

Billionaire's

UNEXPECTED

Bride

SLADE BROTHERS
SERIES

ALEXIS WINTER

BILLIONAIRE'S UNEXPECTED BRIDE

SLADE BROTHERS-BOOK 1

ALEXIS WINTER

A NOVEL

By
Alexis Winter

**ARROGANT, RUDE, HATED BY EVERYONE IN
TOWN...**

And 100% NOT my type.

How the hell am I supposed to fix everything wrong with Drake Slade?

Lord give me strength because the moment I meet him,
The only thing I want to do is kiss that smug look off his cocky face.
Yeah okay, so that's not the ONLY thing I want to do to him.

The day my perfect LA life was uprooted to move to middle-of-frickin-
nowhere Colorado,
Was the day I was convinced my life was over.
Raise and promotion be damned,
What good is it if the only place in town is a dollar store?

But here I am, wearing a jean skirt and cowboy boots,
Rootin and scootin my way around town,
And square dancing my way right into Drake's bed.

Don't worry, I have a plan.
It's just a little rough and dirty fun to make my time here pass,
Get the town to love him and move my ass back to LA.

**I will NOT lust after my new billionaire client.
I will NOT fantasize about all the naughty things I wish he'd do to me,
And I will ABSOLUTELY not fall in love!
Now I just need to convince my heart...**

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WANT A FREE BOOK?

SIGN UP FOR MY NEWSLETTER AND GET *MY BEST FRIEND'S BROTHER* FREE!

*It's no secret I've always had a crush on Damon Strickland.
My best friend's older brother and the center of every single one of my
fantasies.*

He's a walking, talking temptation.

*That cocky grin and those broad, athletic shoulders.
You know what they say about a man with big hands right?*

*Growing up, we always tormented one another.
I was the nagging, annoying little girl he hated
And he was the man-whoring, douchebag I couldn't seem to get over.*

*Now as adults he actually came through and helped me land a job at my
dream company.*

*How the hell am I supposed to focus when all I can think about is tearing that
tight suit from his tempting body!*

*What's even worse?
He forgot to mention, he's my boss.*

**SIGN UP [HERE](#) AND GET A SECOND FREEBIE SENT RIGHT TO
YOUR INBOX!**

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CELESTE

“**W**HITE chocolate mocha with an extra shot?” the barista asks with a pleasant smile the moment I step up to the counter.

I smile and nod. “You know me so well, June,” I say as I pull the card out of my purse, passing it over.

She quickly swipes it and hands it back before getting to work on my coffee. As I wait, I check the time on my phone and begin going through some emails. I click on one from my friend, Jenny. The subject line reads: *Rumor Has It . . .*

Guess what I’ve heard being passed around the office? You’re moving from Los Angeles to Colorado! They’re giving you a promotion and you’ll be running the firm out there, being handed the largest client on the books for that office! Congrats, hon! P.S. Try to act surprised. I just couldn’t hold it in any longer. Love ya.

Upon reading those words, my mouth drops open. Where did she hear this? Is it true? Am I getting the Colorado account? If I am, when will I be leaving? Are they going to tell me today?

“Celeste?” I hear it like a whisper that creeps into my head, snaking its way through all my spinning thoughts. “Ma’am, your coffee,” the barista finally says, causing my eyes to jump up to her as she holds out my coffee.

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” I say in a rush as I reach out and take the paper cup.

“I was lost in this sea of work emails.”

She offers up a small smile, but I’m sure she thinks I’m some kind of space cadet by the faraway look on my face.

“Have a great day,” she says in her sweet voice.

“You too.” I smile as I drop some cash into her tip jar and walk toward the door with a little extra pep in my step. Suddenly, I can’t wait to get to work. I can’t wait to find out if the rumor is true. If it is, I can’t wait to shove it down Jeremy’s throat. Jeremy has been my rival since college. We fought neck and neck for valedictorian, and I only beat him by a few points. I thought I was done with him and our competition, only to be surprised on orientation day. I walked into that board room thinking I had the world at my fingertips. I stopped dead in my tracks when my eyes landed on him, and his mouth dropped open when he looked up and saw me.

We can’t stand each other and we do our best to avoid crossing paths at all costs. However, that’s close to impossible when you work in the same office. He likes to brag about his accomplishments whenever I’m within earshot, and even though I have accomplishments of my own, his bragging always makes me feel inferior to him. But this tidbit of news is something he can’t beat, and I know when he hears my name come out of our boss’ mouth, he’s going to be more angry than the time I beat him for valedictorian. Just knowing this makes me giggle as I walk down the crowded sidewalk toward the firm.

As I finish my walk to the office, I can’t help but think about the move. Colorado? I never dreamed of living outside the city. I’m not a *fall in love, get married, and start reproducing as fast as possible* kind of girl. I never daydreamed about small towns and kids running around the yard, nor do I tear up at the sight of a tiny sock. I’ve always preferred the busy hustle and bustle of city life. I like spending my days walking through endless stores. I love chance encounters with a celebrities or YouTube personalities when the girls and I go out for brunch. I love that I have at least 10 different options for

coffee every morning. Could a small town even offer anything close to that?

My mind is an endless sea of questions as I walk into the lobby of the Mason, Lawrence, and Howe Law Firm. The lobby is packed with staff, clients, and outside workers: mailmen, couriers, and independent contractors. They're all busy talking or checking their packages or phones. I pass by them in a blur on my way to the elevator. I reach out to push the button, but someone beats me to it. I look up to find Gavin smiling at me.

"You looked a little dazed. Figured I'd help you out," he shrugs as his smile widens and his face reddens.

"Thank you," I breathe out, embarrassment washing over me.

He runs his hand through his neat, dark hair and his eyes dart around like he's searching for something to say. "So, how have you been?" He slides his hands into the pants pockets of his perfectly pressed suit.

I nod as I tighten my grip on my purse strap, needing something to keep me grounded. Gavin is young, rich, and handsome. I could easily slip into a daydream picturing us together. "Good. And yourself?" I manage to get out.

"Same old, I guess." He looks at his feet as he moves his weight from one to the other.

"How's the new puppy?" Gavin and I have always had a connection that neither of us has ever acted on. Actually, I don't know if he feels it like I do, but I refuse to act on it. We work together, which means we can't screw things up by acting on our feelings. So small talk is all we've ever done. Awkward small talk while waiting in line for the elevator.

"Really good," he replies, pulling out his phone and showing me a picture of a golden lab on his lock screen. The little puppy has a red bandana around his neck, and his long tongue is hanging out as he sits in the grass next to a rubber ball.

"Aww, he's adorable. Did you ever settle on a name?"

He snorts and rolls his eyes as he slides the phone back into his pocket. "Scout. I didn't name him; my mom did. She puppy-sits for me while I'm at

work. I left work one day and went to pick him up, only to find she'd named him. He was responding when she called him, so I didn't have the heart to change it."

"That's sweet, and it's a good name," I say, managing to keep my voice even, despite my nerves.

The elevator opens just as Gavin starts to reply, cutting him off. We both step inside and he pushes the button for our floor.

I turn to resume our conversation, but he beats me to the punch.

"I don't mean to be forward, but would you like to go out with me sometime? It seems like we've been dancing around it for years and I just figured, why not ask?" He looks hopeful with his wide eyes and raised brows.

"Oh, um . . ." I don't know what to say as I bounce from foot to foot. "Sure?" I answer, but it comes out like a question.

His smile breaks free as a long breath leaves his lips. He's relieved. "Really? I thought for sure you'd say no. Can I pick you up tonight? Are you free?" His words come out in a nervous rush.

A giggle slips between my lips, something that happens when I'm under pressure. "Yeah. Yes, I'm free."

He claps his hands together. "I'll pick you up around eight. Text me your address?" The elevator door opens but he's blocking my exit.

I force a smile and nod. "Mm-hmm."

He backs out of the elevator and holds out his arm so the door doesn't close as I step out. I turn to face him, unsure of what just happened. Why did I agree to that date? Maybe it's the chance I need to explain why this isn't a good idea. Or maybe the date will be bad and we'll decide we're not meant to be. Then all of this worry will have been for nothing.

"I'll pick you up later?" he asks one more time.

I nod my head with a smile in place, watching as he turns and walks away. When he's no longer in sight, a deep breath leaves my lips. Today has brought me all kinds of surprises. I shake off the worry and nervousness and

push myself forward, toward my office. I walk past my assistant and she follows me in just like she always does. As I begin putting my things away, she reads off my messages. Most of them are about returning calls or emails, but then she says it: “Mr. Mason would like to see you in his office as soon as possible.”

I can hear the fear in her voice. She’s afraid for me. No one gets invited into Mr. Mason’s office unless they’re being fired. I was hoping this announcement would be a public one, so I could watch the emotions change on Jeremy’s face. I know. I’m petty.

“Okay, thank you, Mary.”

She nods and rushes out the door, closing it behind her.

Now that the room is empty and I’m alone, I take a few minutes to get myself prepared. I take a deep breath and let it out slowly, feeling a sense of calm settle over me as I do so. I close my eyes and repeat the process. I can feel my heart slow to a steady rate as my breathing evens out. My eyes pop open and I begin straightening my gray slacks and matching blazer. I turn to face the mirror, fluffing my blonde hair that’s curled to perfection. My green eyes are wide with fear, but sparkling with excitement. Lastly, I pull out my tube of MAC lipstick and apply a fresh layer. I want to make sure I look my best when I accept my new position.

As I’m walking out the door, a feeling of doom settles over me. What if I’m not getting a promotion? What if I’m actually getting fired? I shake my head and roll my eyes at myself. No way am I getting fired. I’ve always met and exceeded the goals and expectations set for me by the company. I’ve never lost a case for the firm.

I come to a stop at the elevator and push the button, waiting for the car to return. I look around and find Jeremy standing behind the window in his office. His dark eyes are trained on me and he’s scowling. Maybe he’s heard the same rumor about my promotion. That would definitely cause him to look at me with annoyance and disgust.

The elevator dings and the doors open, giving me little to no time to think about Jeremy and his dirty looks. Instead, I step in and hit the button for the top floor. Riding up, my hands begin to shake and my heart rate spikes again. The calm, quiet moment from my office has worn off. As the elevator comes to a stop, I'm hit with nausea. I've been so excited about the possible promotion that I didn't stop to think about what this could mean. Moving east. Surrounding myself with nothing but dirt, manure, and mountain ranges. No more mid-morning shopping at Gucci. Bye-bye 10 different coffee shops. I feel like I'll be trading in my Louis Vuittons and fancy dinners for boots and mud wrestling competitions.

The doors in front of me open, leaving me frozen in fear as I lock eyes with the administrative assistant sitting in wait. All I can hear is the pounding of my heart in my ears. I can literally hear the blood rushing my body. I can feel my hair growing and my scalp tingling as each passing second ticks away as a reminder of how long I've been standing here. This poor woman probably thinks I'm having a stroke. I hear her clear her throat, but even that doesn't break me free from this fierce panic attack. The elevator dings and the doors begin to close with me still inside.

Finally, I react. I hold my hand out, causing the doors to open as I force myself to step out. As I walk toward her desk, she watches me like someone would look at a flight-risk bride on the day of her wedding. I tell myself that just because I'm being offered this position doesn't mean I have to take it. I can turn it down. I tell myself to just go in there and see what Mr. Mason has to say. This finally settles my nerves enough that I can speak when I come to a stop at her desk.

"My assistant told me that Mr. Mason was asking for me," I manage to stutter out.

"Ms. Teller, I presume?" she replies with a lift of one arched eyebrow. I nod and swallow down the excess saliva in my mouth. "Yes."

"Please have a seat and I'll let him know you've arrived." She motions

toward a line of chairs pushed against the wall. I turn and have a seat as I hear her talking softly behind me. When I sit and am facing her again, I see her hang up the phone as her eyes lock on mine.

“You know, he really isn’t as scary as most people believe,” she says, trying to reassure me.

I offer a weak smile. “It’s that obvious, huh?”

She peers over the glasses sliding halfway down her nose. “Only a little.”

I want to ask for some tips, but the office door opens and Mr. Mason comes into view. “Thank you, Stella. Ms. Teller?” He motions me toward his office.

I stand and quickly walk across the floor. His cologne washes over me as I step past him. It’s thick and heavy and soothing in a weird way.

He closes the door behind us. “Please, have a seat.” He moves around me to take his place behind his desk. His dark hair is combed back perfectly, and his blue eyes are shining bright. He’s wearing a slight smile, making me a little more certain that I’m not being fired. I mean, what kind of psycho smiles when they’re about to fire someone?

“I’m sorry we’re only just now getting around to having a sit-down meeting, Ms. Teller. I usually like to have monthly one-on-ones with our top lawyers long before this, but I’ve been extremely busy these last few months.”

I smile politely. “No worries, Mr. Mason. I completely understand.” I surprise myself with how even and controlled my voice sounds. I’m usually not a nervous person, but today, everything feels off.

“Let’s get straight to the point, yes?” he asks, clasping his hands together on top of his desk.

I nod and cross my legs as I lean forward slightly. I’m sitting on the edge of my seat, waiting for whatever news he’s going to break that could potentially change my life forever.

“I’m sure you’ve heard talk about our Colorado firm.”

“I’ve heard a little, but nothing at the same time,” I say, not wanting to reveal what I’ve heard about the rumor floating around the office.

“Well, John Burns, our top lawyer in Colorado, is retiring, and we’re needing to fill that spot. This branch of the firm has plenty of clients—ranging from your typical small business owner to your everyday, run-of-the-mill nobody. But by far, our top client there is the Slade family. They own the second-largest brewery in North America, with yearly profits in the hundreds of millions. We want you to run it and take over their account. Of course they have their own internal counsel but we need you to handle some concerns they have locally—a neutral party so to speak.”

My mouth drops open, finally hearing these words from him. “I . . . I don’t understand. Run it? Like the entire account? Why me?”

He sits back in his leather chair. “You’re a top lawyer here, and you out-bill and outperform your peers by a mile. You’re young and have fresh ideas. You’re beautiful—the perfect type to get the attention of Drake Slade. You’ve proved yourself time and time again. From looking at your credentials, I have no doubt you’ll be able to complete this job to our satisfaction.”

“Thank you. That means everything coming from you. But I’m curious—is this a permanent relocation situation? I mean, sure, I’ll get to manage a branch of the firm and one of the largest clients, but then what? I’ll take on this client for how long?”

“We’re thinking a year,” he replies.

“Okay, so I’ll manage this account for a year, and uproot my life by moving. And then when the year is up, I’ll just come back here and do what I’m doing now? Is this a promotion? I don’t mean to speak out of turn here, but you should know I have my mind set on partner at this Los Angeles branch.” I have no idea where I’ve gotten the courage to speak my mind like this, especially to Mr. Mason himself, but it’s true. Why should I move for a year only to come back to the same old thing?

He seems surprised, if not a little annoyed. “Most people in the office would jump at this opportunity,” he points out.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Mason, and please forgive my bluntness, but why? Why uproot and move for a year only to come back to the exact same thing? I mean, are you saying the salary and the office will be the same—no perks, nothing?”

He chuckles deeply under his breath. “You drive a hard bargain, Ms. Teller. Reminds me of when I was your age. A real bulldog. Tell me,” he sits up, placing his elbows on the desk, “what is it that you want?”

I have no idea what I want. I haven’t thought this far. But here goes nothing. “Well, sir, for starters, I’ll need a company car for the journey.”

“Of course, that’s standard,” he agrees.

“I’ll need a place to stay once I get there. I mean, expecting me to pay there while I’m still paying rent here wouldn’t work—and I can’t lose my current place if I want to move back to Los Angeles. I spent years on their waiting list and won’t go through that again.”

He smiles and nods.

“And if I’m going to be moving, I’m going to need something to sweeten the pot and make it worth my while. I want a 20 percent raise in my salary.”

He pauses at this for a moment. “Done,” he finally states.

“And when I come back, I want a bigger office, an expense account, and my own parking spot, because if I’m making more money, I’ll be buying a car. And lastly, I want a little more power around here. I’m not asking to become partner or have my name on the building tomorrow, but I want more than what I have now, which is basically nothing more than my name on a door. Right now, I’m just another lawyer here, Mr. Mason, but I’m going to dedicate my life to this firm. I’m not looking for a free meal ticket; I’ll work my fingers to the bone to accomplish my—and your—goals for this firm.”

His eyes dart around the room as he thinks things over. “Next year, Gary Wallace will be retiring. He has an office one floor down from here—four up

from your current floor. If things go well in Colorado, you can have his office.”

I can have Mr. Wallace’s office? I’ve only met him a few times, but even I know he’s untouchable here. He actually has a lot of pull when it comes to important business matters. Jeremy will never be able to touch me then.

I smile and stand, holding out my hand to shake. “I accept the position. Thank you, Mr. Mason.”

He smiles and stands, shaking my hand. “Ms. Teller?”

“Yes?”

“Not to rush you into anything, but we’ll need you on the road first thing Monday morning. That only gives you the weekend to get your affairs in order.”

That does put a rush on things, but for the newfound perks, I can do it. “That’s completely understandable, Mr. Mason. I’ll head down to my office and start packing now. Thank you again for this opportunity, sir.” I turn and head for the door. I place my hand on the handle, but turn to him before exiting. “I expect your assistant will write up the terms we’ve agreed to and have the contract in my office by the end of the day?”

He laughs but nods his head as he runs his hand across his jaw. “Of course. I wouldn’t expect anything less when working in an office full of lawyers.”

I laugh nervously to myself as I step out, closing the door behind me. I take a deep breath, trying to calm my nerves and the butterflies dancing around wildly in my belly. I pause for a brief moment, letting myself absorb it all as I calm down. His assistant turns to look at me from over her shoulder with a wide smile.

“Told ya,” she says with a wink.

I laugh. “I guess you were right after all.”

“He’s really not as scary as everyone thinks.”

“Thanks again. Have a good day,” I say, stepping toward the elevators as

she picks up her phone to make a call.

When I get off on my floor, the whole office is standing and cheering for me. Several people huddle around me, telling me “congratulations” and wishing me the best. All but Jeremy, that is. I look over at his office and find him behind the glass, checking out what’s happening. He frowns at me before closing the blinds.

“Looks like we’ll have to wait a little longer for that date, after all,” Gavin says, coming up to me and pulling me in for a hug.

I smile, excited that everyone is so happy for me. We’ve really gotten close over the last year. “Not at all. Let’s do lunch,” I say, pulling away from his hug.

“Really?” he asks, a little unsure.

I nod, smile still in place. “Of course. I agreed to a date. Let’s do it.”

I spend my morning packing up my office. Before I know it, it’s going on noon and Gavin is knocking on my door.

“Come in,” I say, looking over my shoulder.

“I was thinking we could hit up that new Italian joint. Unlimited breadsticks,” he says around a smile.

I laugh. Just the thought of unlimited breadsticks is funny to me. I haven’t eaten bread or pasta in years. “Sounds perfect,” I agree, planning on sticking with a celebratory glass of wine and a salad.

Gavin leads me down to the parking garage and over to his Mercedes. He opens the passenger side door and motions for me to slide inside. Within minutes, we’re zooming through traffic on the crowded-but-moving California freeway.

“So, Colorado, huh?” he asks as he weaves in and out of traffic.

I laugh. “Yeah, I never pictured myself wearing muddy boots and chewing on a piece of straw, but here we are.”

“How long are you going to be gone?”

“A year,” I reply.

“Wow, a whole year, huh? Now I’m suddenly hoping this date doesn’t go well.” He offers up a teasing smile. “I mean, not that I don’t like you or anything,” he continues.

I laugh out loud. “No, I understand. It would suck to have a great time only to put things on hold for a year. But hey, we might figure out that we can’t stand each other. So, here’s hoping,” I say.

He laughs at my stupid joke and the conversation continues its effortless flow as we pull into the parking lot at the restaurant.

When we’re seated, we start our meal with water and breadsticks. He immediately starts digging in, but I choose to sip my water.

“Not big on garlic?” he asks, raising a brow.

“I try to stay away from carbs. I spend way too many hours in spin class to throw it all away on a piece of bread.”

He shakes his head. “With a figure like yours, I wouldn’t worry about one little piece of bread.” His eyes fall down and slowly make their way back up to my eyes. I feel embarrassment wash over me, staining my cheeks.

He must pick up on it because he says, “What? I can’t be the first person to ever say you have a nice body.”

I shake my head. “No, of course not, but it’s usually not during a lunch date. Maybe a drunken night in a club or something, but not in the middle of the day.”

He sits back and shrugs. “Well, it’s true. You, Celeste Teller, are absolutely gorgeous, and I consider myself lucky to be on this lunch date with you.”

A smile forms on its own at his words. It really does suck that we waited so long for this date. Gavin is definitely the type of guy I usually go for. He’s good-looking, he’s always dressed nicely, he has a good job, and he has social standing—not that that’s all I look for. He’s one of the good ones, and I can’t believe someone hasn’t locked him down already.

I lean forward, running my finger around the rim of my glass. “How are

you still single?”

He chuckles. “I could ask you the same thing.”

I sit back with a shrug. “I think a lot of guys I meet are intimidated by me. I mean, I’m a lawyer for one. Most guys just think that I’m snobby and uptight—just some rich bitch.” I say it like I’m indifferent. I’ve heard these things all my life. I wasn’t raised poor. I went to prep school and understand that I have privilege—more than most. “Most powerful men want a woman they can make a stay-at-home wife—someone they can break out for corporate parties and in front of cameras to prove they’re not sleeping around with their assistants.”

He laughs loud and hard. “Lucky for you, I’m not that type of guy.” He shakes his head. “I don’t want marriage and kids. I’m far too selfish for that. I just want someone who’s okay with keeping our lives separate—someone who wants the same things out of life.”

“And what’s that?” I ask, taking another sip of wine.

“Fun. Experiences. I want to work my job, putting in 70+ hours a week without someone expecting me home for dinner at the same time every night. I want to take lavish vacations and not worry about kids. I want to do what I want to do, when I want to do it. I work hard. I play hard.”

Our eyes lock from across the table. “It sounds like we’re made for each other.”

We eat the rest of our lunch while talking about whatever comes up. I discover that Gavin is an only child who also went to prep school. His mother and father are still happily together, but can usually be found spending their retirement on beaches around the world or on their private yacht. He’s mostly on his own, just like I am. While I have family, they’re usually doing their own thing. We only ever come together on holidays or special occasions like my parents’ anniversary, when they have a massive party only the best people are invited to. It’s always the biggest and most lavish event of the season.

Gavin and I talk all the way back to the office. When he pulls into the

parking garage, he opens my door and takes my hand, helping me out. The moment I have both feet planted on the concrete, he pulls me against his chest where his lips press against mine. The kiss is soft and slow, gaining intensity. My heart pounds in my chest and butterflies tickle my stomach when his hand squeezes my hip. His tongue is sweet like wine and his rich scent washes over me, causing my eyes to flutter closed. The way he kisses, it's strong, but not too strong. It's enough to let me know he means the emotion behind the kiss, but not so intense that he'll be trying to press me against the hood of his sports car.

The kiss slows and breaks away. Our eyes lock and he lets out a long breath. "I can't believe I'm going to have to wait a whole year to do that again."

A silent laugh escapes my lips in a puff of air. "Weren't we supposed to find the things we hated about each other?"

He chuckles. "I tried, but I couldn't find anything. You were put here just to keep me humble."

"What does that mean?"

"Just a reminder that I can't have everything I want, no matter how much money I have," he says, pulling away.

Gavin walks me back up to the office and we promise to keep in touch over the next year. I finish packing up my office and decide to leave early for the day to get a jump-start on packing my belongings at home. But before I leave, I find the contract on my desk as Mr. Mason promised, along with a set of keys. I pick them up and smile before signing the document and handing it off to Mary.

I find the car that's been provided for me just outside the building. It's a shiny silver Tesla and I can't wait to have it packed up so I can get on the road, driving toward a better life. I place my box of office supplies in the passenger seat and climb behind the wheel, heading for my apartment.

The weekend passes quickly and by Monday morning, the car is packed

up and I'm dropping off a check to pay my rent for the next year. I have the trunk of the car crammed full of clothes, shoes, makeup, and jewelry. My little box of office supplies has been moved to the back. The passenger seat holds my purse, a tote bag full of snacks and drinks for the drive, and an envelope containing the paid rent receipt and keys for the place that's been rented for me for the next year.

I program the GPS with my destination, fill up with gas, and hit the highway, ready to meet this Mr. Drake Slade and conquer Colorado so I can get back to the new fancy life waiting for me in Los Angeles at the end of the next 12 months.

Everything is looking up. There's no doubt in my mind that I can do this job. Sure, Colorado isn't the place of my dreams, but I can do it for a year in order to get to where I really want to be: the top of the Mason, Lawrence, and Howe Law Firm, looking down on California from my big office in the sky—maybe even with Gavin on my arm—while stepping on all the little Jeremys of the world. Life has never looked so promising.

DRAKE

“**G**OOD morning, sir,” Harrison, my advisor at Slade Brewery, says as he walks into my house, shaking my foot as he passes the recliner I’m sitting in.

“What’s good about it?” I ask, being the bitter smart-ass I am. I pick up my cup of coffee and take a sip.

“And what exactly is so *bad* about it?” he asks, sitting on the couch at my side. Harrison has been with the family—and the family business—for as long as I can remember. He’s more than just an advisor for the company; he’s an advisor for my everyday life. He’s like my own personal assistant. I honestly don’t know what I’d do without him, but I’d never let him know that.

“The sun is shining,” he continues, “birds are chirping, and the temperature is warm. This is the kind of day that makes me count my blessings.” He leans back and smiles as he looks off toward the window. The blinds are down, but they’re open, sunlight streaming through, lighting up the dust like specks of glitter.

I scoff at his statement, and that causes him to cut his eyes toward me.

“You, my boy, are bitter and cynical. Are you ever going to get out of this bad mood you’ve been in for the last four years?”

“Highly doubtful.” I sit up, kicking down the footrest as I do so. I rest my elbows on my knees, holding my cup of coffee in both hands. “So, what’s

new in the world of alcohol?”

He shakes his head but lets the prior subject drop as he sits up. “I’ve been in contact with the firm, and they’re sending someone to replace Burns this coming week. I’ve already got you on their schedule for Thursday afternoon.”

“Did you tell them that I refuse to come into town? If I’m going to have to take time out of my day to meet with this new lawyer, it’s going to be on my terms.” My voice is firm and even, making sure he understands that I’m not giving an inch on this.

He nods once. “I did,” he replies.

“Fine.” I finish the rest of my coffee and set the cup on the coffee table between us with a loud thud. “Anything else that needs to be brought to my attention?”

“I don’t think so. Everything is running smoothly at the brewery. The beer is brewing and the whiskey is just waiting for the formalities.”

I chuckle as I think about the whiskey we’ve been working on for ages. A good whiskey isn’t made overnight. It takes years to age. If this lawyer can’t get this expansion underway, then I’ll have enough whiskey to last my family a lifetime.

You see, we don’t have enough room to keep producing beer and whiskey. That’s why I need this expansion. We’ve cut way back on the amount of beer we’ve been producing because we’ve had plenty in stock. But that stock is now dwindling. We need our beer production to go back up, and the only way that can happen is if we stop making whiskey or move somewhere else entirely. But if we stop the whiskey, that’s 10 years wasted, and I refuse to waste 10 years.

“And this new lawyer, he understands the predicament we’re in, correct?”

“I relayed the message, sir.”

“And he’s sure he’ll be able to get the job done, despite the locals hating me, my family, and this business?”

He nods. "It's worth a shot."

"Worth a shot?" I ask, turning to face him. "It's the only way, Harrison. If this doesn't go through, we might as well kiss this business goodbye. Our stock is getting smaller by the day."

"I completely understand, sir. Rest assured, I've done my job. Let's just hope this new lawyer is the shark they say he is."

I stand and take my cup to the kitchen, pouring a fresh cup. "Coffee?" I ask as he follows along behind me.

I turn to look at him as I pick up the bottle of whiskey, pouring just a tad into my coffee.

"Hitting the sauce a little early, are we?" Harrison has known me since I was a boy. He doesn't exactly approve of the way I live my life.

"I don't need your judgments, Harrison," I say flatly.

I hear him take a deep breath. Out of the corner of my eye, I see him shake his head. "I guess I'll be off. You know, enjoying my life instead of wallowing in the past." He turns without another word.

I lean against the kitchen counter and sip my coffee as I watch him walk out. When the door slams behind him, I decide a shower is in order. I take my cup to the bathroom with me and set it down on the counter as I start the water. As it heats up, I yank off my shirt and look myself over in the mirror. I look jaded and bitter. My tanned skin is wrinkling around my eyes, my beard is long and overgrown, and my dark hair is starting to gray around the temples from the hard life I've lived. I look rough and haggard. I guess Harrison wasn't too far off when he said "bitter and cynical."

I turn away from my reflection and finish undressing before stepping into the shower. The hot water pours over my head and I close my eyes, giving myself over to the heat and relaxation. For the first time this morning, I just let everything go. I don't think about the past or the future. I don't think about the stress the company is causing me to feel. I don't think about what Harrison said, or what the locals think. For once, there's nothing. It's silent,

and it's much needed.

I wash off quickly and end up sitting in the shower, just letting myself waste some time and absorb the heat. God knows my body needs the relaxation. When the water begins to run cold, I step out and get dressed for the day. I pull on a pair of jeans, my dirty work boots, a white sleeveless undershirt, and a flannel shirt. I add a leather belt and pull a hat on my head before heading outside to get some work done.

I live in the country, and my house is completely private. There's a long gravel drive that's at least three miles long. There's nothing but wheat fields as far as the eye can see. Where the fields end, the mountain range begins. It's absolutely breathtaking.

There's a big red barn just to the side of the old farmhouse. At one point in time, it housed many horses, but the last 20 years or so, it's been empty. I've been thinking about filling it again, but the barn needs a lot of work before that can happen.

I walk over to the barn and pull the doors open. I've been working on mucking the stalls and repairing the old, rotting wood piece by piece. I head up to the loft and flip on the light. I open the doors to let some sun and air in, then plug in the power saw to start cutting the wood I'll need for the day. After I've cut what I need, I carry stacks downstairs and get to work on repairing the stall doors. For each one, I replace all the hinges and hardware, hang the door, and oil it up so it opens easily without any squeaking. By the end of the day, all 12 stalls have new doors. Since I spent all of last week building new stalls, the entire ground level of the barn has been rebuilt.

I stand back and check out my handiwork. All the workbenches have been refurbished, and all the stalls and doors are brand-new. Instead of heading back upstairs to start my work there, I opt to crack open a beer, blare some loud music, and get to work on putting everything back in place.

I'm on my sixth beer when my older brother, Colton, walks in.

"Damn, are you going deaf in your old age?" he teases as he grabs a beer

for himself and jumps up onto the workbench to sit down.

I turn down the music and pick up my beer. “Not yet. Is that something I need to prepare for? You would know,” I joke. He’s only a couple years older, but I’ll never let him forget it since he wouldn’t let *me* forget it growing up.

He holds up his middle finger and takes a long drink.

“Where’s Milly?” I ask, leaning my shoulder against a horse stall.

He waves his hand through the air. “She’s with the new nanny.”

“Another one?” I ask with a raised eyebrow.

He doesn’t reply, only nods.

“How many nannies can one guy burn through? What are you doing to these poor women?” I ask around a smile. My brother is not easy to handle, and he’s only gotten worse since his wife passed away, leaving him alone with their one-year-old daughter.

He shakes his head. “I don’t want to talk about it, man.” There’s a long minute of silence between us. “The barn is looking good. You must’ve been working nonstop on this.”

I look around. “Yeah, it’s something to do.”

He looks at me. *Really* looks at me. “Is this something you’re doing for you, or is this something you’re doing in the hope of—”

“Don’t even say her name,” I threaten.

He holds up his hands. “I was just asking, man. I mean, she was the one who wanted horses, right? You’ve never shown any interest in raising horses.”

I finish my beer, toss it into a nearby trash can, and grab another from the cooler. “It’s just something to do. Yeah, I’m fixing up the barn. That doesn’t mean I’ll be buying horses anytime soon. Hell, I was thinking about putting an apartment in the loft upstairs, though that doesn’t mean I’m putting ads in the paper. It’s all just something to keep my hands and mind busy. Pass some time.”

He nods once. “Ah, I get it. Why don’t you go out and make some friends around town?”

I scoff. “Yeah, like that’ll happen. Why don’t *you* go make some friends around town?”

He snorts. “Yeah, you’ve got a point there.”

Our family is the most hated family in this town. It’s all over a bunch of bullshit too. Years and years ago, back when my family started building the brewery, some locals swore we built on their land. They say my great-grandfather paid off the zoning commissioner and got him to move the property lines. In their eyes, our brewery is on land we stole from them. Of course, it’s been so long now that all the original people involved have passed, but that hasn’t stopped the rumors or the dirty looks we get from their descendants. In my mind, I picture each family sitting down at Christmas dinner and telling their next generation the story of how the Slade family stole their land.

“So, what you been up to?” I ask, needing to take my mind off of this town.

He shrugs. “Nothing much. The garage has been keeping me busy.”

Colton got tired of this small town and the way everyone in it looked at us like we were diseased, so after he married, they moved to a neighboring town and settled down. He opened his own garage with a sliver of his cut from our substantial family fortune and has been living there ever since. I don’t blame him for needing to distance himself from this town. I should’ve done the same thing, but I got stuck with the largest portion of the business when he ran off to get married instead of sticking around and helping Dad when he was needed. He was the eldest son who refused his destiny. I was the second-eldest who was more than happy to take what the oldest rejected.

“Have you talked to Wyatt lately?” Colton asks. Wyatt is our younger brother. He’s absolutely crazy—the wild child out of us boys. He’s the type who will take any dare—no matter how stupid or dangerous—just to make

everyone laugh.

I shake my head as I lift my beer and take a sip. “No, why?”

He laughs. “He called me last night. Guess where he was?”

“Fuck if I know,” I laugh out.

He chuckles. “His ass was sitting in a Florida jail.”

I shake my head and rub my eyebrows with one hand. “What? How?”

“Party boy decided to get drunk and take a page from that movie *Coyote Ugly*. He got up on the bar and started singing and dancing. When the bouncers tried to get him down, he refused and started a fight that destroyed the whole damn club. A riot started, and the police broke out the police vans, all of it.”

I laugh long and hard. “Oh, shit. What’s his bail set at?” God knows we have the money to cover it, but I can’t resist the opportunity to tease him relentlessly.

“He’s waiting for the judge to decide. He’ll be there until Monday at least.”

“I tell ya what . . . that kid has lived his life way better than either of us.” I point at him as I toss my empty can into the trash and grab two more from the cooler.

He joins in on my laughter. “I’m tellin’ ya. Makes me wish I would’ve done some things in my life differently.” A sadness settles over his face.

“Yeah, but if you had, you never would’ve met and married Haven. And you wouldn’t have had Milly either.”

He doesn’t say anything. He just nods his head as he stands, lips pressed into a thin line. “Well, I’m going to get out of here. I just wanted to stop by and fill you in on Wyatt. I’d better get back home.” He takes the beer I handed him and pops it open as he moves toward his truck.

“Careful driving home, man,” I shout to him.

He laughs. “Okay, Dad,” he teases.

I lean against the barn door and watch as he backs out of the driveway.

When he's down the road a ways, the silence of the night settles around me. I forget how quiet it is out here until I have company and they leave. The silence is almost haunting. Deafening. Coming from a large family with four brothers, silence is lonely.

I shake off the chills running up my neck and shut down the barn for the night. I head into the house, and it's just as quiet as the barn was. My old hunting dog, Tatum, lifts his head off the floor when I walk in, but he's old and lazy. He doesn't move to welcome me.

"Hey, boy," I say, bending down and patting his head as I pass. He lets out a small groan. "You hungry?" I ask, looking down at him like he might actually answer me. I pour a bit of kibble into his bowl and place it on the floor. His eyes follow me, but he still doesn't move.

"Ugh, fine," I grumble as I pick up the bowl and move it directly in front of his nose. He rolls from his side to his belly and begins to eat, lying down. I laugh as I stand up and grab the bottle of whiskey off the kitchen table. I twist the cap, take a swig, and set the bottle down with a deep breath. "Whoa, that's some good stuff, Tatum."

He looks up at me but doesn't stop eating.

I decide I'd better find something for dinner. I haven't had any food all day—only coffee with whiskey, then beer, and now, some more whiskey. I open the fridge and pull out a steak. I toss some salt and pepper on it and throw some butter in my old cast-iron skillet. I cut up some peppers and onions and toss them into the pan, then throw the slab of meat on top. I place the lid on the skillet and move toward the bedroom. Stripping out of my clothes and boots feels amazing. My back is sore and my feet are tired. It's been a long day. Hell, it's been a long year—er, I guess a long *four* years.

I sit on the edge of the bed wearing nothing but my plaid boxers and open the bedside table. Inside the top drawer, pushed to the very back, is a picture frame. I pull the frame out and turn it over. The picture inside takes my breath away and causes a sharp pain to radiate through my chest.

