

I watch him shuffle off, and when I turn back, Derek has stepped in front of me. My chin tips up to look into sharp brown eyes that seem to be studying my every eyelash and freckle.

“You’re perfect.” His voice is a thick rasp. “How did you just appear here?”

It’s suddenly very difficult to breathe. “Because I needed a job.”

He smiles, which lights up his eyes. “You’d really want to work here? Be here every day?”

“Yes.”

He holds out his hand again. “Welcome to the team.”

“Thanks.”

He doesn’t release my hand, holding it gently for a long time while staring deeply into my eyes before suddenly letting go.

Several thoughts crowd through my mind at once. First, someone appreciates my abstract, creative mind and slew of ideas. Second, this beautiful man seems completely taken by every single word I say.

And third, I’m already desperate to feel his touch again.

But I can’t throw myself into the arms of my new boss. I’ll just have to work here and ignore the physical sensation of being magnetically drawn to him, and the raw lust that fills me whenever our eyes meet.

Yep, Murphy’s Law strikes again.

When I saw the adorable girl out on the street earlier, I was reminded that it's been years since I've been attracted to a woman. There was something about the curved lines of her body that just drove me wild. But I thought I could come to work, chug a coffee, and shake it off.

Now that she's closer, and the hat and sunglasses aren't hiding her face, I can barely pull in air.

Tilly is the most beautiful, engaging, riveting woman I've ever seen.

I could get lost in her eyes for days. Such a soft blue-gray, like a cloud in a classic painting. Caramel blonde waves of long hair surrounding her delicate face. The high cheekbones of a model, and her full, pouty lips make my heart throb with desire. Not to mention other body parts directly south.

How the hell am I supposed to concentrate on growing this business if I can barely remember my own name?

Focus, Carmichael. You've brokered twenty-million dollar deals without breaking a sweat. She's just one pretty girl. Get it together.

"Did you say something about a patio?" My voice is huskier than usual.

"Yeah." Tilly walks to the edge of the window and points. "This lobby area is huge. If you had a patio with potted plants, and lots of wood and greenery, it would look like an upscale

pub. Somewhere people would want to drop by after work. And then once they're here they'll probably buy something."

There's a gentle sweetness to her voice that I'm already addicted to. Yet it's the way she casually throws out ideas that really blows my mind.

"How do you do that?"

She looks up. "Do what?"

I realize I'm standing too close to her so I step back and smile, hoping that I'm putting her at ease. Every instinct is screaming for me to touch her, hold her. "Come up with ideas off the top of your head in a split second. I've been in meetings with highly paid creatives who always say they need days to produce anything."

Tilly rolls her eyes with a shrug. "I don't know. I've always been able to think up things, especially if there's nothing to lose. We're just tossing ideas around, right?"

She doesn't even know how incredible she is.

I've been working on various businesses since I was seventeen, but raw ideas are just not my thing. I prefer to build on other people's ideas. I add, I tinker, I improve and expand. Pulling things out of thin air is just not something I've ever been able to do.

Especially with this distillery. This is the first hands-on product-driven business that I've ever been interested in.

Usually I buy and sell companies, or pieces of companies, for a huge profit. I'd like to think it's not some kind of early midlife crisis, but I suddenly felt the urge to get away from all that, and actually build something.

My brother's sudden drastic "life event" also caused me to rethink a lot of things.

Tilly walks around the space, firing out ideas as I grab a notepad and pencil to jot them all down. T-shirts and whisky glasses with snappy sayings on them. "Whisky Wednesdays" tastings on the new patio. A social media series that explains how whisky is made, from grain to finished product. Instead of

numbering each small batch, giving it a name instead, like Fred or Ashley. I shoot her an unconvinced look at that last one.

“People name hurricanes because it’s easier to remember than a number,” she explains with an adorable grin. “It’s your company, so you can make up the rules, eh?”

I add it to the list. “I guess so.”

Her head tilts as she looks at me carefully. “No offense, but you’re obviously a corporate guy.”

“Investor and venture capitalist, yes.”

“Hmm.” She turns to examine the photos across the wall by the cash register. There are plenty of old photos of Ray and Duke with their first distillery equipment, followed by newer ones showing the addition of a few other buildings over the years.

She pauses on a recently added photo at the end. “You and your brother?”

“Yes.”

Tilly looks at me with those smoky eyes, and it feels like she sees right into my soul. “Did you lose him?”

“Almost.” I slump back into a chair, and she joins me at the table. “He had a rough fight with the big C for a couple of years, but he won the battle.”

She exhales with a puff, reaching out to pat my hand. “I’m so glad.”

“But it shook him up,” I continue. “He got rid of most of his worldly possessions, and took off on a global trip to figure out what he needs to make.”

“Make? You mean physical objects, like pottery or something?”

I shrug. “I honestly don’t know. He keeps checking in from countries all over, fascinated with their glass beadwork techniques, or hammock-making skills.”

She smiles, clearly holding back a laugh. Then her eyes grow wide. “So instead of just buying this business as an investment, you’re taking time to make it grow so that you’re making something as well.”

I chuckle, nodding. “I’m that transparent?”

“It just feels like a logical reaction. Especially if you’ve been locked in offices for years and have never done anything with your hands.” Her sweet grin is a ray of sunshine directly connected to my pulse. “Making things with your hands creates happiness and satisfaction. All kinds of studies are proving this now.”

“So why are you hiring a roofer instead of doing it yourself?” I tease.

Tilly’s pretty face scrunches into a scowl. “Hey. Safety first, mister.”

“You really want to work here with a distiller who knows what he’s doing and some corporate guy who’s just kind of on vacation from his real life for a while?”

She grins. “For sure. I love working with my hands.”

“All right, then.” I stand up. “Time for a tour and a tasting.”

Her perfect teeth settle into her bottom lip for a second. “You drink on the job?”

I tip my hand back and forth like a seesaw. “Not drinking. *Tasting*. Big difference.” Taking another look at her petite frame, I realize she’s probably a lightweight. “You didn’t drive here, though, right?”

“Oh, no. It’s a very short walk. I’ve just never had whisky.”

“Ray will show you how to take the tiniest sips while getting maximum flavor. You should know the entire product line.”

“What if I don’t like it?” Her eyes sparkle. “I’ll have to stand here and grin at customers as if I do.”

“Yes,” I nod very sternly. “I’m asking you to lie to strangers every single day. It’s very important that you tell them that whisky is the greatest thing in the world, and that they should buy twice as much as they think they’ll need.”

Her bright laughter rings out through the space, echoing off the wooden walls, and somehow I resist putting my arm around her as we walk down the hallway to the back.

It’s going to be a challenge to absorb all of Tilly’s bright ideas and incredible energy while somehow managing to keep my hands off her, even though I am drawn to her more than any other woman I’ve ever met.

I want her.

And I can’t help noting that up till now I’ve always gotten what I wanted.

Well, *damn*. I love whisky. Who knew?

It's difficult to pay attention to Ray's explanation of the woody flavors drawn from different sorts of barrels, and the aging process. Derek's deep, soulful eyes keep pulling my focus.

And it's not the several miniscule sips of whisky I've had on an empty stomach that is lighting me up on the inside. It's my new boss.

Ray sets a glass of water on the barrel in front of me. "Cleanser your palate."

"Thanks."

Sitting around a couple of overturned barrels right next to a huge steel vat, I stifle a laugh as I realize these folding chairs are a far cry from the sleek boardrooms where Derek is used to holding meetings.

I look around the industrial space. "People love this kind of stuff. Machinery. Feeling like an insider. Oh! You could book tours."

Ray throws Derek a look. "I thought of that. But people aren't going to come all the way here for just an hour-long tour."

"So you make a weekend of it." I notice that Derek is already writing things down as I speak. Is he my new secretary? Yikes. Maybe I am a bit tipsy after all. Not fair. The guys had a handful of half shots, and I only had sips.

“You could partner with other business owners in the area. A long weekend aimed at city folks wanting to get away from it all. They stay at a bed and breakfast, go sightseeing and hiking, take the whisky tour and tasting, have a fancy dinner. It would be beneficial for the whole town. The Chamber of Commerce would be all over it.”

Derek looks up from his notepad with a grin. Wow, does he have any idea how gorgeous he is when he smiles? “That’s a great idea.”

Ray nods. “We used to have an annual event for the regulars. Everyone had a blast.”

“Just the regulars around here?”

“Yes.”

I look along the row of stills. “You sell a whack of this stuff to distributors for bars and stuff, right? Invite them.”

Derek’s pen taps on the page. “Interesting. You think that would make them buy more?”

My hands spread across the top of the barrel. Whoa, the old wood is super smooth. “I do. If you make the distributors love you, they’ll push your product more to the people and places they’re...you know. Distributing to. If they sound knowledgeable, people will listen. So you give them free samples to make sure they’ve tried it.”

Leaning forward, I stage whisper to Derek, “People love free stuff. Even when they get buckets of it all the time. Make sure that your free stuff is the coolest, so they wear your shirts and talk to people about it.”

Both men laugh loud enough that I feel like I’ve scored a point, somehow. I take a sip of water, and Derek lifts the bottom of the glass with his fingertip to gently make me have more.

“Okay, I think that’s enough tasting for today,” Ray says. He seems amused. Maybe he’s happy to have an assistant.

“Right.” I jump to my feet too fast and the rest of my body needs an extra few seconds to catch up. “How do I assist? Tell

me my assisting ways and I'll get with the assisting right now."

Derek and Ray share a glance. "I have to run up to Eddie's to pick up some gear," Ray says. "But maybe Derek can show you around a bit more. Oh, and you can look at our website and tell us what you think. We'll start you with real work tomorrow."

"That's cool."

He claps my shoulder. "Great to have you here, Tilly."

Once he's gone, I notice a few drops of whisky left in my glass. As I'm reaching for it, Derek pushes it further away. "Next time we do a tasting you'll have food first, and half as much whisky."

"But—"

He holds up a finger. "You also just had a job interview, which cranks adrenaline and makes liquor hit you harder. Let's walk it off."

"Hold on." I take a few deep, slow breaths. "I really am fine. Amped up, but fine." I point to his glass with a full shot left. "Take that with us. You shouldn't just leave booze lying around."

His deep chuckle is ridiculously sexy.

As I follow him in a slow loop around the enormous space, I realize how amazing it is that he's committed to learning an entirely new industry. And that he knows so much already about different kinds of grains, fermentation, timing and aging. I love that he's so dedicated to being hands-on.

By the time we're back at the barrels and chairs, my head has completely cleared and I'm absorbing all of this new information like a sponge.

"You're into cars, aren't you?" I ask suddenly.

He blinks in surprise. "Yeah. Why?"

I wave toward the equipment. "Guys like gear. Especially when it's big and metallic. It's kind of hilarious."

He chuckles with me, then takes a small sip of his drink, catching me staring at his perfect lips against the edge of the glass. “What?”

“Ray said something about proper whisky glasses depositing the liquor on your tongue a certain way. I’ve read that about the different shapes of wine glasses, too. What about material? Would cups made of something other than glass change the flavor?”

“I don’t know.” Derek moves closer, as if drawn toward me.

I’m feeling the same pull. I would expect to feel like there is a wall between us, since he’s the boss who I’ve just met, plus he’s quite a bit older. But I don’t. There is a distinct magnetic pulse, as if our heartbeats want to be closer.

I can’t help leaning in, until Derek brings his whisky between us, almost like a shield. He wants to kiss me, I can feel it. I need it too. But he probably also wants to do the right thing as an employer.

“Ray said that wood affects the flavor of whisky, but you can’t sterilize wood, so that wouldn’t work for cups. What about stone?” I look up to see his eyes are blazing as my tongue darts across my lips. “Or metal?”

His pupils are huge. “You’re saying that drinking whisky from different surfaces might affect the flavor?”

“Yeah. That could be really interesting for tastings.” We both half lean against the wall at the same time, moving even closer. Derek’s gaze is riveted on my lips, and I tip them up, bringing our mouths closer.

“Should I test your theory right now?” he whispers huskily.

“Yes.” The word pops out too fast, making him smile.

His thumb dips into the glass, then he sets it down. Slowly dragging his thumb along the outside of my bottom lip, he murmurs, “Should I do a tasting now?”

My breath stutters as I part my lips to whisper, “Yeah.”

As the tip of his tongue touches the center of my lip, I'm almost successful in holding back a whimper. He moves slowly, tasting the few drops of liquid before settling his mouth against mine in a lazy, seductive kiss that makes the backs of my knees quiver.

His warm hands slide up my sides as I grip the back of his shoulders. The kiss deepens, our lips parting as we turn so that I'm against the wall, caged in by his huge, muscular frame. Everywhere he touches me leaves a tingling trail of desire.

"You're so gorgeous," he murmurs against my lips. "This is wrong, but I can't stop."

"Then don't," I moan against his mouth.

I'd only been kissed twice before, on first dates that were clearly not leading to a second. But even if I'd had a bit more experience, nothing would have prepared me for this. This kiss is so real, so all-encompassing, that I can already tell I need to give this man all of my firsts to ensure that they're done correctly.

Derek kisses me with his entire body, his arms lifting me and turning so that he can sit on a stool with me standing between his solid thighs. He doesn't just hold me; I'm cradled in his strong arms as a low, scraping growl echoes through his throat.

"Tell me to stop."

"No."

His mouth consumes mine for another full minute, hungry and frantic. Then he gently pushes us a few inches apart. "As your new boss, I order you to command me to stop."

Our eyes meet, then we both burst into laughter, arms still entwined. The urge to kiss him again is almost too much to fight.

His head perks up at the sound of the tinkling bell at the front door. "Let's get you trained on the cash register. We don't get many direct customers, but they're the ones who spread the word to local bars."

“Gotcha.”

Following him out front, I copy his big smile and helpful demeanor. When he rings through the purchase of three bottles for the middle-aged gentleman, I notice his slow, careful motions. I hold back a laugh. Fifty bucks says that Derek has only learned how to use the cash register in the past few weeks.

I take a step back and try to analyze him without noticing how ridiculously hot he is. Even though he’s just wearing black jeans and a gray button down shirt, they fit him a bit *too* perfectly, and are either custom-made or tailored. His haircut and work boots look extremely expensive. His car definitely cost a fortune.

And from the way he works the register so slowly, he’s never had to work retail in his life.

I step in and wrap one of the bottles in a paper bag, so that I can put all three of them together in another without the glass clinking. Before I push the bag toward the customer, I notice a big stack of Carmichael’s Distillery coasters under the counter. Dropping three of them into the bag before I roll down the top, I give the man a wink, and tilt my head toward Derek. “Coasters on the house. Just don’t tell the big boss.”

He chuckles on his way out, and Derek stares at me. I blink back innocently. “What? If he has guests over, and they notice the coasters, it starts a conversation about your whisky.”

Derek smiles. “Here I thought they would only be good for distributors. See? You’re already helping me.”

I love the way he looks at me. It’s intense, yet it makes me feel admired. Less like a weird, freaky, artsy girl, and more like an actual young woman.

Derek’s eyes crinkle slightly at the corners whenever he smiles. He’s probably in his late thirties. It’s hard to tell – rich people take very good care of their skin, or so I’ve heard.

With such a big age difference between us and our different backgrounds, would I actually have a shot at such an incredible man? Plus, he’s my boss. Remembering that makes

me step away from him slightly as Ray comes in the door with a box full of clanking metal parts.

I really need this job so that I can fix up my grandparents' house. If I don't get a great price for it, they might have to move to a cheaper seniors' home. I couldn't stand that. They're so happy right now.

I'd also like not to be alone anymore. The thought of having a boyfriend is even more appealing than having friends. Someone to talk to, lean on, and share ideas with.

Not to mention, more of those stomach-clenching, breath-stealing kisses.

Somehow I'm going to have to keep my distance from Derek for the rest of the day, so I can figure this out.

Even though I'm counting the seconds until we can be alone again.

D *ammit.* I hope I didn't do anything wrong.

After our scorching kiss, then being interrupted by a customer, Tilly kept her distance from me for the rest of the day. I hope that she isn't second-guessing herself.

On my way to work in the morning, I pick up three large coffees and a six pack of donuts, and bring them into our tiny kitchen. I make a note to pick up plates and mugs, since there's a woman on the team now. For today, I just set out some serviettes and hope that's good enough.

Ray and Tilly are already here, and I can hear him going over the list of cleaning tasks in the fermentation room.

I sip my coffee out in the lobby area, even though the sunlight glares on my laptop.

What have I done? Never once in all my years of business have I considered crossing a line with an employee. Is it because I'm outside of my office-y comfort zone, in a small town where I hardly know anyone?

Maybe. But I shouldn't blame the fact that my life is suddenly off-kilter. I just can't resist her, simple as that.

Tilly is everything I didn't know I was dreaming of. A pixie tornado of creativity. A beautiful angel who ignites overwhelming feelings. I'm not prepared for a relationship at all, to be honest with myself. My entire life is in flux.

Ike's bad health scare threw my family for a loop. Then the way he simply took off into the world, searching for a whole

new life... It shook me. Rattled the foundation of who I thought I was.

Once I examined my life and realized that I didn't actually create anything, I searched for some way that I could make something with my hands.

After three nights in a row of whisky tasting, an online search to find any distilleries for sale or looking for partnerships led me to Ray. He's been so patient. Even though he sold me the company outright, he's agreed to stay on as master distiller for a very generous salary. It feels like a stabilizing move for him, even if it's left me feeling out of place.

Tilly's voice floats over the half wall. "Coffee and donuts? Awesome – thanks!"

How am I going to get through the day without touching her?

Focus, Carmichael. She's young, she's your employee, and you don't even know if she's as crazy for you as you already are for her.

Tilly comes out to stand behind my chair. "Whatcha doing?"

"Emailing three contractors to come out and check the space to give us quotes on the patio. It could work from early spring to late autumn – heaters, a cozy outdoor fireplace for fall tastings, that kind of thing."

She leans in to look at some of the photos on my screen. "I agree, there's no point in the dead of winter. But with that pergola top, and the side pieces...yeah. Something like that would be incredible."

She steps back to look at me with a wide grin. "I can't believe you're doing this right away."

I shrug. "It's just a bunch of wood. If it doesn't work, in two years we rip it out. No biggie."

Somehow, even her snort is ridiculously cute. "Most people aren't so cavalier about pitching money around, but

whatever.”

“You know how they say it takes money to make money?”

“Yeah.”

“It’s true. When you have cash to invest, you can set up businesses to grow fast, then make a lot of money quickly.”

Tilly sips her coffee while rolling her eyes. “The tornado of capitalism.”

“If you like, sure.” It’s so easy to laugh with her. Everything about her is engaging. I want to peek inside her mind to discover how she ended up so precious.

“Thanks for the coffee.” Her smile is sunshine. “It’ll fuel me up for all of the scrubbing Ray is assigning me.” She salutes me with her cup, then disappears into the back.

I’m a little jealous of Ray for the rest of the day, since he gets to spend more time with her than I do. He clearly enjoys her bright, hardworking nature. She’s such an easy going person, too – even their lighthearted fight about which music to put on back there was hilarious. Ray put on a country station out of habit, but Tilly cited a study that revealed plants grow better to heavy metal music, and suggested they play music that will help fermentation.

They eventually settled on bluegrass, since Tilly felt that was “the whiskiest.”

At four-thirty, Ray goes out to make some local deliveries, leaving our breathtaking new employee alone with me.

“Hey,” I call out so that I don’t startle her while walking toward her back. Tilly is leaning over a huge vat, stirring the mash with a long-handled paddle.

She turns to me with a bright smile. “Hey.” She shakes the paddle off, takes it to the sink to give it a rinse, then washes and dries her hands.

I love that Tilly isn’t afraid to get dirty or try new things. She’s the complete opposite of the fussy women I’ve always been told I should date. No wonder my longest relationship

was a month and a half, and that was only because she was in Europe for the middle three weeks.

“Tilly.” My voice is already taking on that dark, husky tone that I’ve never used before I met her. “About yesterday.”

She steps slightly closer, biting her pouty bottom lip for a split second. “Yeah?”

“I shouldn’t have kissed you.”

Her breath stops, and her entire body tenses up.

“I wanted to. Hell, I *needed* to.” Her shoulders droop a bit. “But if I’m going to be your boss, I’m not allowed to do things like that.”

She smooths her hair back as she moves slightly closer. “But this isn’t a formal office,” she whispers softly. “Don’t you make the rules at your own company?”

Tilly relaxes as I break into a grin. “I like the way you think. But I need you to know you can tell me we’re done at any time and it won’t affect your job. I promise.”

Her lovely eyes grow wide. “I appreciate you being clear.” Her mouth tugs sideways in a devious grin. “I’ve never been the type to follow rules, anyway.”

“Me neither.” Stepping forward, my hand automatically goes to her hip. “But maybe we should keep it a bit quiet for now?”

She laughs. “You mean Ray?”

I nod sheepishly. “He’s pretty old-fashioned in a lot of ways, and I’m already pushing him way outside his comfort zone on a lot of issues.”

“Still... You own the company.”

“On paper, yes. But when someone has put their heart and soul into a business for years, it doesn’t matter what the forms say. It’s been his longer.”

“I’m glad you think like that. But is it a good idea to keep a secret from your colleague?”

“Let’s not think of it as a secret but as something private that we’re not ready to share yet. Fair?”

“Fair.”

My hand reaches out to pull her against me. “Do you want this, Tilly?”

She nods, smirking. “Even though we haven’t really discussed what ‘this’ is yet.”

I pause. “I think ‘this’ is uncharted territory. We’re going to have to make it up as we go along.”

“Sounds like something a pirate would say. But they drink rum, not whisky.”

My head shakes slowly from side to side, brushing my lips across her forehead. “What am I going to do with you, woman? Even your sassy remarks are creative.”

Instead of saying anything else, her hands grip around the back of my shoulders, pulling me down until our lips meet in a slow, gentle explosion of lust.

In a flash, I have her in my arms, lifting her onto a counter so I can stand between her spread legs, her head slightly above mine.

“You’re so sexy,” I breathe against her silky lips. “I’ve never wanted a woman like this, Tilly. Something about you drives me absolutely wild.”

She manages to murmur, “Mmm-hmm,” but we don’t have enough oxygen to speak beyond that.

Her body fits perfectly against mine, her firm round breasts pressing into my chest, her delicate hands molding to the back of my neck as the kiss overtakes us. My fingertips caress just under her ear, her throat, exploring her silky skin. She’s so delicate, like a porcelain sculpture.

Her soft, breathy whimper sends a surge of blood south, my cock throbbing, begging me to take her somewhere we can be truly alone. Just as I reach down and under her t-shirt to touch her trembling stomach, the bell over the front door chimes.

We both groan dramatically, then laugh. I set her back on the ground and she straightens her shirt. “What’s the opposite of saved by the bell?” she whispers. “Annoyed by the chime?”

We go out front and Tilly compliments a lady’s earrings while her husband buys a crate of whisky for his brother’s bachelor party up at the family’s Muskoka cottage.

Once we’re alone again, we finish up the day’s work together, falling into long, rambling conversations and peppering each other with questions.

I learn that she’s the youngest of two, and her older sister Jennifer is some perfect model of daughterhood to their parents. Tilly clearly doesn’t want to share much about them, but is happy to tell me all about her wonderful grandparents, who taught her about art, crafting, and the world.

I share a bit more about my brother Ike’s transformation from business mogul to world traveler in search of himself. There’s no way to explain how deeply it shook me to the core, to the extent that I put my safe, lucrative career on hold to be splashed with partially processed grains here in small town Ontario.

We bond much better than I ever have on a date, sitting across the table from a stranger. When Tilly and I are side by side, straining the rye mash before it goes into the still, we’re able to let our guard down and chat as if we’ve known each other forever.

Tilly is joyful – a word I’ve been unfamiliar with since childhood. It doesn’t matter that she seems to be in a tight spot financially while fixing up her grandparents’ house somewhere in town. It doesn’t matter that she’s living alone, with nobody to help her. She’s a bright light that wants to believe that everything will work out.

Well, I’m already determined to help her make that happen. Once she’s my girl, she’ll never want for anything again.

I’ve already noticed that she enjoys poking fun at me for being a “suit”. I have to find ways to show her that I’m more

than a stuffy corporate guy, and can be good for her. Let her know that I want to care for her, so her creative energy can flow free.

I have to show Tilly that I can be her man.

TILLY

I 'm on pins and needles during my second full day working at the distillery. Everything is going too well.

Whenever things go perfectly for me, something is about to go wrong. Murphy's Law is going to kick in again, I can feel it. Running the broom around the front lobby area and sales counter, I worry that I'm being paranoid.

But I am truly happy to be back in Port Hope. I thought that leaving town and moving to Toronto for a while would give me a chance to grow, and experience new things. And it did, to a point. Until people here heard how my horrible parents trash talked our hometown.

Nobody likes a snob. Especially when they have nothing to back that up – they aren't particularly successful, or wealthy, or have done anything of note. They just enjoy putting on airs and pretending that they're high class.