CASEY EDISON. The woman I wasn't enough for. The woman who made me fall in love, only to rip out my heart and stomp on it when she left. In this picture, her long blonde curls are blowing in the breeze. Her plump red lips are turned up in a big smile. Her blue eyes are sparkling with the sun shining against them. Her white summer dress is being blown back by the spring breeze, showing me the perfect outline of her body: long legs, curvy hips, toned stomach, and perfectly round breasts. She's standing out in the old garden—her garden. The one that's now overgrown—a field of weeds since she hasn't been here to take care of it. When she left, the world stopped for me. Nothing mattered. Nothing matters, because I wasn't enough. Not for her. Not for anybody. This is my life. I am and will always be bitter, cynical, alone.

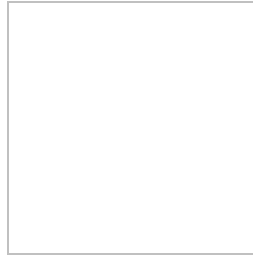
Anger washes over me and I toss the picture back into the drawer. I slam it closed and push myself back up. That's all I have to do: keep fucking going. As I walk into the kitchen, I grab the bottle of whiskey, drink away a little more of my bitterness, and take my place at the stove. One side of my steak is cooked perfectly, so I flip it over and replace the lid before leaning against the counter, staring off into space and wondering how the hell I ended up like this.

My eyes land on an old family photograph that's hanging on the wall. It's a picture of my mom, my dad, my brothers, and me. First, I look at my mother. She passed away from breast cancer when I was 15. She was a kind, patient, loving woman—the type of person every woman aspires to become. Then I look at my dad. Even in this picture, he looks aged, tired, and angry. Bitter. I guess I know where I get it. Then I look at myself. I'm only 10 or so in this picture. A boy. A boy who was always happy and smiling. Growing up, our family already had billions in the bank from the brewery and investments, but if you looked at how we lived, you never would've guessed it. We lived just like everyone else, and our home was an old two-story farmhouse. We had land, a barn, animals . . . everything you'd expect to see.

While my dad was at the office, the boys were expected to take care of the animals and the land. I guess that's how we became the hard workers we are now.

Now that Dad's retired and the business falls mostly to me, we all get a cut of the profits. None of us needs to work, yet we all still do. Life's too short to spend it being lazy. Hell, life's too short to spend it being alone, but here I am.

When my steak's done cooking, I toss it onto a plate and move to my favorite recliner. I turn on the TV and zone out—eating, drinking, and pretending I'm actually happy with my life. When my stomach is full and I can drink no more, I recline my seat and drift off.



I WAKE to the sound of my front door slamming. My eyes open to a room filled with blinding light. My hand immediately flies to my face, covering my eyes as a groan escapes my mouth. “God, what the fuck?” I mumble, desperately trying to uncover my eyes and adjust to the light so I can see who just walked into my house. Whoever it is better hope they can run fucking fast, because when I can see, I'm chasing them with my shotgun.

“What's the matter? Have a little too much to drink last night?” Harrison asks, and I can hear the humor in his tone.

“Fuck you and close those damn blinds,” I say, sitting up and straining my eyes against the light to see him standing by the front door.

“It's going on 10 a.m. Do you remember what you were supposed to do this morning?” he asks, face reddening.

“What? No.” I push myself forward, grabbing the cord on the blinds and yanking it so the shades fall down. Finally, I can see, but it's like when you're in a dark room and a camera flash goes off. That blinding light is still

in my vision every time I blink.

“You were supposed to make an appearance at the local food drive. How in the hell can you expect this town to like you when you make no effort to be a part of it?” He holds his hands out at his sides, eyes narrowing on me. “Remember that big cardboard check you were going to hand over to the shelter?”

I wave my hand through the air. “Any asshole can do that. Send Dave from accounting.” Why am I the only one who can hand over a check?

“That’s who’s doing it, you little shit. But that’s not the point. The point is, you need this town to be okay with you so you can expand your damn brewery. This town will never accept you as one of their own if you don’t at least try to be a part of it.” His face is now red. He picks up a newspaper from the coffee table and throws it at me.

I catch it. “Okay. Damn. I’m sorry.” I toss the paper back onto the table.

He points his finger at me as he takes a step closer. “If this business fails, it’s on you. I’ve done and am doing everything I can do. But I can only do so much. This one is on you.” Without another word, he turns and walks out, slamming the door behind him.

I fall back into my chair and take a deep breath. My head lolls to the side, where I find a half-empty bottle of whiskey sitting on the end table. I reach out and pick up the bottle, but then guilt begins eating at me and I put it back down.

“Fuck,” I whisper, massaging my temples. How the fuck did I get here?

I know exactly how I got here, but I refuse to think about her. I already gave in and looked at her picture. That’s something I only do in moments of weakness. I try my hardest to forget about her, but sometimes she comes sneaking back in. In those moments, a pain seizes my heart, and a pit opens in my stomach. It’s enough to stop me dead in my tracks.

I shake my head and stand, moving toward the shower. I need to occupy my time—to get my mind off everything. I step beneath the hot stream of

water and rest my head against the wall as my eyes drift closed. Her picture forms beneath my lids. It takes on a life of its own. The memory of that day plays out and I'm powerless to stop it.

We were getting ready to go to Colton's, to have dinner with him and Haven. She went out to the garden to cut some roses—planning to give a bouquet to Haven as a *thank you* for dinner. When I went outside and saw her, I couldn't keep my eyes or hands to myself. I snapped that picture and she caught me at the last minute. When the wind blew that dress back, giving me the perfect view of her form, I knew I wouldn't be able to wait until after dinner. I walked up to her nice and slow, just taking her in. I pulled her against me and pressed my mouth to hers. I can still feel her soft lips moving with my own. I can still taste her. I can still feel her heat from the moment I pushed that dress up and slid into her against the back door.

My body comes alive just thinking about that moment. My palm moves up, taking myself in hand. I begin pumping up and down. My heart rate spikes when I remember her soft moans. My breathing picks up as I recall her soft skin against mine. My release rises to the surface and I let out a deep growl as I spill myself onto the shower floor. But the moment my body comes down from its high, anger washes over me and I reach out and lightly punch the shower wall. A tile cracks under the pressure. I hate myself for being weak. I hate myself for not being enough. But most of all, I hate myself for chasing her off instead of just being what she needed.

It's going on noon when I'm walking into the brewery. I head back to my office, passing Harrison on my way. He follows me back to my office, closing the door behind us.

"Well, look who decided to grace us with his presence today." He smiles, causing the wrinkles around his eyes to grow deeper and larger.

"Look, I know you're pissed off. If I were you, I would be too. But you're forgetting one thing."

"What's that?" he asks, walking closer.

I place both hands on top of my desk and lean over it. “I’m the boss. I’m the one in charge. I’m the one who decides if this place stays open or closes. While you may have been employed here longer than me, I was the one born into this. It’s rightfully mine. And I demand a little respect. If I want to spend my nights loaded with more whiskey than any one person should be able to handle, then that’s my business. You are not my father. You are not my keeper. You’re the advisor here because I say you’re the advisor. When I need advising on something, I’ll let you know. Other than that, please keep your damn mouth shut. Got it?”

He slides his hands into his pockets, cocks his jaw, and nods his head. “Will there be anything else, sir?”

“Yes, I’d like the expansion blueprints, please.”

“Right away, sir.” He turns and leaves without a look back.

My heart is pounding in my chest as anger floods my body. I take a seat behind my desk and breathe deeply, trying to clear out the aggression I seem to almost always have. I hate that I had to be that way with Harrison, but sometimes a man needs to be put in his place, especially when he’s overstepping his boundaries. It’s none of his business how I spend my nights. If I don’t want to show for an event, that’s my choice. I don’t need to be chastised for it like I’m a child. I say how I live my life. I say how I run this business. I say who’s employed here. Me.

Harrison is walking back in with the tube of blueprints. He hands it over, anger marring his face, but doesn’t say a word.

I take the tube. “Thank you, Harrison. That will be all.”

He nods once, then turns and leaves.

When I’m alone in my office, I open the tube and pull out the plans. I unroll them and lay them flat on my desk, holding down the corners with anything heavy enough to keep them in place. I stand over the papers and think of everything that needs to happen in the next week. I find myself counting down the minutes until I meet with this new hotshot lawyer, praying

he'll be able to deliver on all the promises made. I find it completely irresponsible that Burns would decide to retire right when I need him most. All these years, he did nothing but sign a document or two while collecting the money we paid him. And now that we actually need him for something, he's passing the torch to someone else? I would've fired Burns long ago if it hadn't been for my father, plus the fact that he's the only good lawyer in town.

If this new lawyer can get the locals on my side and convince the four families to sign off so I can build adjacent to their properties, and if he can push all the paperwork through and get the city to sign off on the permits needed, I'll pay him double—hell, triple. I need this. I just need for one goddamn thing to go right.

The door opens and my assistant walks in. "Here's your mail, sir," Janell says as she walks across the room and hands me a stack of envelopes.

"Thank you, Janell." I take the stack from her and drop it onto my desk, not bothering to go through it today. I have enough on my plate. I need to stay focused and keep my head in the game, at least for the next year. In 12 months, if all goes right, the expansion will be done, and we'll be selling and producing beer and whiskey. I'll be able to take a break. I'll be able to breathe. That's when I'll figure out my life. That's when I'll be happy.

CELESTE

“**Y**OU’VE got to be kidding me,” I mumble to myself as I look at the motel room the firm has rented for me for the next year. A *motel!* Not a nice hotel with room service, but a sleazy motel that can be rented by the hour for affairs and hookers. Honestly, I’m afraid to even walk across the dingy carpet in my Jimmy Choos. No way am I setting my Louis luggage on that sticky table. I run my finger across the top of the old TV. A line appears in the dense dust. The full-size bed is covered with a pea-green comforter. The two pillows aren’t firm and they reek of cigarette smoke. The mirror above the sink is dirty and covered in water spots, and has a crack that travels the length of the glass. In several places, the old plaster walls are cracked and filled in, although the new plaster doesn’t match the old. The ceiling isn’t white—more of a yellowish color with water stains.

I pull out my phone and call the office. I put the phone to my ear but it never rings. It takes several long seconds before the phone beeps, telling me I don’t have a signal.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” I repeat for what feels like the 100th time since I pulled into the parking lot of this shitty motel. I move around the room, holding the phone up above my head, trying to find a signal. Finally, I find one spot where my phone works. I only have to stand on the chair to make a call.

“Thank you for calling Mason, Lawrence, and Howe. This is Mary. How

can I help you?”

“Mary, it’s Celeste,” I say in a rush, hoping the phone doesn’t drop the call.

“Celeste, how are you doing?” she asks, sounding happy to hear from me.

“Fucking fabulous. Listen, I need to talk with Mr. Mason. Could you please connect me to his assistant?”

“Sure, one sec,” she says. The phone beeps twice, then rings through.

“Mr. Mason’s office. How may I help you?” she answers.

“Hi, this is Celeste Teller. I’m calling from the Colorado location and I’m needing to speak with Mr. Mason.”

“I’m sorry, but Mr. Mason is out of the office right now. I would be more than happy to take a message.”

I almost growl, but I hold it back. “Could you *please* just tell him to give me a call back?” I give her my number and she promises to have him return my call. I hang up the phone and collapse into the chair I’ve been standing on. My eyes take in the room once again. Disgust washes over me and literally makes a chill race up my spine. Who knows what’s living in here: bugs, snakes, diseases? I shiver as I push the thought away.

Maybe I can find another place here in town, or at least close to it. I can pay for the night and have Mr. Mason move the money from this place to the place I find. I grab my luggage and head for the car. I toss my suitcase into the trunk and pull away from the motel I hope to *never* set foot in again.

I pull out of the parking lot, taking a left on Main Street. This place is certainly full of small-town charm. There’s a family diner, a small post office, a gas station, and a bar all on the same street. I pull into the restaurant, thinking I’ll have dinner and do some research to find a better place to stay. I park the car and get out, not noticing that there aren’t any cars in the parking lot other than my own until I tug on the locked door.

“Seriously?” I ask myself, looking at the sign on the door that states its business hours.

Wednesday evenings, the restaurant is closed for church services.

“That’s just great,” I mumble, walking back to the car and getting behind the wheel once again. I drive up and down Main Street. I find the church, the school, and a series of offices—including Mason, Lawrence, and Howe—but no other restaurants or hotels. Giving up, I turn around and stop at the bar. If nothing else, I can at least drink some wine and fill my stomach with nuts. The thought makes me cringe, but what else am I supposed to do? I need food. I’ve been on the road for the last three days. I just need a decent meal, a long, hot bath, and a big glass of red wine. Then a good night’s sleep to prepare for my meeting with Mr. Slade tomorrow.

There are five cars in the gravel parking lot of the bar, so I’m confident this place doesn’t operate by church hours. I pull open the large wooden door and loud music filters out. When I step inside, everyone turns to look over their shoulder, freezing when they find me.

Every eye in the place is watching as I slowly walk up to the bar and have a seat. It feels like I’m in a movie—where the stranger walks into a crowded bar and everyone stares as the music stops and the whole place goes quiet. Yeah, that’s how it feels, only the music doesn’t actually stop.

The bartender walks up. She’s a tiny redhead with green eyes and a big chest. She smiles sweetly. “What can I get ya?” she asks, wiping her hands on a white towel.

“A glass of red wine would be great,” I reply, digging in my purse for some cash.

The whole bar, filled with only five people, seems to laugh in unison, causing me to jerk my head back up to see what I’ve missed.

“We don’t carry the stuff,” the bartender says.

“Really? You don’t carry any red wine?” I asked, shocked. What kind of bar doesn’t carry wine?

She shakes her head. “We’ve got beer and whiskey.” She places her hands on the bar and leans on it as she watches me.

“How about a martini?”

“We’ve got gin; no vermouth.” She stands upright and crosses her arms.

I let out a puff of air and shake my head. “Vodka cranberry?”

She nods, finally walking away to mix my drink.

I lay \$20 on the bar and pull out my phone to find another place to stay, however, my phone still doesn’t work due to no signal.

When the bartender comes back, I ask, “Will a cell phone work anywhere in this town?”

She snorts. “Not likely. We’re supposed to be getting a tower built ‘soon,’ but there’s been talk of that for about five years now, and so far, nothing.”

“Great,” I mumble, taking a sip of my drink. I cough when I find there’s more vodka than cranberry.

“I’m Celeste Teller. I’m the new lawyer for Mason, Lawrence, and Howe.” I hold out my hand to shake.

Her eyes move from my face, to my hand, and back, before she finally shakes it. “It’s nice to meet you. I’m Stephanie.”

“Stephanie, I just got into town and my firm rented me a room at the Glendale Motel. Are there any other places around, or is that the only one?”

She nods. “That’s the only place for about 75 miles,” she says in her thick country accent.

I feel my shoulders slump. “There are no towns or cities for 75 miles?” I ask, confused and worried.

“That’s right. We’re sort of in the middle of nowhere,” she says as she begins to wipe down the bar.

“So where does everyone eat? Is there only the one diner?”

Again, she nods. “But we have a kitchen too. I mean, it’s limited, but if you’re just wanting a burger and some fries, it’s better than nothing.”

My mouth waters at the thought of a burger and fries. “A salad?” I ask, feeling hopeful.

She smiles. “That’s even better, because Sam won’t have to fire up the

grill.” She turns away from me. “Hey, Sam! I need a salad!” She turns back to me. “What kind of dressing?”

I shrug, not even caring if I have dressing. “Whatever you have,” I say, almost giddy at the thought of food.”

A swinging door in the back opens. “Got it,” says a man I’m assuming is Sam.

“So, where ya from?” Stephanie asks.

“Los Angeles,” I answer, taking another painful sip of my drink. The vodka burns my throat. I pray it goes numb soon.

She gives me a sidelong glance. “And you volunteered to come here?” Her brows pull together as she watches me.

I move my head from side to side. “I didn’t volunteer. I’m a city girl through and through, but I was promised a promotion when I return in a year.”

“You’re staying here for a year?” she asks, adding on a whistle. “I couldn’t imagine staying in that rundown motel for a year.”

I snort. “Right? I have to find something else. You know of anyone renting out a room, apartment, or couch?” I joke about the last part.

She bites her lower lip. “We don’t have any apartment buildings in town. It’s mostly just big groups of families. The younger people usually move out of town to go to college. The older folks have been where they’re at for a lifetime now. Houses usually don’t go up for sale or rent here either. They’re passed down from one generation to the next. Anyone new usually builds their own house. There are some people who have built little apartments on their property though. Like, I live in an apartment above a barn. And my boyfriend turned his family shed into a tiny house. We all just do what we can.”

I lightly bang my head against the bar and she laughs. “I’ll keep an eye out for you though.”

“Thanks,” I mumble.

My salad comes out and is placed in front of me. I waste no time diving in. It's not the butter lettuce salad with dried organic cranberries and creamy French feta from Joan's on Third, but it will do. I pour on the oil and vinegar dressing and shovel it in. The lettuce is fresh and crisp, and the veggies taste better than I could've imagined.

"This is amazing," I say around a mouthful.

Stephanie nods. "I know. Every ingredient is homegrown. That's one good thing about country living." She smiles and winks at me.

"What about coffee?"

"We have coffee and so does the diner. No coffee shops though."

At that, I want to throw myself down on the ground and kick and scream until I'm given my way, but I refrain. "A gym?"

She presses her lips together and shakes her head. "Nope."

"Movie theater, mall, or salon?"

"Nope, nope, and yes! Jenna Lindon runs a salon out of her garage. She does real good work." She nods as she points to her head. "She did these highlights for me a few weeks ago. Not expensive either." She leans against the bar. "She makes monthly trips to the beauty supply down in Campbell, where she gets dyes and bleach. She even does nails." She holds her hand out to show me her manicure.

"Does she have a license?" I ask, a little worried about some random woman doing my highlights. I'd die if my hair fell out due to inexperience.

She nods her head vigorously. "She does. She lived in Chicago for a time, but it didn't work out. So she moved back here and the ladies of this town have never been happier."

I smile but continue to eat. This town is literally like some forgotten part of the map. Why do people want to live here? Don't they want cell phones that work? Wouldn't it be easier to just order something from Postmates than to have to drive over an hour out of town to reach civilization? I'll never understand small towns or the people who choose to live in them.

I'm happy to see that Stephanie and I are hitting it off so well though. I was told that it's needed for this job. I need to get to know and become friends with every single person in this town if I want my job to be as easy as possible. I had no idea what that meant—and still don't—but I think it just means that to get anywhere in this town, I need to be liked by everyone. I have a feeling the locals stick together. If one of them doesn't like something, then none of them will like it. Since I'm needing to get an expansion approved by the city, I need the city to like me.

When I finish my salad, I look around and find that everyone who was once staring at me has now lost interest. There's one guy sitting at the end of the bar, watching TV. Two others are playing a game of pool. And the last one is falling asleep on the bar.

I point in his direction. "Is he okay?" I ask Stephanie.

She waves him off. "It's Jerry's bedtime. I'm sure his wife will be here soon to pick him up."

"This happen often?" I ask, finishing off my drink.

She nods. "Daily. She drops him off in the morning on her way to work. He sits here and drinks his breakfast, then he has a burger for lunch and drinks the rest of the afternoon." She shrugs as she tosses a towel at his head. "Wake up, Jerry. Your wife will be here soon."

He groans and sits up, but is having a hard time keeping his eyes open.

"Remember what she said the last time she caught you sleeping on the bar?" Stephanie reminds him.

"Yeah, yeah," he grumbles as he wipes his hand down his face and stands. Without another word, he walks off to the bathroom.

Stephanie walks back over, laughing and shaking her head. "You want another drink?"

"No, I think I'm just going to go back to my shitty motel room and take a long, hot shower. I've been on the road since Monday, and I could use a little rest before getting to work tomorrow."

She nods as she hands over my bill. For my drink and salad, the total is only five dollars. “Five dollars?” I ask, surprised.

She nods. “Yeah, why?”

“In Los Angeles, this would’ve cost at least \$14!”

She laughs. “I guess you found the second good thing about living here, huh?”

My money is still on the bar, so I leave it and tell her to keep the change.

“Thanks,” she says with a wide smile as she begins cleaning my place at the bar.

“I’ll see you soon, I’m sure. Something tells me I’ll see a lot of everyone in a town this small.”

“That you will,” she agrees.

I drive back to my shitty motel and drag my luggage back into my room. I stand in the middle of the tiny space and look around. What can I do to make this room a little bit more clean and homey?”

I have an idea, and with that, I head back out to see what the local store has to offer.



TWO HOURS LATER, I’m standing in my nice—er, nicer—motel room. I’ve stripped the bed of its pea-green comforter and replaced it with bedding of my own. I purchased a homemade quilt the store was selling on behalf of someone here in town. It’s white and has tiny little flowers sewn onto it. I bought new pillows, sheets, and throw pillows to decorate. I got a couple of rugs so my feet never have to touch the dirty carpet. I ordered a new flat-screen TV on Amazon—I literally had to hardwire my laptop to get internet access—and it’ll be here in a week. I even bought my own mini fridge, microwave, and hot plate so I’ll be able to keep food and prepare it in my

room. It's not the best, but it's better than it was, and it will have to do—at least for now.

Now that my room is a little more livable, I head to take that shower. The hot water feels amazing beating against my tense, sore muscles. My lavender body wash eases away the stress I've been carrying all week and almost makes me forget that I'm in a town that has nothing to do. I wonder what people do here? I push the thought away, choosing instead to focus on resting and relaxing so I can get to work tomorrow. I need a clear head. I have a lot of people to meet around town, including Mr. Slade, and I have a lot of cases to familiarize myself with before I can represent my clients.

When I finish my shower, I step out, pull on some pajamas, and sink into my nice, fluffy bed. My cell phone rings and I see Gavin's name flash on the screen. I answer but the call drops. I quickly send him a text, letting him know the landline number for my room. Minutes later, the phone beside the bed is ringing.

"Hello?" I answer, a smile stretching across my face.

"How was the trip, beautiful?"

I want to giggle, but hold it back. "Long, tiring, boring. Not eventful at all unless you're amused by fields and tractors. And in case you're wondering, I'm not."

He chuckles. "Really? You struck me as a modern-day Daisy Duke," he jokes.

"Ha ha," I retort, and my fake laughter makes him laugh.

"Well, I'm glad to hear you've arrived safely."

"Thank you for checking on me. How are things at the office?"

"Same old," he says. "Jeremy's been telling anyone who will listen that the company moving you out of state is their way of pushing you out. He's got people taking bets on whether or not you'll return next year."

I scoff. "Ugh. I hate him."

"What's the deal with you two, anyway? Everyone knows how much you

hate each other, but no one knows why.”

I chuckle. “It started back in college. I was his only real competition. That competition turned into hate. And then we both somehow got a job at the same company, and all that competition came back with a vengeance. He thought he was finally rid of me, but there I was, still beating him at every turn.”

He laughs. “Yeah, sounds about right. From what I’ve seen, you do kick ass at your job.”

My face flushes with the compliment. “Thank you. You’re not so bad yourself.”

His voice gets low and hushed. “Tell me we’re still on for that date next year when you return? I just can’t get you off my mind.”

Hearing the desire in his voice makes my heart race. “Absolutely. If you think I’m passing on that, you’re crazy.”

“Just . . . don’t go falling in love with a cowboy or anything, okay?”

I laugh long and hard. I don’t stop until my eyes are watering and my lungs crave oxygen. “That’s never going to happen. Could you see me on the arm of some cowboy?” My laughing picks back up just from thinking about it.

He chuckles. “Good night, Celeste.”

“Good night, Gavin.” I hang up the phone, turn out the light, and curl up in bed. The only thing I can think about is Gavin and our lunch date and how things could’ve been between us right now if we’d revealed our feelings sooner.

My alarm goes off at 5 a.m., and I move quickly to shut it off. When the room is silent, I close my eyes and take a deep breath, hoping to prepare myself for the day. I throw back the blanket and get up—moving toward the small single-serve coffee pot sitting on the counter. I start myself a cup as I move toward the sink. I brush my teeth and wash my face before starting on my hair and makeup. As I apply the finishing touches, I finish my coffee and

toss the paper cup into the trash.

I pull on a black skirt and a white button-up dress shirt. I tuck the shirt into my skirt and put on a wide belt. I slip my feet into my favorite black heels and look myself over in the mirror. My hair is down—curled to perfection—and my makeup is perfect—not too much, but just enough to make me look professional. I add a silver necklace, my hoop earrings, and a thin chain bracelet. I put everything I'll need into my purse and grab my briefcase on my way out the door.

On my way to the office, I swing by the diner and grab a muffin and a cup of coffee. The restaurant isn't full, but it isn't completely empty either. There are a few old men sitting at the counter, drinking coffee, eating breakfast, and talking. They give me quick glance, smile, and nod their heads in my direction, but never actually address me.

When I get to the office, it's going on 6 a.m. I park my car and carry my things to the front glass door. I insert the key I was given and notice that my name has already been put on the door. I smile to myself as I walk inside the dark, quiet office. I turn on the lights and lock the door behind me since we don't open for two more hours. Turning to face the office, I look over everything.

Dark gray carpet covers the floor, and the walls are a light gray—almost white. The trim is done in white and there are lights on the walls, making it look clean and classy, but also like an upscale country office. The assistant's desk is up front, and the nameplate on the desk reads *Deborah Wiles*. There are pictures on the walls, and I step closer to find that every picture is a little piece of town history. The photos show the local post office being built, a ribbon-cutting ceremony at the diner, the brewery, plus multiple photos of farms, animals, and tractors.

I move further into the building and find my office, with my name already on the door. I push it open and flip on the light. The same gray theme greets me. I have a big oak desk with a bookcase and filing cabinets. The

desk is an L-shape, with one end holding the computer, and the other side empty and clear for when I meet with clients. There are two chairs on one side of my desk, and the remainder of the room has a nice little seating area with a couch, coffee table, and big flat-screen TV. If this place had a full bath and a kitchen, I'd stay here. It's clearly nicer than the motel I'm stuck in now.

Instead of sitting down and getting to work, I take a moment to let it all soak in as I enjoy my breakfast and coffee. I sign in to my computer, email, and calendar. My meeting is already set with Mr. Slade. Listed alongside his name is his address with a note declaring the meeting is to take place on his property. I let out a sigh and shake my head. Clearly, Mr. Slade isn't the come-into-town type.

I was told to expect a lot of local travel with this position. Apparently, Mr. Burns didn't require his clients to come to the office, and instead visited them so they didn't have to take time out of their schedules. It's not a big deal, but it would be easier for me if meetings took place in the office. I'd be able to fit more people into one day instead of having to spend extra time traveling.

For the next two hours, I look over my calendar and pull files to look over for the clients I'm going to be meeting this week. Before I know it, I hear someone unlock the office door and walk in.

"Hello?" someone calls out.

I move quickly from my desk to the front of the office.

A woman with blonde hair is placing her things on her desk. She's an older woman with wrinkles forming around her blue eyes. She smiles kindly and holds out her hand. "You must be Celeste. I'm Deborah, your assistant. But you can call me Debbie."

I shake her hand. "It's nice to meet you, Debbie. I'm so happy to have you here. I feel like this would be a lot more to adjust to if I had to do it all on my own. At least you can give me a rundown on everyone in town."

She laughs. "I know all the details," she agrees.

“I have a meeting later today with Mr. Slade. What can you tell me about him?” I ask, leaning against her desk as she takes a seat and starts up her computer.

Her eyes grow in size and she presses her lips into a tight line. “Well . . . Mr. Slade is . . . to be frank, he’s a total pain in the ass and I feel for anyone who has to deal with his shit on a daily basis.” She smiles sweetly, like that last sentence just got away from her.

“Really?” I ask, sitting down in the empty chair across from her.

She nods. “He’s been nothing but a problem for Mr. Burns. You see, the brewery has been in the Slade family for years—decades, actually. When they took us on as their legal counsel, Morty Slade was running it. But it’s since been passed down to Morty’s son, Drake. And that’s when all the problems really started.” She brushes a grayish-blond strand of hair behind her ear. “That family has been surrounded by scandal since the brewery started. It’s common knowledge around here that Alan—Morty’s father and Drake’s grandfather—paid off the zoning commissioner and got him to move some property lines so he could build the brewery. The thing is, there’s no proof, which means he got away with it. Since the day construction started on the brewery, the other families in town have had serious issues with the Slade family. And those problems haven’t stopped. They believe their land was stolen from them—making the Slade family billions in the process as they’ve grown to become one of the largest breweries in the country. Every now and then, one of them will pitch a fit about something, but mostly, it’s just bad-mouthing around town. The Slade family is basically the black sheep of this town. In the eyes of the locals, they can’t do anything right. It doesn’t matter that they single-handedly rebuilt the only school in town, or that the tax money the brewery pays is the money that gets things done around here. It doesn’t matter that they donate to every charity event.”

“So what you’re saying is that the Slade family isn’t really bad? They just have a bad rap?”

She nods. “Yes, for the most part. Drake and his brothers grew up being hated. It’s turned them into outsiders. They’re not accepted no matter what they do. After a while, they just stopped trying. They rarely come into town, which means you’ll have to go to him for any appointment. Drake is arrogant and believes that since he’s the client paying us the most money, he’s automatically the most important. He will call and want something at the drop of a hat, and he can’t be told *no* or *hang on*. He wants what he wants, when he wants it.”

“Deep down, how do you feel about Drake Slade?” I ask.

She shrugs. “I don’t think he’s a bad guy; I think he’s just misunderstood.” Her face reddens. “But I’ve always had a thing for the bad boys.” She lets out a nervous giggle and I can’t help but join in her laughter.

After our giggles die down, I sit back in my chair. “So what I need to do is befriend Drake and get him to join the town, while getting the town to accept him. Once everyone is happy, I’ll get those signatures and we’ll be able to move forward with this expansion.”

“Easier said than done,” she says, tapping her pencil on her desk. “Three families believe their land was stolen by the Slades.” She opens her desk and pulls out a map. “Mr. Burns had the land photographed by drone.”

When she unrolls the map, it’s a big photograph of the brewery. There’s the massive building with a rather large parking lot. Surrounding it is nothing but farmland.

“This corner lot here belongs to the Reynolds family. The plot on this end belongs to the Jones family. And here in the center is the Smith family. They claim the Slades stole their back 20 acres. And this land across the street is owned by the Mason family.”

“Wait, why do we need approval from the Mason family?”

“Because this area is technically a farm zone. Any business that moves next to their property line has to be agreed upon, because the noise of running a factory can be disruptive to the farm animals. When animals are disturbed,

they get stressed and lose weight, meaning they won't bring in as much at auction."

"But the brewery is already there. They've already agreed, right?"

"They agreed for the plot of land the brewery's on now. However, Mr. Slade's plans call for the expansion to be built across the street. That plot of land already belongs to the Slade family, but it wasn't in the original contract with the Mason family. You have to get the Mason family to agree to the land being used as a business zone instead of a farming zone."

"Well, that shouldn't be too hard, right? I doubt one more building is going to affect their livestock when they're already used to the brewery being across the street."

"To a normal person, yes. But these families aren't normal people. The Slades are hated. Word has it that the Mason family is going to deny their request just because they can. They were well-paid when they signed the contract decades ago, but the new generation running the farm now has had a beef with the Slades in the past. They're just looking to put a kink in their plan."

I throw myself back and a long breath escapes me. "This sounds like it's going to be a royal pain in my ass."

She nods. "I hope you're up for a challenge."

"What choice do I have?"

I spend the morning organizing my office before heading out for my dreaded meeting with Mr. Slade. Debbie wishes me "good luck" as I pass by her desk.

"Thanks. Something tells me I could really use it," I laugh out as the door closes behind me.

I get behind the wheel and pull out my map since my cell doesn't work out here in the middle of nowhere, and I'm the only Tesla owner with a broken GPS. Starting the car, a sense of dread settles over me. Suddenly, I'm filled with nerves and fear. What if I can't get the job done? I've never let

down the firm before. And if Drake Slade is as bad as Debbie claims, then he's not going to make my job any easier. My only hope is getting him to let his guard down. I have to make him want to be a part of this town—want to be friends with the people who live and work here. It's the only way this will work, and I just pray he can see that.

DRAKE

I'M working in the barn when I hear the crunch of gravel behind me. Confused as to who it could be, I turn and walk out, stopping quickly when I almost run into a leggy blonde. My fingers tighten around the handle of the hammer I'm holding. Her glimmering green eyes flash from mine, to the hammer, and back. They're now filled with fear. Her thick, plump lips part and her hand flies up to her heart.

"Oh, you scared me," she stutters as her feet start backstepping. "Are you Drake Slade?" Her hands are visibly shaking. Her voice is nervous and full of fear, even though I can tell she's desperately trying to control it.

"I am. Who are you?" I ask, sliding the hammer into the loop on my tool belt.

With the tool—or I guess, weapon—no longer in my hand, she forces a smile and holds out her hand. "I'm Celeste Teller. I'm the new lawyer who's replacing Mr. Burns."

It takes a moment for her words to register. I glance down at my watch, realizing I completely lost track of time again. I totally forgot about the appointment. I look at her soft, dainty hand but make no move to shake it. I look her up and down instead. She's tall in those black high heels, and I can't take my eyes off of her shape. Her tanned legs look soft—giving me the urge to feel them wrapped around my hips. Her long blonde hair is curled and hanging down her back, softly brushing against the slender neck I can picture

myself kissing.

I shake my head. What the fuck is wrong with me? “You? You’re the lawyer they sent to replace Burns?” I ask, my voice gravelly and rough.

She nods. “That’s right. I look forward to working with you. I’ve heard so much about you already.”

I laugh—or more accurately, I grunt. “Yeah, I’m sure you’ve heard some wonderful things,” I say, but the words come out sounding a little sarcastic and bitter.

She finally lets her hand fall, realizing I’m not going to shake it. “My assistant’s told me all about what you’re doing here, and what you’re needing from the firm.” The forced smile is back in place.

“Did she now?” I ask, turning and walking back into the barn.

She follows. “She did. But I’d like to go over the specifics with you, if you don’t mind.”

“Did she tell you that I need this project completed within a year?”

“I do know that.” She nods matter-of-factly. “In fact, I’m only set to be here a year and I refuse to let things go unfinished. I’m just as excited about getting to work on this as you are.”

Her voice is sweet. It teases me. It makes my muscles tighten, my back straighten. My heart starts beating harder. My lungs demand more oxygen. And all of these damn responses from my body make me hate her. After Casey, I swore to myself that I’d never be controlled by anyone ever again. I’d managed to keep that promise this whole time, until now. Now I can’t even force myself to breathe like a normal person. I wipe my sweaty palms down my jeans, drying them and mentally threatening to tear them off if they betray me again.

I pick up my beer and take a swig, hoping to wash away these uneasy feelings clawing their way up my throat. “And how is it you expect to get the job done?” I can’t help but look her up and down once again. Those heels, that skirt, her perfectly manicured nails, that hair, the done-up face—

everything reminds me of *her*. Casey. I'm sure she's just like her too. All they care about is themselves. They don't care who they hurt, as long as they get what they want.

She looks down at her feet as she kicks the dirt. "I have a plan," she says around a smile as she places one hand on her hip.

"Care to clue me in?"

"I intend to. Once we can have a formal meeting instead of standing in the dirt."

"What's wrong with the dirt?" I ask, a grin forming on its own. "You'll never make it out here in the country if you can't handle a little dirt." Teasing her gives me a little of my control back.

She rolls her eyes and it makes me want to bend her over my knee.

"You got me, Mr. Slade. I'm a city girl through and through," she says, walking closer to me as slowly as she can. "But I don't mind getting my hands a little dirty when needed. On the other hand, I do believe in doing business the proper way. And that includes a sit-down meeting where everything can be addressed. I want to know everything you have planned. Everything you expect of me." She's standing right in front of me now, looking up with those big green eyes. She's so tiny compared to my height and weight. I want nothing more than to throw her over my shoulder and take her into the house where I can show her what I expect from her.

"Well, Ms. Teller, let's go into the house, shall we?" I hold up my arm, motioning toward the door.

She nods, her smile returning as she starts toward the house. On our short walk, I have to make an effort to keep my eyes off of her ass. I fail several times, but luckily, she never catches me. I know most men would be excited about working with a beautiful woman, but I'm not most men. I'm not looking for a relationship. I'm not looking for a random hookup, either. I want no distractions when it comes to this expansion, and unfortunately, she's going to be a major fucking distraction whether she realizes it or not.

I reach out and open the door for her, and she thanks me as she steps into the house. I lead her into the kitchen. “Have a seat,” I say as I move around the island and pour two glasses of whiskey. I walk back over to her and set a glass on the table in front of her.

“Oh, no thank you. I don’t drink much.” She waves her hand in my direction, dismissing the thought.

I laugh as I pull out my chair and sit at her side. “Ms. Teller, you said you wanted a business meeting. Here in the country, our business meetings involve a stiff drink. Now, how badly do you want this meeting?” I ask, toying with her. Obviously, I won’t force her to drink it, but this is a little test. How badly does she want this job? What will she do for me if asked?

Her green eyes move to the glass. She picks it up, swirling the liquid as she talks herself into it. Finally, she moves the glass to her lips and takes the smallest of sips. I watch as she swallows it down. Her hand moves to her throat as she blows out a long breath. “Please, call me Celeste.”

A smile covers my face as I tip my glass, throwing back the liquid. “All right, let’s get down to business.” There’s a cardboard tube sitting on the table in front of us. I pick it up, open it, and pull out the rolled-up blueprints. “Here are the plans we’ve drawn up.”

“I was wanting to ask you: is there a reason why you want this expansion built over on the far corner? It seems to me like you’d have an easier time if you cut your parking lot in half.”

“I see you and Mr. Burns think alike,” I laugh out. “The answer to that is: I don’t want to. This land is mine, and I want to be able to use it how I see fit. I don’t farm it. Right now, that land isn’t doing anything but costing me money. I don’t like things that cost me money. I want things to *make* me money. The only way that land is going to make money is if it’s put to use. Plus, I plan on expanding the brewery once I have this new location up and running for whiskey. I have to make more beer to recoup my losses, since we’ve had to slow down production on account of the whiskey. Once the

whiskey side of things is done and in production, the brewery side will also need to expand in order to double production numbers. After a year of doubling production, it'll be like we never slowed down to begin with."

"You do realize that this expansion will require some effort on your part, correct?" she asks.

"On my part? I'm not the lawyer here, Ms. Teller." I shake my head as I toy with the glass in front of me.

"I understand that, Mr. Slade." She says my name with annoyance. "But you're basically asking this town and its people for a favor. 'Let me build a distillery,' right? But I've been told you're not on good terms with the town. How can you expect people to do this favor for you if you won't put in any work when it comes to maintaining—or even fixing—these relationships?"

I sit back and massage my temples. "God, you sound like my advisor."

"I'd say your advisor is a smart man, Mr. Slade." There's that tone again—the one she uses whenever she says my name.

"Why are you saying my name like that?" I ask.

She shrugs. "Why do you insist on calling me 'Ms. Teller'? I've told you to call me Celeste."

"It's a sign of respect. You wanted a business meeting. I'm keeping things professional."

"You're doing it to spite me. And saying it's out of respect is just insulting. Might as well say I'm too stupid to understand." She arches one of her perfectly manicured eyebrows. The look she's giving me is nothing short of bratty. She's a spoiled little girl who's far too used to getting her way. I could use this to my advantage if I could only make her see that it won't work on me.

I laugh as I pick up my drink and finish it off. I swallow down all my issues and nod. "Forgive me, Celeste." I breathe out the words like an admission of guilt.

"I feel like I need to tell you who I am, Mr. Slade," she says clasping her

hands together on the table as her eyes focus on mine.

I don't reply, only motion for her to carry on.

"I know what you must think of me: that I'm just some city girl who doesn't know her ass from a hole in the ground, but that isn't true. I'm a top lawyer at my firm in L.A. I was valedictorian of my high school and college graduating classes. I've worked for this my entire life. I've never lost a case, and I don't plan on starting now. When this job is complete in a year's time, I'm going back to L.A., where I will be rewarded for all my hard work with more perks than any other lawyer at my firm has ever seen—besides the partners, of course—and I will not let you get in the way of that. I *will* do this job. You can either work beside me, or you can fight me, but it will get it done, because I refuse to lose. Especially due to your chauvinistic ideas about what a woman can and cannot do. You can make this next year a total headache for the both of us, or you can accept that I'm what you've got, so we can get some work done. The choice is up to you." Her brows are arched high and her eyes are wide, but not with fear. With determination. She really believes that she can get this job done.

"I won't get in your way, Celeste, but I feel like I should warn you about myself. It's only fair."

She nods once, telling me to continue.

"I do not have 'chauvinistic ideas' about where women belong or what they can do. But I will tell you that I won't treat you any better *because* you're a woman. If you piss me off, I'll let you know even if it hurts your feelings. I expect everything I ask of you to get done in a timely manner and to get done correctly. I will not take it easier on you just because of what you've got between your legs. You want this job, you've got it. But it will not be any easier for you than it would be for any man—which is why I assume you're here. I'm guessing your boss got wind that this whole thing would go much more smoothly if they sent some pretty woman—that I wouldn't give you as much trouble as I gave Burns. But that, Celeste, is incorrect. If I'm

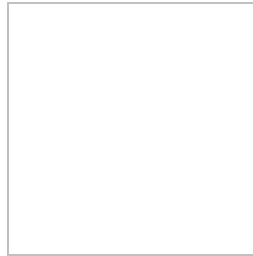
paying for something, I want it to be exactly what I asked for. I will not change my mind. I will not compromise. It's my way or the highway. Got it?"

She presses her lips together tightly as she thinks it over. Finally she holds out her hand to shake. "Deal," she says.

"Deal," I agree, finally touching her for the first time. The moment my hand comes in contact with hers, a spark shoots through me, my heart skips a beat, my lungs momentarily freeze, and my blood boils beneath my skin.

I notice her chest rise as she takes in a large gulp of air and her thick lips part like she's not taking in enough oxygen through her nose. I force myself to release her hand and I clear my throat. "What do you say we get down to business now?"

She nods and wets her lips, but doesn't speak as I start talking about the expansion and the building plans.



THE HOURS PASS QUICKLY, and before I know it, I've got a rather good buzz going. Celeste has kicked off her shoes as she sits in the chair with her feet beneath her. She's writing down almost every word I say as I point to areas on the plans and pace the kitchen floor. She seems to ask appropriate questions at perfect times, and she never interrupts when I'm talking. She always waits for me to pause. She leaves no stone unturned as I explain what it is I want, and she even asks questions no one else has thought to ask—not even Harrison or Burns.

She's finally finished her one glass of whiskey, and her cheeks are starting to turn pink as her green eyes grow more and more glassy. She's smiling more and she's even laughed a time or two when I've told a stupid joke. The point of this meeting was to put everything out on the table, which

I've done, but now it also feels like it was planned on her part—like she's treating this as a way to get to know me—to know what I expect and what she can and cannot get away with when it comes to me. And even though there's a slight possibility she's using this in her favor, I don't care. I find myself craving that giggle that slips past her lips. Every time she smiles, my heart feels like it's soaring across the room. This should piss me off, but I find myself letting it continue even though I already know how this would end: very badly.

“So, let me get this straight,” she says, holding up a finger as a smile plays on her perfect lips. “Everyone is convinced that your family stole their land, yet not one single person has the original property lines? Nobody? There's not an original map in the city library? Not one in the post office or town hall? These are things that federal buildings like to display.”

“Not a single map has been found,” I tell her. “That's another reason why the town believes the lie. They're sure that once my grandfather had the lines moved, he also destroyed every last trace of evidence. It's complete nonsense.” I collapse in the chair at her side and take another swig of my whiskey.

She shakes her head. “This is crazy. I mean, it's like a family feud that's been going on for literally generations.” Her eyes double in size.

I nod once. “Yep.”

“I don't understand. I mean, why would these families carry this around for so long?”

I shrug as I slouch back. “I don't know. I guess they're just jealous? I mean, they've owned this land for hundreds of years and then here comes my grandpa, suddenly making millions—and later, billions—of dollars when they've been working their asses off and farming their land for all these years.”

“So who was farming this land before construction started?”

“No one. My family has never been the farming type. I mean, maybe a

long time ago. But that's why my grandpa started the brewery. He had this land he couldn't do anything else with."

"So . . . were the other families not farming it because they knew it wasn't theirs?"

"At this point, I don't think it matters," I point out.

She gets quiet as her eyes cloud over.

"What are you thinking?" I ask, watching her.

"I was just trying to figure out how in the hell we're going to prove that the land was never theirs."

"If I could do that, what would I need you for?" I laugh and she shoots me an annoyed look.

"Step one, prove the land wasn't stolen. Step two, become friends with everyone. You need to start coming into town to do your grocery shopping. Join the church, drink at the bar, eat at the restaurant. Become a member of society."

I scoff. "What?"

She nods. "I'm serious. If the town sees you as one of their own, you'll get a whole lot further and with less work."

I stand up and take my glass to the island to pour another drink. "If you think I'm going to waste my time playing some kind of political role, you're out of your mind."

She stands up and moves in front of me. Mere inches separate us. I can damn near feel the heat radiating off her body. Mine absorbs it without trying. "Trust me, Drake. Give me three months. If we haven't gotten anywhere with this town in three months, then we'll do what we need to do—legally—to get this expansion built." Her eyes are shining and pleading with me.

"Why can't we just do that now?" I ask, refusing to pull my eyes away from hers.

"This is the easy way. Trust me." Her eyes are still locked with mine and

they're glowing, full of determination. She's sure and she's teasing me in every way possible. Hate fills my gut but it almost doesn't register.

It feels like we're being pulled together. I begin leaning in, so slowly I almost don't realize it's happening. She wets her lips, her green eyes filling with confusion. She wants me, but she's not sure why.

"You're eyes are beautiful, you know that?" I quietly ask. So quietly I'm not even sure I said the words aloud.

Her lips turn up only slightly. She liked the compliment. Time between us seems to have paused, like we caused the world to stop spinning. We're both frozen in this moment, unsure of what it will bring. She lets out a shallow breath that blows across my dry lips. My hand begins to move upward, planning on landing gently on her cheek where I can feel her soft skin as the space between our lips gets slimmer and slimmer. I'm leaning in. She's leaning in. Her chest is rising and falling quickly with anticipation. My body feels like every nerve ending has been set on fire. I crave her kiss. I yearn to feel her against me. I want to taste those lips—feel how tender they are against my own. My heart pounds so hard, I'm sure she can hear it.

Our lips are separated by just a sliver of space when the front door opens and slams shut. That sound may as well be a gunshot. It scares the both of us as time kicks back in. We quickly jerk away from each other as Harrison walks in, shattering whatever moment we had going.

"Drake," he says, coming to a stop when he sees that I'm not alone. "Oh, excuse me."

Celeste snaps out of the trance she was lost in with me. "I was just heading out." She turns and scoops her shoes off the floor. She quickly gathers her papers, pen, and briefcase.

"Harrison, this is Celeste Teller. Mr. Burns' replacement," I introduce.

He smiles. "Ah, yes. It's nice to meet you, Ms. Teller." He holds out his hand.

She quickly shakes it. "Please, call me Celeste," she says, shoving the last

of her papers into her briefcase. “It really is getting late.” She spins around to face me as she walks backward toward the door, arms full of her belongings. “I’ll be in touch with you tomorrow. We can get started on those plans to reintroduce you to society.” She laughs as her face flushes.

I only nod, unable to find my voice.

“Okay, bye,” she says nervously.

Neither of us moves as we watch her almost run for the door. When we hear it close, Harrison walks over to me. “What the hell was that?”

“What?” I ask, pouring another drink.

“It looked like you two were about to jump on each other when I walked in here.”

I snort. “What?” I take a drink. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Harrison lets out a deep breath and shakes his head as he reaches for the bottle of whiskey, pouring himself a drink. “You need to keep your distance from her, Drake,” he warns. “Don’t get me wrong. I’m happy to see you smiling for once, and God knows how long it’s been for you, but she’s off-limits. You don’t shit where you eat and you don’t play where you work. Got it?” He throws back the glass, finishing the liquid in one gulp.

“I have no idea what the hell you’re talking about, Harrison. Celeste was just here for the meeting you set up. I didn’t invite her back to my house. It was completely innocent.”

His eyes stretch wide. “Completely innocent?” he asks, picking up her empty whiskey glass. “Do you offer everyone who walks into this house a glass of whiskey?”

I laugh. “Of course. Do you even know me?” Practically no one visits my house, so if someone does, they’re a friend and welcome to anything I have.

“It looks like you were trying to get her drunk. Maybe take advantage of the situation.” He gives me a sidelong glance.

That statement causes me to go from loose and carefree to straight fucking murderous. “Excuse me?” I ask, giving him the chance to rephrase

his last sentence. “Are you implying that I would force myself on Celeste?” My back straightens and every muscle tightens.

“Absolutely not,” he breathes out. “I’m just saying that you need to be alert with her. She doesn’t know you. She doesn’t know your past. She’s working for you. This is not the combination you want. If you want a relationship, great. If you just want a quick one-night stand, fine. But. Not. With. Her! We both know you’ll fuck it up and then where would we be?”

Fuck. I know he’s right, but the way he’s saying it is only pissing me off more. Telling me I can’t have something only makes me want it that much more. And it’s like he’s saying I’m not capable of having a loving, trusting relationship without it ending badly. The split with Casey fucked me up. I’m broken. No matter how much I want to pretend I’m not, I am. There’s nothing I can do about it. And getting into this with my lawyer? It wouldn’t be good for either of us. I need to keep my distance. I need to focus on all the things I hate about her: she’s a city girl—she’s probably never even had dirt on her hands before. She’s prissy—the type that has to have name-brand clothes and shoes just to make someone else feel inferior. She’s a know-it-all—all lawyers are. She’s only here a year, which means she’ll up and leave just like Casey. Keeping my distance is the only option.

“Nothing is going on and nothing was about to happen. Okay?” I look him straight in the eye.

He studies me for a long moment.

“If you don’t mind, I’d like to take a shower and get something in my stomach. I need to be up early tomorrow.”

His mouth nearly drops open when he hears me say those words. “Okay. See you in the morning.” Without another word, he turns and leaves.

I finish my last glass for the night and head to the back of the house for a long, hot shower. Not only do I need to think things over, but I also need to remind myself of why I romantically avoid people like Celeste. Why I romantically avoid everyone. Casey pops into my head and my blood boils. I

wonder if she knew how badly she was fucking me up when she left. I wonder if she's even given me a second thought, or if she was so preoccupied by her own selfish wants that she hasn't thought of me since. Either way, I guess it doesn't matter. She's gone and she ain't coming back. Even if she showed up on my doorstep right now, I still wouldn't be able to look at her with anything but disgust.

I step beneath the hot flow of water and the heat instantly helps my stiff, sore body relax. I hang my head forward and close my eyes, allowing the hot water to wash over me. Usually, every time I close my eyes, I see Casey—but this time, I see Celeste. I see her plump lips turned upward in a big smile as the most beautiful sound I've ever heard slips out in the form of a giggle. I see the way her green eyes light up and shimmer. I see those long tan legs and that perfectly rounded ass as she walks ahead of me. I see the way her chest rises when she takes a deep breath. I imagine how good she would taste, how warm she would be against me.

It's been a long time since I've thought this way about anyone other than Casey. It's been even longer since I've had anyone but Casey. And that's all it took. One meeting. One drink. One touch.

I take myself in hand as I picture pulling Celeste against me, pressing my mouth to hers. I imagine the sounds I could make slip past those sexy-as-fuck lips. I picture myself backing her up against the wall, running my hand up that skirt and inside her panties. How wet she would be for me. As I imagine sliding my fingers deep inside her, my release rises and I can't help but let out a grunt as it spills onto the shower floor. When I come down from my high, every muscle in my entire body is twitching. Fuck, if thinking about her feels this good, then how good would it actually feel to be with her?

CELESTE

“**W**HAT was that?” I ask myself as I drive away from his place as quickly as possible. I felt something. I think *he* felt something. Remembering the intensity between us, I wonder if he was going to kiss me. Do I want him to kiss me?

No, that can't happen for more than one reason. First, he's my client. Mixing business with pleasure is never a smart move. It's why Gavin and I always kept our distance. It could really complicate things for us. If things went badly, Drake could fire me. Then what? Would I still get my promotion if I went home a failure? And two, he's not my type at all! I mean, yes, he's good-looking and sexy in that mysterious older man kind of way. But he's big and hairy and rough. I typically go for the business casual look on a guy. You know: dress clothes, combed and styled hair, clean face. Not this mountain man look that Drake has going on.

And he isn't really all that nice. He basically told me he's going to treat me like any other guy. Up until the moment we got lost in whatever that was, I would've sworn he didn't even see me as a woman. Maybe it was the whiskey. I'd only had one small glass, but that was enough to give me that warm, fuzzy feeling. And he'd had several glasses. Tomorrow morning, I'm sure he won't even remember that awkward occurrence between us.

When I get back into town, I swing by the local market and stock up on some items before heading back to my motel room. When I walk in, I don't

give myself time to think back on the night. Instead, I start putting everything away and warming up a can of soup for dinner. I sit at the table with my laptop hardwired to the internet, checking my email as I eat. I sign into Facebook and update my status, just to let everyone know I'm still alive, then head to the bathroom to get cleaned up before bed. It's now dark, and even though it's not late, I feel exhausted and could really use the rest.

I turn on the hot water and toss in a little Epsom salt before sliding deep into the tub. I rest my head against the wall and close my eyes, needing to ease my mind. But my mind starts spinning endlessly. All these thoughts of Drake start flooding over me like a dam has busted. I don't know him. I don't know his past. All I know is that once he got a little more comfortable with me, he really opened up before my eyes. The man I first ran into and the man I walked away from are two very different men. I can only assume that's what happens after several glasses of whiskey. I'm sure it had very little to do with me. And even if I did bring him out of his shell, it can't go any further than business colleagues. I won't let him ruin this opportunity for me. I'm more than determined to prove myself—not only to him, but to my boss and to this town as well. Hell, who knows? I might want to stay here after my year is done. That thought makes me laugh.

Even though I know nothing could ever happen between us, I let my mind wander off. I've never been with a man like him before. How would it feel being with Drake? He's big and strong, that's easy to see. I wonder if he'd pick me up against him. I've never in my life been picked up and handled like I weigh nothing. All the guys I've been with in the past have never been all that concerned with my needs. Drake, being a country man, is probably chivalrous when it comes to his women. Even though I know it can never happen, I want to be one of his women—even if it's only for a night. I want to know what being with a man like him is like.

A deep breath leaves my lips when I realize something: if that's what I seriously want, then it'll have to be with another man. No way is Drake Slade

an option. He's out of the question. He's off the table. I might as well consider him a married man. Annoyance pumps through my body and I feel more tense than before. I wish there were something about him I could hate, but unfortunately, I don't know him well enough yet. If I hated him, it would be so much easier to keep my distance.

Giving up on my relaxing bath, I dry off and pull on a pair of gray shorts and a white tank top. I tug a pair of fuzzy socks up to my knees before crawling into bed and turning on the TV. I feel alone and bored and end up finding myself scrolling through Facebook. I have a new friend request, and when I click on the notification, I find that it's from Stephanie, the local bartender. I approve the request. God knows I need some friends around here.

Moments later, my hardwired laptop chimes. Stephanie sent me a private message.

Stephanie: I know you're new in town and figured you wanted to get to know some people. The bar is hosting a Spring Fling event on Saturday. Everyone in town will be there. We'll have food, drinks, and a silent auction. It will be a lot of fun if you want to stop by.

Me: Okay, that sounds great! Thanks for the invite! Hey, quick question. Can anyone donate anything to the auction?

Stephanie: Absolutely! We'll take anything of value.

I smile to myself as I think about a donation.

Stephanie: I just invited you to like the bar's page. All the details are listed on there.

Me: Thanks, girl! See you then.

I quickly look over the bar's page and pick up my phone. It's going on 9 p.m., and I wonder if Drake will already be asleep given how much he had to drink.

"Hello?" he answers in his smooth, gruff voice.

"Sorry, this is Celeste. I didn't wake you, did I?" I ask, a little nervous.

"No, I'm just . . . kicked back in my chair, and watching a little TV before

bed. What's going on?" Drake asks, a little confused.

"I just got an invite to the Spring Fling the local bar is holding on Saturday, and they're having a silent auction. I thought this could be a great opportunity to donate to the cause."

He groans. "What exactly did you have in mind?"

I shrug, even though he can't see me. "I was thinking you could donate some beer, and maybe a cooler with the company logo, plus any kind of merch you have like shirts, hats, koozies. What do you think?"

He's quiet for a long moment. "Yeah, I guess I have to since I agreed to this three-month deal, huh?"

I giggle. "You did make a deal," I remind him.

"All right. Come by the brewery tomorrow and pick up everything."

"Perfect. And Drake?"

"Hmm?" he asks, and the sound cuts through me like a hot knife through butter. It causes goosebumps to prickle my skin.

"I was thinking that maybe you could even make an appearance at the event?" My voice sounds hopeful.

"Oh, come on, Celeste," he whines.

I laugh. "You agreed," I remind him once more.

"Fine. Send me the details. I can't promise I'll stay the whole time, but I will make an appearance."

"Thank you," I say around an excited giggle. I have no idea why this pleases me so much. I know nothing can happen between the two of us, but I feel like he's giving me an inch at a time.

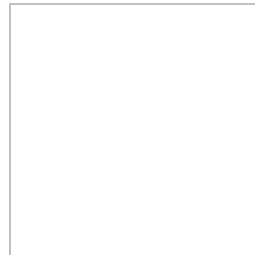
"See ya tomorrow," he says in his deep, silky voice.

"Bye," I breathe out, finding myself breathless.

I hang up the phone and shake my head at myself. This is nothing but a little crush. I have to get over it. I have to get him out of my head. It's no different than when a teenage girl finds herself lusting over her hot science teacher. It's wrong, but nothing can or will happen. It's an innocent crush. It

will fade as time goes by. I just have to wait it out. And I'm nothing if not patient.

I turn off the light and slip further into bed. In the darkness, relaxation finally finds me. The more relaxed I become, the sleepier I get. Before I know it, I'm sound asleep and having delicious dreams about Drake Slade that I'll never share with anyone.



WHEN I WAKE in the morning, I'm full of excitement. I spring from bed and brew a cup of coffee as I begin putting on my makeup. I find myself taking more time than usual, wanting to make sure everything is perfect. I step back and look myself over in the mirror. My eyes are accentuated with slightly-winged eyeliner, and my cheeks are bronzed. I look a little too laid-back, so I pull my hair into a sleek bun with a few strands hanging down around my face. I pull on a pair of black dress pants that hug my curves nicely, and a red sleeveless shirt. I match my sky-high red heels with the outfit. I want a look that says *I'm approachable but open for business only*. I quickly swing by the office just to check my schedule. Debbie has made several appointments for me to meet more of the clients we represent, but I don't have anything until later. I tell her I'll be back and head for the car to swing by the brewery.

I have to use my map once again, but I thank God I'm not one of those people who can't read an old-school map. It takes me at least 30 minutes of driving through the country to find it, but I see it up ahead before I even arrive. That's how big it is. Inside, I find a front desk where a dark-haired receptionist sits.

She smiles sweetly as I approach her desk. "Hello, I'm Celeste Teller, Mr. Slade's new lawyer. He should be expecting me."

Her look changes in an instant from sweet to skeptical, and she picks up her phone. “Mr. Slade, there’s a Ms. Teller here to see you. Are you expecting her?”

She waits a moment before hanging up and pasting that sickly-sweet smile on her face again. “Follow me.”

She walks me down a long hallway to an elevator. Motioning for me to go inside, she reaches in and presses the button for the top floor before scanning her badge. “Remind him that you’ll need your own badge if these *meetings* are going to be taking place in his office. Limited personnel are granted access to his office.”

The way she said the word *meetings* leaves a bad taste in my mouth, but I don’t mention it as she walks away with the elevator doors closing. What exactly does she think we’re going to be doing in there? Surely he’s not the type to have random hookups in his office, is he? I want to laugh at myself. It’s not like a town this size has an endless pool of people on Tinder.

I shake the thoughts from my head as the elevator dings and the doors open. Stepping out into his office, I find Mr. Slade—I told myself if I keep our names formal, it should be much easier to keep things professional—sitting behind his desk. He looks up and his eyes shine when they take me in, however, he seems to rein in his previous response to seeing me, forcing his smile to fall.

“Ms. Teller,” he greets me, standing up and holding out his hand.

I quickly shake it and ignore the spark that shoots through my entire arm. “Mr. Slade.”

He lets out a puff of air—almost like a laugh but not—as he turns his head to the side. “I have everything you asked for over here.” He moves around his desk to a brown leather couch that’s pushed against the far wall. Sitting on the couch is a big gray cooler.

I follow him over to the couch as he opens it. “We put a case of beer inside, plus two hats, shirts, and koozies. And we included a pair of passes

for a tour of the facility, which includes free beer and whiskey samples.

I smile. “Perfect. Did you see the invite I sent you with the event details?”

He nods once but keeps his eyes on the cooler. It’s almost like he’s refusing to look at me. “I did and I passed everything on to Harrison. He handles my schedule and makes sure I show up where I’m needed.”

“Okay, then. I guess I’ll just take this and be on my way.” I reach for the cooler and pick it up. I find it rather heavy and pray I can make it all the way back to my car with this thing.

“You need help?” he asks.

I turn for the elevator. “No, I should be fine. Thanks.” I reach out and push the button to call the elevator back.

“Are you sure? It’s a little heavy with that case of beer in there.”

My arm already feels like it’s about to detach at the shoulder. “You wouldn’t mind?” I ask, turning to look back at him.

He almost steps forward, but restrains himself. He holds up one finger then moves for the phone. Picking it up, he pushes a couple buttons and says, “Harrison, would you please accompany Ms. Teller to her car?”

Moments later, he hangs up. “Harrison will be more than happy to help you. He’ll meet you in the lobby.”

The doors open and I step inside. “Thanks again,” I tell him, reaching out and pushing the button for the lobby.

He slides his hands into his pants pockets and nods, eyes locked on mine as the doors begin to close between us. Lines appear around his eyes like he’s smiling, however, it’s not easy to tell with his beard covering up most of his features.

When I’m alone in the elevator, I set the cooler down on the floor and lean against the wall, letting out a long breath. It feels like I held my breath the entire time I was alone with him in that office, even though I know I didn’t. What is it about that man? He has nothing that usually attracts me. He’s not witty or polite. He’s doesn’t have the usual look I go for. There is

literally nothing attracting me to him other than this tickle in my belly.

“I wish I understood you,” I quietly say, looking down at my lady parts.

The elevator dings and the doors open. Harrison, the man I met yesterday, is already waiting.

“Hello again, Ms. Teller,” he says, reaching into the elevator and picking up the cooler.

“Hello, Harrison,” I reply, forcing myself to stand upright instead of looking like a lazy lawyer who leans against walls.

“How are you this morning?” he asks, leading me back past the receptionist.

“Great, and yourself?” I ask, shooting her a glance, wanting to make sure she understands I wasn’t sleeping with her boss. I was up there a total of five minutes. No way could we do anything that fast.

She smiles and waves. “Nice meeting you,” she says in her sweetest voice.

I return her smile but don’t reply.

“I’m as well as can be expected. Job well done on getting Drake to agree to this Spring Fling nonsense. I’ve been trying for years to get him to engage with the town. How did you manage to talk him into it in one night?” He glances over at me, but something about the way he’s looking at me tells me he’s looking for something.

I shrug. “I just asked him to give me three months. If the locals won’t accept him in three months, then they never will. After that time is up, I’ll have to do whatever I can to get this expansion underway.”

As we approach my car, I hit the button on the fob to pop the trunk. Harrison places the cooler inside and closes it. “Ms. Teller,” he starts, sliding his hands into his pockets. “I want to warn you.”

“About?” I ask, frowning as I cross my arms over my chest.

“About Drake. He’s not exactly in a good place at the moment. He was in a very serious relationship a few years ago. When she up and left, it wrecked

him. He's never been the same since. So starting something up with him right now would be . . ."

"What? No! There's nothing going on between us. I just met him, for God's sake!" My hand flies to my chest, covering my heart.

Harrison holds up his hands, showing me his palms. "No, no, I didn't mean to imply that something was going on. I just wanted to let you know just in case things progress in the future. I saw the way he looked at you." His hands fall back to his sides. "Mr. Slade is very business-oriented. He's professional when it comes to his work. But . . . he's a man. He's a broken man. He doesn't know how to love anymore. He can't even love himself." He takes a step back. "Just remember that if you ever notice a change between the two of you." He nods once, turns around, and leaves me standing alone in the parking lot, unsure of what just happened.

I'm confused the whole way back to town. I can't believe Harrison would have the audacity to imply I don't have any control when it comes to Mr. Slade. It's not like he's going to start paying attention to me and I just won't be able to help myself. I'm a professional and I know how to keep my personal and professional lives separate. Anger swells in my chest. Maybe it's not Harrison's fault. Maybe he's just warning me. Maybe he's seen this happen before between Mr. Slade and another woman who worked for him.

When I pull into the parking lot at the bar, I push those thoughts out of my head. Stephanie is happy and excited to have another item to auction off. She even offers to make me a drink on the house for talking Drake into it. I accept her offer since I'm so confused about Drake and the people in his life.

"Steph, can I ask you something without the whole town knowing about it?"

"Sure, what's up?" she asks, leaning against the bar.

"Did you know Drake when he was in a relationship?"

Her eyes grow in size. "Oh, yeah. Her name was Casey."

"What can you tell me about them?" I ask, leaning in.

“Well, I was a lot younger at the time, so everything I know is what’s been passed around town, but I guess they were a thing. Like, a serious thing. There was talk of them getting married and starting a family. That’s the pretty typical route for people in this area. This town is small, and when you’re here living the small-town life, you kind of forget that you always have the option to leave and start your own life. Settling down is kind of the only option around here.”

I nod her on.

“Anyway, I was told that Casey had big dreams. It was like she suddenly remembered she didn’t have to stay here, get married, and have children. She remembered that there’s life out there. The thought of staying here and never having a life of her own freaked her out. Out of the blue, she packed her things and left to find the life she felt she was meant to have—breaking Drake’s heart in the process. She left and time stood still for him.”

“That’s so sad,” I mumble, looking at my drink.

She nods.

“So Drake has done what since she left? Has he slept his way through town or caused trouble or something?”

“No, nothing. He just keeps himself locked away. He doesn’t come into town at all. He’s basically a recluse. Why are you asking anyway?”

I shrug. “I was just wondering. He’s my client and I want to know all there is to know. I have to get him to be a part of this town and wanted to know how stacked the odds are against my plan.” I offer a smile.

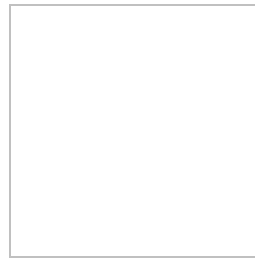
“Miss?” someone across the bar yells for a drink.

Stephanie leaves me alone and my thoughts swirl. Suddenly, I understand why Harrison said the things he did about Drake. He was being protective of him. He knows that if something did start with us, it couldn’t end happily. In a year, I’ll be leaving, the same way Casey did. Could Drake survive two women leaving him?

I shake my head clear of these thoughts. All of this is pointless worry,

because Drake and I will never be more than business partners. Maybe, if nothing else, I'll be his friend, and help him see there's more to life than wallowing in a lost love. That's what I'll do. I'll become his friend and get him to join the town, where he might even find a *new* love. Then when I leave in a year, he'll be happier than ever.

I've always been told that I have to stop trying to fix everything, but I feel like it's my job to fix things. I've been brought here to fix this problem for Drake. He needs the town's acceptance. He needs to expand his business. He needs to be happy. Sure, I wasn't hired for that last one, but I feel like it's my job to do so anyway.



SATURDAY ROLLS AROUND and excitement fills me. I pull on a short jean skirt, a white tank top, and my brown cowgirl boots. Spring Fling, here I come! I curl my blonde hair and leave it hanging down my back as I add the finishing touches to my face. I head to the bar a little early, planning on helping Stephanie set up and get things ready.

When I walk in, she's running around like a crazy person trying to get everything ready. "Thank God you're here. Would you please help me in the back?"

"Of course," I reply, moving behind the bar and setting my purse on the shelf. I follow her through the door and into a stock room. She bends down and picks up two cases of beer. She hands them over and grabs two more before leading me back to the main barroom. She sets the cases on the bar and opens the cooler to stock up for what I'm assuming will be a busy night. I place my two cases on the bar top and slide open the cooler door to help load in the beer.

"So, planning on a busy night, huh?"

Her eyes grow wide. “Last year, we ran out of beer. We sold every case we had and ran the kegs dry. We ended up only being able to sell mixed drinks by the end of the night. And let me tell you, people who are already drunk don’t need to finish it off with whiskey. It was a madhouse to say the least.”

I smile. “Sounds fun. Back home, we never had things like this. I mean, clubs would have their special occasion nights or whatever, but it was always the same old thing. Techno music, flashing lights, grinding on the dance floor. I’m looking forward to my first country experience.” I laugh and she joins in.

“You may be surprised by just how closely what you just described will happen here tonight. I mean, other than the techno music. I think people here would have a heart attack if anything other than country music came over those speakers.”

We laugh and talk as we finish putting the beer away. “Let me make you a drink for helping me out,” Stephanie says as I take a seat at the bar.

“Thanks,” I reply, looking around and watching as people start to fill up the bar. It’s only two in the afternoon, and there are already more people in the bar than I’ve ever seen before.

A man sits at my side and shoots a smile my way. I return his smile as I check him out. He has blond hair that’s cut short. He’s wearing a flannel shirt and a tight pair of jeans with brown cowboy boots.

“You must be new around here; I’ve never seen you before,” he says with that smile returning.

It’s a nice smile. He’s cute, and I wouldn’t mind getting to know him considering he’s a man who’s not forbidden.

I nod. “I am. I’m the new lawyer in town, Celeste Teller.” I hold out my hand and he shakes it.

“Nice to meet you, Celeste Teller. I’m Brock Weston.” He bows his head. I smile. “It’s nice to meet you, Brock.”

He leans closer. “Has anyone ever told you how beautiful your smile is?” His blue eyes twinkle.

I laugh out loud. “I’ve been told how charming you country boys are,” I tease.

He winks. “You ain’t seen nothing yet. Just wait until you see how charming I am out on the dance floor.” He stands up. “Steph, play something for us.”

He holds out his hand. I look from him, to Stephanie, who’s starting up the jukebox with a big smile, and back. I slap my hand into his. “Okay, show me what you can do.” He drags me to the center of the wooden dance floor and pulls me to his chest. One hand lands on my hip, and the other holds my hand as we begin moving to the upbeat country song.

I’ve never danced this way before. I find myself watching my feet, trying to copy his steps. His hand leaves my hip for a moment, landing on my chin and directing my eyes to his. “Look here, not at your feet.”

“I don’t know how to dance this way,” I laugh out.

“Just feel the music, baby,” he says around a smile.

I laugh, but try to keep my eyes on his as he leads us around the dance floor. Every time I step on his foot, I laugh and apologize.

“Don’t worry about it. I’m pretty sure dancing with a pretty girl like you is worth a broken foot,” he teases, only causing me to laugh harder.

By the time the dance is over, I’m out of breath and exhausted. He takes my hand to walk me off the dance floor, but we stop when a man steps in front of us.

He holds out his hand. “May I have this dance?” he asks.

Brock smiles over at me but releases my hand as he walks away.

The man takes my hand and spins me around. “I’m Trevor. Trevor Taylor.”

“Celeste Teller,” I tell him as we begin to move at a much slower pace than the last dance.

“How you liking our little town, Celeste?”

I shrug one shoulder. “It’s not so bad.” I give him a little grin. I’ve never been the type of girl who craved attention from boys. I always kept myself busy with school, studying, and extracurricular activities I knew would look good on my applications. However, now that I’m having my second dance with a second guy, I can see how this could get intoxicating. It’s like I’m the shiny new toy and all the kids want to play with me. Considering the current predicament I’m in with Drake, attention from other men is exactly what I need to keep myself at arm’s length with him.

Trevor and I talk while we dance, getting to know each other, and when our dance ends, there’s another man waiting for my hand. I giggle as I take it. His dark hair and dark eyes are all I can focus on. This town definitely doesn’t have a shortage of good-looking men!



HOURS PASS, drinks go down smoothly, and the men almost never give me a moment to catch my breath between dances. I’m laughing and having a good time, and Stephanie is working her butt off but finds the time to check in on me every once in a while. She makes sure I stay hydrated—and by hydrated, I mean a quick dose of vodka now and then—and she even shoos away a man or two to give me a bit of time to sit down and relax.

Finally getting to sit down, I feel my muscles burning.

“So, you said Drake was going to make an appearance for the auction, right?” she asks, wiping down a glass.

I nod as I lift my glass and take a drink.

“Well, it’s getting ready to start. Do you think he’ll still make it?”

I look at my watch and see that it’s already going on 5 p.m. I’ve spent the last three hours drinking and dancing. My mouths drops open. “I can’t

believe time passed so quickly. Can you give me my phone? I'll try calling him."

She bends down and grabs my phone from my purse. I look at the screen and see a text from Drake. *Sorry, something's come up and I won't be able to make it. Maybe next time.*

I hand her the phone. "He's not coming."

She takes the phone and places it back into my purse. "Oh well. I'm sure his donation will help out regardless." She walks off to wait on more customers.

Anger fills my chest. Not only am I mad that he blew me off, but I was really hoping to see him. I know it's stupid and I know nothing can come of it, but I was looking forward to getting to know him—becoming his friend. He promised to make an effort, and he's not holding up his end of the bargain. I needed a chance to show him that we can be friends without things getting awkward after what happened at his house.

I finish my drink just as Brock turns to me. "You look like you're in need of a distraction." He gives me that smile I've really come to like.

I smile, nod my head, and place my hand in his.

"Let's go," he says, pulling me back to the dance floor.