Honestly, Mom has too many favorite old movies that involve royalty and the obscenely rich, and I think she's trying to emulate them. But she started out as a grocery store manager, and is now a mid-level executive. Not the glamorous trophy wife that she tries to be.

I can't quite tell yet what kind of rich Derek is. He jumped right in when some metal parts needed scrubbing, and didn't mind splashing water on his clothes. He doesn't care about getting his hands dirty, and is always fascinated when Ray teaches us new things about the machines and the whole distillation process. He obviously loves learning.

And wow, is the man passionate about whisky. I know he says that he bought this distillery as an investment and wants to triple the profits in the first year, or whatever. He's very motivated by numbers. But he was as excited as a little boy on Christmas morning when he told me that one of the vats is ready to be transferred into barrels in just a few days.

I wouldn't expect a fancy guy who is loaded and owns a whack of companies to love being so hands-on.

Speaking of which... He certainly likes having his hands on me. The connection between us is electrifying, not to mention the danger that flows both ways.

I could have my heart broken if he doesn't turn out to be as amazing as he seems. I could be fired from a job I really need.

And for Derek, what if his new business, which seems like the first enterprise he's ever been personally invested in, ended up with a terrible reputation? If the most gossipy people in town caught wind that he was associated with me and my bizarre family, it might make people avoid his distillery.

The smart thing to do really would be to stop this before it starts. Like patching a tiny crack in the wall before it spreads.

But I can't help it: I need to be with him. Derek is incredible, and I'm so drawn to him physically that I can't think of anything else.

We're also clicking on a personal level. Every conversation we have, I find out more about his likes, his quirks, and how fascinating he is. Seriously, who has a favorite Chinese food place in ten different cities around the world? I could listen to his stories for days, yet keep forcing myself to get back to work, and put some distance between us.

I wait until five minutes past the official end of my shift to grab my purse and call out toward the back, "I'm off, have a great night!"

"Okay." I already recognize the distracted tone of voice Derek uses when he's got his nose in his laptop. It must be challenging to keep an eye on his other companies and investments, while working here all day.

The bell over the door tinkles as I leave the shop, and I turn to walk down the quiet road. I barely make it to the corner before I hear, “Tilly!”

A sleek car pulls up beside me. “May I take you out to dinner?” The now familiar deep voice makes me tingle before I even turn to meet his eyes.

Then a prickle of nervousness zips up my spine. I can’t tell Derek that I don’t want to be seen with him for his own good. Looking down at my jeans and t-shirt, I shrug. “I’m not exactly dressed for it.”

“I still think you’re stunning.” His grin makes my heart race. “Come to my place, then. I’ll have my chef make something special.”

I blink in surprise. “You have a personal chef?”

Derek drops his eyes sheepishly. “Yeah. She comes in twice a week to fill the fridge with stuff I can just heat up. But she’s there right now, and could make us anything we wanted.”

Since he’s offering, I may as well give into a craving. “I only have until eight o’clock. But... Steak tacos?”

He grabs his phone, his thumbs flying across the screen as he sends a text. “Done.” He jumps out of the car, taking my arm to escort me into the passenger seat.

It’s the first of a series of grand gestures and new experiences for me. I’ve never ridden in such a luxurious car. I’ve never been in a house that looks like it was styled by one of those home decor TV shows. I’ve never had a chef personally ask me how I liked my steak cooked, and precisely what ingredients I wanted in my tacos.

It’s like stepping into a dream world, complete with oversized sparkling chandeliers. Yet to Derek it’s completely normal.

“This is totally ridiculous, you realize that, right?” I ask as we finish our fudge caramel ice cream and still-warm sugar cookies out by the pool. Although the sun hasn’t completely set yet, the first soft beams of moonlight are filtering through

the trees of Derek's back garden, blending with the amber light of the old-fashioned street lamps on either side of the patio.

"The back yard, or how incredible this dessert is?"

I grin. "Both."

We set down our bowls and Derek slides his chair closer to slip an arm around me. "Right now I'm too busy trying to wrap my head around how ridiculously beautiful you are."

"Don't believe everything you see under these old timey lamps," I laugh.

His deep voice becomes softer. "I can't believe you're really here." He looks at me as if I'm the only person in the world.

This electrifying spark between us is much too intense. It's one thing to be aware of the sun, but you should never look directly at it. I don't want to get burned. Or blinded. But every single thought and feeling is screaming that I need to be close to him. Close, and possibly naked. The sexual tension is pulling us closer every chance we get.

Derek pauses, his deep brown eyes staring into mine. Then he leans slowly toward me, staring at my lips as if the urge to kiss me is coming from an animal side of him that he doesn't quite control.

When our mouths finally connect, I release a sigh, my hands cupping his face, stroking his short beard as he pulls me into his lap. Just as I feel his palm skimming up my side, there is a shuffle in the doorway behind us and a discreet cough.

"Yes, Kaitlyn?" Derek asks, as if it's completely normal for him to chat with his personal chef while a girl is sitting on him.

"Do you need anything else, sir? A nightcap, perhaps?"

Derek looks back at her, then chuckles. "No, we're fine, thank you. Have a good night."

I turn to watch her walk away, as he brings his lips to my ear. "Unless you'd like some champagne, or wine, or anything?"

I shake my head, brushing my forehead against his. “No, thank you. I have to leave soon. Plus, I’m not much of a drinker, so I think I’m going to save all my liver cells for work.”

Derek tilts his head back slightly to examine my eyes. “Are you truly okay with being romantically involved with your boss?”

My breath catches. Romantically involved? He just came right out and said that? I’ve heard of men beating around the bush and avoiding any talk of commitment or involvement for as long as they possibly could.

“Yes.”

“Good.” He grins for a split second, then looks serious again. “Ray says you’re twenty-one. I’m thirty-eight. Does that bother you at all?”

I actually like that he’s older. I have so little life experience that hanging out with someone who has a clue about what they’re doing feels reassuring.

Not to mention, he’s handsome. Seriously striking. Guys my age don’t have enough character in their face yet to be truly attractive.

“Honestly, I like it.”

“Well, if I do anything that’s too old-fashioned for you, just let me know. I don’t want to be a fuddy-duddy,” he smirks.

“Erm, you could start by never using that term again, please.” My hands glide around the back of his shoulders. “Seriously, I think that it’s incredible that you’re so...shall we say, *well established*. I’m just a small town girl. It’s hard not to be dazzled by a guy who has his own chef.”

Derek leans in to nuzzle just under my ear. It’s such a tender gesture, soft and intimate, causing all kinds of sensations to flood my body instantly. His hand slips under my t-shirt, gently caressing my skin, teasing me as his fingertips drag along the bottom edge of my bra.

“For heaven’s sake, Mr. Carmichael,” I whisper in my snobbiest voice. “What would the neighbors think of this behavior?”

“You’re right. Completely, utterly foolish.”

His strong arms scoop me up easily as he strides inside. He sets me down so he can close the patio doors, and I follow him up the beautiful curved stairs, while watching his perfect ass in those jeans.

It’s tough not to gasp when we reach his bedroom. It’s like a massive hotel room, just the right blend of comfortable and minimal, with an open, Zen-like elegance. Every time I learn something new about Derek it’s kind of overwhelming, yet amazing at the same time.

“Tilly.” His hand settles on my hip as he towers over me. “I think it’s clear that I want you. I have all kinds of feelings for you, and they’re not just physical. But I’m not expecting anything. Even just kissing you is incredible.”

My fingers play at the edge of his collar. “You have a real knack for saying just the right thing. Did they teach you that at fancy man school?”

“Yes, as a matter of fact. It was right after the class in learning how to spot when a beautiful girl is the woman of your dreams.”

His chuckle is low and sultry as he holds me against his chest in a hug that presses us tightly together, making me tingle all over. “I’ve never laughed as much as I do when I’m with you,” he confesses. “Seriously, Tilly. Everything about you is exactly what I need.”

“Well, I’m happy to be in the right place at the right time for once. By the way, exactly where in the fancy man curriculum was the seminar on dazzling the girl with your spectacular house and personal chef?”

“Oh, that was just a workshop. But there *was* one seminar that I’d like to review my notes from right now.” He stares at me up and down, then licks his lips like an overly dramatic cartoon character. “It involved admiring and worshiping a

gorgeous girl properly. I haven't had a chance to put the theory into practice for a long time. Will you help me?"

His combination of cheesiness and seriously seductive glances sends prickles swirling in my stomach and up my spine. "I suppose if you need an assistant, I could help."

"Perfect."

He slowly slips my t-shirt and bra up over my head, while I do a quick gut check.

Derek wants me. *Me*. This incredible man could walk down Walton Street and snap his fingers and every woman in sight would come running. Yet he seems fixated on me, for reasons I can't understand. I've never felt truly desired before. It's like turning on a light inside me that I didn't even know was there.

He sits me on the edge of the bed, arching me back and kissing long paths around my breasts. As his thumb teases across my nipple, it feels like he's just as excited as I am. Yet his careful touches are tentative, as if he doesn't want to frighten me away.

"Tilly." His voice lowers to a sultry combination of gravel and silk. "May I taste you?"

Already nodding, I lie back as he unfastens my pants, pulling them off while I lift my hips to help him. He spreads my thighs and I realize that my panties came off at the same time, leaving me completely naked as I'm stretched across his bed.

Derek's eyes meet mine, then skim slowly along every part of my body. His thumb teases my nipple. His fingertips dance across my stomach. Then he pushes my knees farther apart, and settles between them.

Warm breath across my most sensitive skin makes my belly flutter. "Try to relax, gorgeous. Just tell me what you like, and if there's anything you don't."

Since I've never been naked with a man before, I don't exactly have any points of reference. I watch curiously as his

thumbs spread me open, staring into my center. His jaw tenses, as if he's riveted by what he sees.

Suddenly my fingers grab the duvet when his tongue gently drags across my bare flesh. My breath catches, my heart racing as I try to make sense of all the brand new sensations coursing through me. I'm so exposed, yet feel completely comfortable with him.

He definitely knows what he's doing. The tip of his tongue glides in a meandering path, finding every single nerve ending. Then he swirls gently around my button, barely touching it, teasing me until it feels like my entire body is throbbing in time with my pulse.

I've always wondered what to expect when it came to sex with a man. Now that it's happening, I'm overheated and twitching from the feeling of being completely open and vulnerable while giving my body to Derek to play with.

His rough palm drags slowly along my inner thigh as I gasp. A broken moan escapes my lips as his tongue flattens against my clit, his thick middle finger dragging slowly back and forth along my opening. He knows exactly how to tease me, almost dipping inside, but not quite. Keeping me on the edge and wanting more, even as warm tension overtakes my entire body, pulling me inward until I'm about to explode.

Just as my shoulders curl forward, fists gripping the bed as every muscle in my body tenses up, I meet Derek's eyes.

Oh my God.

This isn't just sex. This isn't just connecting physically because we find each other hot.

This man wants me in every possible way. I can see it, feel it, know it from the twinkle in his eyes as his tongue moves faster. He knows I'm close. He's already reading my body, and somehow I can tell that he's falling for me already.

My mouth falls open when Derek makes a humming noise of approval. His finger swirls, moving very slightly inside me as I realize I'm soaking wet and quivering for him. Then I begin to shake in a series of small explosions, a deep, burning

release as I come hard, barely realizing that I'm clutching his hair and riding his mouth as I squirm and gasp for air.

I fall back, still throbbing as Derek's tongue carefully laps up every drop of my juices. He kisses all around my pussy, then his mouth moves upward, trailing lazily around my breasts before meeting my lips.

My limbs reach out to him, pulling his body over mine. The size and weight of him feels so right. My hips start shifting restlessly against him, desperate to feel his erection between my thighs.

"Not yet, gorgeous." His lips brush along my ear, his voice thick with need. "You have somewhere else to be tonight, and I don't want to rush things with you."

I'm so riled up that if he tore his clothes off right now and asked to have sex, I would definitely say yes. Yet he wants to go slowly with me?

I think there was a tiny part of me I was holding back, unsure whether I could trust Derek. Even though he's been incredibly sweet to me, he's still an older man with a lot more experience than me. Someone used to having an agenda.

His desire to wait makes me want him even more. But not just in this bed, on this date. I think I want him for a real relationship, although I'm terrified to bring that up yet. For the moment, all I can do is laugh with him as he clumsily helps me get dressed.

My head is still spinning when Derek drops me off in front of Shady River Seniors' Home. He escorts me out of the car and right to the front door, then pulls me in for a hug. It probably looks innocent enough from a distance. Yet the heat between our bodies as they press together and the way his hands move against my back and shoulders tells me this sexy man might already be planning our next date.

"I'll see you tomorrow." His voice is husky as he looks deep in my eyes. "Have a good visit."

"Thanks. For everything."