DRAKE

CHECKING the time on my watch, I see that it's going on 4 p.m. The auction starts in an hour, and I promised Celeste I'd make an appearance. I'll need to be leaving soon, so I begin cleaning off my desk. I come across a stack of mail I set down the other day and promptly forgot about. I grab the stack and begin opening it quickly so I can get out of here. Most of it's trash, invitations to parties and events, invoices that need to be paid, and receipts for invoices that have already been paid. Then I get to the last envelope in the stack. I quickly tear it open and pull out a single piece of paper. When I unfold it, a picture falls out. I study it quickly and find that it's a picture of my father. A woman is sitting on his lap, but the woman isn't my mother. On the table in front of them is a newspaper. I quickly grab a magnifying glass to get a closer look. The date on the paper is November 7, 1980. My mother died in February of '81. Who is this woman sitting on my dad's lap? They're both smiling and looking happy. He doesn't have a guilty look on his face—not like a married man with a sick wife should. Anger swells in my chest and I toss the picture on my desk as I read the letter.

IT LOOKS like dear old dad created more problems for you than you thought. My mother was paid off, but I wasn't. And I want what's mine.

“HARRISON!” I yell, standing up.

Harrison walks in quickly. “What’s wrong?” he asks, looking around the office like I’m being attacked and he can’t find my assailant.

“You know anything about this?” I ask, handing him the letter and then the picture.

He reads it quickly, then looks closely at the picture. He lets out a deep breath before collapsing in the chair across from my desk.

“Drake,” he says quietly, not tearing his eyes from the photograph.

“Just tell me the truth. Who is the woman in this picture?” I ask, a little too loudly.

He nods. “Her name is Linda Hammond. She was a secretary here back in the ‘80s.”

“Why is she sitting on my father’s lap?” I don’t know why I even have to ask this question. If the picture had been taken after my mother’s passing, then there wouldn’t be an issue. But my mom has remained the most important woman in my life. I compare every woman I meet to her, and wonder what Mom would’ve thought of them. Knowing that my father was less than honorable to her in her dying days makes me livid.

“It was rumored that she was sleeping with him. But that’s all it was. A rumor.” His eyes go wide as he finally looks up at me.

“Well, it doesn’t look like just a rumor now, does it?”

He shakes his head as his face wrinkles. “I . . . It . . .”

“You think my father cheated on my mother? My sick and dying mother?” I ask, a little louder than necessary.

He shrugs. “I never would’ve thought it. He loved your mother. He was devastated when she got sick. She was the love of his life. He’s still never had a serious relationship since then.”

I thought our family was full of one-woman men. I thought that’s where I got it from—not being able to move on after Casey. My father met and fell in love with my mother when they were still in high school. They dated, fell in

love, got married, and had children. When she passed, he vowed that he would never love again, and he's remained single to this very day. My grandfather was the same with my grandmother. But now I'm finding out that my father cheated on my mother when she was lying in bed sick and dying? And not only that, but he potentially has an illegitimate child out there—a child who wants what's mine—something I've worked for my entire life?

I shake my head. “I guess there's only one way to find out.” I take the picture and the note and head toward the elevator.

“Where are you going?” he asks, standing up and chasing after me.

“To talk to my father.”

“What about the auction?”

Fuck. I forgot about the auction. “This is more important,” I tell him, stepping into the elevator. The doors close between us. As I ride down to the lobby, I pull out my phone and send Celeste a quick message, letting her know I won't be able to make it after all. It pisses me off that I have to let her down on the first thing I promised her, but I don't have a choice. My whole world is being turned upside down right now. I have to find the truth.

I jump behind the wheel of my truck, tossing the piece of paper and photo onto the seat next to me. Twisting the key, the loud motor fires to life and I shift into drive. I stomp the gas and the truck leaps forward. My mind is an endless river of confusion, anger, and determination. My father and I don't have the best relationship, but I refuse to leave without the answers I need.

My dad lives far out in the country. He's basically a hermit, never coming into town for anything. I drive up the long dirt driveway, stomping on the brakes when I reach the end. Dirt swirls around the truck as I climb out. My dad is sitting on the front porch with a glass of bourbon in hand. His shotgun is resting at his side as he rocks himself back and forth in the old wooden rocking chair.

“Well, what have I done to deserve this visit?” he asks, lifting his glass and taking a sip.

I sit in the empty chair next to him. “I was going through the mail today and found this,” I say, holding out the paper with the picture tucked inside so it’s not visible.

He looks at the paper in my hand, but doesn’t move to take it. “So?” His tanned, wrinkled skin looks like leather and his dark eyes hold no welcome. He’s an old, bitter man. Exactly what I’ll become if I don’t change my ways.

“Take it,” I order.

Instead, he turns and pours himself another glass, not bothering to ask if I’d like one.

Finally, I open the paper and pull out the picture. “Who is this?” I ask, showing it to him.

His eyes glance from his glass, to the picture, and back. “No one for you to worry about. That was a long time ago.” He raises his glass and takes another sip.

“You cheated on Mom? When she was sick?” I can feel the emotions swelling in my chest. That alone tells me that this is no good. I won’t get anywhere with him if I’m emotional. He’s an old man. He was raised—and raised us boys—to be tough, to act like men. In his eyes, being emotional is for women.

“Back then, that kind of thing wasn’t unheard of,” he says, running his wrinkled hand through his smoothed-down gray hair. “In fact, back then, every man had his wife—the mother of his children—as well as his mistress—the woman he used. You couldn’t treat your wife like you’d treat your mistress. A wife requires respect. A mistress?” He laughs. “Well, they don’t require anything.”

“Who is she, Dad?” I ask, a little more forcefully.

He waves his hand in front of his face, dismissing the question. “Who cares? She was a whore who entertained me from time to time when the love of my life was dying.”

“*Who cares?*” I repeat. “I care! Apparently, my half-brother or half-sister

cares!” I yell, holding up the paper.”

He lets out a deep chuckle. “Don’t be ridiculous,” he says, taking another sip.

“Look at this letter. Who could this be from if you didn’t get your ‘whore’ pregnant?”

He snatches the paper from my hand and looks it over. “This is nothing more than someone trying to get something for nothing. There was no child. Hell, the relationship only lasted a couple weeks. Once she realized she meant nothing to me, she quit and left town.”

“Then you really don’t even know if she ended up getting pregnant or not.” I stand up, holding my arms out at my sides as I look down at him.

He looks up at me but doesn’t bother standing. “There was no pregnancy. This letter is nothing but garbage.” The way he says the words makes me feel as if he truly believes them himself. His voice is deep and even.

“So you didn’t pay her off?”

His lips press together in a thin line as he thinks it over. He nods once. “I did give her money at one point, but it wasn’t because a child was involved. She was hurt when she realized we’d never marry, even after your mother’s passing. She couldn’t bear to look at me. She told me she was quitting—it was the only way to move on—but then a week or so later, she met me in the parking lot late one night as I was leaving work. She asked for some money to leave town.”

“And that’s it. You just gave her some money out of the goodness of your heart, right?”

He chuckles. “Not exactly. She threatened to spill our secret—to tell your mother about my infidelity. Your mom was sick and dying, and I didn’t want her to worry about unnecessary things, so I gave Linda what she wanted. She left and I’ve never talked of her since. Until now, that is.”

I shake my head, wondering how the hell he could be so naive. He really thought she just wanted money to keep quiet. He never thought there could

be a deeper reason for wanting the money?

Either way, I know I'm not going to get what I'm looking for here. He's not going to confess all of his sins to me. He's not even sorry for betraying my mother. I climb back into my truck without another word. I toss the paper and picture into the passenger seat and twist the key. The loudness of the motor cuts through the silence like a sharp knife. As I turn the truck around, I check out my father in the mirror. He's still sitting in that chair, sipping his drink. He's staring at the land in front of him; he refuses to look at me or my truck. He refuses to accept anything that doesn't fit his expectations. Hell, given how little he sees me and the rest of his children, he might as well be dead. He was never a loving man, and that's only gotten worse since Mom's passing.

I drive slowly through the countryside, needing the time to cool off and clear my head. I can't help but think about my father, his mistress, and my mother. While my mom was lying in bed, slowly dying, her husband was off screwing another woman? How could he even think of doing such a thing? And to then refer to Mom as the love of his life? Ha! I shake my head. My fingers tighten around the steering wheel—so much so that my knuckles turn white. I feel every muscle tighten as the anger surges through my body. I hate this. I hate him. I hate that my poor mother had such a shitty husband. Did she know? Did she know what my father was off doing when he claimed to be working?

I've been driving mindlessly for too long. When I pull myself from my thoughts, I find that I'm driving down Main Street, right toward the bar and the auction that's probably over by now. Maybe I can slip inside, find Celeste, and tell her how sorry I am for not showing up. I don't know why I even care at this point, but I need her to see that I'm serious about our deal—that I'm a man of my word.

I pull into the gravel parking lot and shut off the truck. The place looks packed based on how many cars are in the parking lot. I know walking in

there is going to earn me all kinds of looks from the people of this town, but maybe it will show Celeste what she needs to see: how much the people of this town really hate me, and how unlikely it is that they'll work with us. If nothing else, I'll at least get to see her again and tease myself a little more.

I step out of the truck and slam the old metal door behind me. The gravel beneath my boots crunches with my every step. I pull open the door and the loud music from inside filters out, welcoming me. I walk into the bar, and to my surprise, no one stares at me. They all seem lost in their own worlds—drinking and laughing. I head up to the bar and order a beer. The woman behind the bar slides one over and points toward the dance floor. I toss her some money for the drink then look in the direction she's pointing. My eyes land on Celeste.

She's smiling wide and her eyes are glowing as she's being spun around on the dance floor by another man. She looks sexy as fuck in that short miniskirt and boots. Her white top is hugging every curve, and her tan skin is dewy and glistening from dancing.

I feel my teeth clench together as I lift the bottle to my lips and take a sip.

"She's the new toy in town," the bartender says. "You better get in line if you want your turn." She offers a knowing smile before turning around and walking away.

What the fuck is that supposed to mean: *if I want my turn*? This woman doesn't know me. I don't want a turn with anyone. Yes, I'm attracted to Celeste, but looking around the bar, so is every other man in town. She's beautiful and sexy. If someone isn't attracted to her, they're out of their mind. But just because I find her attractive doesn't mean I want anything to do with her outside of business. In fact, I've never wanted someone so little before. Or more accurately, I've never wanted to want someone so little before.

I shake my head at myself and toss back the rest of the beer. "Bourbon," I order, needing something a little stronger.

The bartender gives me a little smile but pours the drink and hands it

over. I toss it back quickly, but she's still standing in front of me, holding the bottle. She pours another like she knows what I'm going to ask for. Hell, I probably look jealous as fuck right now. I'm sure she's seen this before with every other man in town.

I take my time with this drink, sipping it slowly while watching her have the time of her life. She never notices me. Her attention stays on the man she's dancing with. When the song ends, a new man replaces the last one and they start dancing all over again.

"Why don't you just go over there?" the bartender asks.

I shake my head. "Why would I do that? She doesn't want to dance with an old man. Especially not the town pariah." I finish off my drink, wanting to wash that word out of my mouth.

She leans against the bar. "I saw the look on her face when she thought you couldn't make it. Maybe you're not as old and washed up as you think." With a grin, she turns and walks away.

I get one more drink as I talk myself out of going up to her. I drink it slowly as I watch her. Her cheeks are pink, and her skin is glowing. Her eyes are bright and filled with excitement. She looks like she's having the time of her life. I don't want to ruin that for her or confuse her like I'm confusing myself. Why can't I ignore her like the rest?

I place my empty glass on the bar and head for the door. I'm hanging my head as I walk across the gravel toward my truck. I want her, but I don't *want* to want her. She could only bring more hurt and pain into my life if I reach out and take her the way I want to. I laugh at myself. Hell, it's not like she wants me anyway. She's in her late 20s and I'm in my 40s. No way would a beautiful young girl like that want anything to do with a bitter old man like myself.

"Drake!" someone calls from behind me just as I'm opening the door to my truck.

I turn around to find her running toward me. "I didn't even know you

were here! Where are you going?” she asks, coming to a stop in front of me. Her chest is heaving from her short jog. It’s rising and falling quickly, and drawing my full attention. “I thought you couldn’t make it?” she adds on.

“Something came up with my dad. I didn’t mean to blow you off.” I swing the truck door closed and lean against it.

She offers a coy smile. “Don’t worry about it. Why don’t we go inside and get a drink?” She slides her hands into her pockets, looking a little nervous.

I shake my head. “Nah, I really shouldn’t. I already missed the auction, so I think I’m just going to take off.” I motion toward the road with my thumb.

“Come on. Stay. Please? For me?” she begs with a grin on her lips. She reaches out and takes my hand in hers. “Let’s get a drink. Get to know each other better.” She bats her long, dark eyelashes at me and I can’t tell if she’s being serious or making a joke to persuade me.

My eyes are glued to our joined hands. My mouth is suddenly dry. “Nah, I really should be going,” I say, pulling my hand from hers with a surge of determination. I have to go. I have to keep my distance. It’d be too easy to pull her against me, especially right now. She’s been drinking. I’ve been drinking. She seems more carefree and friendly right now, and I don’t want to take advantage.

“You, Drake Slade, promised me,” she says, stepping closer. Her eyes are locked on mine. Our chests are nearly touching.

I look down into her eyes—big fucking mistake. My mouth opens but no words come out.

“Come back inside with me. I’ve danced with every guy in this town . . . everyone but you, that is.”

“Celeste, I . . .” I try, but the words stop when she tugs me back toward the door.

I don’t put up a fight or argue with her as she drags me to the dance floor. I guess maybe this is part of her plan: let the town see how close we are. If

they like her, then maybe they'll like me by extension. Knowing that, I don't let this dance go to my head. It doesn't mean she likes me; it just means she's doing her job.

She smiles as she places my hands on her hips. "Come on. Show me what you got," she laughs sweetly, starting to move against me.

I grunt and shake my head as I begin moving with her. Her body is pressed against mine, and each wiggle of her hips only teases me that much more. As we dance, I try to think of anything that will keep my body in check: baseball, my father and his mistress, my troubles with this town, but none of it works. I can feel myself coming alive. My blood begins to boil and my blood pressure rises.

When she turns around and presses her ass against my groin, a soft growl leaves my lips. She feels how excited I am. Suddenly, she stops dancing and turns around to look up at me. Her lips are parted with her heavy breathing, and her eyes are glassy.

I open my mouth, not even sure of what I'm going to say. To no one's surprise, no words come out. There we are, standing stock still in the middle of a dozen dancing people. We can't talk or even move. All we can do is stay locked inside whatever this is. It's the same whirlwind we were trapped in the night we met. We both know we can't act on this, but we can't escape it either.

Someone dancing near us bumps into Celeste's back, causing her to fall forward. My arms reach out, steadying her.

"Thank you," she breathes out, her hot breath blowing across my dry lips.

Instead of replying, I do what I know I shouldn't, but I can't keep avoiding it. I need it out of the way so we can get back to business. I press my mouth to hers. She's already in my arms, with her chest pressed against mine. I'm almost shocked when her arms move upward, latching onto the back of my neck as she takes the kiss deeper.

Her lips are as soft as clouds. Her tongue is as sweet as the ripest fruit.

And the way it moves against mine is fucking heavenly—or I guess in my case, hellish, since I know this is all I'll ever get. My hands move up, cupping her face, holding her to me as I give the kiss my all, my everything. I kiss her like she's the air I need to breathe. I kiss her like she's my lifeline and I need her to survive. Then she lets out a whimper and I feel her shiver against me. The sensation is like an electric current, and I've gotten too close. She literally sends a shockwave through me.

I pull away from her as fast as I can. Her eyes are wide with surprise and glassy with fresh tears. Her lips are red, swollen, and glistening from our kiss. Her chest is heaving with excitement, and her face is turning pinker by the second. Is she embarrassed because I pulled away? Does she think I'm turning her down in some way? I hope not, because in this moment, the only thing I can think of doing is pulling her out of this bar and into my truck, where I can drive her home and spend the rest of the night buried inside her.

But. That. Can't. Happen.

"I'm sorry," I tell her so softly I'm not even sure if she heard me. Without another word or waiting for a reply, I turn and leave the bar as quickly as I entered it. Pushing through the door into the cool night air, I feel more awake and refreshed. I breathe the crisp air deep into my lungs. I take every step toward my truck with determination. I need to get out of here, away from her. I don't even remember being this drawn to Casey all those years ago. There's just something about Celeste that pulls me in. I don't know what it is or why I can't ignore it, but I fucking hate it. I hate anything that tries to control me. I'm my own man; I can do as I please. So why the fuck can't I keep my distance when it comes to her?

I rip my truck out of the parking lot at lightning speed, but the drive home is slow. I need time to think. I need time to get this straight in my head. Why did I go to that bar? Why did I let her talk me into going back inside? Why did I dance with her when I knew it would only tease me?

Stress. That has to be the reason. Dealing with all that's going on at the

brewery, then dealing with my dad on top of it, I've had more stress than usual. Drinking certainly didn't help matters. I pull into the driveway and exit the truck, walking straight into the house and to the kitchen, where I left my bottle of bourbon. I plan on drinking it until I don't remember that kiss we shared. No way will I be able to move on if it's still fresh in my mind. I need to erase it.

I grab the bottle and lean against the counter as I open it and take a long drink. It burns going down, but it's a burn I crave. It's a burn that will bring peace in the end. I shake my head, and mentally, I'm ripping myself a new one. I should've done everything I could in order to avoid her. I should've had Harrison attend all the meetings. I should've known I couldn't trust myself.

The crunch of gravel draws my attention toward the door. I look up, confused as to who could be coming over so late. The porch light is on, and the moment she steps up to the screen door, I see her. Her green eyes are damn near glowing. Her cheeks, flushed. Her eyes lock on mine but she doesn't say anything or move to open the door. I take one more swig of my bottle and set it on the island in front of me as I move toward the door.

What is she doing here? Doesn't she see that this can't happen? Why would she follow me home? I open the door and she steps inside without a word. She looks up at me and I look down at her.

"I . . ." she says quietly before shaking her head clear. "I know I'm not thinking clearly."

"What are you doing here, Celeste?" I rasp out, not even sounding like myself.

She pushes past me and I turn to watch as she paces the living room floor.

"I know I shouldn't be here. I know we shouldn't have kissed. But I haven't been able to get you out of my head since I met you. I don't know what it is about you. I was more than prepared to keep my feelings to myself, but that was when I thought they were one-sided. When you kissed me, it

opened a whole can of worms, and suddenly, I can't remember why it's wrong anymore." She holds her arms out at her sides and lets them fall. The expression on her face is verging on sadness, and it pains me to see it. I didn't mean to confuse her or hurt her in any way. In fact, it's the last thing I want to do. I'm only trying to hold things together—not make them worse.

"We work together," I remind her. "You're going to be leaving in a year," I add on. "Oh yeah, and let's not forget the big age difference between us."

"We're both adults, Drake," she says, stepping closer. "You don't think we can be adult enough to keep things separate? I know I can." Her fingers hook under the bottom of her shirt as she slowly pulls it above her head, leaving her standing in front of me in her black lace bra. Her breasts are pushed together and I can't do anything but imagine running my tongue between them.

"I promise I won't think this is more than what it is as long as you promise you won't either. I can't stay with you. All I can do is give us both something we want." She bites down on her lower lip as she watches me intently. God, how I'd like to be biting down on that lip right now.

Her eyes are full of lust and excitement. Her chest is moving up and down quickly, causing her breasts to press together even more tightly. She's basically giving me what I want. She feels it. She wants me too. But she knows we can't work in the long run. All this could ever be is sex—two consenting adults who want to fulfill a need that no one else can fill at this moment. I feel myself wavering. She's offering herself up on a silver platter, and I'm not strong enough to walk away.

I step toward her quickly before I can change my mind. With my mouth on hers, I pull her against my chest and pick her up against me. Her legs wrap around my hips and my hands land on her firm ass to support her weight. The alcohol I've consumed tonight pushes away the reasons why this is wrong, and convinces me that this is so fucking right. My blood feels like it's boiling beneath my skin—bringing my entire body to life in ways I haven't felt in

years. Her small hands push my shirt up my stomach and her fingers skim across my skin. Her touch nearly burns my flesh. I press her back to the wall and break our kiss to yank my shirt over my head.

Tossing it to the floor, my mouth is right back on hers. Even though I want this more than I've ever wanted anything, I also know how bad this is. I want to give her the chance to back out—to change her mind. The way she's kissing me: fast, hard, and rushed, and the way her nails are digging into my skin, it's clear she's wanting me to take the next step. My hands slowly start moving up her back.

I've had one-night stands before—long, long ago—but even those were with women I knew. I know nothing about Celeste other than the fact that she's my new lawyer and she's from California. I have no idea what she drinks, what her favorite food is, or the type of man she usually goes for. I don't know if she's a romantic or if she prefers to get down and dirty with random men. Instead of being able to use my knowledge of a woman to give her what she likes, I just have to go with what feels right. And right now, the only thing that feels right is everything that should feel wrong. I want to move us into the bedroom—which hasn't been used since Casey moved out—but I don't think I could handle being in there with another woman. I haven't slept in that bed in years, because I couldn't bear the thought of being in there without her.

My fingers find the hook on her bra and it's still easy to unfasten it without looking, even though I'm extremely out of practice. Her bra straps fall from her shoulders as my mouth pulls away from hers. I keep my eyes on hers at first, giving her the chance to change her mind. Instead, she pulls her bottom lip between her teeth as if she's awaiting my approval. My eyes slowly fall past her plump lips, make their way down her slender neck, and finally rest on her chest. Her breasts are perky, with her nipples standing at attention. My mouth waters just from gazing at them. There's an ache in my stomach, and it's urging me to reach out and touch them, massage them, taste

them.

I fall to my knees in front of her, with my palms moving up to cup them. They feel heavy in my hands—so soft and perfect. I don't even remember making the decision to taste them, but the next thing I know, her hard nipple is in my mouth and my tongue is flicking against it. Her fingers thread through my hair, pulling and tugging as her breathing becomes harder and more ragged.

My lips kiss their way lower, down her flat stomach, as my fingers begin to unbutton her skirt. Moments later, it falls to the floor and she's in nothing but a pair of black lace panties. As I'm kissing my way to her hips, my fingers brush against her core. Her wetness is soaking through the lace. I breathe her in deeply and she smells as sweet as I'd dreamed she would.

"Drake," she whispers my name. Her hands are shaking as they move up to cup my jaw.

I open my eyes and look up at her. She looks scared and nervous. Suddenly, I'm wondering if this is her first time.

"Do you want me to stop?" I ask, even though it pains me.

"No," she replies with a slight shake of her head. She falls to her knees, placing her at eye level now. Slowly, she kisses me. It's a soft kiss, so different than how we were just kissing. Her hands move to my chest and she pushes me back until I'm sitting down in front of her. I watch her for a moment. She watches me. Something is changing between us—charging.

Her hands reach for the waistband on my jeans and they're shaking as they unfasten my belt. I reach out—pulling her on top of me—and our lips meet once again. Rolling us over, I take my place on top, between her parted knees. Her hands are on my hips, pushing down my jeans as she kisses me passionately. My hands begin pushing her panties down her long legs. I hear the sound of fabric tearing, but don't think anything of it, and neither does she. When my jeans are down to the middle of my thighs, I spring free, resting against her core. She's so wet for me, I glide against her with ease.

“I don’t have a condom,” I say against her lips, hoping she stops me, but praying she doesn’t. I haven’t had a use for condoms in years, and the last couple months that Casey and I were together, we didn’t even use them since we both wanted kids.

“I have one in my purse,” she says, causing me to pull away and look around on the floor for her purse. I find it by the door. She must’ve dropped it there when she walked in. I grab it quickly by stretching. I refuse to remove myself from her completely, fearing it might break the spell for her.

“It’s in the small zippered pocket on the inside,” she says, removing her boots and kicking her panties the rest of the way off.

I pull the zipper open and there’s the condom. I quickly grab it and toss the purse to the side. I open the foil packet with my teeth and quickly slide on the condom before taking my place on top of her again. Her hands tangle into my hair, pulling my mouth to hers. She raises her hips, causing me to glide between her folds. My hands rest on her hips, holding her still.

“Please, Drake, I need this. I need you,” she pleads against my lips. I can feel her knees shaking on either side of my hips.

I can’t stand to listen as she begs for something I want just as badly. Without warning, I push my hips forward and slide deep inside her. Her whole body tenses and she sucks in a large gulp of air. I push in the rest of the way and melt into her. She’s so hot—so tight around me. She’s my own special version of heaven. I’ve never in my life felt something so good. Not with any other woman I’ve been with. Not even Casey.

Already, my release is aching to explode, but I refuse to let it go. No way can this end so soon. No way will I allow it to end before dawn. If I know one thing and one thing only, it’s that I will make this last as long as possible. I won’t stop until she’s begging me. I won’t leave her until I’ve had her in every way possible. If this is a once-in-a-lifetime shot, then I won’t let it end until we’re both done with each other once and for all.

CELESTE

I wake in the morning, but I don't open my eyes. Honestly, I don't want to be awake yet. My body is sore from last night's dancing and my stomach is doing flops from the stupid amount of alcohol I consumed. And . . . I had the best dream ever. A dream where Drake and I came together in the most delicious way possible. Maybe if I don't open my eyes, I'll be able to find my way back to that dream.

My head starts pounding and my body is begging for me to find a bathroom. I want to stomp my foot. I don't want real life right now! I want that dream. I want to be lost in Drake—but from a safe distance since I know I'd be a moth to his flame.

I hear a groan from behind me and my eyes pop open as fear consumes me. Who's in my room? Did I bring someone home last night? No way. That's not my style What the fuck? Wait . . . I don't remember coming home last night. My eyes strain against the bright light of the sun that's streaming through the window. I'm momentarily blinded. Slowly, everything comes into focus.

The first thing I see is a wooden coffee table. Then my eyes move up to a recliner and a large window. I push myself up into a sitting position and find Drake beside me. A blue blanket barely covers him from the waist down. His chest is bare and he has his forearm thrown over his eyes, shading them from the bright sun. I look down at myself and find that I'm completely naked. My

body flushes with embarrassment and shame.

“Wha—? No, no, no, no, no, no,” I whisper, shaking my head back and forth as I look at myself, at Drake, and around the room trying to piece things together. My dream *wasn't* a dream! It was real. I followed him home. I seduced him. I slept with him—my client! God, everything is going to be so fucked up now. How can we pretend this didn't happen? How can we work together with this huge secret between us? What if he fires me? What if I have to return home a failure? How could I have let this happen?

I have to get out of here. I look around me and find my clothes on the floor. I tug on my shirt—skipping the bra—and then pull on my skirt. I pull my ripped panties up my legs beneath my skirt and start crawling around on my knees, looking for my socks. I have to get out of here right now, before he wakes up. I can't face him. Not now. Not after this.

“Don't freak out, Celeste,” he says, voice deep and even.

“What?” I breathe out, turning to face him. He's still lying on the floor, but his arm is on his forehead now, blocking the sun from shining in his eyes, which are locked on mine.

“We got wasted. It happens.” He shrugs. “There's nothing to be embarrassed about.” He sits up and runs his hands through his dark hair.

My mouth drops open as my head shakes. “I . . . I'm sorry. I didn't mean for this to happen. I don't do . . . this.” I say motioning between us. I try to stand up, but end up tripping and falling back to my knees. He catches me and pulls me back to his chest. He rolls us over quickly so he's hovering on top of me. He may as well have poured ice-cold water on me. Every muscle tenses beneath him. His weight feels good, but it also feels wrong. So wrong.

“There's nothing to be sorry for. I think we both knew there was an attraction the night we met. Last night, we acted on it. Simple as that.” The way he says those words is so completely unfazed, like what we did wasn't a big deal. But it's a big deal to me.

“I don't do this, Drake,” I say sternly.

“Yeah, you made that clear already,” he says, running his lips up my neck.

“I don’t sleep with men I don’t know. I don’t put my job in jeopardy. I don’t complicate things like this. This isn’t me.”

He offers a cocky smile. “I think I got to know you pretty well last night, Celeste.” He drags the tip of his nose along my jaw. “And to be honest, I wouldn’t mind doing it again.”

I push him away and get to my feet, looking down on him. He lets out a loud laugh. It’s like a slap to my already sore ego.

“The rules have been broken,” he says. “We can’t pretend like they haven’t.”

“Yes, we can, and that’s exactly what we’re going to do,” I argue as I pull on one of my boots.

“Suit yourself,” he says, standing up and letting the blanket fall as he does so. He’s standing in front of me, completely naked and erect. Holy shit, his cock is like a python. How the hell did that girthquake monster fit inside me?

“You know where I’ll be,” he says, turning and walking down the hallway. His perfect ass is the only thing my eyes can lock on. He has two dimples on his lower back—one on each side of his spine. His thighs are toned and his ass may as well be a peach that’s asking me to take a bite. My stomach tightens and I think a whimper escapes. I fucking love peaches.

“Stop gawking and take what you want, Celeste,” he says, turning to look at me with a grin before walking into another room. Moments later, I hear the shower turn on and I collapse onto the floor, still holding one boot.

How the fuck did this happen? How could I have let it happen? Why do I still want it even though I know it’s wrong? Memories from last night start to wash over me. He knew what this was. *I* knew what this was. It was a hookup, plain and simple. We weren’t deluded. We didn’t think it would be the start of some epic romance. We’re both adults—adults who have an undeniable attraction to each other. As long as we can keep work and play

separate, why should there be a problem?

But I already know the answer to my own question: because this is the real world and someone always ends up hurt. He's already hurt. I don't want to hurt him again when I have to leave in a year. This could never work out and we both knew it before we did what we did last night.

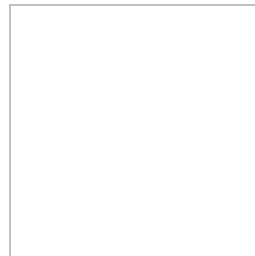
I quickly gather my things and run for the door. Not saying goodbye isn't polite, but no way can I walk into a bathroom where he's naked. Actually, I don't think I could even face him right now. My head is pounding and my stomach is turning. My entire body is sore, and I now have this built-up anxiety inside of me. I just need to get away. I need to clear my head and think things through.

I refuse to let myself think about him on my drive back home. I refuse to let myself think of anything other than how sick I'm feeling. The bright sun doesn't help the headache, and the bouncy roads don't do anything but mix up the contents of my stomach. Walking into my motel room, I head straight to the bathroom to empty what's left of it. After five minutes of vomiting up the entire bar I drank last night, I flush the toilet and reach for my toothbrush. As I brush my teeth, I turn on the water and fill the tub completely, adding in some Epsom salt and bath oils. I need to unwind and relieve some of the soreness in my muscles.

Sinking into the hot water, I wonder if I'm sore from dancing or from having sex with Drake. It's been a while since I've been in the sack with someone, and from what I can remember from last night, he was a monster in bed. Just thinking back on the night has my stomach tightening and my thighs squeezing together beneath the water. I lean my head back and close my eyes, hoping to clear my head and constant thoughts. Unfortunately, the only thing that happens is I see flashes of our time together. I see him moving on top of me. I see the way he squeezes his eyes shut. I can feel his strong arms around me, holding me close and making me feel the safest I've ever felt. A heat consumes me from the inside out, and suddenly, the bathwater is too hot.

I wash off quickly and get out, needing to cool down. I pull on a pair of shorts and a sweatshirt, then go in search of food. I've always been a big eater after drunken nights, and I've loved waking up and going for breakfast. Nothing cures a hangover better than a greasy breakfast. Sadly, I don't have any of the items needed for a greasy diner breakfast, so I'm stuck with soup or microwavable food. I settle for a frozen breakfast bowl that contains scrambled eggs, potato chunks, sausage, cheese, and gravy. I toss it into the microwave and turn to prepare my bed for my lazy Saturday.

I flip on the TV and turn down the blankets. I grab a brush and begin running it through my hair as I grab an orange juice from the mini fridge. Two minutes later, my food is done and I'm snuggled up in bed watching *Lost* reruns while eating as much food as my stomach will hold. After gorging myself on breakfast bowls, chips, candy, and popcorn, I fall into a deep, dreamless sleep.



I SPEND the weekend on the down-low, hiding from everyone who possibly came in contact with me at the Spring Fling. I avoid Drake like the plague, too—no way am I ready to face him so soon. He must feel the same way, because he hasn't called or texted me at all to see where we are on the plan or what the next step will be. Instead of facing my problems head-on, I avoid them for as long as possible.

When Monday morning rolls around, I can't put it off any longer. I have to force myself from bed and into real clothes to head out into the world. You'd think that living in a town this small and so far away from home, I wouldn't care if I made an ass out of myself. But I do. My reputation isn't the only thing on the line here—it's the reputation of the company I work for as well. I highly doubt Mr. Mason wants to hear about how I got a little too

carried away at the Spring Fling, danced with every man in town, and then followed our biggest client home to seduce him. God, just thinking about it that way has my skin flushed with embarrassment. I just want to crawl back into my hole and stay there, so I never have to see the judging looks I'm sure to get when I walk out of here.

Pushing everything away, I leave my motel room and decide that I'll test the waters by stopping at the local diner for some coffee and a muffin. Walking inside, everyone looks up, but I don't see anyone whispering like what I thought would happen. I stop at the counter and have a seat. I'm only there a few minutes before the waitress is walking over with a kind smile.

"Good mornin'," she greets.

"Morning. Can I get a cup of coffee and a blueberry muffin to go, please?"

"Sure thing." She quickly walks away to prepare my order.

While I wait, I glance around the diner. Most of the old men sitting at the counter either tip their hats to me or offer up a friendly smile. The people sitting at the tables seem to ignore me completely. Maybe I'm not the talk of the town the way I thought I'd be. Maybe all the embarrassment and worry were for nothing.

The waitress places my order in front of me and I hand over a five before telling her to keep the change.

"Thank you. Have a wonderful day now."

I grab my things and walk toward the door.

I drink my coffee and eat my muffin on the way to the brewery. I need to face Drake and talk about the next thing we can do to get the town on his side, however, that's going to be hard to do when I'm avoiding him. He didn't reach out all weekend. That tells me he took our agreement seriously. He's accepting that it was just a one-night stand and he's not expecting anything else. That makes me feel a little better, but I'm still embarrassed and ashamed of my actions. It never should've happened.

Finishing off my coffee, I put the car into park and look up at the building. My heart is pounding in my chest, and my breathing is erratic. I take a deep breath and let it out slowly. With a surge of bravery, I push myself to keep going. I step out and walk across the parking lot, then open the big double doors. The woman at the front desk waves me on.

“I’ll let him know you’re on your way up,” she says as I pass.

I smile and nod once as a thank you, but I’m too afraid to say it, fearing I won’t have control of my voice. Nerves have taken over my body.

The elevator opens and a man steps off. I almost bump into him, then realize it’s Harrison. He must’ve just left Drake’s office. Great. That means we’ll be all alone up there.

“Good morning, Ms. Teller. How are you doing today?” he asks as he sidesteps me.

I nod and offer a smile. “As good as can be expected. Is he up in his office?” I point toward the ceiling.

He nods once. “He is. Please call down if you need me.”

On the ride up, I’m a nervous wreck. My stomach is doing flips, I’m sweating, and I can’t seem to stand evenly on my feet. Instead, I’m bouncing from one to the other. The elevator dings and the doors open more quickly than I would’ve liked. With a shuddering breath, I push myself forward, stepping into his office.

I find him sitting behind his desk, looking at whatever’s in front of him. His eyes are cast downward, determination etched on every feature of his face. Small lines surround his serious eyes, with wrinkles forming between them as he draws his brows together. His sharp jaw is cocked, and his soft lips are pressed together in a straight line. His shaggy dark hair is tucked behind his ears and his gray Henley shirt is pushed up to his elbows, exposing his larger-than-life forearms. I linger another second to fully take him in. Why am I drawn to this man like catnip? He’s big and thick all over—rough around the edges just like his big hands. Dammit, there I go again. Just the

thought of those hands has me weak in the knees.

“You going to come in or stand there gawking?” he asks, not bothering to look up at me.

I swallow down every emotion that’s bubbling up and step forward. I move across the office slowly and carefully. Finally, I take a seat across from him and he looks up at me. When our eyes meet, the breath is stolen from my lungs. I’m suddenly hit with images of the things we did: him moving between my parted knees, the way my hands shook with need for him, the sound he made when his release took over. It causes goosebumps to prickle my skin, and I hope he doesn’t notice.

“What do you have for me today?” he asks, clasping his hands together on top of his paperwork.

“Uhh, I . . .” I start, but I honestly have no idea where to go from here. I was expecting a recap of what we did, as well as a discussion of how to put it behind us. I was expecting awkwardness and a sense of unease. I’m completely thrown off by his attempt to ignore the situation completely.

I clear my throat and give my head a small, unnoticeable shake, trying to clear it. I open my notebook, looking over the list of ideas I have. “I wanted to talk about giving back to the community. It’s been brought to my attention that there’s a local family whose barn recently burned down. I guess most of the donated money the Spring Fling brought in went to them. I was thinking that it’d be great if you could make a sizable donation to help rebuild their barn.”

“Sure. Would \$20,000 cut it?” He opens his desk drawer and pulls out his checkbook.

“I . . . I think that would be more than enough.” I nod my head. I can tell that my eyes are stretched wide. I’m being weird, but I can’t help it. He must find it amusing, because his eyes are glistening and his mouth is slightly turned up at the corners.

As he writes the check, I look back at my list, trying to find the next

thing. “I’ve been doing some digging into the families who own the surrounding properties where you’re wanting to build, and I discovered that Lucy Jones just had a baby girl. I thought we could send them a card, and maybe a floral arrangement or something, just to let the family know we’re thinking of them.”

He chuckles and shakes his head. “Seems pointless to me, but whatever you think is best.”

I sit upright, straightening my back and raising my chin. “We need this brewery to be considered a small hometown family business.”

“It is,” he points out. “It’s been passed down from generation to generation, and in this town, that’s as good as it gets.”

“I know, but you’ve kept yourself so locked away that the town doesn’t even consider you a part of it. You’re a billionaire thanks to this business and your family’s wise investments, and the people here know it. Small hometown businesses care about their community and the people in it. They support other local businesses. They support families in their times of need. A company that shows compassion for its customers is a good company. And in return, customers will show respect for the company.

“So did you already pick out the flowers?” he asks, rolling his eyes.

I quickly send him a link to the flower arrangement I’d previously selected. I also text him the address of where it’ll need to be sent.

“Great. My assistant will handle it. Anything else?” he asks.

I nod, a wide smile in place. “Yeah, the town is putting together a Battle of the Businesses. I thought it’d be great if you entered.”

“And what exactly is that?”

“It’s where all the local businesses enter a competition. There will be all kinds of contests, and the business with the most wins, wins!”

“What do they win?”

I shrug. “No idea, but any exposure is good exposure.”

“Fine. Sign me up.”

I smirk just thinking about watching Drake in a potato sack race.

With a smile, he hands me the check he wrote. I reach out and take it, our hands accidentally touching in the process. The moment we have skin-to-skin contact, everything seems to freeze. Everything but my heart, that is. My heart starts racing. I thought after our one night that this would be out of my system, but it's not. It must not be out of his, either. His eyes squint as they take me in, his back straightens, and his chest moves up and down quickly like he's out of breath.

"Are we going to talk about the elephant in the room?" he asks, not taking his eyes off me.

I let my hand fall back to my lap as I look down at the notebook I'm holding. I'm too afraid to make eye contact with him now that he's seen my body's natural reaction to him.

"I don't know what you're talking about," I try.

He laughs and it causes my eyes to cut to him. "You don't know what I'm talking about?" he questions.

"Even if I did, it wouldn't matter, because we had an agreement, remember?"

"Oh, I remember, but I regret it. The agreement, not us," he clarifies.

"Wha-what do you mean?" I can hear the nerves and fear in my voice. It's drenching every word that leaves my lips.

"I hate that I agreed to keep it as a one-time thing, because once wasn't enough. I haven't gotten you out of my system yet. And honestly, I don't think you've gotten me out of yours." He's leaning closer to me. I'm thankful the desk is between us.

"Why would you think that?" I ask, if only to delay the inevitable.

"The way your body came alive when our hands touched. Your chest started rising and falling quickly, causing your nipples to harden and poke against your top. Your eyes filled with lust and passion. And I can't ignore the sudden change between us. Things went from friendly business talk to

awkward and shaky at best. I want you, Celeste. Not forever—I'm not that kind of man. Not anymore. But I want you now. I want to bend you over this desk and slide inside you until you beg me to stop. I want to hear my name come from your lips in gasps. I want to feel the way your body shakes around mine. I want you walking out of this building pumped full of me. And I want that until we're both done with each other. I can't offer you any more than what I am."

"And what's that?" I ask, a little too out of breath.

"A broken man who needs more than he lets on. I need you out of my system, and there's only one way to do that. I want to fuck you, Celeste, over and over. I'm not promising sweet love; I'm promising carnal lust and desire. What we both want."

I want that too, every bit of it, but I can't. Not sober anyway. The other night was a mistake. I know it. He knows it too, deep down.

"The other night was a mistake," I tell him, controlling my voice as much as possible, but it still betrays me.

He nods. "I know." He sits back in his chair. "I never should have allowed myself to touch you, but I did, and now I need more than a taste."

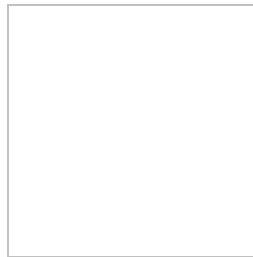
I shake my head and stand, needing distance. "I should go before I make another mistake." I rush toward the elevator and push the button, but the door doesn't open right away. I hear footsteps behind me and turn around, coming face-to-face with him.

His eyes lock on mine, and they're dark and determined. He wets his lips as he steps closer, causing me to step back. My back hits the wall and he stops just inches from me. "If you don't want me to touch you, I won't. I'm not that kind of man. But I think we both know how badly we want each other. If you think you can pretend you don't, fine. But if you want to stop pretending and join me in the real world, I'll be right here."

The elevator dings and the doors open, causing me to jump. Drake backs away and I take this opportunity to leave. I push the button for the ground

level and stand back, willing the doors to close as quickly as possible. Our eyes lock together as they finally begin to shut. When the elevator starts to descend, I lean against the wall and let out a deep breath, thankful for the space and distance. I'm not sure what I was hoping would happen. Did I want him to kiss me? Yes, but no. I need to keep my distance, but I don't want to. I feel like a confused teenager again. I've never in my life been more confused. Do I keep my distance since my job could possibly be on the line, or do I give myself what I so desperately want, consequences be damned?

I exit the building as quickly as possible, questions unanswered.



AFTER I PUT in my time at the office, I find myself heading toward the bar, hoping to talk with Stephanie. Maybe all I need is another woman's perspective. I take a seat and she smiles as she walks up to me.

"How you feeling after the other night?" she asks, hands busy making a drink.

I let out a deep breath. "That was rough."

She laughs and nods along. "Yeah, I figured it would be. At least you seemed to be having a good time. Did you find yourself a suitor?"

I laugh nervously, "No. I'm not looking."

She passes the drink off to the guy sitting a few seats down. She walks back and has a seat on the other side of the bar, in front of me. "So, you want a drink or—?"

"Ha, no. I don't think I'll be drinking for a long time."

"What brings you by?" She lifts her eyebrows and gives me a knowing smile.

I press my lips together. "I'm confused," I confess, laying my head against the bar.

“About Drake?”

My head pops up. “How did you know?”

She shrugs. “I’m good at reading between the lines. You were upset when you got his text. But your entire face lit up when you saw him here. Not to mention there was enough heat between you two on the dance floor, it could’ve melted the North Pole. Then when you left, it seemed like you were chasing after him. And it was easy to see how much he wanted you. The whole time you were dancing, he was just drinking and watching you.”

“It’s so stupid. I want him. Like, I *really* want him. But I don’t know him. And I shouldn’t want him. He’s my client! But it’s all I can think about and I don’t know what to do about it,” I confess, the words leaving my lips at lightning speed.

“If you want him, then go for it. I mean, how bad could it be?”

“I could lose my job if my boss finds out.”

She moves her head from side to side like she’s weighing the options. “Yeah, but what are the odds he’ll find out? Plus, you’re both adults. I guess I don’t see why you think it’s so bad.”

“He’s probably 15 years older,” I point out.

“So? That’s not that big a difference anymore. And he’s totally hot for an older guy. I’d do him,” she laughs out.

I roll my eyes. “So you really don’t think it’d be bad to start something up with him?”

“I’m all about choices, Celeste. It’s your choice. It’s your life. Do what makes you happy.”

I offer a small smile. “Thanks.”

DRAKE

HAVING to hold myself back and watch her walk away was the hardest thing I've ever had to do, but I managed it. I don't want to come on too strong. I don't want to scare her. She's obviously in the middle of a mental tug-of-war. When she's no longer in my office, I take a seat behind my desk again. My mind fills with images of the other night. Just thinking about her makes me hard. The most frustrating thing is, I was hungry for her and had a little too much to drink that night, so I don't remember much of it. I want to do it again—burn it into my memory so it can last forever.

Harrison walks into my office and drops a file folder in front of me. "This is everything I found on Linda Hammond."

"Thank you," I say, shaking the dirty thoughts from my head as I lean forward to study the contents.

"Is there anything else I can do for you?"

"Not at this time. Thank you."

He nods once, goes to take a step, but then stops.

"Is something bothering you, Harrison?"

"You and the lawyer . . ."

"Are none of your business," I say, finishing his sentence.

"I know that, sir. But . . ."

"No buts."

“Is there reason for me to worry? You are like a son to me, after all.”

“I’ll let you know when your opinions are needed. Until then, please, get back to work.”

He nods and finally leaves my office. I hate to make him feel unappreciated, but I really need him to mind his own business when it comes to my personal life. What Celeste and I are—or aren’t—doing is none of his concern.

Now that I have my office to myself once again, I open the file in front of me. The first page is a piece of paper with all of Linda’s employee information. Her tax papers are included. I’m guessing that’s how Harrison managed to pull all this information together. The paper trail follows her throughout her time here at the brewery and then a few towns over in Mooresville after she quit. She rented a small two-bedroom apartment when she arrived there, and took a job at a local grade school, where she became a cook. She worked in that job for four years, and at some point during her first year, she took a six-week leave. I stop reading and think. Maternity leave is usually around six weeks, but then again, so is something like FMLA. I try to find more details about her leave of absence, but there’s nothing else available.

When she left the school, she moved to Southern Florida, where she lived until the day she passed away, just a few weeks ago. Her passing could explain the sudden need for this dipshit to find my father and claim what they think is rightfully theirs. In the entire folder, there’s no mention or proof of children.

I grab my phone and call Harrison’s cell.

“Hello?” he answers.

“You didn’t find any proof of this so-called brother—or sister—of mine existing?”

“Nothing, sir.”

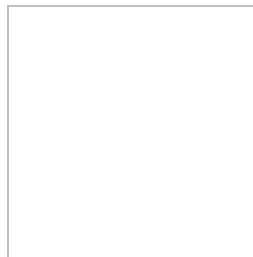
“You can’t get your hands on some old tax forms to see if she claimed

any dependents?”

“The information I gave you was what the company already had in their employee files. The rest I found by doing a simple internet search. The school she worked for had all of their past employees listed in their staff directory. I pulled her obituary from a Florida paper.”

“Do some digging. Hire an investigator if you have to. We need to get to the bottom of this,” I demand, hanging up the phone.

I push the file away. Anger and annoyance eat at me. More than anything, I want to find out if I have another sibling or not. I’m not happy about the thought of my dad fathering another child with a woman who isn’t my mother, but family is the most important thing. And if there’s a piece missing, we need to bring him or her home.



AFTER LEAVING the office for the day, I pass by Celeste’s law office. I quickly pull a U-turn and drive into the parking lot. The sign on the door says *CLOSED*, but there are still lights on inside. I try the knob and the door opens easily.

“Hello?” I call out, taking a step inside.

“Sorry, we’re closed!” she shouts from the back before sticking her head out of her office door. “Oh, it’s you.” She steps into the hallway and crosses her arms over her chest. “What can I do for you, Mr. Slade?”

“Mr. Slade? Going back to that, are we?” I ask, amused by her tone as I step into the office.

She shrugs one shoulder. “Seems appropriate considering our standing.”

“Our standing? Seems to me like we’re on a first-name basis,” I say with a smile. But she doesn’t seem amused. She presses her lips together as she pulls her eyes from mine. Clearly, she’s anxious about this situation. “Let me

take you out,” I say, almost begging.

“What?” she asks, clearly confused. Her eyes jump back up to mine.

“I want to take you out,” I say, taking a step closer. “Let’s go get dinner, talk, and get to know each other a little better.”

“How in the world does that seem like a good idea?” she asks, but there’s a smile playing on her lips.

“I want you, Celeste. You want me, I know you do. But I think something is standing in the way.”

“Yeah, attorney-client privilege. My job. Ethics. Morals. You know, real-life adult stuff.”

I shake my head as I start walking closer. “No, that isn’t it. I think you’re the type of person who grabs a ripe opportunity when it’s right in front of you. I just have to prove how good it is. Right now, you don’t know enough about me to make it worth it. Let me change that.”

She’s fully smiling now, and I take that as a good sign. “Doing things a little backward, aren’t we?”

“I never claimed to be smart, Ms. Teller.” I’m only an inch away from her now. Our eyes are locked. I can feel the heat leaving her body. I absorb it, letting it warm a spot inside me that only she can touch.

“Come on, you’re not going to sleep with me then turn me down for dinner, are you?” I shoot her a little grin I hope she can’t refuse.

She laughs. “I guess that would be rather rude of me.” Her breath blows across my face and I want nothing more than to pull her in for a kiss, but I don’t. Holding off on the urge causes my stomach muscles to tighten.

“Get your stuff,” I request softly.

“Right now? You want to take me to dinner right now?” Her green eyes stretch wide.

I nod. “Mm-hmm, unless you have other plans.”

“No, no other plans. But there isn’t anything open in town other than the diner, and I can’t do stale black coffee and limp fries again this week.”

“I know a place,” I tell her, turning around for the door.

“All right, let me get my purse.” She disappears into her office, shuts off the light, and is back in front of me within seconds. “Lead the way,” she motions for me to go.

I open the door and step out, holding it open for her. She turns off the entryway light and joins me on the sidewalk. Taking her keys, she locks up the office. I lead her over to my truck and open the passenger-side door. She gives me a look but climbs inside. I close the door after her then jog around the truck to get behind the wheel.

“So, where is this secret little place?” she asks, pulling on her seatbelt.

“I didn’t say it was secret,” I say around a smile. It occurs to me that I probably look way too happy right now. It’s been a long time since I’ve smiled this much, and my cheeks are paying for it.

“You going to give me a hint?” She smiles at me and it steals the air from my lungs.

I laugh. “Don’t like surprises much, huh?”

“I hate them. Just tell me.” She’s watching me, and I can see the lack of amusement in her eyes.

“My place,” I tell her.

“Your house?” Her brows lift with surprise.

I nod once. “Is that okay?”

She looks nervous now. “I don’t know, Drake. I thought we were going to a restaurant—someplace public.”

“Nothing is open; you know that. You said so yourself.” I want to grin from using her words against her, but I manage to hold it back.

She laughs and shakes her head. “Then why don’t we wait for another night?”

“Because I want to have dinner with you tonight. Don’t worry, I’m an excellent cook.”

She sits back in her seat and enjoys the ride down the dark country roads.

When we get to the house, I park the truck and go to open her door. She's already opened it and is sliding out.

"I can tell you're from the city," I chuckle.

"How's that?"

"You didn't wait for me to open your door." I close it and hold out my elbow for her to take.

She looks amused, but slides her arm around mine. "I'm not the kind of girl who needs a man to do things like open and close doors or lead me somewhere. I've been doing these things for a long time all on my own."

"That's not the point," I argue.

"Okay, then what's the point?" I can hear the challenging tone in her voice.

"It's just the country way, Celeste. Women don't *need* men for anything. We know that. These are just the little things we can offer to make your day a little easier, and make you feel a little more special. That's all. Manners. Hospitality," I say. We're on the porch now, so I lean forward and open the door, allowing her to walk inside ahead of me.

"Care for a drink?" I ask, walking to the kitchen and flipping on lights as I go.

"Sure, but no whiskey. This isn't a business meeting," she jokes.

I laugh and open the fridge. "Wine?"

"You have wine?" she asks, eyes stretching wide.

"I do. I don't know why, but . . ." I pull out the bottle and place it on the island as I search around for wine glasses. After searching every cabinet, and coming up empty-handed, I grab two whiskey glasses instead. "I hope this is okay. As you can guess, I haven't had wine in a long time . . . or company, for that matter."

She giggles but accept the glass of wine. Gently, she knocks it against mine. "I'm sure it will taste just fine."

We both take a sip and instantly regret it.

“Can wine go bad?” she asks, scrunching up her nose.

I quickly spit mine into the kitchen sink. “I didn’t think so, but this is horrible. Give me that.” I reach out and take her glass, pouring both down the sink. “I told you it’s been a while since I had wine!”

We both laugh as I dig around for something else. “I know you’re a city girl, but how about a beer?”

“Anything has to be better than wine that tastes like vinegar,” she laughs out.

I take out two bottles. I open one and hand it over before doing the same with mine. We both take a sip at the same time.

“Much better,” she says, nodding her head.

“My kind of woman,” I say without thinking.

Her eyes jump up to mine and we both stand awkwardly for a moment. Neither of us knows what to say or do from here.

“So, what’s for dinner?” she asks, breaking the silence.

I jump into action, open the fridge, and root around until I come up with chicken breast. “Chicken?” I ask, looking back at her.

“Sounds good.”

I close the fridge. “I’ll go fire up the grill.”

I walk out the back door that’s just off the kitchen and get the grill going. When I walk back in, she’s busying herself in the kitchen. The island is covered with various items.

“I figured I’d help, if you don’t mind.” She looks over her shoulder at me, a small smile in place.

“I don’t mind at all,” I tell her as I start seasoning the chicken.

She’s standing at the island while I’m standing at the counter behind her. We’re back to back. “So, you cook often?” I ask, needing conversation.

“I did back home. I’ll admit, though, that I prefer to spend my money on a nice apartment and shoes rather than food. Plus, it saves my ass from doubling in size, since I eat more when I cook for myself.”

“What do you like to cook?”

She thinks it over for a moment. “I like making salads, grilled veggies, and anything with rice—like, I could literally live off the stuff, but truthfully, I don’t eat it much. You know, due to the carbs and all. I like chicken and turkey, but I’m not big on pork.”

“No bacon?” I question with a laugh.

She giggles. “Not really. I’m more of a sweet breakfast person. The sweeter the better, in my opinion.”

“Ah, so you’re like the kid who sucks the syrup out of the bottle,” I tease.

She laughs. “You do that *one* time and you never live it down,” she jokes, but we both chuckle.

I grab a pair of tongs from the drawer and turn to take the chicken out, but freeze when she turns at the same time. We’re eye to eye. She smiles, causing her cheeks to blush.

“Sorry, go ahead.”

“No, I insist.”

She nods and moves toward the fridge. She opens the door and bends down low, grabbing a tomato. When she bends down, I can’t keep my eyes to myself. I have to take her in. When I feel my body start to come to life, I shake my head and move outside with the chicken. Finally alone, I start to wonder what the point of this whole dinner date is. I’m not the *take a girl out to dinner* kind of guy. Not anymore, at least. I guess I used to be, back when I was trying to win over Casey. Back then, of course, we went out from time to time, but after we’d been together a while, we just kind of settled into our routine.

There’s something about Celeste that draws me in. I thought it was her body, plain and simple, but when we’re together, we laugh and have a good time even when it’s work-related. Maybe something else pulls me to her and has from the beginning. Maybe she’s meant for me. All this time, I thought Casey was the only woman I could ever be with, but Celeste seems perfect in

every way.

I walk back into the house and Celeste turns to face me. “I got the salad ready,” she says, but stops when I step up to her.

“I can’t wait until after dinner for this,” I say, leaning in and pressing my mouth to hers. At first, her lips are stiff and uninviting, but almost instantly, she gives in. She kisses me back. Her tongue tangles with mine and her arms wrap around my neck, pulling me in deeper. My left hand rests on her hip while my right hand moves gently up and down her back. The kiss is long and deep.

Slowly, I break it off, not wanting to take things too far—just wanting to give her and myself a little taste of what could be. When I pull away, her eyes are wide—sparkling with something I can’t place. Her lips are red and glistening from our kiss, and they’re parted with her heavy breathing.

“Drake, I . . .” she breathes out.

“I know. We shouldn’t be doing this,” I say, using her words from before. She shakes her head. “No, that’s not what I was going to say.”

I release her and she leans against the island. “I know we should keep our distance for more than one reason, but I’ve never thought of someone as much as I’ve thought about you. Something just draws me to you—something I don’t quite understand but something I can’t ignore nonetheless.”

“So . . . us . . .” I say, motioning back and forth between us.

She shrugs one shoulder and smiles. “You think it’ll work out?”

My mouth opens but no sound comes out.

“I mean, just keeping things casual?”

“I think we can do anything we want, Celeste,” I say, moving back toward her. As I pick her up against me, her mouth returns to mine. I set her on the island and her hands tug at my shirt until I pull it off in one swift motion. Her fingers graze over my shoulders and biceps. Her touch is so soft, it causes a chill to run up my spine. Goosebumps prickle my skin wherever she draws a path with her fingertips. My hands start moving over her hips and

under the hem of her shirt, pushing it up as they go.

“I’ve never been with a man like you,” she says, mesmerized, as her fingers continue to trace over my body.

“A man like me?”

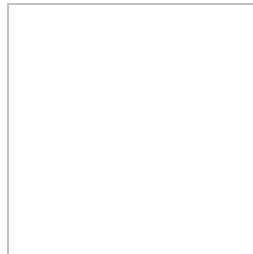
“Big and rough. A man who knows how to do anything. A man who has a body built by hard work. A man so . . .” She doesn’t finish the sentence; she just pulls me toward her mouth. I don’t need a second invitation. I kiss her deeply as I pull at her top.

“What about the food on the grill?” she asks, breaking the kiss.

“Fuck it,” I mumble, needing my mouth against hers.

She giggles against my lips and pushes me away. “We have all the time we need for this. Let’s have dinner first. Otherwise, we may end up burning down your house.”

I groan. “Fine. I’ll check the grill,” I say, grabbing my shirt and moving toward the door. My heart is hammering away in my chest and my breathing is labored from being so close before being turned away. At least I wasn’t turned down this time. I made her see there’s more than just sex. I can’t wait to sit with her and enjoy this meal. I want to know all there is to know. It’ll make our time together that much sweeter.



WHEN THE CHICKEN IS DONE, I take it inside. She’s already set the table with two plates, our beers, and a candle in the center. Next is a bowl of salad and a basket of rolls. “Wow, where’d you find all that?”

“In the cabinets,” she answers, serving the salad.

I place a chicken breast on each of our plates and we take a seat. “So, tell me about this ex of yours. The one who ruined you.” She offers up a little smile.

“Ruined me?” I ask with a lift of my brow.

She shrugs. “That’s what I’ve heard . . . from literally everyone.”

I shake my head. “I wish everyone would mind their own fucking business.”

“Well, are you going to tell me?” she asks, cutting a piece of chicken.

I tear off a piece of the roll and stuff it in my mouth. “Casey was my only real love. We were together for years. We’d even talked of starting a family.”

“So, what happened?”

I shrug. “I don’t know, really. I don’t know why she just all of a sudden decided to run off. I guess she wasn’t as happy as I thought. She was meant for more than just living the small-town life.”

She nods. “You never thought of going with her?”

“Nope, this is my home. I don’t even know what I’d do anywhere else. I was born into this life. It’s all I’ve ever known: the brewery and taking care of the land.”

“So even though you have billions of dollars, you never even considered taking a vacation?”

I shrug. “I’ve considered it, of course, but if I left, who would take care of things here?”

“What about Harrison?”

I laugh. She’s making perfect sense, but to get me out of my home and out of my routine would take a miracle. I like my life and where I’m at. No need to run around to find a life I don’t want. “Tell me more about you. How many men have been in your life?”

She snorts. “Wow, straight to the point! Not many. I had a serious boyfriend back in high school. We dated for the first couple of months in college, but never seeing each other caused us to break up. Then I didn’t date again until my senior year. There were a few guys, but nothing serious.”

“So you’ve never had your heart broken?” I ask.

She presses her lips together and offers a sad smile. “You have to be in

love to get your heart broken.”

I reach out and place my hand over hers. “Love isn’t all it’s cracked up to be. Trust me. It hurts.”

She pushes her chair back and stands. I can’t do anything but watch as she moves closer to me, sitting on my lap. “That’s why I think what we’re doing is the perfect option for both of us,” she says, leaning in and pressing a soft kiss to my lips. My hands immediately go to her hips, pulling her down against my growing erection. She lets out the softest of moans against my lips and it only makes me harden more.

Finally picking up where we left off earlier, my hands push her shirt up her stomach. She reaches for the hem and yanks it off, tossing it onto the floor. Her light pink lace bra is calling my name. It makes her tanned skin glow under the candlelight. My lips move off of hers, down to her jaw, and finally to the swell of her breasts while my hands work at the clasp.

When it falls away, I suck a hard nipple into my mouth. She reclines, back arching as soft moans and whimpers leave her lips. Her fingers thread into my hair, pulling at the roots.

“Drake . . .” She breathes out my name and it sounds amazing leaving her lips—like nothing I’ve ever heard before.

“What, Celeste?” I whisper against the soft skin of her breast.

“Take me to bed,” she nearly begs.

I scoot my chair back and it scrapes against the hardwood floor. I stand with her in my arms and carry her down the hallway to the bedroom I’ve refused to enter ever since Casey left. Tonight, this room gets a new memory. It’s time I replace the bad ones anyway.

I lay her down on the bed and kick off my boots. I watch as she slides out of her pants and shimmies them down her legs. Only seconds go by before I crawl up her delicious body, exploring with my tongue as I go.

CELESTE

IN his arms, I feel safe—like nothing could ever hurt me. I’ve never been the type of woman who finds comfort in the arms of a man I don’t know very well, but with Drake, it’s different. I know we met not that long ago, and I realize that deep down, I really don’t know him. But on some level, it feels like I’ve known him my entire life. The way he looks at me with such passion and determination, the way he touches me—even innocently—it just feels so right, like we’ve been together many times before. He knows what I need without me having to say it. He innately knows how to touch me and kiss me just the way I like. He knows me on some deep level, even though I can’t put my finger on how.

He’s between my parted knees, bare from the waist up. He kicked off his boots before climbing onto the bed, but his jeans are still in place while I’m completely naked beneath him. The way the denim rubs against me is teasing. His mouth is on mine, kissing me fiercely—his beard tickling my soft skin. His strong hands are rough and calloused from long days of working the land. The way they scratch against my hips causes goosebumps to prickle my flesh.

“You have no idea how badly I’ve wanted you, Celeste. From the day you walked into my barn, I’ve thought of nothing but moving between these sexy-as-fuck thighs of yours,” he says as his lips move down to my neck. “And now that I’ve had you, I’m never going to stop.”

I can't reply. All I can do is let out a needy moan as he descends my body, peppering my skin with kisses as he goes. His tongue comes out, running across my collarbone. His teeth nip at my chest. Finally, he sucks a nipple into his hot mouth. My back arches into him, needing more. His hands move to my waist, pulling me upward as he moves to the other breast. He licks, sucks, and nibbles before moving down to my stomach.

"I haven't been able to think of anything other than how good I knew you'd feel wrapped around me." He softly bites at my hip, making me call out. "How sweet I knew you would taste." With those words, his tongue runs across my slit. My hips buck upward, but his hands quickly move to them, holding me in place. "Fuck, you taste so good," he whispers before flicking his tongue against my sensitive nub.

My fingers grasp the blanket beneath us, needing something to hold on to as my eyes flutter closed in ecstasy. My knees are already shaking on either side of his head. "Drake, please," I beg, needing more, needing him inside me, filling me.

He senses my need and slides a finger inside me, though his mouth never quits. The moment he sucks my clit and his fingers touch that magic spot, I'm seeing stars. My releases washes over me—hot and heavy like a summer storm—claiming everything in its path. My hips are moving back and forth against his face as I ride out my climax, calling his name in gasps. I release the blanket and thread my fingers through his dark hair, pulling until he moves away. I drag him back up my body until his mouth is on mine once again. I can taste myself on his tongue, and more than anything, I want to taste him.

While I've never been the bossy, take-charge type in bed, I'm different with him. I know what I want and I feel like he wants me to take it. I push against his chest until he allows me to roll us over. Breaking the kiss, I sit up, and my hands start working on his belt. It clanks loudly in the darkness, filling my ears and making every hair stand on end in excitement. Quickly, I

work his jeans down past his hips, where he springs free. His massive length looks impressive when I wrap my small hand around it, working him up and down. A drop forms on the tip, calling to me. With my eyes on his, I lick my lips, causing a sexy growl to radiate from deep within his chest.

“Fuck,” he whispers, tightening his hands into fists at his sides. “You’re so fucking sexy when you work me over, baby.”

I shoot him a knowing grin before lowering my mouth to his thick cock. I lick the drop first, then move him into my mouth completely. He sucks in a hissing breath as his hand flies to my head, tangling into my hair and gently pulling at the roots. I move him in and out of my mouth as my nails bite into the skin of his thighs. He lets out a deep moan as he lifts his hips off the bed, pushing further down my throat. When I double my pace, he doubles his breathing.

“I can’t take it anymore. I have to be inside you. *Now*,” he says, somehow flipping us over and placing himself at my entrance. Before I know what’s even happening, he rolls his hips and slides into me. We become one with nothing between us, and I’ve never felt anything better. He moves with precision, like he’s learning my body with each thrust. He bucks his hips against mine with a growl, as his hands maintain their firm hold on my hips.

Unlike most men, he doesn’t just pump into me—he also grinds against me, rubbing my clit at the same moment he reaches that perfect spot inside me. His thrusts are so powerful, we’re sliding up the bed with each one. I feel like I’m being split in two, but in the best way possible. He’s too large for me, but the pain mixes with pleasure to create a delicious cocktail I can’t resist.

His teeth scrape against my neck and he softly bites my ear before claiming my mouth with his own. My fingers lace into his hair again, pulling as I keep him where I want him—against me in every way possible.

“You feel too good, Celeste—so hot, so tight. We have to slow down,” he says, but I think it’s more of a reminder to himself.

Instead of responding, I bite his lower lip. I don't want to slow down. I want to keep going just like this for as long as possible. I've never been claimed the way he's claiming me now. It's like he's marking my skin and branding me as his own. Even though I know this isn't forever, I'll never be the same. Every man I'll ever be with will now be compared to him, to this experience.

He quickly flips us over so I'm on top. Using a pillow, he props his head up against the wooden headboard. "I want to watch as you ride me—take all of me," he says, his strong hands squeezing my hips and egging me on.

I reach out, placing my hands flat on his chest as I begin lifting myself up and down, slowly at first. His eyes land on my chest and slowly move upward, locking with mine. There's fire burning beneath his dark, hooded eyes—a fire that scorches me and kisses my flesh. My back arches and my head falls back as my release begins to build. He leans forward, sucking a nipple into his mouth, almost pushing me over the edge. For all I know, I'm nearly falling off the edge of the earth. My heart pounds against my chest. My breathing doubles as I try to suck in labored breaths. Moans leave my lips, sounding nothing like me.

"Look at me, Celeste," he demands. "I want to watch you the moment you come for me."

My eyes snap back to his, watching as he bites his lower lip. I can't help but notice the way his eyes fill with lust and passion, and the way his brows furrow together and small wrinkles form between them. His jaw flexes as he moves his hand from my hip to my stomach, running up between my breasts and then massaging one. With a slight squeeze of my nipple, I come completely undone. My eyes flutter closed and my mouth opens as gasps and moans fall from my lips. I can feel my muscles squeezing around him, making him feel even larger. He releases my breast, and his hand moves down and begins to rub my clit back and forth, only making my climax that much stronger. As it ends, I shudder and slow my pace.

“That was so goddamn sexy, Celeste,” he says, lifting me up and moving me so I’m beneath him once again, but this time, I’m on my knees with him sliding into me from behind. Without warning, he slams into me, making me scream out. He lets out a powerful roar of his own. His hips move back and forth quickly. The sound of skin smacking skin fills the room as the headboard begins banging. His hip bones dig into my ass, and his fingers bite into my hips. He lets out one more loud moan just as his hips become more frantic, spilling himself inside me.

He falls forward, pressing his chest against my back as he calms his breathing. He has an arm on either side of my body, encasing me. With a deep breath, he removes himself from me and falls to the bed, keeping his arms around me as he pulls me to his chest.

“That . . . was . . .” he breathes out.

“Amazing?” I finish for him.

“Better than amazing.” He nuzzles my hair and breathes me in deeply.

My heart is still racing, but being held against him feels so good. He’s warm and strong—safe. A part of me wants to lie here all night, sleeping by his side, but another part of me starts to feel awkward. That part of me wants to get up immediately and run away so I can reflect on this moment alone. Which side will win?

When he presses his lips to the back of my shoulder, with his beard tickling my skin, I know exactly which side will win. His hand cups my breast, which he gently squeezes before moving down over my hip to the junction between my legs. I gasp when his fingers slide between my folds. My leg lifts on its own, giving him more room to move between them.

“Again?” I whimper out.

“I told you, Celeste, it’s going to take many, many times before I’m done with you,” he says, moving to cover my body with his.



DRAKE and I spend the rest of the evening learning everything there is to know about each other's bodies. Sometime after the morning sun starts peeking through the slats in the blinds, I fall into a deep sleep.

It feels like I've only been asleep for a short time, but I wake when I hear a dog bark. My eyes pop open and I roll over to see that Drake is already out of bed. I sit up, tug his shirt on, and stand up. His large shirt ends mid-thigh on me—it covers enough but also looks sexy at the same time. My eyes are still sleep-filled as I walk down the hallway.

“What's going on in here?” I ask, finally looking up and coming to a stop when my eyes land on Drake and Harrison in the kitchen, a man on each side of the island. Drake is only wearing a pair of unbuttoned jeans, and his muscular chest is bare. Harrison is fully dressed and growing more red by the second. Both of them are watching me.

Harrison looks from me, to Drake, and back, with his mouth hanging open.

My face heats up under their gaze. “I'm sorry. I didn't mean to interrupt,” I say, quickly turning and hightailing it out of there. I slam the bedroom door closed behind me and start searching for my clothes.

Fuck. My shirt and bra are in the kitchen, where Drake and Harrison are! I need to get out of here. Based on the look on Harrison's face, he isn't happy about this development. I can hear their muffled voices from the bedroom, but don't focus long enough to figure out what they're saying. Before I can gather all my clothing, I hear the door slam shut. Moments later, Drake walks in with two cups of coffee.

He hands me one and sits on the edge of the bed, at my side.

“So I'm guessing he's mad,” I say, moving the cup to my lips and taking

a sip.

He nods, mouth full of coffee. “That’s an understatement. But who cares?” He leans over, setting the cup on the bedside table. He takes the cup from my hand and places it next to his, then he tries to move on top of me.

I press against his chest. “Drake, wait.”

“What?” he asks, stopping but not removing himself from me.

“I mean, shouldn’t we talk about this? We’ve been caught. Our secret is out.”

Finally, he sits up, removing himself from me. “I didn’t realize we were keeping this a secret.”

My mouth drops open. “I’d just assumed . . .”

“Well, stop.” He stands, towering over me. “I don’t give a shit what Harrison or this town thinks about us. We’re both adults and what we do is none of their business.”

I nod. “I understand that, Drake, but this isn’t just about you. It’s about me too. It’s my reputation on the line. I just got here. I can’t have everyone in town thinking that I sleep with all of my clients. That could really drive away business for my firm.”

He smirks. “Or bring in a whole new crowd,” he teases.

I cock my head to the side and shoot him a warning with my eyes.

He rolls his eyes. “All right, Celeste. We’ll be discreet. And Harrison won’t say anything. I mean,” he sits back at my side, “*I’ll* never hear the end of it, but it won’t leave this house or my office. You don’t have to worry.”

I nod, thinking about his words.

“You got plans for today?” He reaches over and picks up his coffee cup.

I shrug one shoulder. “Not really. Why?”

He shrugs one shoulder, mocking me. “Just thought we could hang out.”

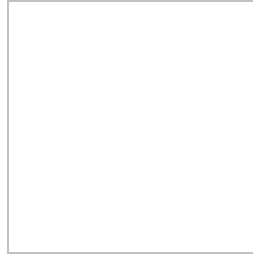
I can’t hold back my smile. I’d love to spend more time with him and pretend the world doesn’t exist. “What’d you have in mind?”

The corners of his mouth pull up into a grin, but he works hard at hiding

it. “I thought I’d give you a tour of the brewery.”

“Okay, that sounds fun!” I agree. “But I’m going to need a shower and a change of clothes.”

“Let’s go.”



A LITTLE WHILE LATER, we’re walking into my motel room. “This is where you’re staying?” he asks, walking in and looking around.

The small room seems even smaller with his big frame in it. “Yeah, this town doesn’t offer much. Make yourself at home. I’ll be quick,” I say, heading for the bathroom. I turn on the water and start stripping out of my clothes from yesterday. As the old pipes warm up, I brush my teeth, then step beneath the lukewarm water. Ugh, I guess a lot of hotel guests have been using up the hot water this morning. I dip my head back and close my eyes, letting the water flow over me. I feel a gust of cool air smack my front. My eyes pop open and I find Drake standing in front of me, completely naked. Water bounces off me and splashes him, beading up over his hard, rippled chest and stomach.

I can’t stop the smile that takes over. “What are you doing?”

He takes a step closer. “I couldn’t bear the thought of you being naked one room away without my hands on your body,” he says, hands moving up to cup my face as he brings his lips to mine. Quickly, he lifts me up, pressing my back to the wall, his hardness nudging against my sex. A fire lights in my belly. How is it possible we’ve been together time and time again over the last 24 hours, and I still want him—still ache for him to touch me, kiss me, and move inside me?