The gentle kiss at the top of my head revs up my heart. As I turn to walk into the lobby, I can feel my cheeks stretching from the size of my grin.

Derek really likes me. My new job is amazing.

For once, when my grandparents ask, “What’s new?” I’m going to have *plenty* to tell them.

DEREK

Watching Tilly work is truly inspirational. She has such enormous energy, whether she's packing bottles or chatting with customers. I love the way she makes every single person who walks into the place feel special.

She's also incredibly organized, and is already setting up a morning routine of dusting, sweeping, and returning messages. When I dropped off her coffee this morning there was a tidy printed list stuck to the fridge in the kitchen.

It's clear that Ray enjoys having her here, too. He's not much of a people person and watching the front cash is his least favorite task.

He also appears to be completely on board with lots of her suggestions, which is a relief. I didn't know whether he would prefer to keep everything exactly the same.

But he's a bit old-fashioned. I don't know how he'll react when he finds out Tilly and I are together. Yet hiding it feels wrong. I want to shout from the rooftops that this incredible girl is mine.

...Even though she's not *exactly* mine yet. Here I am pushing forty and I don't know how to ask a woman to be my girlfriend.

Ray had been wanting to reconnect with grain suppliers he hadn't seen in a while, and now he's able to make more trips during the day to do that now that Tilly takes care of customers. It makes him happy.

It also gives Tilly and I more time alone.

The second Ray leaves on one of these trips, I join her at the front counter. She looks positively radiant in a light blue t-shirt that brightens her eyes. It's also quite snug across her perky breasts, making it impossible for me not to stare.

"Thanks for the coffee." Her grin is adorable. "You know, we could just get a decent coffee maker for here."

Standing closer, my hand gravitates to her hip, pulling us closer together. "You're right. Ray doesn't seem fussy about his coffee."

"I'll take care of it," she says brightly. "He really likes this stuff, so I'll get similar beans, and a good machine."

"You're such a problem solver. I've rarely seen people your age be like that in offices. They wait around for instructions, or ask a million questions. Not just jump on a problem and get it done."

Tilly's laugh rings out. "I've always been the do-it-yourself type."

"Which is why you're renovating an entire house on your own."

She giggles again. "Not totally on my own. I'm not touching plumbing, electrical, or anything with tall ladders. Sanding, painting, staining and a few bits of plaster, I'm learning."

"I think you're amazing."

There's something in her eyes that says she doesn't believe me. Has nobody ever told her that before? Just as I reach to pull her into my arms, the bell over the door rings.

Tilly turns toward a couple and smiles triumphantly. "I knew it! You're back for the honey whisky, right?"

While she chats with the customers about some specialty cocktail they were discussing yesterday, I realize how hard I've already fallen for Tilly. Her charm. Her grace. Her lively energy.

The fact that she's the sexiest woman I've ever met is lower down on the list for a lover than I would have expected. And yet there it is...I'm falling hard and fast.

After the customers leave, I pull Tilly's back against my front, sweeping her hair to the side to nuzzle her ear. Rocking her gently, I murmur, "Do you know how amazing you are?"

She looks up at me sideways. "Hey, you're the genius who owns dozens of businesses."

"Have you been checking me out online?" Why does that excite me? I guess it's a clue that Tilly is truly into me.

"Of course I have."

Taking her hand, I walk her back to a corner behind one of the stills. The front door has a bell, and the back door creaks loudly, so it should be safe.

I wrap my hand around her delicate wrists, bringing her arms up until she's pinned against the wall. Although her blue-gray eyes are wide, she's not afraid. Her chest heaves slightly as her breathing becomes erratic, stretching the t-shirt tighter over her breasts.

My free hand slides under the edge of the shirt and up her side, caressing her soft skin as she watches my eyes. "You're so sexy," I murmur, dipping my head to kiss the side of her throat. "Are you aware just how beautifully distracting you are?"

Her soft smile melts into a gasp as our mouths meet in a slow, sultry kiss. I drop her wrists so that she can wind her arms around me. Just as we begin breathing harder and everything begins to blur as we sink into each other, we hear the sound of the back door opening.

Instantly we jump apart. "I have some paperwork and calls to make." My voice is husky, but hopefully Ray won't notice.

"Cool. Thanks for showing me..." Tilly's voice trails off as she turns away, so that Ray can't quite hear her. "I'll be at the counter going through the website." She gives me a sassy wink, tossing her hair as she disappears to the front.

I grab my laptop and go out to the picnic table behind the workroom to take a moment to clear my head. Tilly is much younger. Although she seems to be in control of her life, and has herself together, I need to be careful with her.

She said her parents and sister live in Toronto now, and I noticed her eyes crinkled oddly when she mentioned it. It's clear that her grandparents are the only family she likes, although they're in a home.

I want to really be there for her.

Tilly has appeared at a strange crossroads in my life, where I'm not really myself. I'm glad I met her now and not six months ago. Back then I had my head up my ass, locked into nothing but paperwork and acquisitions for months at a time.

I power through a handful of emails, then see that my brother Ike has sent a group message to myself and several other friends and family members. It's a photo of him in a forest, sitting cross legged at the base of a tree with a river in the background. The caption reads, "Air and water. Light and love. This is all we need."

This from the man who once nearly got into a fistfight with me years ago because I didn't tell him how well my latest investment discovery was doing, and he felt he missed getting in on the ground floor.

It's strange that Ike has made such a night and day switch. He'd been stuck in his ways his entire life, until a year ago when he went into remission and his temperament became mercurial.

Then he just – took off. No more financial goals, just hippie guru stuff.

Even though I have no idea where he is or if he has cell service, I give it a shot and phone him.

"Om Shanti," his previously forceful voice murmurs. "So good to hear from you, my brother."

"I like that photo of you communing with nature." Jumping to my feet, I feel the need to pace. "I hope that I didn't wake you up?"

“Of course not. It’s four am already. I was just rising with the sun before going down to the river to meditate.”

I listen in fascination as he goes on for several minutes about the ashram he’s financing, together with a village of craftspeople.

“What about you, Derek?” he asks. “Last I heard you were taking a bit of a break as well. How is your whisky business?”

“Amazing, actually.”

Ike barely hesitates before bursting into laughter. “You’ve met a woman!”

“What... How did you know?”

Ike guffaws heartily, just like he used to when he beat me to a new undiscovered stock on the brink of exploding. “You’re usually so tightly wound. I can hear something in your tone. Something new.”

“I could just be sampling all the whisky.”

He snorts, sounding completely like the old Ike again for a moment. “Trust me, I can tell the difference. You’re head over heels for this woman. What’s her name?”

Checking behind me, I drop my voice to a murmur. “Tilly. She just started working here at the distillery.”

“And what is it about her that lights you up?”

The question is simple, yet enormous, and I have to take a moment before I answer. “Everything. She’s beautiful, with magical blue-gray eyes like the northern sky before a storm rolls in.”

My pacing slows to a stop as I become lost in thought. “She’s incredibly creative. Ideas burst out of her like a fountain. She’s not self-conscious, allowing herself to think of good things, bad things, everything in between, then we sort them out later.”

“Hmm. So she has a spirit that’s free enough to not fear judgment. That’s wonderful.”

“Exactly. She’s also fixing up her grandparents’ house for them.” I pause. “There’s some tension with her parents, but she glosses over it.”

“We are not our parents, Derek.” There’s an edge in his voice for the first time. “You know that just as well as I.”

“Do I ever.”

Our father was a brutal tyrant, who tried to raise us to be as cutthroat and savage as he was. We both inherited his business savvy, and made the most of his contacts. Yet unlike him we drew a line between moral and immoral. Legal and illegal. Acceptable and completely...not.

Dad was horrified when our portfolios’ growth began to outpace his. Apparently when everyone realized that we played the game fairly, they preferred to deal with us and we got the better opportunities. Ike and I don’t really talk to him anymore.

“You’re already in love with her. So what are you worried about?” Ike asks.

“I...” Am I in love with Tilly? I hadn’t been ready to think that through quite yet, but the truth is already sitting right in front of me. I am.

“She works for me.”

“Pfft. You’re the boss. You make up the rules. You said she just started, so it’s not like she can’t go and get another job if working with you is too much. What else?”

“She’s only twenty-one.”

“Yes, but you’re ridiculously immature for thirty-seven, so I don’t think that matters.”

“Jerk.”

He chuckles. “I’m older and wiser. Deal with it.” Then his tone softens. “This is all very new for you, Derek. You’ve always put massive walls around yourself. The money, the lifestyle, the frantic pace. It was all to avoid emotions. You grew your businesses, then tore them apart again to resell them

in pieces. You don't like the thought of being planted in one place, or being stuck on one track.”

I drop into a chair, shocked at how accurate he is.

“Let love be your guide.” Surprisingly, there's no hippie lilt in his words. “Just let things roll out however they develop. Tell Tilly you love her. Even better – show her. Share every part of yourself, and support her unconditionally.”

“Even though it sounds like you've been huffing incense, that's good advice. Thanks, man.”

Ike laughs. “Just fresh air and organic fruit and vegetable juice out here.”

“Email me your address and I'll send a crate of whisky.”

There's a long pause. “Maybe just a couple of bottles. You know... To support my brother and give my honest opinion on how the work is going.”

“Consider it done. Thanks.”

I end the call, then jump up to pace back and forth again, thinking. I'm not sure why, but remembering my old life makes me more determined than ever to triple the output of this distillery as quickly as possible. All we need is another large building for more fermentation vats and stills, and outer small buildings for grain storage and barrel storage for the aging process. Plus a bigger road for the delivery trucks.

More land, more production, and more help.

Any other distillery would have to grow gradually over time as they amassed the money for expansion.

Luckily, I've already got more money than I know what to do with. And thanks to Tilly's amazingly creative ideas, I'll be able to get the town excited about the project as well.

TILLY

This evening Derek and I are able to have dinner at his house completely alone, because his chef left a wonderful lasagna that we could just heat up.

It's interesting: just as I deflect conversation about my family, so does he about his work, except for the distillery.

It feels like he's turned over a new leaf and completely changed his life recently. Could this – this whatever-it-is between us – be just something else new that he's trying on for size, to see if he likes it? Should that worry me?

We snuggle on his comfortable overstuffed sofa, sharing weird little anecdotes of our lives from childhood to high school to our first few jobs. It sounds like his father is cold and driven, and Derek had already broken off from that path before he found the distillery.

Strong fingers trail gently up and down the back of my neck. “You zoned out for a sec. What were you thinking?”

“Just that you're strangely thoughtful for a mega business man.”

I love the way his eyes twinkle when he chuckles. “I'll be honest with you, Tilly. I've never had a reason to be thoughtful with a woman before. It's only been a few days, and you've already changed me. For the better.”

I have no idea what to say to that, so I just lean closer, cuddling against his shoulder. “This big life change thing

you're going through." I study his eyes carefully. "Is it temporary? Permanent? Do you even know yet?"

His chin tips up and down slowly. "I see what you're getting at." His lips brush my forehead. "This isn't a midlife crisis, Tilly. I'm not going to wake up tomorrow and drive back to the city and my old life." He swings my legs over his lap to bring us face to face.

"I know it must seem weird for me to just up and launch myself in a different direction. But it's been a long time coming. I've been dissatisfied with the theoretical nature of my work for years. I've never had the opportunity to make something with my hands. To create a product that I can hold in my hands and offer to people and ask them what they think." He winks. "Plus, I've always truly loved whisky."

My palm slowly circles his chest. "There's really something about whisky, isn't there? It's the drink of super refined billionaires, party boys, farmers, mechanics, and hipsters. I guess it's a guy thing."

His nose brushes mine. "Oh, I wouldn't say that. A lot of women like whisky too."

"Sure, but it's more interesting to guys."

He smiles while leaning closer. "At the moment, this guy is only interested in the most beautiful woman in the world."

If anyone else said such a thing, I would think they're feeding me a line. Yet everything about Derek has always been completely sincere.

His lips brush mine softly. My arms wrap around the back of his shoulders until I'm sitting in his lap, my hip grinding against his obvious arousal as our mouths open, the kiss deepening until we can barely breathe.

His entire body tenses up, muscles tightening as he holds me closer. Then he pulls away, taking a slow breath. "What are you thinking right now, Tilly? Should we watch a movie? Go to the bedroom? Go for a walk somewhere?"

My pulse is already racing. There's only one thing I want. "Bedroom."

His eyes light up, yet he hesitates. “Are you sure?”

I nod slowly, bringing my lips to his ear. “I think it’s pretty obvious that I’m a virgin.” I actually feel his hard cock twitch against my hip. “And I’m sick of wondering what it’s like. I even went on the pill a while back, hoping that I’d meet someone this year to help me find out what all the fuss is about.”