After spending more time in the shower than technically necessary, we both get dressed. As I dry my hair, Drake sits on the edge of the bed, flipping

through channels. My phone rings and I see Gavin's name flashing on the screen. Guilt eats at me. I know Gavin and I aren't together. And I know that Drake and I aren't together, even though Drake and I are more together than Gavin and I are. Something makes me feel like I need to let them know about each other, even though I have no idea why. I push the thought away and tell myself not to be silly. Gavin and I agreed to wait until I got back to decide if we should move forward with dating or not. Drake and I have already agreed to let things end when the time is right. It's not like either one of them is promising to be exclusive or wait for me.

My blonde hair is fully dry, but instead of taking the time to style it, I pull it into a messy bun on top of my head. I pull on a pair of jean shorts, a gray T-shirt, and a pair of tennis shoes. Walking out, I grab my purse and stop to look at Drake. His eyes slowly rake up my body.

"What?" I ask. "Do I not look okay?" I'm concerned that perhaps now that he's seen me natural—no makeup and hair unkempt—he's rethinking our agreement.

"You look beautiful, Celeste." He shakes his head once, like he's clearing it. "But don't expect me to look at those sexy long legs of yours all day and keep my hands to myself."

I laugh out loud as I move toward the door. "Whatever you say, Drake."

He follows me out. "You've been warned."

We pile back into his truck and it roars to life as he turns the key. As we drive through the quiet little town, he keeps checking me out from the corner of his eye. I giggle and shake my head.

"You're insatiable," I tell him.

He laughs but doesn't say anything as he reaches over and places his hand on my leg. I smile as I gaze upon it. I like it there. It causes the butterflies in my stomach to take flight—tickling and tingling as they flutter their wings against my insides. His thumb slowly starts moving back and forth against my skin. It's teasing. I've never enjoyed being with someone who constantly

needs to touch me. I've always found it annoying, constricting. But with Drake, it's like he has to be touching me in some way. It doesn't always have to be sexual, but I've come to notice the small touches that some people wouldn't even think about. Maybe I only notice it due to the tingles that take over my body each time.

I'm enjoying the comfortable silence between us on the drive over. I'm loving the feel of his rough hand on my soft leg. So when we pull into the parking lot, I almost feel let down, even though I know the day will only get better from here.

"Ready?" he asks, throwing the truck into park.

"Let's do it," I reply, slipping off my seatbelt and waiting for him to open my door.

He does so quickly, with a smile, causing his dark eyes to light up against the shining sun. I can't help but look up at him, breathless.

"Why are you staring?" he whispers, leaning in.

"You're . . . different. This is a side of you I've never seen before. You actually look . . . *happy*."

He laughs—a deep baritone sound that radiates from his big chest. He closes the door behind me then presses my back against it. Moving in close to my ear, he whispers, "You can't cum as many times as you caused me to and not be happy." His hot breath blows against my ear, and his words turn me on to the point it feels like a hot flood between my legs.

I swallow, yearning growing thick in my throat. I look up at his eyes again and pull my bottom lip between my teeth, biting down.

His hand rises, resting beneath my chin. He uses his thumb to pull my lip free. "Bite mine instead," he says, moving in and pressing his lips to mine. His tongue slips past my lips and into my mouth, softly and slowly dancing with my own.

I enjoy the feeling of his lips pressed against mine for a moment, then place my hand against his chest and gently push him away. He's wearing a

shocked expression on his face.

“We’re in public, remember?”

He raises an invisible wall between us. “Right. Let’s go inside.”

We walk across the parking lot and into the building. The usual lady is sitting behind the counter, but this time, Harrison is leaning over it, talking with her. When the door opens, he looks at us from over his shoulder. His brows pull together and the smile falls from his face, turning into a straight line that causes wrinkles to form around his mouth and eyes.

“Mr. Slade. Ms. Teller,” he addresses us.

“Mornin’,” Drake replies, walking straight past them as if we hadn’t been caught messing around only hours ago. We quickly step into the elevator and Drake pushes the *CLOSE DOOR* button over and over until the doors shut. He lets out a long breath. “That was a close one.”

“I thought you said he wouldn’t say anything?”

“He won’t, but that doesn’t mean he wouldn’t ambush us in the elevator.” The doors open and we step into his office. “I just need to get my security key.”

“You need a key?” I ask, leaning against the wall and crossing my arms over my chest as I shoot him a look.

He opens his desk drawer and pulls out a key card dangling from a lanyard. “This key opens every door in the brewery.”

“Oh, big shot, huh?” I tease.

He chuckles as he starts stalking toward me. He reaches for me when he’s only a foot away, hands moving toward my hips. I won’t lie: since the moment I stepped foot into his office, I haven’t been able to stop thinking about him bending me over that desk of his.

The second he pulls me to his chest, the elevator dings and the doors open. Harrison walks in, giving us both a grave look. His eyes take us in. His hand is moving up and down his jaw, rubbing over the light gray scruff. “I think we all must have gotten our wires crossed,” he says, slowly walking

toward us. “When I said, *don’t touch the new lawyer*, you took that as *treat her as my own personal plaything*, yes?” he asks, looking up at Drake.

Drake takes a deep breath, and his hands fall from my hips as he turns to face Harrison head-on. “Harrison, it’s not that big a deal,” he starts, but Harrison cuts him off by looking at me.

“And when I said to you, *he’s been hurt; don’t mess with his emotions*, you took that as *let’s see how far I can push him before he breaks completely?*”

“Harrison!” Drake says, a little louder.

Harrison jerks his eyes toward Drake. “You know what? You’re both adults. Do what you want. But don’t come crying to me when she leaves you behind.” He points his finger in Drake’s direction before heading for the elevator. He pushes the button, clasps his hands in front of him, and waits patiently for the doors to close.

Drake turns back to me. “Where were we?” he asks, moving closer, but I step back.

“Drake! What the hell was that?” I ask, motioning toward the elevator.

He waves his hand through the air, dismissing Harrison. “Don’t worry about him. He likes to act like my father even though I’ve told him to stop. I already have an asshole for a dad; I don’t need another one.” He tries pulling me to him one more time, but I look up and shake my head *no*.

“Let’s get to the tour before he comes back up to scream at us some more.”

Drake’s smile falls but he nods his head. “All right. Let’s go.”

As we step into the elevator, I can’t help but feel hopeless. Since last night, Drake and I have been lost in our own little world, pretending that everything’s fine and there’s no end to this. But Harrison’s reaction quickly brought me back to the real world—a world where I have to leave in a year. What we’re doing will end. How long can we go on pretending we’re just having fun?

Drake takes me through all the different parts of the brewery. He shows me where the beer is made, bottled, and packaged to ship out. He explains how things work and why things are done the way they are. It's all interesting and very detailed. I try paying attention, but I end up daydreaming as I watch him. The way he moves, the way his muscles tighten under his shirt, the way his eyes light up and his smile breaks free, it's all breathtaking. I've never seen a man more captivating than Drake. It interests me and scares me at the same time.

The tour takes most of the day. As we're heading out, he decides to show me the newest whiskey line—the whole reason I'm here. He leads me down a long, white hallway and pushes through a set of thick metal doors. Past those doors is a big warehouse. It's filled with barrels of whiskey. There are rows and rows of high shelving, all covered in whiskey.

My eyes grow in size as I take it all in. "Wow!" I say, spinning around to check out every direction. "I'm not a whiskey drinker, but if I were, this would be heaven."

He laughs. "It's pretty close to heaven. Come on. Let's sample the product." He takes my hand in his and drags me through the aisles. After several twists and turns, we come to a cleared-out section of floor. There's a barrel of whiskey in the center with a few chairs positioned around it.

"Tasted the product before, have you?" I ask, flopping down in one of the chairs.

"Hell, sweetheart, can't sell something if you don't know its worth." He grabs a full bottle and plops down across from me. "Trust me, it's worth it." He offers up one of his panty-dropping smiles that causes his dark eyes to gleam with amusement. He uncaps the bottle and takes a pull. Swallowing it down, he lets out a long breath and shakes his head. "Whoa, that's good stuff. Go on, try it." He leans over with the bottle in his outstretched hand.

Due to my recent hangover, I'm not excited about the thought of being drunk again, but something in his eyes—in the way he's smiling and moving

—has me wanting to go there again, despite the sickness I know will follow.

I reach out and take the bottle. Tipping it up, it pours into my dry mouth, stinging and burning as it makes its way down my parched throat. I gasp and my hand flies to my neck, hoping to soothe the burn. It doesn't help.

He laughs. "Yeah, it'll go numb soon." He takes the bottle when I pass it back. He takes a sip, but doesn't bother returning it to me. It's like he knows I'm not ready. "So, what do ya think?"

I nod as I glance around the room. "Pretty cool. I've never taken a tour of a brewery before. Do I get to see how the whiskey's made?"

He smirks. "Sorry, honey, that one's a secret," he says in his country drawl. "If I told ya, I'd have to kill ya and . . . well, you're too pretty to kill."

I smile, rolling my eyes and shaking my head. "So, this is how you get to spend your days? Lounging around in a hidden corner of the building, getting drunk as a skunk?"

"I wish," he says, taking a sip and passing the bottle back to me. "Most days are spent stuck at my desk, signing papers, and managing trivial tasks that are supposed to make me feel important. The company doesn't really need me here. It basically runs itself."

"Then why stay?" I ask, feeling a little bold.

He sits back in his chair. "What else am I supposed to do?"

I take two more sips and hand over the bottle. The warmth has caused my throat, mouth, and lips to go a little numb, and there's a heat spreading through me. "Go exploring. Find what makes you happy."

"I already know what makes me happy."

"What's that?"

He motions around the brewery. "Being here, taking care of the business that's been passed from generation to generation longer than I've been alive. I'm a part of something here. And when I'm not here, I'm at home—a house I basically rebuilt from the ground up. I'm working on the barn now. When that's done, I'm thinking about turning the loft into an apartment—or hell,

maybe I'll make it my own personal bar." He shrugs. "Either way, I still have work to do around here." He takes a swig and passes it back.

I take a drink—a bigger one this time, now that the stuff is starting to grow on me. "There's more to life than work, you know." Instead of passing the bottle back, I stand up, walking over to him with it in my hands. "You need to get out of here, have fun, make memories." As I straddle him, I set the bottle on the barrel that had been separating us.

"Will you come with me?" he asks, placing his hands on my thighs as his dark, lust-filled eyes meet mine.

"Where we going?" I ask in a whisper, suddenly losing my voice from seeing the passion burning bright in his irises.

"Wherever you want: Fiji, France, Australia. You pick." The corners of his mouth turn upward, but not quite into a smile.

"Hmm, Fiji does sound nice, and I've heard it's beautiful there this time of year," I joke, slowly moving in to press my lips to his.

The moment my warm mouth touches his, his hands on my thighs squeeze. He deepens the kiss like he'll never get enough. His tongue swirls around mine, our lips moving perfectly in sync. His hands start moving slowly up and down my thighs, squeezing and caressing. It almost feels like he's trying to hold himself back.

I break the kiss. Staring deeply into his eyes only inches away, I whisper, "Don't hold back with me, Drake."

The moment the words leave my mouth, his lips are back on mine, doubling the pace from before. His hands move to my ass and he picks me up against him, causing a little yelp to escape. Through my hooded eyes, I watch as he closes the space between us, his lips finding mine once again.

DRAKE

I 'VE held back with damn near everything in my life. I held back the love I felt for Casey. I held back the pain of losing her. I held back the agony of having to live every damn day alone. So when those words leave Celeste's lips, *don't hold back with me*, it's like I've finally been given permission to let go—let it all go. I never realized how much I needed those words.

Without thinking, I pull her against me and press my mouth to hers—tasting, teasing, memorizing. The little whimper that escapes causes my dick to jump with excitement. The little sounds she makes could bring me to my knees. I've never in my life heard anything more beautiful.

Realizing this fact causes panic to flare up in my chest, but I forget all about it when she threads her fingers through my hair and pulls me closer, as if I *could* get any closer. My hands find her ass and I pick her up against me as she wraps her long legs around my hips. Given that we're in the brewery's warehouse, there aren't a lot of options, so I set her down on a barrel of whiskey. Her hands immediately start pulling at my shirt, wanting it gone *now*. I break our kiss for a moment, but only long enough to pull it over my head and sling it to the floor at my feet.

The moment my lips are against hers again, I work on removing her clothes. The barrel is a little too high, so I pick her up and hold her against me as I move us to the nearest wall. Pressing her back to it, I work my jeans

over my hips, freeing myself. The only thing I can think of is how badly I need to be inside her. I never had this urge with Casey. I never felt like things would be okay as long as I was in her, but with Celeste, I know everything will fall away the moment I bury myself deep inside.

I position myself at her entrance and push forward, sliding into home. And that's exactly how she feels—like home. Her warmth and tightness welcome me, and her muscles squeeze around me like a firm handshake. I'm overwhelmed by the intense feelings building inside me. I have no choice but to pause for a moment. She's whimpering and panting against me, begging me to move, but I can't. I know if I start, it'll be over too soon.

“God, Celeste, we fit so perfectly,” I whisper against her lips.

“Please move, Drake,” she begs again. I can feel her muscles squeezing around me, getting impatient.

Finally, I pull out, only to bury myself again. My eyes open, locking on hers as I move in and out of her. Something about this feels personal, intimate—something completely wrong given what we're doing and how we're doing it. We basically agreed to be fuck buddies, but dammit, I'm falling in love and I'm falling harder than I ever imagined I could.

Turning off my emotions, I close my eyes and work until we're each shuddering with release. I rest my head in the crook of her neck, allowing us both to calm our breathing. Finally, I remove myself from her and place her gently on her wobbly legs. I bend down, picking up her clothes and handing them to her as I zip up my pants. Neither of us talks as we get our clothes back in place.

“Never been on a tour like that before,” she says, voice shaking as a giggle escapes.

I laugh and hold out my hand. “Let's get out of here.”

She places her hand in mine and I lead her out of the warehouse and into the elevator.

We've been together almost 24 hours straight, and I feel like I need to put

some space between us. We load into my truck and drive quietly back to her car. I pull up next to it and put the truck in park. I look over at her and she's sitting stock-still, unsure of how to act or what to do.

"I'll be home later if you want to come over," I offer, not exactly sure of how to take this next step.

She smiles and nods. "I think I'm going to head out to the Joneses and see if I can get them to sign some paperwork. I'll let you know how it goes." Without another word, she climbs out of the truck, slamming the door behind her. Instead of climbing into her car, I watch as she enters the building, closing the door between us.

With Celeste no longer in my line of sight, I shift into reverse and back out, heading for home.

When I pull into the driveway, I find my brother's truck waiting for me. I climb out and walk to the open barn doors, finding him inside with a beer.

"What's up, brother?" I ask, leaning against the old workbench.

He shrugs. "Where ya been?"

"At the brewery. You been here long?" I grab a beer out of the six-pack sitting next to him.

"Nah, not too long, anyway. Since when did you start working on Saturdays?"

"I wasn't working; I was giving my new lawyer a tour of the facility." I pop the top on the beer and take a swig.

"New lawyer, huh? This isn't the same woman you've started something up with, is it?"

My mouth drops open. "How the hell?"

He laughs. "Harrison was venting to Dad—something about watching you make all the same mistakes he watched Dad make, whatever that means. So, is she hot?"

It occurs to me that Colton doesn't know about the mysterious half-brother or half-sister we have out there. I debate telling him before I have

anything concrete. “She’s easy to look at,” I say around a smile I can’t contain.

“Yeah?” he asks with a grin and a raise of his brow. “She’s not some prissy city girl, now, is she?”

That causes me to laugh a little harder. “She’s from Los Angeles, but she’s super-chill and down-to-earth. To be honest, I have no idea what the hell she sees in me.”

“How old is she?” he asks, taking a sip of his beer.

“Late 20s,” I answer, causing him to gasp and then laugh. “Plus she’s tall and has legs that go on for days. She’s got this long, blonde hair and these amazing green eyes that somehow pull me in and keep me prisoner. She’s . . .” I let my sentence break off as I sigh.

“Man, you just met her, right?”

“Yeah, she just moved to town. Why?” I ask.

He shrugs one shoulder. “The way you’re talking about her sounds like you’re falling for her. But I know my brother, and he doesn’t do things like that, especially after only knowing the woman a short time.”

I scoff and wave a hand in his direction. “We’re just messing around and having a good time,” I tell him, knowing that in reality, he isn’t far off. “So, what brought you out today?” I ask, needing to change the subject.

He hops up and pulls a white envelope from his back pocket, handing it over.

“What’s this?” I ask, reaching out and taking it.

“Open it.”

I open the ripped envelope and take out a single piece of paper. Unfolding it, I read the letter.

YOUR BROTHER DIDN'T TAKE my letter very seriously. Maybe you will—I strongly urge you to. Your father disowned me before I was even born. I only

want what I'm entitled to. I suggest calling a lawyer to hand out shares equally. I'd hate for this to have to go the hard way.

Signed,

Your Loving Brother

“WHAT THE FUCK IS THIS SHIT?” he asks when I let my arm holding the letter fall.

I fold up the paper and stuff it back into the envelope. “I got a letter the other day. Inside was a picture of Dad. He had a woman in his lap. After doing some digging, I found out that Dad had an affair. He broke it off and the woman was so upset, she left town. Dad gave her money, feeling guilty or whatever. Apparently, the woman was pregnant. Dad owned up to the affair but still claims there's no possible way a child was conceived. But since then, I've had Harrison on it, doing some digging and trying to find out the truth.”

Colton shakes his head and runs his hands through his hair. “What the fuck? So what, he's wanting his share of the brewery?”

I nod as I pick up my beer. “I guess so. I mean, I can't blame the guy. And if we have a brother out there, then we need to bring him home, don't you think?”

“Fuck that. He shouldn't get shit. This is ours. It's our reward for growing up the way we did. You're not seriously thinking about giving this guy a share, are you?”

“I don't know, Colton. Maybe after some tests—once we make sure he is who he claims to be.”

He lets out a long breath, clearly irritated with me.

“What's the big deal?” I ask. “You've never wanted anything to do with the brewery before.”

“That's because it was being shoved down my throat. I wanted to decide my future, and not have it forced on me.” He takes a breather and leans

against the bench. “I feel the same affection toward the brewery that you do. It’s ours. It’s been in our family for generations. It needs to stay in the family and be taken care of. I just don’t want some creep off the street getting a say in our family legacy.”

I open my mouth to reply, but the sound of gravel halts my words. An engine cuts off and a door slams. I stand and exit the barn to see who’s pulled into the drive.

Celeste bounces toward me. “I did it, Drake! I got the Joneses’ signatures! That’s one down!” she cheers, throwing herself in my arms and pressing her mouth to mine.

At first, I want to push her away before Colton sees, but when her lips touch mine, I completely forget he’s even here. My arms tighten around her middle, keeping her close while my mouth takes from hers. She tastes of coffee and vanilla, so sweet against my tongue. Her arms wrap around my neck, holding me close.

I hear someone clear their throat from behind me and I break the kiss, turning to see Colton standing there, wearing a wide smile.

“Celeste, this is my brother, Colton. Colt, this is Celeste, my, um, new lawyer,” I say, a little unsure of how to introduce her to him.

Celeste quickly wipes away the wetness from our kiss and clears her throat. Her face turns pink with embarrassment as she holds out a hand to shake. “It’s nice to meet you, Colton.” She offers up a shy but beautiful smile.

Colton takes her hand in his, eyes bouncing from her, to me, and back. “I’ve heard a lot about you, Celeste, but my stupid little brother here didn’t tell me you were *this* beautiful.” He gives her his best flirtatious smile.

“All right,” I say, swatting his hand off of hers and pulling her closer to my side.

“I didn’t mean to interrupt. I was just really excited about the news. I’ll head out and let you two get back to—”

“Nonsense. Don’t be silly. I’d love to get to know you a little better. I gotta look out for my little brother,” Colton says, reaching out and wrapping an arm around her shoulders as he leads her toward the house.

Fuck, I think to myself as I follow them inside.

“Drake, where are your manners? Shouldn’t you offer your guests a drink?” Colton says, his smile never faltering.

I roll my eyes but head to the kitchen to pour three drinks. As I’m pouring, I see Tatum lying in the corner as usual. He looks up at me. “Why don’t you do your job? Go attack him or something,” I say to the old hunting dog.

He just lays his head down like I didn’t say anything at all. I pick up the three drinks and take them back to the living room. Colton is in my recliner. He’s sitting up, resting his elbows on his knees, and looking at Celeste, who’s sitting on the couch to his left, looking rather awkward. I hand them each a drink and sit at Celeste’s side.

“Now, what are your intentions with my brother?” he asks her.

Her mouth drops open and words seem to fail her.

“Colton!” I warn.

“I’m just joking,” he laughs out, waving his hand through the air as he takes a sip of his whiskey. He finally leans back in the chair. “Tell me about yourself, Celeste. Where ya from? What do ya like to do for fun? Of all of the men in the world, why did you choose Drake?”

She lightly shakes her head. “You two are something else, you know that?” she says, looking over at me. I give her a playful shrug since I have no words.

She leans forward and sets her glass on the coffee table. “I’m from Los Angeles. Born and raised. I was working at the firm there, but was given this job for the next year.”

“So you’re only going to be here for a year?” he asks, looking a little concerned.

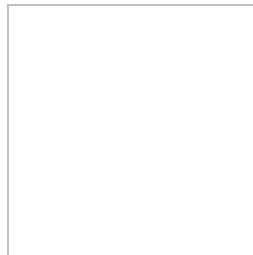
“That’s right. In a year, I’m going back to city life and coffee shops on every corner. The magical place where you can get anything delivered and everything is a phone tap away,” she jokes.

“So what you two are doing has a time limit,” he clarifies.

She cocks her head to the side, unsure of how to answer.

“Colton, I’m not sure what you’re trying to do. I don’t know if Harrison has gotten to you or what, but you need to understand that Celeste and I are adults. We know what we’re doing. We’re not dating or falling in love. We’re choosing to spend our time together because there’s no one else here we’d rather do it with right now. Now if you, or Harrison, or anyone else has a problem with that, then you’ll just have to get over it. What Celeste and I do, that’s our business. Got it?”

He nods once then finishes off his drink in one gulp. “Well, it seems like the two of you have everything figured out. Now,” he pats his stomach, “what’s for dinner?” He smiles wide.



AN HOUR LATER, dinner is cooked and the three of us are sitting around the table.

“So, Colton, do you have any good stories about growing up with this one?” Celeste asks, motioning toward me.

Colton laughs. “Do I!” His eyes open wide.

I clear my throat, a warning he picks up on but ignores.

“One time, Drake thought he could jump out a second-story window with an umbrella.”

Celeste sucks in a loud breath. “Did you get hurt?”

Colton laughs. “A broken ankle later, he learned that Mary Poppins wasn’t real.”

Celeste laughs and shakes her head.

“Then there was the time he thought he could collect four turtles and a rat and turn them into the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. He was so mad when the one with the orange X painted on its back wouldn’t eat the pizza he tried feeding it,” Colton says, laughing.

“All right,” I say, interrupting. “Why don’t we just eat, huh?”

“And then, he got his first girlfriend. They kissed and he was scared to death he got her pregnant.”

“Because you told me that kissing led to babies!” I defend. “I was only eight. Come on!”

Celeste laughs harder. “Why were you kissing girls when you were only eight?”

I shrug. “We saw two teenagers making out in the back of the bus one day. We thought we’d try it.”

“Who was the girl?” she asks.

“Her name was Judy. She moved away when we were in the fifth grade.”

“There are so many more good stories,” Colton insists.

“No. No more stories. Eat your food before I give it to Tatum and throw your ass out,” I threaten.

“Fine. Celeste, why don’t you tell us some of your childhood embarrassments?” Colton picks up his fork but his eyes never leave Celeste.

She swallows a bite of spaghetti. “Well, I don’t really have any. I never did anything dangerous. I was kept pretty busy as a kid.”

“How so?” Colton asks.

“I had school five days a week. On Wednesday evenings and Sunday mornings, we always went to church. I was also in gymnastics, dance, and cheer. When I got a little older, I moved into volleyball and softball. I ran track. I also had private tutors growing up, so studying was a must.”

“A gymnast, huh?” He wags his brows at her.

I pick up a roll and toss it at him, smacking him in the head with it. I

know exactly where his mind was going.

“Hey!” he yells, angrily looking over at me.

“Keep your mind out of the gutter,” I tell him. Celeste can’t do anything but laugh at our antics and shake her head.

Dinner eventually ends and Colton says his goodbyes by giving Celeste a hug and smacking me on the back. I walk him out while she insists on helping me clean up.

“Well, brother, I think you’ve gotten yourself in over your head with that one,” he says, opening his truck door.

I laugh. “And how’s that?”

“I watched you in there. Every time you thought you were alone, you couldn’t keep your hands off her. You were smiling and laughing. You’re happy with her. Which is great, don’t get me wrong, but that also means you’re going to be twice as hurt when she leaves in a year.”

I wave him off. “Don’t worry about it, Colt. I know how to keep myself in check.”

He rolls his eyes. “I highly doubt it. Enjoy it while it lasts.” He climbs behind the wheel and starts the truck. I stand back, watching him drive away before turning back for the house.

When I walk in, Celeste has the dishwasher loaded and everything cleaned up. “Thank you,” I say, pulling her against me. “You didn’t have to do that.” I press my forehead against hers, breathing her in.

“Thank you for dinner. Before I got to know you, it’d been a long time since I’d had home-cooked food. And my motel room options are hot plate or microwave-only.” She wraps her arms around my neck, so I press my lips gently to hers. I don’t want things to get out of hand. I feel like we’ve done nothing but screw since we agreed to the terms. But kissing without sex does feel like I’m getting in over my head.

“Want to stay here tonight?” I ask against her lips.

“I really shouldn’t. I need to get back to my room and do some laundry

for work this week. I also have a few things to do for some other clients.”

“Are you sure?” I ask, walking her backward. I press her back against the fridge and run the tip of my nose against her jaw. Her eyes flutter closed and she takes a deep breath.

“No,” she giggles out, “but yes. I’ll see you Monday.”

I step back. “Promise?” I ask, not letting go of her hand.

“Promise. First thing Monday morning, I’ll be in your office, so you better be ready,” she says over her shoulder as she moves toward the door.

I stand back and watch her go, feeling twice as lonely as I ever have before. Something about her has pulled me in and trapped me. I’m a different man when I’m with her. It took months of dating Casey to feel this way. But with Celeste, it was immediate. It’s not something I had to force myself to feel. It was forced upon me by something unseen—God, destiny, whatever you want to call it. It’s like she was made for me. She was placed directly in my path. And that scares me beyond belief.

I lock the door and move toward the bathroom for a shower. Stepping beneath the hot flow of water, I close my eyes. The only thing I see is her. I can see the way our future could play out together: I see myself bending down on one knee to propose. I see her smile and tears of joy as she accepts. I see our summertime country wedding, her beautiful white dress, and the flowers in her hair. I see lovemaking—a *lot* of lovemaking. I see her stomach big and round, supporting our growing baby. I see us bringing the baby home, watching as he or she grows, watching as we grow. I see us old and gray, sitting out on the back porch in our rocking chairs, talking and watching the setting sun.

It all feels so real and perfect. It would be so easy to let myself fall head over heels for her—so easy. But I know none of it can happen. She’s a big-city girl who’s meant for much grander things than me. She’d never be happy living the country life. She needs a big penthouse apartment and fancy things. She’ll go back home in a year, find some rich guy who’s worth her time, and

settle down with him, forgetting all about me. She'll get my dream. The only problem is, I won't be in it.

No, I'll still be here, alone and bitter, wondering how the hell I ended up that way. Instead of waiting for Casey, I'll be waiting for Celeste, hoping and praying she'll come back to me one day, but knowing deep down she never will.

I have to be careful when it comes to her. Being with her once wasn't enough. Being with her these last 24 hours still wasn't enough. It'll never be enough. The most I can do is enjoy it while it lasts, just like Colton suggested. Have the time of our lives now and wait for it to end. All good things must come to an end eventually, but that doesn't mean we shouldn't enjoy them while they're happening.

Yes, I think that's what I'll do. I'll keep her at arm's length, making it that much easier to watch her walk away from me for good.

CELESTE

SIX MONTHS LATER . . .

DRAKE IS WEARING a wide smile as I slap all the paperwork down on his desk. “You did it?” he asks, looking up at me, eyes wide and full of excitement.

“I did it! Took a little longer than I thought it would, but we got all the signatures and you’re free to build your expansion,” I say around a giggle as I bounce up and down.

He leaps from the chair behind his desk and picks me up against him, spinning us in a circle. My arms go around his neck, holding on for dear life. I knew he’d be excited, but not *this* excited. Over the past few months, Drake has really opened up to me. He’s smiling and laughing more and barking out orders less. I think even Harrison has noticed a change in him. I’m over the moon seeing him this happy, but deep down, I worry that he may be getting too attached. Hell, *I’m* getting too attached, but I’m not worried about breaking my own heart. I’m worried about leaving him with a broken one.

“When are we breaking ground?” I ask as he pulls away.

“As soon as possible,” he answers around a wide smile. His hands move up to cup my cheeks. His smile fades away but his eyes remain locked on mine. Slowly, he pulls me in for a lip-crushing kiss. His tongue dances with

my own, sending shivers up my spine. He pulls away before I'm ready.

"Will you be there with me? I couldn't have done this without you."

I place my hands over his. "If you want me there, I'll be there," I promise.

"Great," he says, pulling away and rushing back to his desk. He picks up his phone. "Harrison, contact the construction company and see when we can break ground. Let me know as soon as possible," he says, smile still in place. He hangs up the phone and turns to look at me. "Let's celebrate."

His happiness is infectious and I can't hold back my own excitement. "How are we celebrating?" I ask.

"I'm taking you to dinner . . . in the city. Someplace nice and fancy. There will be wine and fine dining. Go put on your best dress." He points an index finger at me as he smiles, backing toward his desk.

"Oh!" I say, turning on my heel and heading for the elevator. Stepping inside, I feel giddy. These six months have been spent quietly—hidden away from the town. We spend most nights at his place, and a few at mine here and there. We don't really go out to eat at the diner in town. If we do, it's for a "meeting," where we go over paperwork while having our meal. A real date, though, that's different. Over time, Drake has opened up to me like I never would've thought. I've seen him go from a serious, almost-miserable guy to the funny man who's come out of his shell lately. I can't wait to see him in full-on date mode.

I rush back to my motel room and immediately shower, taking my time and shaving every extraneous hair on my body. I take extra time perfecting my long blonde curls and makeup. My green eyes are almost glistening against the dark eyeliner and mascara. I line my lips with a deep red pencil, and fill it in with matching lipstick. I slide on a little black dress that sweeps off one shoulder and ends mid-thigh. I pair the dress with my favorite black heels. Standing back, I check over my reflection. The diamonds in my ears catch the light, and my skin is a deep olive color compared with my red lips, which make my teeth look even brighter than usual. I quickly swap my

normal purse for a cute black clutch that glitters and sparkles.

I'm all ready to go, but I haven't yet gotten a call from Drake saying he's on his way. I grab my phone and send him a quick text.

Me: I'm ready for our fancy date night!

I drop the phone onto the table and look around. I don't want to sit and wrinkle my dress, but I'm too tightly wound to stand and not do anything. I busy myself dusting off every surface, being extra careful to ensure none of it clings to my dress. I fluff the pillows on my bed and sort through my laundry. Finally, my phone beeps. I rush over and pick it up. My heart sinks when I read the message.

Drake: I'm so sorry, Celeste. Something came up and I won't be able to make it. Rain check?

I can't believe he's canceling. He'd given me the impression that he was looking forward to this date as much as I was. I wonder what could've come up to make him cancel?

Me: Is everything okay? Do I need to come back to the brewery?

Drake: No, everything is fine. I'll talk to you tomorrow.

My shoulders slump as the phone slips from my fingers, back to the table. Feeling defeated, I finally sit down, looking around my now-sparkling-clean room. I feel a tear well up in one of my eyes, but I will it away. I refuse to let myself feel upset. Drake has never canceled on me before—well, other than not initially making it to the auction when we first met—so whatever the reason, it must be important. I take a deep, cleansing breath.

All dressed up with nowhere to go, I decide I'll go to the bar, have dinner and a drink, and talk with Stephanie. I grab the keys and head to my car.

It only takes minutes before I'm pulling into the bar parking lot. There are only a few others parked, so it must not be very busy. I walk inside, finding Stephanie behind the bar just like I knew she would be.

She whistles loudly. "Looking good! What's the occasion?"

I sit down, dropping my clutch on the bar. "Nothing now. Can I get a

salad and a drink?”

“Sure thing.” She runs to the back to place my order and then gets started on my drink. “Were you planning something that got canceled?” she asks, looking up from the glass in her hand.

I take a deep breath. “I got all the signatures Drake needed. He was supposed to take me out to celebrate, but something came up and he had to cancel,” I admit.

She places my drink in front of me and presses her lips together in a tight line, like she’s holding something back.

“What?” I ask, moving for my drink but not picking it up.

“I’m not sure if I should tell you,” she says, refusing to look at me.

“Tell me what?” I ask.

“It’s just that, I don’t know if the two things are linked, and I’d hate to cause you to worry.”

“Spill it, Steph,” I threaten.

“Well, you know about Casey, right?” she asks, looking a little afraid.

“Drake’s ex?” I ask and she nods. “What about her?”

“She was in here today.”

I tap my finger on the wooden bar. “She was in here? Today?” I ask, needing confirmation.

She nods.

“But she left town long ago.”

“I know.”

“She hasn’t been back since,” I say in a rush.

“I know.” She nods her head.

“What’s she doing back here?” I finally pick up my glass and take a long drink, needing it more than I thought I would. I know exactly what she’s doing back here. She’s back for him. She misses him. She realizes what a mistake it was to leave him. And now, he’s canceling our date to be with her. I just know it.

“She didn’t say,” Stephanie says, looking a little sad on my behalf.

“Do you think she’s back for Drake? That would explain why he canceled on me, wouldn’t it?” I ask, feeling crazy.

She shrugs one shoulder. “I’m sorry, Celeste. I shouldn’t have told you. Now you’re all worried for nothing. I wish I had more info, I really do.”

“No, it’s okay,” I say, picking up my drink and bringing it to my lips. Meanwhile, my mind is turning and twisting every which way. I wonder if he’s with her. I wonder if I should text him. No, of course I shouldn’t. He said he’d talk to me tomorrow. I need to give him space. I’m sure he’s just as confused about all of this as I am. Or maybe he’s not. Maybe he’s just happy to have her back and he’s not even thinking about me right now.

In fact, why am I thinking about him right now? We’re not together. We’re nothing. That was the plan and that was what we agreed to. So if Drake is nothing to me, then why am I so upset by the knowledge that Casey is back in town? Somewhere deep inside, I know the answer to that, but I refuse to let myself go there. *That* wasn’t part of the deal. *That* wasn’t planned. It’s something that snuck up on me when I wasn’t paying attention. And if I’m feeling this way, then how is he feeling?

“Here’s your salad,” Stephanie says, placing the plate in front of me. I hadn’t even noticed her walk away.

“Thanks,” I mumble, picking up my fork and playing with a cherry tomato. I watch as it rolls around with each poke.

“Seriously, Celeste, don’t worry about it. I really regret telling you.”

I wave her off. “No. Casey being in town isn’t a big deal. I mean, if Drake wants her, then he’ll take her back, right?” I look up at her.

She lifts a brow but doesn’t verbally answer.

“And if he doesn’t, then he’ll disregard her. He’ll call me tomorrow and let me know either way, right?”

She bites her lower lip.

“I just wish I knew which way this was going to go. I’ve never been good

with waiting. And honestly, breaking things off with him probably wouldn't be a bad idea. I mean, I'm only going to be here for a little over five more months, and my work with him is technically done. Keeping this going will only hurt one of us in the process. Maybe both of us—and that'll be determined tomorrow, I guess." I'm ranting. I'm thinking out loud and I can't shut up. The words are leaving my mouth faster than I can stop them.

"Celeste, chill!" Stephanie shouts, stopping me.

"Thank you," I tell her as I finally stop babbling.

"You need to calm down. Eat your dinner. Sip your drink and relax. Then go home. Watch a movie—something funny. Take a long, hot shower, put on your pajamas, and go to bed. Don't think about it at all! Just rest and relax. You'll know something soon enough."

I nod once. "You're right," I agree, stabbing at the tomato and popping it into my mouth.

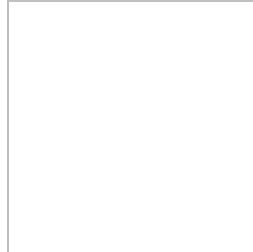
But I still can't stop thinking about it, and it angers me. I sit and eat my salad, quietly stewing. How dare he drop me for her? Even if he doesn't love me, I got the job completed. Because of me, he can build his expansion. I did that. Shouldn't I get a reward? *Get a reward for doing your job? Come on now, Celeste.*

I shake all thoughts from my head and push away my plate. "Thanks, Steph," I say, dropping \$20 on the bar and standing.

She's clear across the bar, but looks up when I say her name. She shoots me a sad smile. I ignore it all and head out to my car, needing someplace quiet. A place where I can think things through and fall apart if I feel the need. I drive back to my motel room and let myself inside. I strip out of my dress and toss it into the corner. I kick off my shoes, leaving me in my black lace bra-and-panty set. Instead of pulling on a pair of comfortable pajamas, I crawl into bed and bury myself under the covers. The phone in my hand is practically begging me to call him. You know, just to check in and make sure everything is okay. *Don't you dare,* I tell myself. Give him time to think

things through and deal.

I turn on the TV and put on a stupid slapstick movie. I'm watching it and it's funny, but I never laugh. I'm too out of it to laugh or enjoy anything until I talk to Drake and learn our fate.



I WAKE in the morning still clutching my phone. I force myself to release it as I shake my hand back and forth. It's cramped and hurting from sleeping in that position all night. I push myself up and head for the bathroom, needing to get ready for work. I take a quick shower, washing the curls from my hair and all the makeup from my face. When I get out, I pull my hair into a sleek bun and only add a little mascara and lip gloss. I pull on a pair of jeans, a tank top, and a sweater. I slip my feet into a pair of plain-looking flats. I don't look business-ready, but I don't exactly look like I've just walked in from off the street either.

I gather my things and move toward the car to go to the office. I don't stop for my usual coffee and muffin. I don't think I could eat if you paid me to—not until I know. I'm on edge, needing answers to my questions.

Debbie is already sitting at the front desk of the law office when I walk in.

“Good morning,” she greets me.

“Morning,” I say, passing her by and heading straight to my office. A part of me wants to give her the third degree, wanting to know all she knows about Casey coming into town. This is a small town, so I'm sure she's heard the news of the runaway blonde who's suddenly reappeared. I sit at my desk and turn my computer on for the day. As it starts up, I look up. There's a mirror hanging on the wall across from me. I find my reflection and study it. Speaking of runaway blondes . . . is that why Drake chose me? Because I'm

similar to her? We both have long blonde hair. We're both pretty by social standards. I'm from the city and she wanted to live in the city. If my assumptions are correct, I know he'll drop me to have her back if I'm nothing but her look-alike, her replacement. Why wouldn't he drop me when he could have the original?

I shake my head and let a long breath escape. I need to stop this. But there's only one way to make it stop: the truth.

I get up, grabbing my purse and phone.

"Cancel this morning's appointment," I tell Debbie, heading for the door.

She stands up quickly, mouth open like she's going to say something, but I don't stop or give her the chance. I exit the building and climb behind the wheel. I don't allow myself to think until I'm parked in front of the brewery. I look up at the big building. There are more people coming in and out of it than usual. Maybe Drake is already working with a team to build the expansion?

I imagine myself walking into his office, ready to have this deep, meaningful conversation, only to discover every inch of the room filled with other people wanting something from him. I know if he's this busy, then he won't want to talk right now anyway, and I'm not going to grovel for his attention. If he wants Casey, then he'll just have to break the news to me.

I shift into reverse, leaving the brewery behind. The whole way back to town, I do nothing but curse myself for being so silly. We had a deal, I remind myself. We're not together. We're not exclusive. We're friends and work partners who couldn't keep their hands to themselves. We were both lonely and needed each other to pass the time. That's it. That's all I mean to him, and after I get my head screwed on right, that's all he will be to me. I've been getting too attached these last few months. I try to think back on the last time I actually spent the night alone. I can't remember; it's been so long. There were even nights when we didn't do anything at all other than enjoy each other's company and fall asleep. Fuck. We're in deeper than either of us

meant to get.

I walk back into the firm and slide behind my desk, determined to push everything from my head and focus on the work that needs to get done. I refuse to think of Drake, Casey, what they could be doing, or why he hasn't called. Those are things that someone in love thinks about, and I'm not in love. I can't be. It wasn't part of the deal.

Once I really get into my work, I forget about everything else. I work through lunch and well into the evening. It's going on 7 p.m. when I finally look up and notice the time. I quickly save everything on my computer then start packing up my belongings. I see movement out of the corner of my eye and suck in a loud breath. My eyes land on Drake walking into my office.

"God, you scared the crap out of me," I tell him, letting my hand fall away from my heart.

"Sorry. I tried calling you, but the phone went directly to voicemail."

I look down at the phone on my desk and pick it up, finding that it's dead. Probably because I slept with it in my hand instead of charging it like I should have. "Oh, I didn't notice that it had died. I've been buried in work."

"We need to talk," he says, taking a step closer as he slides his hands into his pants pockets. His mouth is pressed into a thin line, worry lines surrounding his blue eyes.

Anger swells in my chest, but I'm not sure if I'm upset with him for wanting to talk—break things off with me—or if I'm pissed at myself for falling for him when I knew he was off-limits. Either way, I don't want to hear the breakup speech he shouldn't have to give.

"Save it, Drake," I say, pulling on my coat. "There's no need for the speech." I grab my purse and briefcase, wanting to take some work home with me to keep me occupied for the night.

"The speech?" he asks, seemingly confused.

I flip the light off and step past him, heading for the door. He follows along behind me. "Yeah, the speech. We're not together. We had a deal. I

completely understand if you want to break things off. But luckily for you, there isn't anything to break off, because we're not together." I open the door and flip off the light. As I hold the door open, he steps past me, but waits for me on the sidewalk outside.

I close the door and lock it. Turning around, I nearly bump into his chest. His hands catch me by my biceps. Even after all these months, after having sex in every position possible, his touch still lights a fire in me that I'm going to have to learn how to control. Especially now that he's getting back together with Casey.

"What the hell are you talking about, Celeste?" he asks, his hot breath blowing across my face.

Now I'm confused. "You called off our date," I state flatly.

He nods. "Yeah, because something came up that I want to talk to you about."

"Casey?" I ask with a high voice and probably even higher eyebrows.

He shakes his head, brows drawn together. "Casey? What about Casey?"

I let out a deep, annoyed breath. "Aren't you breaking things off with me to get back together with Casey? Stephanie told me she's back in town, and since you called off our date, I assumed it was because she found you."

His face goes slack: his mouth is hanging open, he's speechless, and every worry line on his face has eased away. He's shocked. He didn't know that she was back in town—that's obvious by his expression. But if he didn't know, then why did he call off our date?

DRAKE

CASEY is in town? How is it that Celeste knew about this before I did? Either way, it doesn't matter. "No, that's not why I called off our date. I had no idea she was back in town." I reach out and pull her against my chest. "God, I can't imagine how you've been feeling—waiting for the ball to drop. I'm sorry. That wasn't my intention," I say, running my hands up and down her back.

She sighs and shakes her head as she pulls away. Her eyes find mine. "It's fine. I guess that's what I get for jumping to conclusions and listening to town gossip. So, what's up? What made you cancel?" Her hand moves up, latching onto my coat.

"Uh, let's go somewhere else and talk. Maybe have some dinner?"

"Okay." She looks at her watch. "I think the diner is already closed, but we can swing by the bar and grab a drink and a salad, or I guess a steak for you." She offers up that drop-dead gorgeous smile of hers.

"I'll follow you." I walk her over to her car and open the door for her. I watch as she slides into the seat and starts the engine. "I'm right behind you," I say, closing her door and moving toward my truck.

Moments later, we're both parking outside the bar. The place isn't very busy; only a few cars are parked up front. I open the door for her and she walks in ahead of me. I place my hand on her lower back and lead her over to a far table, so we can talk without anyone overhearing. We get comfortable in

our seats and the bartender takes our orders. I order beer, steak, and a baked potato, and Celeste orders a fruity cocktail and a salad. When our drinks are placed in front of us and I know we won't be bothered again for a while, I take her hand in mine.

“Not too long ago, I received a letter. It was from a man claiming to be my half-brother. He provided me with proof that his mother and my father had a fling. I asked my father about it and he confirmed the affair, but then swore up and down that there was never a child.”

“Oh, Drake,” she breathes out.

I shake my head, not wanting her to worry for me. “This guy wants his rightful share of the family business, and honestly, if he's family, I want him to have it. I want to get to know this brother I've never met. I want to bring him home. However, Harrison hasn't been able to find any proof, and I can't just hand over a chunk of my business to anyone who claims to be related. Yesterday, I had to cancel our date after I received another letter. My half-brother got his hands on some of my dad's legal documents. In these documents, it states that the brewery will be divided evenly among his children. He highlighted it. He also sent a letter stating that he's getting a lawyer and taking what's his very soon. I figured that since he was getting a lawyer, I needed to inform mine immediately.”

She nods and takes a sip of her drink. “Okay, but you're not wanting to stop him from claiming his rightful inheritance, right?”

“If there's proof that he's family, then I'll welcome him in myself.”

“Okay, so we'll have to request a DNA test to confirm that he is, in fact, related. Then we can go from there.”

“But Celeste, I want to ensure my family is protected. I don't know this guy and he's not exactly going about this the right way. If he is family, I want to make sure he gets his due, but not more. I don't want him having something up his sleeve to take what the rest of us have worked our whole lives for.”

She rubs her hand over mine soothingly. “Okay, we’ll get everything figured out. I can’t believe you’ve taken this on all by yourself. This is big news! I mean, your father having an affair? A mystery brother?” Her eyes are doubling in size at the shock.

I nod as I pick up my beer.

“What do your brothers think of this?”

Our food is placed in front of us and I grab my knife and fork. “Only Colton knows right now. I wanted to have something concrete before telling them. And this guy, my half-brother,” I roll my eyes, “hasn’t even shown himself yet. I don’t know his name, what he looks like, nothing. I mean, he could be any one of the assholes in this bar right now.”

She glances around the bar. “That’s kind of weird when you think about it that way. I mean, what if he’s just trying to cause trouble for you and your family? He could’ve been here for years, just waiting to make his move.”

I nod. “Yeah, and he picks now to show up? Right when I’m starting this massive expansion? It seems like he’s just looking for a payout.”

She takes a small bite of her salad. “I wonder if he actually wants in on the goings-on of the company or if he’ll allow you guys to buy him out of his share. I mean, you have things in place so he can’t just sell it to anyone, right?”

I shrug. “I don’t know. It’s been a long time since I’ve seen any of that paperwork, and it’s something I’ve never had to worry about before. I knew my brothers would never sell outside the family.”

She points her fork at me. “I’ll look into it first thing in the morning.”

“Thank you,” I say, placing my hand on hers.

She offers up a smile. “It’s no problem.”

We both get back to eating. She looks around the bar, taking everyone in, and I can’t do anything but look at her. Damn, she’s gorgeous. I don’t know how the hell I’ve managed to get her into my life, but I’m sure glad I did. But these thoughts only remind me of the fact that we only have five months left

together. That shoots my good mood clear out of the water.

“So, when are we making up our date night?” She shoots me a grin that causes her green eyes to light up brighter than a summer day.

I laugh. “Friday night. And we break ground next week. You’ll be there, won’t you?”

“Of course,” she agrees in a whisper.

We chat as we finish eating, but the conversation switches to something much easier. We laugh and joke and have a good time. Moments like this really make me miss having a normal home life—a life where things are just easy with no stress or worry. Just having someone to talk to and be with makes everything else fall away for me.

“Want to come back to my place tonight?” she asks.

I take a deep breath. “I’d love to, but I have to get back to the brewery. Things have been crazy there since we got the approval. I probably won’t make it home until midnight or later.”

“Need me to come with you?”

I shake my head. “No, I saw the workload you were carrying. I think we both need to get our work done so there’s no reason to cancel this date. I want to see you in the sexy dress I know you’ve been saving for me.” I can’t hold back my smile when I imagine how beautiful I know she’ll look. We both stand and I walk her out. When we get to her car, I spin her around and press her back against it, my lips moving to hers. She wraps her arms around my neck and pulls in me deeper. Her tongue tangles with mine, teasing me. Fuck, I just want to bury myself in her right here and now. I breathe in her sweet scent and it carries me away, off to that little back bedroom we share when she’s visiting.

“Are you *sure* you want to work tonight?” she asks against my lips, causing me to laugh.

“No.” I kiss her again then lean my forehead against hers. “But yes,” I mumble, echoing a similar answer she once gave me, knowing there’s too

much work to do to blow anything off.

“All right. I’ll get to work on the things we talked about and call you if I find something.” She turns to get in her car, but I stop her.

“Call me anyway. I just want to hear your voice.”

She smiles and nods before slipping into the seat.

I close the door behind her and stand back, watching her drive away. When her car is no longer in view, I start to head toward mine, but then I remember I forgot to leave a tip. I walk back into the bar, dig \$7 out of my pocket, and drop it down on our table. I pick up what’s left of my beer and toss it back. When I turn around, I’m face-to-face with Casey.

Seeing her stops me dead in my tracks. My eyes start at the top of her blonde head and work their way down. She’s just as beautiful as the day she left. Her long blonde hair is straight and sleek. She’s wearing a tight pair of jeans with knee-high boots. Her blue and white flannel shirt clings to her big chest.

“Hey, cowboy,” she says with a grin as her hand moves to the hip she’s sticking out.

“Casey,” I say, bowing my head in greeting.

“It’s been too long, stranger.” Without warning, she wraps her arms around my neck and pulls me against her for a hug. She smells the same: like vanilla and sugar. It’s a smell that’s always reminded me of homemade cookies. Being with her was like being home.

I place my hands on her lower back and squeeze lightly, still in shock.

“What are you doing back here?” I ask.

She pulls away and looks me up and down. “Let’s have a seat and catch up . . . if you’re not too busy, that is.”

I know I need to get back to the brewery, but I have to do this with her. I need the closure. I gesture toward the table that Celeste and I were just sitting at, but she scrunches up her nose.

“It’s a little used. How about we go over there?” She points toward the

booth in the darkened corner. “After all this time, we need a little privacy.” She grabs my hand and tugs me across the bar, waving at the bartender as we pass, and ordering us some drinks.

I slide into the booth, and to my surprise, she slides in next to me, not across from me. She takes my hand in hers, rubbing it back and forth.

“What are you doing here, Casey?” I ask again, my voice a little strained.

“My granny passed away last week. The whole family is here to go through her things and arrange the funeral. Are you surprised to see me?” She bats her long, dark lashes and flashes me the smile that usually gets her whatever she wants.

“Surprised? Yeah! I mean, we were together for years, and then one day, you just up and left without an explanation.”

Her eyes double in size. “Without an explanation? I’d been unhappy for months, Drake. You knew that.”

“I didn’t know that,” I argue, pointing at my chest.

The bartender sets down our drinks and gives me a sidelong glance. To me, that look says, *don’t even think about it. I will tell Celeste what I see here tonight.* But I don’t care. I’ll tell her myself.

“How did you not know? I’d been complaining for months about wanting to get out of this town. I told you how I wanted to explore the world and make something of myself, not just sit around in a cabin and garden all day. I needed more in my life and you refused to give it to me. So I took matters into my own hands.”

“And did you get everything you hoped for?” I ask bluntly, picking up my drink and swallowing it down in a long gulp.

“Not everything, but close. I got to travel and see the world. I fell in and out of love. I made new friends along the way. I’m happy.”

“Good for you,” I grind out. “While you were running around making yourself happy, you left me here. Alone. To deal with your loss. I mean, damn, Casey, I couldn’t find the coffee filters for three months!” I know it

probably sounds funny. But first thing in the morning when all you want is a cup of coffee and there are no filters in sight, it's aggravating.

She laughs. "Why didn't you just buy more?"

"Not the point," I say, glancing over at her. "I didn't have any of the passwords to pay a damn bill. Fuck, I didn't even know we *had* so many bills. A little talk would've gone a long way before you left, don't you think?"

She shrugs, now looking a little guilty. "I guess I should have tried to make things a little easier for you. But at the time, I just felt trapped. I needed out, and in that moment, I knew if I didn't go then, I never would. So I packed my things and left."

"Good for you. I'm so proud of you." I'm still bitter and I don't care if she knows it. I'm not bitter about my entire life now, though. Not since I found Celeste.

"So, who was the woman you were just with?"

"That's Celeste; she's my new lawyer."

"That looked like a whole lot more than a business dinner. You kissed her. With passion. I saw it, Drake Slade. It's been a long time, but I remember just how that felt." She smiles and it causes her cheeks to burn crimson.

"We've been seeing each other for about six months now."

"Only six months? So how many women *have* there been? Who's been keeping you company all this time?"

I let out a deep chuckle. "No one before Celeste." I look her square in the eye. "I waited for you far longer than I should have. Then she showed up. One look from her was all it took to take away all the pain you left me with."

"You—you waited?" she asks, seemingly ignoring the rest of my sentence.

I nod. "Yep. I waited. I was in love with you, Casey. I thought you loved me too. I thought you'd be back after you got all of this out of your system.

Guess I was wrong.”

She scoots closer. “I had no idea, Drake,” she whispers. “If I’d known, I would’ve come back sooner. I thought you hated me for leaving the way I did.”

“Hate you? I fucking loved you. Maybe . . . maybe a part of me still does.” I shake my head, not wanting to say anything I’ll regret. My emotions are all screwed up right now. I’ve been feeling things I shouldn’t for Celeste, and now, seeing Casey is bringing up things I thought I’d gotten over. It’s all mixing together. I can’t tell which feelings are meant for whom right now. The alcohol probably doesn’t help, but damn it, it’s the only thing holding me together right now.

“I still love you too,” she whispers, causing my eyes to pop up and lock on hers.

I’m frozen. I never thought I’d hear her say those words again. I never thought I’d *want* to hear those words again from her. Celeste has helped me move on. *Celeste*. I should’ve left with Celeste. Then I wouldn’t be here having this conversation with Casey. All this confusion would be gone. I’m stuck: a part of me staring at my past, and my future calling me home. It’s hard moving on, especially when you know that future will just up and leave you in five months. But my past is right here, reminding me of how good things used to be.

I don’t even see her leaning closer. All I know is that her lips are on mine. Her fingers are laced into my hair and she’s tugging me closer. Her tongue is soft and sweet. Her skin is warm against mine. Memories of all our past kisses flood my mind. But over time, something changed. This doesn’t feel the same. It doesn’t feel as good. Not anywhere close to how I feel when I’m with Celeste.

The kiss slows and she pulls back, looking into my eyes with her hooded ones. “Take me home, Drake.” She stands up and takes my hand in hers, pulling me to my feet.

My mind is a cloud of confusion as she tugs me toward the door. My feet move on their own, but my mind is trying to catch up. She finds my truck and leads me to it, but before we complete the walk, she's spinning around and throwing herself into my arms. I catch her on impulse, and her lips land on mine once again. Her tongue is back in my mouth, kissing me like no time has passed at all.

"Take me home and make love to me, Drake," she says against my lips. Suddenly, the cool night air really hits me, waking me up and clearing me from this fog.

She opens the door to my truck and pulls my hand, wanting me to climb behind the wheel, but I jerk my hand away. She looks back at me, confused.

"No," I say.

"No?" she questions.

"No," I confirm. "You thought you could just march back into town and everything would be the same between us? That you'd only have to bat those long lashes at me and I'd be eating out of the palm of your hand?" I shake my head. "That's not how it's going to work, sweetheart. There's too much between us now. I have something better. *Someone* better."

She juts her chin into the air and straightens her back. "The lawyer? That *girl* you were just in here with?" She laughs. "What is she—10 or 15 years younger? You can't tell me you're in love with her or that things will actually work out between you two. You need someone more mature, Drake." She reaches for me but I step back.

This angers her and her eyes squint at me. "Seriously? You're going to tell me how you've waited all this time for me and how you might still have feelings for me and then turn me down?" She points at her chest. "If I walk away, it'll be the last time you see me. You'd better think long and hard about what it is you want, Drake. Do you want me, the woman who was by your side for years, who knows everything there is to know about you—the woman who's finally come back to you? Or do you want to take the shoddy

chance that this younger girl won't leave you? You think you'll be enough for her—that *this* will be enough for her?" She motions around the town.

I shake my head. "This has nothing to do with her, Casey. This has everything to do with us. You left. You broke my heart. And I'm not giving you another chance to do it again. I've finally got a normal life. You've taken enough from me already." I step past her and climb into my truck. She stands outside the window, watching and waiting to see if I'll change my mind. But I won't.

I twist the key and the truck roars to life. I hit the gas a couple times to make the engine roar louder due to my anger. Finally, she steps back when I shift into drive and the truck jerks forward. Without looking back, I pull out of the bar parking lot as fast as I can.

CELESTE

LIGHTS flash quickly through my room, pulling me away from the work that's spread out in front of me. I pull back the curtain and see Drake climbing out of his truck. Confused, I stand up and move toward the door. I open it before he gets there, and his eyes look me up and down slowly. The cold wind blows against my bare legs and arms since I've changed into pajamas for the night.

"Hey," I say as he steps though, but he doesn't reply. Instead, he pulls me against him and his lips are on mine. His strong hands land on my ass, picking me up against his chest. Using his foot, he kicks the door closed behind him. I want to ask what's brought this on, but everything he's doing feels too good to stop. We fall onto the bed and he climbs up my body—his hands pulling clothing out of the way as they trace every curve.

He uses his hips to push my legs apart and then he settles between them. His mouth moves quickly with my own. All I can taste on him is the beer he's just finished. Surely he can't be drunk. Not from the one beer he had at dinner. His lips move from mine, down to my jaw, and then to my neck. A quiet whimper slips past my lips. With that sound, I feel him harden against my center.

"What's gotten into you?" I whisper as he continues to kiss his way down my body.

"You have," he replies, pulling my shirt over my head and exposing my

breasts. “You’ve worked your way deeper than I ever thought possible,” he says, sucking one of my nipples into his hot mouth. His tongue lashes across it, making my back arch up off the bed. I suck in a loud breath, my eyes fluttering closed. Suddenly, I’ve forgotten what we were talking about. Every last thought slips from my mind. All I can think about is the way he’s moving above me, controlling me, dominating me.

His hands push my shorts down my hips as he sits back and watches them fall away. After he tosses them onto the floor, he rips his shirt over his head and drops it. He cocks his jaw and licks his lips like he’s about to devour me.

“I can’t believe I never saw how perfect you are for me,” he whispers as he leans in and closes his mouth around my clit.

I want to ask what that means, exactly, but a sudden blinding, building passion takes over. My eyes flutter closed and my mouth falls open, sucking in a breath. His tongue flicks against me as he slides a finger inside.

I grasp the sheets at my sides and cry out his name. He continues with his torture, only pushing me to my breaking point. My release builds and builds until it can go no higher. Suddenly, I’m bursting at the seams and shattering, raining down like a late summer storm. My toes go numb, my legs shake, and my breathing stops completely. It feels like every nerve ending has been lit on fire—like every hair on my body is vibrating. My body goes limp and forces me to take a breath. My eyes open and they’re a little hazy. When my vision clears, all I can see is him taking his place on top of me. Suddenly and without warning, he’s thrusting into me. He lets out a deep moan the moment he fills me completely.

“Oh, fuck, Celeste,” he moans out, his lips finding mine once again. His hand wraps around the back of my neck, keeping my lips to his as he slides out of me. With just as much passion and force as before, he’s pushing into me again. His hips tilt upward, hitting that magical place that has spots forming before my eyes.

His hands squeeze and caress every inch of my body, leaving

goosebumps in their wake. His mouth never leaves mine. He kisses, sucks, and licks. It's like he's trying to squeeze this into his memory to never be forgotten. As my release begins to rise and my muscles start tensing around him, he doubles his pace, pushing us both over the edge. He fills me with a loud moan that makes my toes curl. Before Drake, I never found sounds like that to be a turn-on, but just knowing I caused him to moan like that has me fired up again.

He pauses for only a moment, pressing his bare chest against mine as we catch our breath. Softly, he presses kisses to my cheek, jaw, and shoulder. When he lifts himself up and pulls out of me, I feel empty, cold. He settles at my side, wrapping his arms around me.

“So . . . I ran into Casey,” he says softly.

His words make my blood run cold. “You did? Tonight?”

He nods his head, his beard tickling my shoulder. “Yeah, after you left.”

“And how did that go?” I ask awkwardly. Suddenly, I'm filled with fear. The butterflies in my stomach take flight.

“She kissed me,” he confesses. He takes a deep breath. “At first, I couldn't believe it. She's the woman I never thought I'd get over. I mean, six months ago, I was praying for her to randomly show up and throw herself at me.” He lifts his hand and rubs his eyes. “And that's what she did tonight. She dragged me outside, wanting me to take her home. She threw herself in my arms and kissed me like I'd always wanted her to.”

I feel the heat of tears filling my eyes and it feels like there's a lump in my throat.

“But then I realized that I don't want her anymore.”

His words make me turn to look at him. His darkening eyes meet mine and he cups my face. “I don't know how you did it, but you cured me of her. It's no longer Casey I want. It's you.”

I'm speechless. My mouth opens but no words come out. I couldn't force any out even if I wanted to, because I have no idea what to say to that. We're

both in deep. Too deep. It wasn't supposed to be this way. We were supposed to take it for what it was: someone to waste time with, someone to feel good with. That was it. Now, here we are, messed up over the thought of losing each other. I don't know how we got here or what we're going to do. But his words hit me right in the heart and I can't stop myself from rolling over to face him. My hand moves up to his jaw as I look into his eyes, which are focused on mine. He runs his tongue over his lower lip, then slowly leans in for a kiss that's both deep and slow.

His hand lands on my hip and he tugs it over his. Rolling over to his back, he pulls me on top of him. He's long and hard again, pressing against me. My body burns hot, needing him. My stomach muscles tighten in anticipation, and goosebumps prickle my skin as he drags his calloused hands over my hips and up to my breasts. He caresses them and skims across my nipples before going back to my hips. Lifting me up, he positions himself at my entrance. Slowly, he pulls me down on him, filling me inch by inch. Being connected again so soon, everything is tender. I already feel like I could shatter.

His hands stay on my hips, moving me up and down his length, teasing me slowly. His tongue dances with mine until he breaks our kiss and stares longingly into my eyes, watching the expressions change on my face due to how my body responds to his. When I bite my lower lip and my eyes fall shut, he loses all patience.

He flips me over and moves behind me. Seconds later, he's filling me again, but he's not being slow or gentle. Now he's a wild man who's taking what he wants. What he needs.

"Fuck, Celeste," he says between thrusts, "I know I shouldn't . . . but I fucking love you." He pounds into me hard, making me move up the bed and cry out with pain and pleasure. My release floods over me, causing my walls to milk him of every last drop.



WE KEEP up with this routine for most of the night. We make love, rest, and start over. It's like the first time, but so much better. We can't get enough of each other. When we rest, we don't talk. I think we're both too afraid of the words he said when he was buried deep inside me: *I fucking love you.*

Love. He loves me. Deep down, I love him too. I've known for a while but I've refused to let myself believe it. I told myself I was just enjoying our time together and that I loved the way we connected. It's no longer easy to ignore. Now, it's out there.

As my eyes flutter closed from exhaustion, I feel him peppering my skin with soft kisses. They're light and teasing, but I have no energy left to go back for another round. Sleep consumes me. His heat warms me. His strong arms shield me, making me feel more safe than I've ever felt.



WHEN I WAKE in the morning, I roll over to find the bed empty. I look at the clock on the nightstand. It's going on noon. I sit upright and shoot out of bed. How did I sleep so long? I knew I was tired, but I guess Drake wore me out more than I thought. It was going on 4 a.m. when we finally fell asleep. I wonder how he managed to crawl out from under me and leave without me waking?

I quickly pull on my shorts and a tank top and grab my phone to see if the office has called. I know I had morning appointments. There's one missed call from the office and one unread text from Drake.

*Sorry to sneak out on you, but you were out cold. I couldn't wake you . . . not even with my lips. *winky face* Call me when you're up and we can grab some breakfast. Or maybe lunch, given how many logs you were sawing lol.*

I laugh and roll my eyes. I quickly type out: *You're so funny . . . not! I'm late for work now because you couldn't keep your hands off of me. I'm charging you for my missed appointments j/k. *kissy face**

After I send the message, I call the office.

"There you are!" Debbie says, obviously seeing my name on the caller ID. "Are you sick today?"

"No, I'm not sick. I just stayed up a little too late with some . . . work I brought home. I'll be there as soon as possible. Can you try to reschedule my appointments for me?"

"Will do. See you soon," she says, hanging up.

I toss the phone and run to the bathroom to get cleaned up.

An hour later, I'm walking into the office freshly showered, dressed, and ready to start my day. I brush past Debbie with a quick wave and head directly to my office. I turn on my computer and start setting things down as it warms up. Debbie walks in with a notebook.

"Your 10 a.m. appointment has been rescheduled for 4 p.m., and your 11 a.m. has been moved to tomorrow."

"Thanks, Debs."

"Oh, and you have an appointment at 2 p.m. with a . . ." she squints at the name on the paper, "Casey Edison."

I freeze. "Did you say Casey Edison?"

She nods. "Mm-hmm."

I flop down in my chair. Why is she coming here? Does she know about Drake and me? Is she angry or coming to threaten me?

"Di—did she say what she wanted?" I ask, tying my fingers in knots.

Debbie stares at me for a moment and shrugs. "Something about needing help getting her late grandmother's affairs in order. Typical lawyer stuff."

She turns and walks out like it's an ordinary day.

To her, it *is* an ordinary day. But to me, this is anything but. I'm not afraid of Casey, *per se*. But I am afraid of what she could try to do. I'm not the type of girl who gets into fist fights over a guy. Drake isn't just any guy though. He's special. He loves me and I love him. If she comes at me, I'll just punch her in the throat! She can't threaten me. She walked out on him, not the other way around. Sure, he chose me over her last night, but if she'd never left, that never would've happened.

I sit for an hour, running through different scenarios in my head. Suddenly, Debbie beeps me. "Your 2 p.m. is here."

I take a deep breath and check my reflection, wanting to make sure I look presentable and not like I'm worried out of my mind. I straighten my shirt and push the button. "Send them in please."

I turn my chair to face the door and stand. As I'm stepping toward the door, Casey enters in all her glory. She's tall. She's thin. Her blonde hair has the perfect amount of highlight, and her skin has the most beautiful glow. Her eyes are bright blue, and her plump lips are thick and red. Everything about this woman is perfect. How could Drake turn her down last night? Oh yeah. Me.

I hold out my hand. "It's nice to meet you, Ms. Edison."

She shakes my hand. "Likewise."

"Please, have a seat." I motion toward a chair and as she takes it, I close the door to my office. Taking my seat behind the desk, I place my hands on top and force a smile on my face. "Now, my assistant mentioned that you need some assistance in getting your late grandmother's affairs in order, is that correct?"

She scrunches her nose and raises her shoulders like she's been caught doing something naughty. "Not exactly."

My mouth drops open, feigning surprise. I knew she was coming here because of Drake.

“I know you know who I am, Celeste.” Her voice is velvety soft, dripping with sweetness.

I nod once, my mouth going into a straight line. “I do. You’re Drake’s ex-girlfriend.”

“Ex-fiancée, actually.”

I clear my throat. “Right. So what’s this about?”

“Well, I’m not sure if you know this or not, but I ran into Drake last night, and we kind of hit it off.”

My eyes widen with surprise. “Oh, really?”

She nods, that fake smile back in place. “He had mentioned you two had been seeing each other, so I thought I’d just come here and break the news to you myself. You know, to save him the trouble of doing so. He doesn’t take these kinds of things lightly. I mean, he hung on to my memory for years.” She giggles, almost sounding happy that she’s been the reason for his misery.

I roll my eyes, making her drop the sugary-sweet act. Her face is now pinched, awaiting my reply.

I sit back in my chair and clasp my hands together in my lap. “It’s funny you mention that, because Drake was with me last night, Casey. And I’m quite aware of the meeting you had between our dinner and the sex we had all night long. Thanks for that, by the way. You chased him right into my arms and made him realize his true feelings for me.”

Her mouth drops open and her eyes throw daggers my way.

“So,” I say, my voice full of cheer, “if that is all, I do have other appointments I need to prepare for.” I stand and open the door, waiting with my brows raised and my eyes wide.

She slowly stands up as straight as she can. Her shoulders are back and her breasts are pushed out like she’s sucked in more air than she can hold. Her walk to the door is deliberate. She stops when she’s directly in front of me. In her tall heels, she’s a good foot taller than me in my flats. Her nose wrinkles as she takes in my appearance. “I don’t know what it is he sees in

you, but trust me, Drake Slade gets bored and moves on very quickly with his little projects. I wouldn't start waving your champion belt just yet." Without another word, she walks past me, her heels clicking down the hallway as she goes.

I stand there a moment—annoyed, pissed off, and downright surprised she'd even try something like this. I tap my shoe, deciding whether or not I should go after her or be the bigger person. I've always chosen the high road before, but no one has ever looked at me or talked to me with the amount of disrespect she just did.

Fuck it.

I turn on my heel and follow her outside. She's climbing into the driver's side of her car as I approach.

"Casey!" I call out.

She pauses and tosses her expensive handbag into the passenger seat before turning to face me. She crosses her arms over her big chest and puckers her lips.

"I know you thought you were too good for this town, for this life, and for Drake, and my guess is that the world showed you exactly what it thought of you: nothing. And that's why you're crawling back. You're nothing. You have nothing. You treat people like they owe you something—like everyone is beneath you. Why Drake ever had feelings for you is beyond me, but I assure you, we've worked very hard to put you right where you belong: in the past. Take it from me, he's moving up in the world very quickly, and you won't even be an afterthought to him anymore. You wanted him to forget about you all those years ago. Well, now he has. Get over it. You lost."

"Screw you," she spits out. "The only reason he's crawling on top of you every night is because you remind him of me." She climbs into her car and starts the engine.

I stand back, laughing and shaking my head. I thought that exact same thing at one point too, but it couldn't be further from the truth. I know that

now. Drake chose me because he found exactly what he was looking for. I'm not just some fancy city girl. I'm a good person who treats people with respect and kindness. I love him the same way he loves me: endlessly. And once you find that, you don't throw it away to run back to what you had before. You take it and hold on tight with every last bit of strength you can muster.

DRAKE

SITTING behind my desk, I can only think of one thing: what I said last night. *I fucking love you.* What the fuck was I thinking? It wasn't a lie. It's how I really feel. How could I fuck up this badly? We had one rule: don't get attached. And what did I do? I went and fell in love with yet another woman who's destined to leave me and break my heart in the process.

Now what options do I have? I could take it back—say it was just something that slipped out in the heat of the moment. I could say my head was all fucked up from running into Casey. Or I could go with it and tell her how I really feel. But I know if I did, it would only hold her back from what it is she really wants: to go home, back to California, to her real life. I don't want to give her an ultimatum. I don't want her holding all this stress because of me. This is on me. These are my feelings. This will be my pain. I won't put that on her.

When she walks into my office completely unannounced, it feels like an answer to a prayer. Her blonde hair blows behind her as she walks toward me full of determination. There's a slight smile playing on her lips that causes her green eyes to sparkle.

"To what do I owe this pleasure?" I ask as she takes a seat on my lap, instantly making me hard.

"Casey," she answers, wrapping her arms around my neck.

I sit up straight. “Casey?”

She nods. “Mm-hmm. She thought she could make me jealous. Even came up with a lie about needing help getting her grandmother’s affairs in order to get my assistant to book her an appointment.” She scoffs and rolls her eyes. “I don’t know what you ever saw in that woman. She’s horrible.”

I shrug. “She didn’t used to be.”

“Either way, it made me miss you and since you snuck out of bed this morning . . .”

“I didn’t sneak,” I say, butting in. “You were in a coma.” I can’t help the smile that spreads across my face.

“I was screwed into a coma,” she laughs out, moving her lips to mine.

I laugh as I kiss her. I know everything I’m doing is wrong, but it feels so right. My hands move up to cup her cheeks. Leaning her backward, I deepen our kiss. Her hands rub up and down my chest. Slowly, she starts tugging my shirt upward. I break the kiss and study the need on her face.

“All I’ve been able to think about since I woke up this morning was you between my legs.” She kisses me hard. “I’ve been turned on all day,” she whispers, narrowing her eyes on mine.

My hand slides up her inner thigh, slipping her panties to the side. I find wetness waiting for me. A growl slips past my lips. “Always so eager,” I say, standing and taking her with me. I place her ass on my desk while my hands start to undo my belt.

The elevator dings, the doors open, and Harrison steps into my office.

I let out an annoyed breath and shake my head. “Harrison?”

“I’m sorry, sir. It wasn’t my intention to intrude, but we have a meeting in five minutes,” he reminds me.

Fuck. I forgot all about that. “Okay, I’m right behind you,” I say, using all my strength. I only want one thing right now, and her pretty ass is sitting on my desk damn near begging me to fuck her back into oblivion.

Harrison nods and heads back into the elevator. Celeste sticks out her

bottom lip in a pout. I offer her my hand and she takes it to hop off my desk.

“Looks like someone is just going to have to set aside some time for me later.”

“Absolutely,” I agree, pulling her in for one last kiss before she has to leave.

Her lips are soft and teasing against mine. She’s not kissing me hard anymore. She knows exactly what she’s doing. I’m hard as a fucking rock and I want a real kiss—one that makes my lips go numb. But she’s not going to give me that. She wants me wanting it all day long. A part of me loves her even more for it. Another part of me wants to say *fuck the meeting* and take her now.

She pulls away with a giggle. “Have fun at your meeting,” she says, walking to the elevator as her hips sway and she shoots me a sexy glance from over one shoulder.