His hand glides up the back of my head, tightening in my hair as he slowly arches my head away so that he can kiss a line down the column of my throat. “If you’re absolutely positive, baby, I’ll give you anything and everything you want.”

I can barely pull in enough air to murmur, “Yes. Everything.”

We untangle ourselves and stand up, laughing as we walk upstairs.

Derek is in no rush as he sits me on the bed, slipping off my socks, then my shirt. I love the way he traces long lines of looping kisses around my shoulder, my collarbone, then up to my ear. By the time he slips off my bra, I feel like I’m floating. He lies me back on the bed, again pulling off my pants and panties together.

Before he can kneel down, I pull at his shirt. “Your turn, mister.”

His deep brown eyes lock on mine as he nods, unbuttons his shirt slowly, then slips it off and tosses it toward a chair.

My lips fall open as I blink, taking him all in. *Holy crap.* I know that Derek is one of those dedicated hard-working types when it comes to his job. I didn’t realize that he put in that many hours at the gym as well. He’s sculpted like a fitness model – cut and tight, to go with his tan.

He shrugs as if his incredible physique is no big deal at all. “Lifting weights prevents stress. I’ve had a gym in the basement for years.”

He spreads my thighs and begins to devour my pussy as if it’s the most delicious thing he’s ever tasted. There’s no way to

control the quivers and moans that overtake me as Derek's tongue flutters near my clit. Then he swirls it around my skin, avoiding the most sensitive area until I'm gasping, before licking hard straight across it.

His finger nudges deeper this time, increasing the volume of my moans. I can't believe how wild it feels to have him inside me. And in just a few minutes I'm going to have a lot more than just his finger in me. I'm going to have the hulking weight of this sexy man over me as he drives his hard...

My fingers grip the sides of his hair as I start to climax, staring into his eyes as my weak cries reverberate in my chest and my thighs tighten around his shoulders.

"Mmm," he growls against my skin, prolonging my release. Falling back, I feel more relaxed than if I'd just soaked for an hour in the tub.

"So sexy," he murmurs, kissing slowly up my body. His lips close around my left nipple, flicking and sucking, while he pulls me higher up the bed to spread my hair over the pillow. My palms explore his chest, taking in every hard dip and curve.

His confidence is reassuring, but I still feel quite nervous as he stands up to take off his pants.

Then they hit the floor, and my tongue runs across my lips. Every part of his body is huge, so I guess it's no surprise his shaft is so long and thick. But still...

Derek lies down beside me, and my hand instinctively reaches for it. It's warm and pulsing and alive in my palm. Wild.

Derek's grin is positively devilish as his fingers cup my pussy, his middle finger dipping inside just a bit. "You're soaked for me. So sexy, baby."

My hand looks tiny around his length as I stroke it up and down. He pulls back and holds my eyes. "Is this what you want?"

"Yeah."

His finger curls inside me slightly, making my thighs quiver. I already feel like I'm going to come again, just from the pressure of his thumb brushing slightly against my clit.

He moves over me as my hands let go of his shaft and slide around to the back of his shoulders. Everything is so natural and instinctive, as I spread my legs wide, thrilled to finally discover what this feels like.

Derek moves slowly, caressing my breast with one hand as he drags the thick round head of his cock against my slick skin. Just when I'm about to ask whether he's teasing me or maybe having second thoughts, he presses inside just enough to thrill me to the core.

"Tell me you want me, Tilly."

"I want you," I whisper immediately. "Completely."

He sinks a bit deeper, hissing between his teeth. Then I realize he's trying desperately not to hurt me as he stretches me wide.

Bending my knees, I place my feet flat on the bed, raising my hips to help him. We both groan. It's a slow, heart-stopping, intense stretch that feels so wild and incredible I can scarcely breathe.

"Easy, baby," Derek murmurs soothingly. He grips my hip firmly to prevent me from moving too fast.

I can see in his eyes that he's dying to plunge inside me hard, yet he's being as gentle as possible. I love that Derek is so protective. Something swells inside me, making me feel like my heart might burst.

I'm falling in love with him. Deeply. It's so fast that I don't even know if it's normal. But it doesn't matter. This is us. A creative weirdo, and a straight-laced businessman who's trying to make a fresh start.

Derek stares back, then nods. "You feel this, too, don't you?"

I nod, my thighs tightening around him as we begin to move together. He looks down in awe at where our bodies join

as he makes a slow, deep thrust all the way inside me.

“You’re mine now.”

My heart pounds at the low, growled words.

“You’re mine, Tilly. Tell me this is real.”

I want to tell him that I’ve never felt anything more real in my entire life, but all I can manage is a whispered, “Yes. Real.”

My breath stutters as his arm scoops under my shoulders. Slow, deep strokes open me up even more as he grinds deeper. The friction makes every molecule of my body shake from the intensity. It’s as if he was given a map of every pleasure center in my body, and is hitting each one. His lips under my ear. His thumb across my nipple. His hot, hard shaft, pulsing and throbbing inside me with each deep, slow stroke.

Reaching down, he finds my clit, then shifts so that the base of his cock rubs against it as his pace increases.

“Yes,” I gasp, overwhelmed by the thought of Derek losing control because of me. “More.”

“How much more?”

I grin, looking up and losing myself in his eyes. “You’re not going to break me. I want you to take me, so do it.”

I expect him to increase his pace, driving us both wild. Expect him to give me that sexy, laughing smile. Instead, he stops moving entirely, pressing his forehead to mine.

“I’ve waited a lifetime to find you, my precious baby.”

My heart flutters. He genuinely thinks we belong together.

It’s the sexiest thing I’ve ever heard in my life.

DEREK

I can't believe I've confessed my feelings already, but there's something about Tilly that makes me brutally honest. I don't want to play games, or play it cool with her.

It's clear from the look in her eyes that she's overwhelmed by my statement, so I kiss her lightly, gripping her hip as I pull my wet, pulsing cock all the way out of her snug little pussy.

"You want more, baby?"

"Yes." I wait until she smiles, understanding that I'm teasing her. Her fingers tighten into the muscles of my back. "Please."

Plunging inside, we both moan helplessly from the rush of heat. Her soft breasts flatten against my chest as we roll slightly, trying to get even closer. Tilly's beautiful eyes are half-lidded with desire, her luscious lips parted as she gasps. I can feel her tension slowly gathering, her lower belly tightening as I thrust quick and deep.

I didn't know I had this much lust inside me. Yet it's so much more than that already. I'm in love with her. Every freckle, every eyelash. Every wild idea that spouts from her brilliant mind, even the nutty ones.

My fingers slip between us, finding her swollen clit and stroking gently. Tilly's head falls back as her mouth opens in a moan, her body shaking as her pussy flutters around me. She's very tight, but so wet that I'm able to thrust faster.

I need her to come before I do. Somehow I need to hold on just a bit longer.

Her hips buck up against me, fingernails pricking my skin as she cries out. The stunning sight of my beautiful Tilly falling apart, coming hard as I drive my cock into her... This image is going to stay with me forever.

“That’s it, baby. Let it all out. Just like that.”

Her head lashes side to side, then another string of gasps and moans ring out as I feel her tight pussy flooding my shaft.

I growl, every muscle tensing as I drive deeper, faster, clutching her soft, curvy body to mine. I roar into her neck while filling her with what feels like a lifetime’s worth of my seed.

Finally lifting my head, her eyes flash open, her mouth a surprised O before her eyelids flutter shut again with another round of spasms. Did my climax make her come again? It feels like it, as her pussy massages my length perfectly.

How did I find a girl this beautiful, this responsive, this perfect for me?

Once we find our breath, I rush to the bathroom to bring back a warm, wet towel to clean her up. Tilly seems touched by the gesture, but doesn’t speak until I lie down, cuddling her in my arms.

“That was more than I could ever have imagined,” I murmur, watching her eyes carefully.

Her teeth sink into her bottom lip for a second. “That seemed super intense. Is that normal? Or was it just, you know... Because it was my first time?”

I stroke her back gently. “That was *not* normal. That was above and beyond anything I’ve ever felt before.” Her eyes glow. “And I think that’s because it’s us, and we belong together.”

There’s a tiny, desperate noise from the back of her throat, then she nods quickly, nestling into my shoulder. I pull a blanket over us, fanning her long hair out behind her.

If I tell her I love her too soon, she's going to think I'm crazy. Instead I try to show her by the way I stroke her skin, pulling the blanket snugly around her, and making sure she's comfortable. She falls asleep almost immediately.

Good. That means she trusts me.



IN THE MORNING I slip downstairs quietly to make coffee. Luckily, Kaitlyn left homemade granola bars and pre-sliced fruit. I don't want Tilly to know how spoiled I've been. When I went through phases of working fourteen to sixteen hour days, I needed all the help I could get: a private chef, laundry pickup and delivery service, and a personal assistant.

I've done away with everything but a twice-weekly house cleaner and a chef now. It's also a goal never to work such long hours again. Sure, it's exhilarating to have an extremely busy week now and then. Just not for months on end.

Tilly's bare feet barely make a sound on the marble floor, yet I sense her behind me and turn to her. "Good morning, cutie."

Her lovely eyes light up when I hand her a mug. "Good morning. Whoa, did you make this all by yourself?"

I knit my brows into a glare and point to a chair. "Grrr."

My growl makes her giggle as I set out plates, then sit beside her, chuckling. "One of these days I might learn to cook, if I ever have some free time."

Her toes, tipped pale blue, drag along the floor as she swings her feet while popping a tangerine segment into her mouth. "Mmm. Yeah, free time does give people space to grow. I always made great leaps in my painting and crafting during school breaks and vacations."

Staring at the surface of my black coffee, something clicks. "Space for growth." My eyes lift to meet hers.

"What are you thinking about?"

My pulse speeds up as I study her soft smile, her plush lips. “Space for expansion.”

“What do you mean?” She takes a sip of coffee, completely unperturbed that I’m already thinking of work this early.

“The distillery.” I can feel the thought breaking out of its cage. “The main things that kept Ray and Duke from growing their business were a lack of money and physical space.” My fingers tap impatiently on the table. “Now, no judgment here – they may have been satisfied with a small, family business that paid their modest salaries and nothing more. We can’t really calculate for attitude.”

“That would be a bit abstract, yes.”

“But I have lots of money. That’s no longer an issue. We just need more space.”

“For more stills?”

“Yes, and everything that goes with them. Storage for supplies, and a lot more.”

She nods thoughtfully. “Your property is kind of hemmed in, with that big road and the river.”

My grin kicks in full blast. “You’re not accustomed to having a truckload of money to throw at something. Diverting the river isn’t exactly impossible.”

Tilly’s laugh echoes through the kitchen. “Yeah, right. The town council would never approve of that. And even if they did, I don’t think it’s polite to move to town and start rearranging the natural features. Think it through sometime when you’re not wired on this sad do-it-yourself coffee.”

I blink as if in shock, then dip my finger into my mug before poking her cheek. “No insulting my delicious coffee,” I laugh through her squeal.

I want to tell Tilly that I’m already prepared to keep her with me forever. That I have no doubt that she’s the girl for me. That we belong together.

But not yet.

Instead I sit back and feed her grapes while her toes swing along the floor, waiting until the time is right.

I t's gratifying to know that Derek and Ray already think I'm trustworthy enough to be left alone in the shop while they run errands and make deliveries to bars in the immediate area.

I think Derek admires my do-it-yourself nature, and my preference to be self-sufficient. Although he digs into dirty work around the shop, he's always had the money to hire help and the option of leaving it to someone else. I don't see it as being spoiled. He's always busy working on other things.

Other things. My entire body flushes and tingles just thinking of the way he touched me last night. He put my needs and feelings first, which means a lot to me.

To return the favor in some tiny way, I finish scrubbing down the counter area in the kitchen, then move on to the office. I stack the community newspapers that take up half of the small, worn couch. It looks like Derek has been studying businesses in the area. I drop several takeout coffee cups in the trash, then carefully wipe down the front, uncluttered section of the desk.

As I lift some papers out of the way to get some crumbs, I see that the page on top is a printout of a map, with some red and blue lines added. It shakes in my hand as I sink into the desk chair.

I've never looked at a satellite shot of this area before. There is a blue line around the distillery itself, bordered on the west by the access road, on the north by a busy road with a

huge noise barrier fence, and on the east by the river. A red line works its way south, around a narrow scruffy abandoned lot, and three older houses. Two of them have dotted marker over the property lines. The one directly beside the abandoned lot has a solid red line.

My grandparents' house.

What is he planning?

The tips of my fingers feel like they're turning blue, even though it's perfectly warm in here. Setting the paper down just the way I found it, I tiptoe back out of the office.

I take the company laptop to the front counter to make notes for the website, even though my head is spinning and I can't concentrate. Derek probably has no idea who owns that house or lives in it. For all he knows it could be housing a family of seven who have no intention of moving.

Is that what having a ridiculous amount of money is like? If you want something cooked or moved or flattened, you just hire someone and boom, it's taken care of?

Of course, I have no idea what he's thinking. I should try to stay calm until I know more.

Somehow I manage to focus enough to get another round of research and notes compiled, while selling a few cases and single bottles of whisky to people dropping in. I remember to slip coasters into their bags, and tell them that a "fun new line of t-shirts" is coming in a few months.

Derek and Ray return mid-afternoon. I keep my mouth shut about my discovery while listening to their excited tale of finding two new farmers who are willing to sell them huge amounts of top quality barley and rye next season.

"Now all we have to do is find the room for an extra still," Ray says, looking toward the back room. "It's going to be tight, but it might be doable."

"What? No." Derek shakes his head emphatically. "Ten more stills by spring, then once they're up and running, more in the fall. And storage buildings for the extra grain."

He runs to his office, coming back with the red and blue labeled satellite photo, and grabbing a pencil. “Look. I finally figured it out.” He draws a line through the narrow band of the empty lot. “We’ll put the road here for delivery trucks. Then buildings for supplies go here, and the additional stills go in a new building here.”

He draws large oblong boxes straight on top of my grandparents’ house and yard, and the one next door.

My stomach drops fifty feet.

Derek grins. “I can’t believe I didn’t see the solution before. Tilly’s creative energy is already rubbing off on me.”

Ray looks at him in disbelief. “And what if the people living there have a problem with this?”

Derek sniffs as if simply considering which restaurant to order from. “People sell their homes to developers all the time. If they’re not important historical houses, which given this location, I doubt they are, then they’ll sell. They get money, we get space. Win-win.”

My vision begins to swim.

“Tilly?” Ray looks at me sharply. “What’s wrong? You’re white as a sheet.”

I try to answer, but my legs are turning to jelly.

Derek drops his pencil, rushing over to scoop me into his arms. He carries me to the small couch in the office, lying me down and then kneeling as he presses a hand to my cheek. In seconds Ray follows with a cool, damp cloth for my forehead.

Somewhere in my haze, I realize that Derek isn’t trying to keep his distance in front of Ray, as he squeezes my hand gently. “Talk to me, Tilly. What is it?”

Ray leans in, gently tipping my head so that he can check my eyes. “Pupils are fine. Did you eat something that hit you the wrong way? Or is it...er...*woman troubles?*”

Hearing the older man being embarrassed to ask but still caring enough to spit it out makes me want to laugh and settles me somewhat.

The front bell tinkles, and Ray jumps up, tapping my shoulder. “I’ll get it. You stay lying down for a few minutes.”

He’s barely out the door when Derek murmurs, “What is it, baby? You know you can tell me anything.”

My mouth opens, but nothing comes out. How can I explain that bringing his dream to life would require squashing mine? He’s from a different world. It’s doubtful he’s ever painted a wall or felt a real connection to a house, since he’s able to purchase something bigger and better every single year.

His home is breathtaking, yet it was clearly done by professional decorators. I doubt Derek picked out a single piece of art. Even though it will break my heart to sell my grandparents’ house someday, that’s a lot different than having it bulldozed.

“Up,” I manage to whisper. Derek helps me sit up, still leaning against the backrest.

“Were you testing any of the whisky today?”

“No.” I manage a smile.

We hear Ray telling someone that Derek isn’t available for a few minutes. “I’m fine.” I sit up straighter, rolling my shoulders back. “You go deal with whatever that is and I’ll stay put.”

His thumb traces softly over my cheek. “Do you need to go home and lie down for the rest of the day?”

“Maybe. I’ll decide in a few minutes. Now *go* – they need you out there.”

I reach out to give his shoulder a push. Derek kisses my forehead lightly, then leaves the office to go deal with what sounds like a bar owner who wants a larger bulk discount.

As soon as the matter sounds relatively settled, Ray rushes back to the office, pulling over the desk chair to sit directly in front of me. “Well, there’s some color in your cheeks again. That’s a good sign.” He has a way of smiling with just his eyes that reminds me a bit of PopPop.

“Really, I’m fine. I don’t know what that was all about.”

He leans in, his voice dropping to a murmur. “Tilly, I know that you and Derek are... Something. It’s not my business. But if you need help with anything and don’t feel you can tell him, I’m right here.”

“Thank you.” After a few slow breaths, I smile brightly. “Honestly, I’m fine now.”

His eyes narrow. “All the same, I’d feel a lot better if you took the rest of the day off. I have to run an errand downtown, so why don’t I drive you?”

Crap. Ray doesn’t know that I’m living at my grandparents’ house. For that matter, have I ever told him who they are? I can’t remember. But he must know them, since they were neighbors of the distillery for over fifty years before they moved to the home.

“I think a walk down by the lake would be terrific. It’s just breezy enough today to be refreshing.”

Ray chuckles. “I know exactly what you mean. The wind off the waves is bracing. Grab your things and I’ll drive you there.”

Derek is deep in conversation with a few more people who have dropped in as Ray and I walk by. “Taking Tilly for some fresh air, she’s fine,” Ray says on the way by.

Derek reaches out to trail his fingers along mine discreetly as I pass, giving me a nod. I smile back, then hurry outside.

The drive in Ray’s old pickup is soothing, with Stompin’ Tom’s “A Real Canadian Girl” twanging away over the radio.

When he stops the truck, Ray hands me a bottle of water to slip into my purse, and double checks that I have his number in case I need a ride home.

“I adore long walks. They clear my head. But thanks.”

“All righty, then. Get a good night’s sleep, and I’ll see you tomorrow, eh?”

I walk slowly along the beach, the uneven surface of the worn, rounded stones making me have to concentrate on every step. The low murmur of the waves is just imperfectly

rhythmic enough to lull me into tranquility. Yet for once I can't get lost in staring at the ruffled white tips that curl over the edge of the waves.

I need to figure out what to do. And there's only one other place I go when I need to think.

Twenty minutes later, I'm walking quietly up the steps of the big white bandshell in Memorial Park. I'm sure that nobody is supposed to be up on the stage without a good reason, but no one's ever bothered me when I've come here to puzzle things out before.

I sink down with my back against the slightly curved wall, and my eyes drift closed as the familiar sensation comes over me. Sound is different here. Not just an echo, amplifying noise and projecting it forward. There's a shimmering quality to it. Like the ancient rocks at the edge of the lake, this space feels timeless.

Thousands of performances, from kids' choirs to big band celebrations – the wooden beams have absorbed sonic energy, most of it in happy celebration.

Closing my eyes, I slow my breathing, then make a clicking noise with my tongue that echoes to either side before swooping overhead. Finally, I'm calm enough to think.

What am I going to do?

I'm already falling for Derek hard. There are so many incredible things about him and it would be so easy to simply be absorbed into his life.

I picture a drop of yellow paint being stirred into a big can of magenta. It will tint the final color very slightly, but the more dominant pigment will absorb the lighter one until it disappears completely.

What would it mean if my grandparents' house was demolished? Years worth of memories, wiped out. The dent in the back door frame where my father crashed his sled into it when he was eight. The tiny chip in the kitchen window glass where Nana "allegedly" threw a spoon at PopPop's head when

she thought he was gambling over the limit she had set for him.

I have no problem with the thought of another family moving into the house and using that space to raise their own families and create their own memories.

But bulldozing it entirely to make a storage shed for grain? I truly love Carmichael's Whisky, but that's ridiculous.

Is it also ridiculous that I don't feel like I can tell all this to Derek?

I think it's because I doubt he'll understand. What's more, it underlines how fundamentally different we are. Physically, we fit together perfectly. Yet mentally, emotionally, our goals... We're so very different that I don't think his waves would ever hit my shore, so to speak. That worries me.

At first I questioned dating a guy who is also my boss, but ultimately figured it wouldn't make a difference, because we just met, and it was just an assistant job.

I'd also questioned dating an older man, but I really like that he's worldly and confident and secure. It turns out that it creates an energy that I'm oddly drawn to.

But that Derek's goals would end up literally toppling a house that means everything to me?

Good job, Murphy. I didn't see your sneaky law coming this time.

DEREK

An hour later, Ray returns to the shop alone, telling me that he dropped Tilly off at the beach before running his errands. Then he dashes to the back to check on something, leaving me feeling lost.

I need to go to her, yet I don't even know where she lives. She didn't put a full address on her job application, just "Port Hope."

From the way she spoke about fixing up her grandparents' house, it sounded like she's living there while she's getting the work done, but now I'm not completely sure. If it's anywhere in this neighborhood, which she kind of implied, it's going to be a long walk back from the lake.

I wander back to where Ray is taking readings from one of the stills. "Hey, did Tilly say how long it would take her to get home?"

"No. She just said she liked long walks because they clear her head, and we agreed that fresh air from the lake is always the best thing." He sets down his notes and turns to me. "She looked completely fine, or I wouldn't have left her."

"I know." My fingertips tap against my thigh. "I want to go check on her, but I don't know whether that would be crossing a line."

He gives me a flat look. "Contrary to what some people think, I'm not an idiot. I know that you two are together romantically."

I sigh. “I’m sorry. We weren’t trying to keep that from you, exactly. We just weren’t sure of everything yet ourselves. It’s only been a few days, even though our connection has been...” I hesitate, but there’s no point in holding back now. “Very intense.”

He chuckles. “I had a feeling, from the sheer force of you two avoiding each other in front of me.”

“Do you know where her grandparents live? I think she’s been staying there.”

“They moved into Shady River Seniors’ Home a while ago. I doubt a vibrant young thing like her would be happy there.”

“No, I mean their house. She’s been fixing up their old house.”

Ray’s eyes widen, then his entire body sags. “*Oh, shit.* I assumed they’d already sold it.”

“What?”

He sighs heavily, his hand scrubbing his face before pointing toward the back wall. “Sadie and George Mitchell lived on the other side of the abandoned lot. You know... One of the houses you bulldozed with your pencil earlier, as if it was an annoying pebble to be kicked out of your way. That was right before Tilly turned white as snow.”

I slump against the wall, my limbs suddenly numb. “Dammit.”

“Yeah. Or as I put it, *oh, shit.*” Ray gives me a hard look. “Listen, I know that you come from a different world, where people buy and sell houses as investments and whatnot. But these people have lived in that place forever. It’s not a house. It’s a home.”

“It’s still an investment.” My eyes drop. “But I get that it’s different.”

“Damn straight it’s different. I doubt they thought of that home as an investment. It was a dream come true. A place to

raise their kids. Now it's their family history that they want to pass down to their beloved granddaughter."

Even though Ray is several inches shorter than me, his pointed look is starting to make me feel very small. "I thought Tilly said they were prepping it to sell it?"

He sighs heavily again. "They were likely going to give it to her and let her decide. People do that around here."

"She wouldn't rather have the money? Buy something more modern?"

"With all due respect, Derek, if you think that, you don't understand women, or small towns." Ray nods for me to follow him, grabbing a sample bottle and two glasses along the way. Once we're seated in the front, he pours a generous splash for each of us, waiting until I've taken a few sips.

Then he smiles. "You're a good man, Derek. I wouldn't have gone into business with you if you weren't. I can tell that this is your version of... Well, I won't quite say a mid-life crisis, but you're itchin' for a change, that's for certain."

I almost choke on my mouthful of whisky. "It's that obvious?"

"Course it is. You came out of nowhere, desperate not only to take over this place, but also to grow it like crazy almost immediately. It's too much all at once."

Ray knocks back his drink, then stands up. "I have a few more tests and readings to do. *You* need to figure out what to do about Tilly. Not to mention what you're going to do about this expansion. Make it a bit more sensible and a lot less destructive."

"Thanks, Ray. As always, I really appreciate it."

He tips his imaginary hat, then walks into the back.

I grab my laptop and phone, then head out to my car. Just as I'm about to start it, my phone rings. My heart leaps, hoping it's Tilly.

It's not. It's Ike.

“Hey there. Sick of all that meditating yet? Do you need to come back to some properly polluted air?”

As he chuckles, it strikes me how much his life has genuinely changed. I don't even know my brother anymore. It's kind of strange.

“No, I just thought I'd check in. You sounded a bit...off... on our last call.”

“Thanks, but I'm all right. I thought you were just calling to ask for money. You know me – that's a problem I can solve by snapping my fingers.”

Ike snorts. “That's the most Derek comment I've ever heard. Unfortunately.”

Then he grows quiet. “Money is nothing. Things are nothing. I hope that you truly know that.”

“In the abstract, yes. Of course.” I pause, trying to think of one of the spiritual quotes I actually agree with. “‘Happiness comes from the accomplishment of goals’, right?”

“Right!” He sounds delighted that I remember. “And the beauty of it is, the size of the goal doesn't matter at all. It's the effort, and the sticking to it that brings us real joy.”

“Well, you'll be happy to know there are some goals being accomplished. Others, not so much.”

I hear a heavy sigh before he speaks. “Look, Derek, I'm going to be brutally honest with you here. Happiness also comes through connections. The things we create with our hands. The people we connect with. Real, meaningful relationships, where it feels like we're in sync with the other person.”

“I know. And that's what I want. But I think I've ruined everything.”

“Oh, no. The girl you began seeing? I can hear in your voice that it's not going well.”

“Well, it was, until I basically shot myself in the foot.”

Somewhere in the distance of wherever Ike is, I hear what sounds like temple bells ringing. “You said this Tilly is a creative person?”

“Yes.”

“Which means she probably paints, and makes things with her hands. Tangible things.”

“Yes. That’s right.”

“Meanwhile you’ve never done anything like that,” he says flatly. “You have other people take care of your tangible things. A stylist to pick your shoes, a barber to tell you how to wear your hair. You don’t actually make anything yourself. No offense.”

“You’re absolutely right.” I slump back into the car seat. “Even here at the distillery, Ray is doing all of the creation, and I’m just sort of giving opinions.”

“Don’t beat yourself up. That’s just your way. But you’re going to have to learn to think like she does.”

“How do I do that?”

“Creative people think of their creations as precious. Anything that people make with their own hands has a deeper meaning to them. So you’re going to have to watch for things that she makes, and does, and understand that’s all just as precious as she is.”

“Damn.” I stare out the front windshield as a red-winged blackbird lands on a bush at the edge of the parking area. Is Ike really developing some kind of sixth sense? “How did you know that I needed to hear this right now?”

He sputters a laugh. “I didn’t. But I’m going on a silent meditation retreat for three days, and thought I should call you first.”

“But you knew that if I started seeing a girl, I was going to have problems?”

He hesitates. “Well, you don’t exactly have a great track record,” he finally admits.

“Ike...” I’m not sure how to say it properly, so I blurt it out. “How can I just up and tell a woman that I didn’t mean to offend her, but I was excited about something and my head was so far up my ass I couldn’t see that what I was thinking was wrong?”

He chuckles warmly. “Just like that. Be brutally honest with her. Stop trying to be cool and confident and act like you have all the answers.”

“But that’s what people have always expected of me.”

“And that’s why it’s always been hard for you to connect with people. Do you feel connected to this girl?”

“Yes. One hundred percent. More than any other woman in my life.”

“Then you need to stop hanging onto your old patterns. The old version of you was a different person that wasn’t ready for her. Think about how whisky changes with time. The oak cask changes the whisky. She is changing you, and it’s a beautiful thing. But you have to allow yourself to change. Not just for her, but also for yourself.”

“Wow. I’m going to have to put that on a t-shirt.”

Ike laughs so loudly I worry he’s going to frighten any nearby meditators. “Do it. And save me one.”

“Will do. Thanks.” Before I disconnect, I add, “Thanks, man. I take back at least half of the jokes about your new hippie life.”

“Half? That’s impressive. Thank you. *Namaste.*”

“Uhh... Right back atcha.”

I put the phone away, but don’t start the car yet. How is Tilly ever going to trust me again, if I was so cavalier about bulldozing a house that she dearly loves? It’s not that I didn’t know that it was hers. It was that I didn’t care about a house I knew nothing about.

I was callous. That’s the trait of a true asshole.

Not someone who deserves a gorgeous, sensitive, creative angel like Tilly.

A plan begins to formulate, and I glance at the clock. Unlike in Toronto where most stores are open until at least ten, I have to remember that here in a smaller town, things often close by seven or even earlier.

Even though I haven't really figured out what to say to Tilly yet, I can't let her go to sleep without knowing that I'm thinking about her, so I send a text.

Me: I'm so sorry. I really messed up. I had no idea. Don't respond yet, but please don't give up on me. On us.

I can see that she reads the message almost immediately, but doesn't answer. Good. At least she's not so angry she's prepared to break up with me on the spot.

I have all night to figure out what to do to fix this.

But for once, I'm going to have to think up a creative idea all by myself.

TILLY

My time thinking in the bandshell calmed me down, then the long walk home made me tired enough to be able to sleep. I still tossed and turned half the night, though, wondering whether I could bring myself to go to work in the morning.

How can I be with a man who thinks nothing of flattening people's homes? Who thinks he can just pay people off to get what he wants? From his text it's clear that he knows he may have done something wrong, but that doesn't mean he understands *why* it's wrong.

Finally at seven I give up and take a quick shower before putting the coffee on. As soon as it finishes brewing, I pour myself a mug, then nearly jump out of my skin when I hear some kind of thumping noise on the front porch.

Is that *hammering*?

Looking out the front window, I see Derek on the front porch.

I unlock the door and step out slowly, pulling my robe around me more tightly. "What are you doing here? Measuring to see how much concrete you'll need to pave over the front lawn?"

My anger dissipates a little as I watch his huge, strong body reaching up to a wooden beam and hanging a basket of flowers on the porch overhang. There are two more baskets on the ground.

Derek turns to me with a huge grin. “A bouquet dies in a week. I’m hoping these will last until the snow flies.”

I’m speechless. I’ve never had a man bring me flowers.

“I’m also getting quotes from three roofers,” he continues. “Including the guy you said had a trustworthy face.”

It’s a sweet gesture, but still. A few baskets of pink and red blooms can’t erase the fact that he is so wildly different from me, and wants to do something unforgivable to my family home.

He checks that the pot is secure before turning to me. “Tilly, now that I know how much this property means to you, I won’t let anything happen to it. Ever.”

“What about all your grand expansion plans?”

Wow, his eyes are stunning when he smiles like that. It’s distracting. The fury and fear that is still clenching my stomach abates a little more.

“I can easily expand the parking lot through the gully instead. Dig deeper for the storage buildings, and make them two stories high but with a smaller footprint. It’ll be more expensive, but that doesn’t matter. It’s only money.”

Derek takes my shaking hands in his, falling to his knees in abject apology. “I’m so sorry, Tilly. I didn’t understand.” He kisses the back of each of my hands in turn. “I’m in the process of changing my entire life all at once. I didn’t realize how much it would change me as well. But parts of my old self are still going to keep cropping up now and then. You’re going to help me with that.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means that you’re going to keep me in line when I get stupid ideas in my head.” He shuffles closer, still on his knees, to wrap his arms around my lower back. “Tilly, you’ve changed me more than you realize. You’ve cracked my entire heart and soul open.”

A giggle bursts from me. “You sound like that hippie brother you mentioned.”

“Well, I think I’m coming to believe that’s not entirely a bad thing.” He smiles, his head tilting to the side. “You are an oak cask who is going to change me over time. For the better. You’re going to mellow me in the best of ways.”

I start to open my mouth, but he interrupts. “And no, I haven’t been drinking.”

We laugh together for a moment. “Tilly, you’re good for me, plain and simple. I want to be good for you in return. When I suggest completely bizarre things, all you have to do is tell me no. Tell me I’m being stupid.”

My mind is reeling. “So you’re not going to flatten this house?”

He shakes his head emphatically. “Never. I’m going to fix it up for you.” His nose crinkles. “No, I’m sorry. *With* you. You’re in charge of everything. I will just provide the money, the muscle, and the connections. Whatever you need.”

I try to take a slow breath, but my entire body is shaking too much. “I can’t believe it.”

He reaches up to beckon with his finger until I bend down, bringing my ear to his lips. “Believe that I’m already in love with you, gorgeous. Your energy, your light... All of those things that spiritual people talk about that didn’t make any sense to me until I met you. We have a real connection. And I want to spend the next forever or two connecting with you.”

The second my lips drop open in shock, Derek pulls me into a soft, slow kiss. For a man who hasn’t really been in touch with his feelings until now, he’s certainly catching up fast. I would never have imagined it was possible to convey so much information through one kiss.

Derek really loves me. He thinks I’m precious. He wants to be with me, and for us to grow together.

We finally part for air, bodies entwined, him still on his knees, our hands exploring each other until our breath is ragged. His thumb slides over my nipple, making me quiver. The strong palm against my back presses me against him as if he can’t get close enough.

“You’re mine, Tilly,” he whispers as I stare into his deep brown eyes. “You’re my person. Since you’re the creative one, you’re going to help us figure out how to be together any way you want this to work. Does that sound like a good plan?”

“Yes, it does.”

“Now, can I hang the other two plants while you get ready for work?”

“No.”

“Okayyy...” His eyebrow raises. “What would you like to do instead?”

It’s as if some unseen force has overtaken me. My fist grips the center of his shirt as I walk backward through the door. “I think you need to see my room in order to properly understand the energy of this house.”

Derek grins, locking the door behind us, then following me up the stairs.

Just a week ago, I would never have thought I’d be bold enough to drag a man into my bedroom by the shirt, then start unbuttoning it.

But it’s okay. Because he loves me. That thought continues to echo through the back of my mind as we slowly undress each other. It feels like I am baring my soul by stripping him here, in this house.

A slight breeze washes over my skin, turning it to gooseflesh and making Derek frown. “We’re replacing that window before the fall storms kick in.”

He tears off his pants, then slips off my robe, skimming my panties over my hips and down my legs. I’m already desperate for him to touch me everywhere.

He looms over me, lifting me by the waist and setting me across the bed. My breath catches as he shoves my legs apart, burying his mouth between my thighs and instantly hitting that spot that makes me clutch at the quilt.

“I love how responsive you are,” he groans. “Already so wet for me, sweet girl.”

My back arches, my nipples so tight they almost ache. He licks and sucks, devouring me until the world blurs, leaving me twitching and gasping. Then he plunges his tongue inside me, flicking it against my oversensitive clit. I shake underneath him, crying out and coming so hard I see stars.

Derek grins when I finally catch my breath. “We really are going to have to replace that window immediately, or the neighbors are going to hear us every night.”

“I’m not that loud, am I?”

He moves over me, peppering my neck and collarbone with kisses. “You’re going to get louder. I want to hear every noise you make for me, baby.”

My hands are pinned on either side of my head, as he nudges my legs apart with a knee. My breath stutters as his hot, hard length brands my hip. He shifts, dragging it through my crease until I can’t stop squirming.

I can see it in his eyes: Derek wants to pound deep and hard and let his animal instinct take over. But he’s holding back. For me. Always gentle and caring, from the first second he saw me standing in the street taking a photo of a roofer’s phone number and insisted that I look up the reviews.

I’m in love with him. Completely.

Derek has constantly shown me how much he cares through his touch. Now, I’m going to have to find a way to do the same thing.

DEREK

It's incredibly difficult to be the thoughtful, caring gentleman Tilly needs when my body is screaming at me to take her hard, thrusting fast and deep.

I know I was a bit too rough the first time, yet she seemed to love it. Still, I need to make sure she's only getting what she wants and needs, and she's just so sweet and tiny and perfect. I can't hurt her.

Just as I begin to ease inside her, Tilly shifts, moving away. She pushes my shoulders, flipping me onto my back. A mischievous smile lights up her smoky blue eyes as I lie back and let her position me any way she wants.

Tilly straddles me then reaches down, angling the head of my cock so that it probes her entrance. My erection is so hard that it's already starting to ache.

We both exhale as she lowers herself an inch, then clasps my hands, looking deep into my eyes.

“Derek...” Her bottom lip quivers. “I love you, too.”

My heart surges as a growl floods my body. Releasing one of her hands, I scoop around her lower back, steadying us as I sit partway up, backing us up against the headboard. Her eyes light up as she realizes that this will make it easier for her to ride me while we kiss, and she nods.

“I love you so much.” The words are thick in my throat as she lowers herself another heartstopping inch.

She's slow and careful as she spreads her legs wider, easing down onto me. I rest my hand between us, teasing her clit gently in small circles until her chest begins to flush and her breathing starts to come more quickly.

Tilly finds her rhythm, moving her hips, using her thigh muscles to raise and lower herself a bit more with every stroke. Her body softens and she grows more slick, sinking even deeper onto me until I fill her completely.

"Oh," she murmurs, moving at different angles until she finds the spot that makes her quiver and vibrate.

I move my thumb faster, using my other hand to guide her hips, lifting and lowering her faster. Tilly's hands land in the center of my chest as she whimpers loudly. The satisfaction of giving her pleasure makes my heart thump triumphantly.

"You're mine." I thrust harder. "The love of my life."

"Just like you're mine," she chokes out. "My man, and my boss."

I chuckle, increasing the pace as we both fight for air. "You can be the boss of me whenever you want."

She laughs, then it turns into a moan as her body rocks above me. Tilly is a vision – breasts swaying, lips parted as she cries out, tightening around me as she chases the edge. I can feel her inner muscles fluttering. Her rapid pulse. I drink in the sight of her eyes closing as she loses herself in the deep sensations.

Electricity and satisfaction crackle through me. We truly were made for each other.

Tilly leans forward to kiss me, the headboard tapping against the wall as I flex my thighs, lifting her with my hips, bouncing her with every deep stroke.

"Oh," she moans weakly against my lips. "Yes...Derek... please..."

My shaft feels unnaturally hard as I thrust up into her, watching her sexy body tremble as the climax approaches.

Then her eyes snap open, palms landing on my shoulders as she moans.

I can feel that she's right on the precipice, so I rub her clit harder, feeling my face stretch with a grin as she spills over the edge like a beautiful waterfall. I'm right behind her, roaring my release as her body grips mine, squeezing out every drop of satisfaction as I fill her with long, hot spurts.

Tilly pitches forward onto my shoulder as we pant together, breathless and spent.

"Was that too much?" I ask.

She smiles, giving her hips a shake. "I have a feeling we're just getting started. And I see what you mean – that window's gonna have to be fixed asap."

Our bodies settle together perfectly as we cuddle in her bed. "You love me," I say accusingly as my fingers walk up her arm.

"Yeah, but *you* love *me*. That's, like, ridiculous."

"I actually think it's one of the smartest things I've ever done."

She laughs, lightly swatting at my chest. "The best decision you ever made was to get out of your stuffy office and start making something." Her beautiful blue eyes lock on mine. "You don't have to ever meet my parents, or my sister. They're not nice people. But my grandparents are sweet. And they're going to love you."

"I genuinely look forward to meeting them. Does your grandpa drink whisky?"

"I think so. But I don't know if it's allowed at the home."

"Please. I'll smuggle it in." Stretching out flat on my back, Tilly curls into my shoulder like a contented kitten. "I like this house."

She eyes me carefully. "Enough to live here?"

"There would be a few conditions. Like a king-sized bed. Espresso maker, if you don't already have one. Also, a

waterfall shower.”

“The kitchen might be a bit small for your chef lady.”

My fingertips trail along the side of her cheek. “Would you laugh if I said I’ve seriously started thinking about taking a cooking class?”

Her eyes dance. “Maybe a little, but I’ll come with you.”

“Can we put in a special whisky cellar?”

“Now you’re pushing it, buddy.”

“I’m sorry. You’re right. That’s going too far.”

Tilly props herself up, kissing me gently, then simply smiling with me. “I would never have imagined someone like you would just appear in my life.”

“And I didn’t think that leaving my main job would lead to something even more delicious than honey whisky.” This time when I kiss my beautiful girl, I try to pour every single emotion into my touch. How I adore her. How she’s the most precious person in the world to me. How her creativity and light brighten up this small town and make it irresistible to me in a way I would have never thought possible.

I want us to be together forever. In this house...when we travel...and someday when we might even end up at Shady River. As long as I have Tilly with me, my life is complete.

She is going to be my life’s work.

“Yes,” she murmurs against my lips. “Whatever you’re thinking about...yes.”

EPILOGUE

** Three Years Later **

“Mango whisky?”

Derek snorts. “Would you please stop suggesting fruit?”

“Okay... Fireplace whisky.”

“Humm... What does a fireplace taste like?”

I stare up at the roof of the bandshell, where we’re both lying on our backs on the old wooden stage. Derek is holding his phone up, taking notes as I fire out random ideas. “Cedar and cinnamon. Caramel. Oh! And smoke.”

“That we can absolutely try.”

“How about peanut butter whisky?”

He chuckles. “You think you’re joking, but I’ve tried it, actually. Sweet and interesting, but too weird for most people.”

I roll slightly to face him. “Are you serious? Ew.”

“Hey, you know the rules. You can’t say *ew* until you’ve tried it.”

“Okay, now I’m curious.”

“I think I have some in the cellar, actually. Ready to stop brainstorming, and start tasting?”

“Sure.”

We leave the park, and Derek drives back to what I used to think of as my grandparents' house, but is now our first home together. We got everything updated and refinished just before our wedding last year. Now that we're planning on starting to try for a family in six months or so, my whisky tasting days are numbered.

I walk into the house and nearly trip on the gray ball of fluff that hurls itself at my feet. "Bourbon, I'd really rather not step on you, please."

She jumps up onto the end table and gives me a pitiful look that suggests she might not have been fed this century. I pet her for a moment, then grab an assortment of glasses while Derek brings up an armload of bottles.

"Oh, she's going to hate this," Derek chuckles, pouring a small amount of a rare scotch into a rocks glass and placing it in the center of the coffee table.

Bourbon struts over, then leaps gracefully onto the table. We adopted her a month ago, and she spent the first few days sticking her nose into our glasses or mugs to sniff our water, juice, or coffee. When she eventually came across glasses of whisky, she was deeply offended by the scent. Until she cautiously popped her little pink nose into a sample of bourbon, then nodded, as if to say she approved of that one.

Hence the name.

Sure enough, Bourbon yanks her head away from the scotch as if seriously insulted. She jumps straight from the table to the easy chair, turning around once before curling up to keep an eye on us.

"Nana is going to love her," I laugh, as we take tiny sips of the new blend.

"Are they coming for dinner this weekend?" Derek adores my grandparents; that surprised me at first until I realized that he loves me so much it just spills over onto everyone I care about.

He picks up Nana and PopPop once a month so that I can cook us all dinner, with Derek as my more than capable

assistant. I wasn't permitted to know what happened when he sat down to negotiate the sale of this house with PopPop. I have an inkling that he let PopPop make up any price he wanted, then made various excuses to pay him more.

I also happen to know that he's subsidizing their stay at Shady River, but he's trying to keep that a secret.

My handsome husband grins as we taste the incredible new flavors created by his very own distillery that has more than tripled in size. Carmichael's Distillery is now known coast to coast, and a major chain of bars has picked up the main line.

As we chat about the flavor notes and brainstorm what we might do next season, Derek's warm hand strokes my back gently. We can never stop touching each other. Poor Ray is probably sick of catching us canoodling around the shop.

Although I'm having a wonderful time just chatting with him, I can't wait until we go upstairs. Last night Derek took me in the shower. The night before, I was spread across the dresser so that he could watch us in the mirror. For a man who doesn't think he's very creative, my sexy husband certainly keeps things surprising.

To heck with your stupid law, Murphy. This time, everything turned out perfectly.



Author's Note:

This should maybe be a secret, but I grew up around Port Hope, Ontario. I still remember the calming scent of the lake air from the stony beach, and the echo inside the bandshell – especially when it's snowing. It's a town where you truly feel the magic of all four seasons intensely.

It was during story time at the Port Hope Public Library that I decided at six years old that I wanted to write books. So thank you for reading, and helping to make my childhood dream come true!



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EXCERPT

Possessing My Lily

“Dammit,” I mutter. I’ve always hated that I’m so sensitive. Sometimes it’s handy, since I can always sense when my sisters need help. But sometimes it means things eat away at me.

Like right now.

My shoes echo on the bare wooden floor as I march to the next window. Gripping the edge, I try to lift it, but it won’t give. Channeling my frustration at the money situation, I plant my feet and yank as hard as I can.

My fingers slip, leaving me stumbling backward toward one of the dustiest walls. I squeal, feet and arms windmilling, trying to stop myself.

Stopping suddenly, it takes me a second to realize I didn’t hit the wall. A thick arm wraps around my waist as I hear a soothing voice. “Easy. I’ve got you.”

The smooth, deep baritone sends odd electrical pulses up my spine and the warmth of the chest against my back flips a switch, making me quiver.

Slowly turning, I look up into rich brown eyes, watching the man’s scowl transform into a pleasant smile. “I’m so sorry,” I stammer.

He blinks, staring at me in surprise, then runs a hand through his thick dark hair. “For what?” He lifts my hands to

check them. “I’m surprised you didn’t scrape your skin off, heaving on the window like that. Are you okay?”

I look up at the muscular stranger in front of me as he stands back and holds up his hands. “I’m the one who should be apologizing. I didn’t mean to startle you.”

His warm smile holds my attention for a second, then I start taking in the rest of him... which is a lot. The man is huge, but there’s a sweetness in his eyes as he takes another step back.

“I’m the electrician. Marty McGee has me updating everything on this floor.”

I’m still so surprised that I start to laugh. “When Aunt Doug told me about a contractor named Marty McGee I instantly pictured a cartoon character.”

He laughs with me. “Yeah, he’s a character all right.” He holds out a huge hand. “Dean Owens.”

Warm, slightly rough skin against my palm reminds me that I’m at the point in my life where most girls are looking for boyfriends. But this is no boy. He’s an extremely gorgeous man in his early thirties. “Lily Morgan.”

His smile almost knocks me over. “Right. Marty called you the flower girls.”

I can’t suppress the giggle that bubbles out of me. “Yeah, we’ve heard that before.”

Dean goes over to the window and pulls a utility knife from his pocket. He runs it all the way around the edge of the frame before gently pulling it open. “In these old buildings, sometimes the paint sticks over the years from the humidity.”

“I see. Um, so, you’ve updated the electrical?”

“Mostly.” He takes me quickly around the apartment, pointing out everything he’s done, then we reach the small storage room with the washer and dryer. “I’m afraid the connectors I need are on backorder, so it will be a few days before you can do laundry.”

“That’s fine. We’re living at the Willow Hotel down the street until this place is fixed up.”

“Yeah, sorry, I heard it was a rush job, but I can’t rush safety, and I really do need the right parts.”

“Totally understood. Thanks for your help.”

Dean turns to face me, his deep eyes so hypnotic that the few moments of silence between us stretch out. “May I get your number so that I can let you know when I’ll be finishing up?”

“Sure.” He enters it into his phone.

His head tilts slightly to the side as he studies my expression. “May I also use this number to call you tomorrow and ask you out?”

My heart thumps loudly, and it’s difficult to stop myself from nibbling at the corner of my thumbnail. “Me? Um... Sure.” Then the question in my eyes tumbles out of my mouth. “Why?”

It’s hard not to tremble as his hand slowly reaches out, taking mine for just a few seconds. “You’re beautiful, Lily. And a girl who risks splinters and attacks a nasty window with her bare hands is a fighter. I’d like to get to know you.”

My sisters are already coming up the stairs, laughing together. Dean gives my hand a gentle squeeze before dropping it. “I’ll call you tomorrow.”

As he walks away murmuring, “Good afternoon, ladies,” to my sisters, I can’t help but stare at his strong thighs and perfect butt in his faded jeans.

I’d been hoping for a clear indication that Sandersville was the place for me to settle, start my business, and begin my adult life.

Having the most gorgeous man I’ve ever seen ask me out just minutes after I get here?

That’s gotta be a sign.



*Possessing My Lily is available now
on Amazon and Kindle Unlimited.*

ALSO BY HALEY TRAVIS

The Lumberjack's Quirky Girl

I probably shouldn't have ogled Braden Oakley's big axe. *Oops.*

Tall as a redwood and built like a moose, the devastatingly gorgeous lumberjack should have nothing in common with little miss artsy-pants—aka, *me*. So how come the harder I try to stay away, the more I end up wrapped up in his muscled arms begging for more of his hard...wood?

Meet all four *HOT* Oakley brothers [HERE](#).

Possessing My Lily

From the second her delicate body thumped into my chest, I knew Lily was mine.

I'll find a way to prove I'm worth getting through her fears. That my possession will be the best thing for both of us.

Her New Bodyguard: Jackson

It was supposed to be a simple personal security job. But Ashley was so sexy and innocent that my need to care for her was far more than professional. She was sunshine and warmth and everything I truly desired. She felt like... home.

Mackton Mechanics

Rev your engines and get ready to fall for these hot mechanics! These huge, rough men are comfortable working with steel. What will happen when they're tinkering with a sweet girl's heart instead of a motor?

Never Date The Boss

Ashley was talked into one little "business date" with her boss, and everything changed in a heartbeat. Or rather, a flutter of them.

Daddy's Billionaire Boss

When Emily discovers her Dad's boss is the improbable man her aunt predicted she'd fall for, can she fit into his world?

Mr. Right... as Rain

A sexy older man appeared out of the gloomy rain to save me before a job interview. Maybe it was the enticing good luck kiss from a stranger, but I got both the job and an instant boyfriend.



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