I stand back and watch her go, grinding my teeth as I hold myself back from taking what I want. Every muscle is hard and tensed until the doors close between us.

I sit on the edge of my desk and close my eyes. Using my right hand, I rub over them, hoping to wipe away this edginess building inside me. There’s so much need and want boiling in my blood right now that I’d leave this company high and dry to chase my satisfaction. I’ve never felt this way before. Even with Casey. I would wake up and go to work, having no problem leaving her warm body in bed. At work, I’d stay focused. I wouldn’t relive our memories from the night before like I do with Celeste. And I never considered blowing off work just to bury myself in her. Something about Celeste is so much better, but so much more dangerous.

I push myself away from the desk and head for the elevator. I push the button for the 10th floor to head to the board room. The elevator stops one floor below mine and Harrison joins me.

“I really am sorry about that, sir.”

“Don’t worry about it, Harrison,” I mumble, still lost in my own thoughts.

“Is everything all right, sir?” He looks over at me with concern.

I lean against the wall and shake my head, letting out a rush of air. “I’m so fucking lost, Harrison.”

“What do you mean?” He reaches up and hits the pause button on the elevator, causing it to stop to give us a moment of alone time.

I stand up and start pacing in the small space. “I love her, Harrison. I fucking love her more than I’ve ever loved anyone.”

“And the problem with that is?”

“She’s leaving. In a few months.”

“You mean, after all this time of you two being together, you still haven’t talked about how this thing will end?”

I shake my head. “No! I mean, our arrangement was to not get attached—to have fun while it lasted and to part on good terms. But I never planned on falling in love with her.”

“How does she feel about you?”

I shrug. “I have no fucking clue. I told her last night that I loved her.”

“What did she say?”

I wave my hand through the air. “It was while we were having sex. She probably just thought it was due to the heat of the moment. She didn’t say it back, but that was because she was too busy screaming my name.” I smile at the memory.

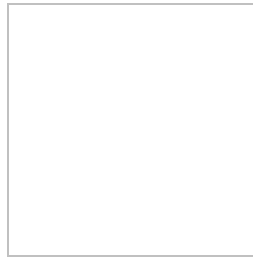
“Well, maybe she didn’t even hear you.” His eyes are wide—maybe even a little freaked out by all the graphic details. But I’m silently thankful to him for not telling me *I told you so* after begging me not to get involved with Celeste months ago.

“Maybe,” I agree, “but whether or not she heard me doesn’t matter. It doesn’t change the fact that I love her and she’s leaving. What am I supposed to do?”

“That’s easy, Drake. Just tell her how you feel. See how *she* feels.”

I shake my head. “I don’t want her giving up her life for me, Harrison. When she came to our town, she had a plan: work here for a year, then go home to a better life thanks to her year in Colorado. She has a fancy office waiting for her, a bigger paycheck, family, and friends. I don’t want her sticking around here and giving all that up for me—someone who can’t offer her anything more than a fucking brewery and a good fuck.”

Harrison shakes his head and rubs his hand across his face. “It sounds to me like you have some thinking to do. You either need to tell her how you feel and ask her to stay, or start pushing her away now so it can be easier for you both when it ends.” Without another word, he looks at his watch and restarts the elevator.



LEAVING the brewery for the night, my body feels heavy and tired with the weight of the knowledge of what I have to do. I won’t ruin her life. I have to let her go. Hell, maybe breaking things off now is what I really need to stay focused on what’s important: my family, the business, and this half-brother nonsense.

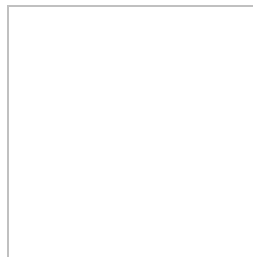
I drive slowly into town, not in any kind of hurry to break either of our hearts. When I pull up to her motel room, there’s a soft glow from inside. I park the truck and step out. I open her door and find her on the bed. She’s completely naked in the dark. The only light is from the TV that’s on in front of her, illuminating her body as the colors shift and dance from moment to moment. Her round breasts are pressed together and she’s biting her lower lip, welcoming me.

I step inside and lock the door behind me. I can’t do anything but watch her as she watches me. My eyes take her in from the top of her head all the way down to the tips of her pink-painted toes—every curve, every freckle

ingrained deep into my memory. I yank off my shirt and kick off my boots as I work on my belt. I know I came here to do something, but suddenly, I don't remember what it was. Now, all I can think about is how goddamn perfect she is and how I just need to be inside her.

As I push my jeans over my hips, she rolls from her side to her back, spreading her legs as I crawl onto the bed and settle between them. When my body is covering hers completely, she wraps her arms around my neck and locks her eyes on mine. Something is being exchanged between us, but I don't know what it is—love, passion, a primal need for each other? Or maybe unspoken promises, knowing that this is coming to an end?

I press my mouth to hers and she sucks my tongue into her mouth, making me see stars. After that, I'm lost to her for the rest of the night.



IT'S GOING ON 3 a.m. and she's sound asleep in my arms. Her green eyes are closed, and her plump pink lips are slightly parted with her deep breathing. Her blonde curls are splayed out across the pillow as one arm rests on my chest. Every time with her just gets me in deeper and deeper. I have to do what I came here to do. If I wait until tomorrow, I won't be able to go through with it. Hell, I couldn't even go through with it tonight. I can't say those words to her face.

But I can write her a note and explain everything as well as I can. This way, there will be no fight, no arguing. She won't be able to talk me into staying. She won't be able to try to make deals with me or convince me to do something other than what I believe is right.

I manage to wiggle out from underneath her and pull my clothes on quietly. I use the restroom quickly and find a legal pad on the table by the window. I sit in the chair and pick up her pen. Looking over at her, I search

for the right words. Words that will let her know how much I'll always cherish the time we spent together this year, but firmly tell her that the only right thing to do now is release each other. Putting pen to paper, I start writing my note—the last thing she'll ever see of me again.

CELESTE

THE morning sun is bright as it shines through the motel window. I strain my eyes against it as I feel around on the bed for Drake. It's cold and empty. He's been gone for some time. Dammit, did I oversleep again? I force my eyes to open despite the bright light of the room, and I sit up, looking around me.

The room is exactly how I left it. The TV is on, but muted. The bed is a mess of blankets, pillows, and wrinkled sheets. I look at the mirror on the wall and see into the dark bathroom. He's gone.

My shoulders slump with that knowledge, but I talk myself out of feeling too let down. He's a busy man and he's got a lot going on at the brewery right now. He can't waste mornings in bed with me when there are more pressing issues at hand.

I grab my phone and see that it's only going on eight. Happy that it's not too late, I stand up and move toward the bathroom to prepare for the day. Twenty minutes later, I'm dressed and ready to go. I do my final walk-through of the room, grabbing my keys and phone, and gathering all the things I need to shove into my briefcase. I reach down to grab my legal pad and pen . . . and that's when I see it. His handwriting. A sinking feeling weighs down my heart the moment my eyes land on it. I swallow my fear and sit in the chair as I pick up the notepad and bring it closer to my face.

CELESTE, I'm sorry I have to do this in a note, but I knew I'd never be able to get these words out with your beautiful green eyes on mine. The way I've felt with you, I've never felt with anyone else. You've opened my eyes to what life can be at its best. You brought me back from the dead in a way. Before, I was just biding my time and going through the motions of living. Then you walked into my life and changed me forever. I'll never forget the time we've spent together. I'll never be able to put us in the past.

But we had an agreement. We were always temporary. This was nothing but keeping each other company. Somewhere along the way, the lines started to blur for me. I forgot that you were leaving because I didn't want you to leave. I wanted to stay lost in time together forever. But as our time together draws closer to the end, it's no longer easy to ignore. You're leaving. You have big plans and a big life ahead of you. A life that I could never fit into. I want you to go live your life the way you've been planning. Go back home, get that promotion, fall in love time and time again, and never look back at this tiny town or the man who was too small to leave it. Do big things, but please, if you ever do think back on your time in Colorado, I hope you feel as warm and happy as I still do to have shared this too-short time with you. I know you still have plenty of time left here, but I feel the longer we draw this out, the harder it will be.

Forever yours,

Drake

MY EYES BLUR with tears as I read his words. My heart cracks and my lungs burn, needing oxygen. My hands are shaking so hard that the words on the page aren't even readable anymore. I drop the legal pad and reach for my phone, calling him.

The phone rings and rings until it goes to voicemail. Anger bubbles up in my chest. He left me. We still have time. We have almost four months! I

can't stay here for four months if he's not by my side. All this time, he's all I've had. He thinks breaking things off will be easier this way? Still having to run into each other and work together? Ha! I can't see him and not reach out and touch him, kiss him, and want him. I fucking love him.

Oh God. I love him and we're over. I've known for a while how I truly feel about him, but I didn't fully think about the end of this thing. Do I want things to be over? Do I still want that promotion and fancy office? Or do I want him?

I shake my head. None of it matters if he doesn't want me. I try calling him again, but nothing changes. His phone still goes to voicemail.

Angry and annoyed, I stand up and grab my keys. He can't ignore me forever. If he wants things to end, then he's going to have to do it to my face. Not take the coward's way out and break up with me in a letter. Break up? We're not together. He can't break up with me.

I grab my keys and purse and head for my car. After 20 minutes of stewing on the drive over, I'm pulling up to his house, but his truck is nowhere in sight. I glance at the house. The front door is closed behind the screen door. When he's home, that front door is always open. I look at the barn and it's locked up tight. He must be at the brewery. I put the car in reverse and hit the gas. I travel down the old country roads as fast as I safely can. Finally, I'm at the brewery and walking quickly to the doors. The receptionist is behind her desk like normal. I wave as I walk by, but she calls my name and chases after me.

"Celeste! Please wait! You can't go up there," she says, almost jumping in front of me so I can't get in the elevator.

"What? Why?" I ask, standing back and crossing my arms over my chest.

She swallows. "I've been told directly not to allow you up today. Mr. Slade is very busy and has contractors in and out all day. I'm sorry, Celeste."

Tears sting my eyes and quickly fall over the rims. "I just need to see him. Just for a minute. Please?"

Her eyes are soft, as are her facial features. “I’m sorry.” She shakes her head.

I take a deep breath just as the elevator opens. Harrison steps out. “Come with me, Celeste,” he says, wrapping an arm around my shoulders as he leads me back outside to the parking lot.

“I just need to see him, Harrison,” I whine out.

He squeezes me close and runs his hand up and down my bicep in a soothing way. “I know, Celeste. And I’m sorry. I think it’s time you both just moved on.”

We come to a stop at my car and he releases me, but doesn’t walk away.

“I love him. I don’t want things to end. Not like this.”

He nods his head once and slides his hands into his pockets. “I know you both feel the same way, Celeste. I do. I’d never seen him as happy as he was with you. But that doesn’t change anything. You don’t belong here. You have a life waiting for you in California. And he doesn’t belong there. His life is here. The best thing for everyone is to just move on. I know your calls and your presence here have upset him. He hasn’t said anything, but I can see the pain in his eyes every time he has to ignore your call. So please, just go. If things are meant to be, then they’ll work out in the end. You have to have faith.” He pats me once on the shoulder then turns and walks back inside, leaving me staring at his back, alone.

Feeling weak, sad, and let down, I get back behind the wheel. I start the car but don’t have the energy to drive. I look up at the building that has practically been my home since my arrival. I miss it already. I miss him. Sadness fills me, but anger pushes me forward. I hate myself for ever starting anything with him. I hate myself for falling for him. I was warned. I knew he was broken before we got together. But I also saw him heal and come to life in front of my eyes. That was all because of *us*. Maybe that’s what I was supposed to do. Maybe our fling wasn’t meant to last forever—maybe it was only meant to heal him.

I shift the car into drive and start heading back into town slowly, not in any hurry since there's nowhere I need to be. Right now, I just need to clear my head, relax, grieve, and move on. Try to figure out how the hell I'm going to live here another four months without him.

When I make it back to my motel, I lock the door behind me and move toward the tub for a bath. I need to relax and unwind. A long soak in a hot bath is just the way to do it. Stepping into the hot water, I feel the soreness leave my body—soreness that's there thanks to a certain man I'll never get to touch or feel again. My legs ache, my stomach is sore, and the junction between my legs is warm and ready for another round.

I lean my head back against the tub and close my eyes. Behind my eyelids, I see scenes of us from the past seven months. I see him moving on top of me, I see the way he smiles at me as his eyes light up. I see his hand moving toward my face, cupping it as he pulls me against his lips. I can hear his words as we talk late into the night. I can hear his moans when he slides into me. It's all ingrained deep inside me. I'll never forget. I'll never recover. Drake Slade will always be the one I never wanted to leave—the one I'll never get over.

My phone rings from the side of the tub and I grab it quickly, hoping to hear Drake's voice.

"Hello?" I answer without looking at the caller ID.

"Ms. Teller?"

I sit up, suddenly surprised by the strange voice. "Yes?"

"This is Nick Mason. I'm here with Jefferson Howe and Terry Lawrence. We just wanted to call and congratulate you on the completion of Mr. Slade's project!"

I smile weakly to myself. "Oh, thank you." I mean the words, but I can't muster up the energy it would take it make it sound right.

"We're so pleased you got this finished so quickly that we'd like to welcome you back to the Los Angeles location. Your office is being prepared

as we speak, and your reserved parking spot will be in place later today. Everything else we discussed is lined up. We're very pleased with your work, Ms. Teller."

My heart flutters as I process the words I've been dying to hear for so long, but it's buried under grief.

"If you'd like to take us up on our offer, we'll immediately reserve you a plane ticket home."

I nod my head as tears well up in my eyes. I guess I should go home. I mean, I was worried about being stuck here for another four months without Drake. Going home would make things easier, and I could get back to where I'm supposed to be.

"Okay, that sounds great, but who will be taking over this location?" I ask.

"We can discuss that when you get home. We thought that after being there all this time, you'd want a say in who's given the position. Well, Ms. Teller, my assistant will get your plane ticket set up right now and send you the details. We look forward to meeting with you soon. Good job, Ms. Teller." Without another word, the call disconnects.

I take a deep breath and stand from the tub. I waste no time in packing. I don't allow myself to stop or think about anything other than gathering my belongings. I fit what I can into my suitcase and the rest I don't care about. I leave a note for the cleaning lady to keep what I've left behind. A little while later, my phone chimes with the details of my travel. I'll turn the car in at the airport, then enjoy a first class seat back to California.

I load my luggage into my car, but before I can leave town, I have a couple things to do: tell Stephanie goodbye and gather my things from the office.

I stop by the bar first, where Stephanie is wiping down the counter just like she always is.

"Hey," she says, watching me approach.

“Hey,” I say, coming to a stop in front of her. “It’s time for me to go home.”

Her eyes widen. “What? Already?”

I nod. “My bosses just called me. They’re so happy I finished Drake’s job early that they’re calling me back home.”

Her shoulders fall. “So what does that mean for you and Drake?”

I feel tears stinging my eyes again, but I refuse to let them fall. “He actually just broke up with me. So, nothing. It means nothing. I get to go home. Be me again. I just wanted to stop by and say thanks for being a friend to me these last few months.” I grab a cocktail napkin and write down my Los Angeles info. “Don’t be a stranger.” I slide it across the bar. She picks it up and tucks it into her apron. I lean over the bar, wrap one arm around her, and give her a hug.

“See ya next time I’m passing through,” I laugh out, knowing I’ll probably never set foot in this town again.

“I’ll look you up when I find myself traveling through Cali,” she replies with a smile and a wave.

I wave from over my shoulder and push my way through the door.

DRAKE

“WE need your signature right here and we’re all done,” the contractor says as he leans over my desk. I scribble my name on the line and drop the pen. He picks up the contract and hands it to Harrison to make a copy.

“Make sure Celeste gets a copy of that document, Harrison,” I say, trying not to think about that statement. Before, I would’ve given it to her myself, but now I have to keep my distance. I know that if I see her, I won’t be able to walk away without touching her and taking what I want.

“Will do, sir,” Harrison says as he leads the contractor out of my office.

When I’m alone, I stand up and walk to my drink cart. I pour a rather large helping and walk over to the window, looking out at the farmland around me. Thanks to Celeste, in just a few months, I’ll be able to see my new distillery from this window.

This doesn’t feel right, celebrating without her. She was supposed to be there when we broke ground. She got us here, after all. I take a long pull of my whiskey as I rub my hand over my eyes. I hate the way I’m feeling right now. I miss her. God, I miss her. It hasn’t even been that long since I’ve seen her face. How can I miss her so much already? It’s probably because I know I’ll have to see that face from time to time over the next few months and won’t be able to hold it in my hands. I’ll never be able to touch her again.

Anger washes over me. Anger at myself and with her. She made me fall

in love. If she'd been any less of a woman, I never would've had these feelings to begin with. She knew what she was doing by drawing me into her web.

I shake my head at myself. That isn't true. She was just being herself. This is all my fault, but being angry with her makes things easier for me. I have to stay away—not just for me, but for her too. I don't know how she feels about me exactly, but I know I don't want to mess up her life and her plans.

I finish off my drink and shut down the office for the night. Instead of heading straight home, I drive through town, creeping by her office. It's dark and locked up for the evening. I drive by the grocery store and bar, looking for her car—not that I'd approach her, but just needing to see a piece of her somewhere. When I don't find it, I give in and drive to her motel. I shut off my headlights as I pull in, not wanting to give myself away. I shift into park and look for her car. It's nowhere to be found.

I look at her room. The light is on and I can see movement behind the curtain. I wait, wondering if someone has broken into her room. The door opens and a cleaning cart rolls out, followed by the maid. I can see that the room is completely empty—Celeste's personal touches are gone. The housekeeper reaches inside and turns off the light, leaving the room in complete darkness. She closes the door and locks it before pushing the cart down the sidewalk.

She left town. *Fuck*. Celeste left town. It feels like someone has reached into my chest and yanked out my heart. I was breaking things off now so I'd have time to adjust to being alone, but I wasn't ready to be without her completely. I still need her. I need to see her face. I need to have awkward conversations. I need to feel my feelings for her slowly fading away. Now she's gone and I'm here alone with everything buried inside of me. Anger washes over me and I punch the steering wheel. Goddamn it.

I take a deep breath. No, this is good. This is what I needed. She's gone.

If she's not here, then these feelings can be buried so I never feel them again. I just need one night of good blackout drunken sleep. I shift into drive and turn on my lights, heading home.

Once at home, I let myself into the house and head straight for my bottle of whiskey. It's been placed inside the cabinet instead of left out on the table. When I was with her, I didn't need it. But now, she's not here and I need something to take the edge off. I pull it out and uncap the bottle, taking a long drink that burns its way down my throat. I repeat this process over and over until I feel the first warning signs of the alcohol. The tingling in my stomach takes over as I head down the hallway to the bedroom. I kick off my boots and lean back on the bed. Disturbing the pillows makes the smell of her waft up my nose. I breathe it in deeply, needing to smell her, feel her, and pretend she's here with me.

"Drake?" a man's voice yells out.

I grab my bottle and head to the living room to find Colton walking in the door.

"Hey, man. What's up?" he asks, flopping down on the couch.

I shrug and take my seat in the recliner. "Just getting shit-faced. What about you?" My voice sounds strained—off in some way. It's thick with emotion.

He looks up and studies me for a moment. "Where's Celeste?" He starts glancing around.

"She left. Went back to Los Angeles," I grind out, lifting the bottle and taking another swig.

"Whoa, hey, slow down." He reaches for the bottle and takes it away. "Keep throwing this stuff back like that and you'll be in the hospital getting your stomach pumped before the night's up." He tips the bottle back and takes a small sip.

"Fuck it. I need something to do later," I joke.

"What's going on, man? Did you two break up for good?"

I nod.

“You mean you aren’t even going to try the long-distance thing?” His brows are pulled together in confusion.

“Nope,” I say, shaking my head.

“Well, why the fuck not?”

My eyes cut to him, but I don’t know how to answer.

“I saw how good the two of you were together. Why would you just give that up?”

My mouth opens but no words come out.

“What the fuck is wrong with you, man? Go get her!” He motions toward the door.

“No! She’s not mine. She never was. She’s meant for more than I’ll ever be.”

He scoffs. “Dammit, Drake. Why do you always do this shit?”

My head jerks in his direction. “What shit?” I ask, getting offended.

He stands up, pacing the floor in front of me. “You find something you want, something you love, and you just throw it all away! I know you want her. I know you love her! Why the hell are you just letting her go?”

I wave my hand though the air. “You wouldn’t understand.”

“Then explain it to me!”

I don’t bother. I just stare at his feet.

“I’m living every damn day of my life in fucking misery,” he says. “The woman I love was taken from me. She was taken without warning and I’m still not over it. Deep down, I know I’ll never be over it. And what makes it worse is that I have this little girl, and every time I look in her sweet little eyes, all I can see is the woman who’s gone and I hate it. I hate her for leaving me, even though I know that makes no sense and it wasn’t her choice to die. I hate God for taking her and leaving me here. I’m alone. But *you* don’t have to be. Go get her, Drake. Stop being afraid of everything. If she turns you down, then she turns you down. Then you get up and dust yourself

off and work to get over her. But there's still a chance, man—a chance she'll want all the same things you want. Just reach for it!" Without another word, he slams the bottle on the coffee table and marches out, leaving me staring after him.

I'm speechless. I knew my brother was still fucked up from the loss of his wife, but I've never heard him talk about it like he just did—so bare and raw. He's right. He doesn't have a choice. He has to let go. But I don't. Not yet. There's still hope.

I grab my phone and call her number. It goes straight to voicemail, and hearing her voice is like a knife to my heart. I try again and again, but she never answers. Pissed off at myself for being so damn stupid, I get up and grab my keys. I go back to her office, hoping to find something. Anything. The parking lot is empty, and her assistant is gone for the night. I go by the bar next, finding Stephanie walking out as she locks up behind herself.

I throw the truck in park and rush at her, causing her to yell and drop the keys.

"Fuck, Drake! You scared the shit out of me." Her hand covers her heart.

"I'm sorry, but I need to find Celeste."

She nods. "She's gone."

"I know. She's not answering her phone. Do you know how to get in touch with her?"

She gives me a sidelong look. "She said you two were done."

"I know. I was stupid. Please, Stephanie, if you know anything, please tell me. I have to go to her. I have to tell her . . ." I stop and take a deep breath. "I have to tell her that I love her. That I can't live without her."

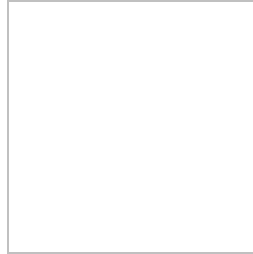
She studies me for a long moment then reaches into her apron, handing over a bar napkin. "Here."

I take the white napkin and unfold it. It's Celeste's number and address.

"Thank you," I breathe out, rushing back to my truck. I stop for a moment, looking at the town I love. Then I look at the long road in front of

me and know what I have to do.

After throwing some things in a bag and buying a last-minute ticket, I haul ass to the airport. I run inside and get through security just in time to find my gate and board my flight to Los Angeles.



THE WAIT for liftoff is long. The flight's even longer. I bounce in my seat the whole damn way, and not because I'm a nervous flyer. When the plane lands, I move determinedly to the exit. I'm on the road more quickly than normal considering I don't have any bags with me. I call an Uber and offer him an extra \$50 if he gets me to my destination in record time. He stomps the gas and drives like a madman. It's a wonder anyone here even survives with the crazy drivers and packed roads.

As we drive, I try not to think about anything other than what's around me. I take in the sights of the city, trying to picture Celeste living like this. Suddenly, it doesn't make sense to me. She doesn't belong here. She belongs with me, in the country. She belongs in my fields, riding horses. She belongs in my home, sharing my bed. She belongs in my life.

I toss the cab driver some money and exit the vehicle, wasting no time in running up to her building. I yank on the glass door, but it's locked. I look around and find the buzzer. I search for her name and press the button for her apartment.

"Yes?" she answers.

"Celeste?" I ask, my voice cracking.

"*Drake?*" she responds, confusion filling her words.

"It's me, baby. Please, let me up," I beg.

"What are you doing here?"

"I'm sorry. I came for you. I can't live without you, Celeste. I'm sorry it

took so much for me to see it. Please, baby. Let me up?”

There’s a long silence. I feel every thud of my heart as the time ticks by. It feels like time freezes. I wonder if she’s changed her mind about me. If maybe she doesn’t feel the same, or if being back home has changed her in some way. Maybe she’s happy she’s home. Maybe she’s just ready to put me and our time together in the past.

My hand falls away from the wall as I stand up straight. I’m preparing to walk away, never to be the same again, but then the door buzzes. I stop and turn around to face it. I reach for it, yanking it open. I don’t even know what’ll happen next. The next thing I know, I’m running down the hallway. A door opens and she rushes out. Her eyes land on mine, and mine on hers. Without any words being exchanged, I reach for her, pulling her against my chest as my mouth covers hers.

Her arms wrap around my neck, deepening the kiss. I taste the saltiness of tears mixing in, but I don’t know if they’re her tears or mine. At this point, it doesn’t matter. All that matters is that I have her in my arms once again and I’m never letting her go.

“I’m so sorry, Celeste,” I say against her lips.

She shakes her head but doesn’t stop kissing me. “Don’t be. I love you, Drake.”

The words leave her mouth and make the world stop spinning for me. I pull away, looking into her glistening eyes. She smiles and nods. “I heard you loud and clear. And I love you too. I didn’t want to leave us. I don’t want this to be over.”

I pull her back to me, picking her up and carrying her through the open door. I kick it closed and press her against it. Her hands immediately start pushing away my shirt and mine work hers up her stomach and over her breasts.

“I never want to be without you again,” I say, peppering the swell of her breasts with hot, wet kisses.

“You’ll never have to,” she breathes out as her fingers lace into my hair, pulling my mouth back to hers.

That hole I’ve been feeling in my chest for the last few years finally seals. I’m whole again . . . with her. I don’t know how this will work exactly. I don’t know if she’s willing to give up her life to come back to the country with me, or if we’ll be left dealing with a long-distance relationship, but in this moment, I don’t care. As long as she’s mine, I’ll do anything to keep her, love her, and make her happy every day we’re together. Celeste was someone I was never meant to have. She wasn’t made for me, but I took her anyway, and I’m never giving her back.

EPILOGUE

THREE months is entirely too long to go without seeing your boyfriend, but that's how long it's been since Drake rushed to the city to get me back. Three months, five days, six hours, and 32 minutes. At the time, I was so happy to see him here that I would've agreed to anything to be called his. Now, I'm damn-near desperate to feel his arms around me. It's the only thing I can think about as I pack up my things in my brand-new office.

A tap comes at the door.

"It's open," I call out, looking up to see my assistant, Mary, walking through.

"Before you take off for the next three months, I wanted to give you this." She's holding a small gift bag that has a curly silver ribbon dangling from the side.

I smile. "Mary, you didn't have to do this," I say, reaching out and taking the bag she's handing over.

She offers up a kind smile. "I just wanted to let you know how proud I am of you."

I reach into the small bag and my hand wraps around something hard and smooth. I pull it out to find an engraved glass plaque. It reads *Mason, Lawrence, and Howe Award of Excellence*.

My eyes double in size as I suck in a breath. "Is this real?"

She laughs and nods. “It is. Congratulations! You’ve worked so hard. You deserve it.” She reaches out and pulls me in for a hug.

“Thank you,” I breathe out, hugging the award to my chest.

“You’re more than welcome, dear. Now, you best be on your way if you want to be in that sexy man’s bed by tonight.”

I laugh. “I like the way you think, Mary.” I watch as she leaves my office, closing the door behind her.

I hold the award and admire it. I look around my office and move to hang it on the wall. I find the perfect spot: in the center, right behind my desk, so that everyone who enters will see it.

I stand back, admiring my handiwork, then snap a picture of it that I send to Drake. Immediately, he responds.

Good job, baby. I knew you could do it.

I smile from reading his words. I can’t wait to be in his arms. I grab my briefcase and head for the door. I step inside the elevator and bump into Gavin. He smiles when he sees me.

“Hey, congrats on the award. I knew it’d be you.” He slides his hands into his pockets.

“Thanks. I was totally surprised.” I push the button for the ground level.

“Back to Colorado?” He looks down at my briefcase.

“Yep, I’ll be gone for the next three months.”

“I don’t know how you do it.” He shakes his head. “Three months here and three months there? I mean, what’s there to do out in the countryside?”

I laugh and shrug. “Nothing, really. But it’s not about what there is to do. It’s who I’m with.”

He nods. “Ah, this mystery boyfriend. Am I ever going to meet the man who stole you away from me?”

I laugh. “One of these days.” The doors open and I exit. “See you in three months,” I call out behind me.

He holds up a hand and waves goodbye.



TWO HOURS LATER, I'm boarding my plane with only one thing in mind: Drake. I can't wait to surprise him. He knows the arrangement: three months in the city, three months with him in the country. However, he doesn't know I'm coming today. I've already rented my car from the airport—it'll be returned to a rental location tomorrow, but I didn't want to ruin the surprise by asking him to pick me up. Thanks to our iPhones, I'll be able to check his location and go straight to him instead of running all over to see if he's at home, the brewery, or the newly-built distillery. He's been spending more of his time at the distillery, wanting it up on its feet and running as smoothly as the brewery.

It's going on 5 p.m. when my plane lands. Perfect timing to have dinner together. As I grab my bags, I check the app that'll show me right where he is. I can see him traveling down the old dirt road that leads to his house. I slide the phone into my pocket and head for the rental counter. The drive from the airport to his house is a long one. Being anxious makes it feel even longer.



THE GRAVEL CRUNCHES under my tires as I finally roll to a stop at his place. I shift into park and shut off the engine. As I'm climbing out, the barn door rolls open and his tall frame is standing in the opening, the light shining from behind him. I can't see the look on his face, but I can tell he's happy by the way he quickly jogs toward me.

He pulls me against his chest and presses his lips to mine, his hands cupping my face. His warm lips move with mine as his hot tongue, which tastes of beer, takes what he craves.

“What are you doing here?” he whispers against my lips.

“I wanted to surprise you,” I reply, smiling as I look up into his dark eyes. “Are you surprised?”

“Pleasantly surprised,” he says, picking me up against him. My legs wrap around his hips as he carries me into the house. His hands tour my body, pushing clothes out of the way as they go. He lays me flat on the bed, standing over me as he removes his belt. His eyes are darkening, his body turning even more hard. He’s like a lion stalking his prey.

“I’m all yours for three whole months.” I smile up at him as he bends down and pulls my jeans from my legs in one swift motion.

“These last three months have been the hardest I’ve ever had, Celeste,” he says, coving my body with his. He picks up one of my legs behind the knee and presses a kiss to the inside. “When you have to go back, I’m going with you. I can’t live without you for a single day, let alone three months.” His mouth travels higher.

My brain is muddled by the way he’s making my body feel. “What about the distillery?” I ask, surprised I even managed to get the words out.

“In three months, it’ll be running itself just like the brewery. It’s time I got to living my life, and I don’t want to do that unless you’re by my side every single day.” His mouth closes around my clit, his tongue lashing against me.

My eyes flutter closed as my back arches with the intense pleasure. My lips part as I suck in a deep breath. All thoughts of the future stop. All I can think about is this moment, the way he touches me, and the way he loves me.

When my release rises, he doubles his pace until I’m withering beneath his strong body. My heart is pounding in my chest, and my breathing is erratic, as every nerve ending burns with desire. He climbs up my body and

positions himself at my entrance. “I want to spend every day of the rest of my life with you, Celeste. I thought I knew pain until I had to live without you by my side. I need you more than I need air in my lungs. Every breath without you hurts. Will you marry me so I never have to feel this pain again?”

Surprise shocks my body, but love warms my heart. I cup his face in my hands, locking my eyes with his. “Yes,” I answer.

The moment the word leaves my mouth, he pushes himself into me, claiming me as his forever. His mouth finds mine and he kisses me fiercely and passionately. With his hips rocking against me, his mouth taking mine, and this promise now between us, I feel full. A fullness I thought I’d always had, but now, I see how empty I was without him.

“I love you, Celeste,” he whispers against my lips as he pumps in and out of me.

“I love you, Drake,” I reply, a tear sliding down my cheek. But it’s not a tear of sadness. It’s a tear of happiness, a tear of fulfillment, a tear that holds a promise of forever for us.

I’ve never in my life felt a love as strong as his—never as sure and true.

I don’t know where we’ll settle, but I know thing for sure: wherever it is, we’ll be together.

If you LOVED *Billionaire’s Unexpected Bride*, make sure you check out ***Off Limits Daddy!***

**THE TEMPTING RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN BROODING, ALPHA
SINGLE DAD COLTON AND HIS OH SO INNOCENT NANNY
BRENNAN**

*Get ready for page-turning passion, a roller coaster of emotion and of course
and HEA!*

GRAB *Off Limits Daddy* HERE!

OFF LIMITS DADDY SNEAK PEEK

CHAPTER 1

RUNNING a hand through my hair, I take a deep breath and let it out slowly. Every muscle in my body is tense, sore, and tired. Emotionally, I'm fucking drained, stressed, and pissed. I don't know how many more nannies I can interview today. Every single one is either stupid, on drugs, or is some kind of hippy that believes rubbing a magical balm on a child's feet will cure them of cancer. I laugh at the stupidity and shake my head. I pick up my old, worn baseball cap and pull it back on low to cover my tired eyes. I rub my hands over my face and prepare for the last interview I have set up. Mentally, I pray that this one isn't crazy. I'm in dire need of a nanny. Celeste, my sister-in-law, isn't here full-time, so I can't count on her to babysit at the drop of a hat like I have been doing lately. Hell, if it wasn't for her, I wouldn't be doing these interviews right now. She was the one who set up the ad in the paper and sifted through the *hell no*'s before handing me this stack.

My phone chimes with a text and I pick it up. On the screen is a picture of Milly, my daughter. She's only two years old now, but she's wearing a pair of Celeste's high heels. She has bright red lipstick all over her face and a string of pearls around her neck that almost reaches the floor. She's wearing a big, proud smile as her blonde ringlets fall into her face. I chuckle to myself and set the phone down when a knock comes from the door.

With a deep breath, I stand and move to answer it. *Just get through this*

last interview, I tell myself. Maybe I should be looking into daycare rather than a nanny. I turn the knob and pull open the door. On the other side stands a girl that couldn't be any older than eighteen, if that. She's short, only coming up to my chin, and she's tiny—I bet I could bench press her. Surely, she doesn't weigh more than a hundred pounds. Her green eyes find mine and they're wide with fear. Her strawberry blonde hair is pulled away from her face and hanging down her back in soft curls. Her ivory skin is perfect, with freckles kissing her nose and cheeks. I almost expect to find her selling Girl Scout cookies.

“Can I help you?” I feel my brows pull together as I look her over again: long, shapely legs, narrow waist, and thin neck.

She holds out her hand. “I'm Brennan Crawford. I'm here for the nanny interview.” She offers up a sweet but nervous smile, showing me her perfectly straight, white teeth.

I look her up and down, confused. “Uh, if you don't mind me asking, how old are you?” I rub my hand over my scruffy jaw as I take her in.

Her hand falls back to her side. “Twenty-four. It should say that in my application.” She crosses her arms over her chest, causing her breasts to press together and giving me just a glimpse of cleavage. Her skin is like peaches and cream: smooth and milky.

“It did,” I agree with a nod. “It's just that you look much younger.” Fuck, I feel like I could be arrested just for checking her out.

Her smile is back in place. “I get that a lot. I'm tiny compared to most women my age and I'm not big on makeup.” She shrugs one shoulder. It's only now that I notice the natural beauty of her face. It's not covered in a thick, off-colored foundation. Her eyes aren't lined in a deep black. It appears she's only wearing a shiny lip gloss and maybe a touch of mascara.

Already, I'm wondering what the point of this interview is, but I know I have to go through with it. I mean, Child Protective Services will probably be called if the two of them go out in public alone together. The nosey

townspeople will think some worthless parent let his older kid babysit. I shake my head at the thought and open the door wider.

“Come on in,” I mumble, stepping back and allowing her to walk through.

She steps inside and as she walks past, I get a whiff of lavender, vanilla, and mint. The mixture is sweet and has my mouth almost watering. She sits in the nearest chair, and I take my place in front of her on the couch with the coffee table that’s littered with applications between us.

“So, tell me about yourself.” I lean back and cross my ankle over my knee, giving her my full attention. The corners of her plump lips turn upward. The dark pink of them seem even more vibrant compared to the creaminess of her skin. My eyes automatically lock on her lips and stay there.

She sits up straighter and clasps her hands together in her lap. “Well, I was born and raised here. After high school, I went to college as a piano performance.” She giggles. “I know, pretty useless, but I just love singing and playing piano. I was hoping to get a job as the music teacher here in town. However, I wasn’t given the position, which has led me here. I’m an only child, but I babysat in high school, so I have plenty of experience. I also have a long list of references if you want those.” She begins digging around in her purse and pulls out an envelope, handing it over.

I lean forward and take it but drop it onto the table to look over later. “And you’re aware that this job is full-time, correct? Monday through Friday, seven a.m. until five or six p.m.? You’re okay with that? It wouldn’t interfere with whatever it is a girl your age does?” I wave my hand in her direction.

Her eyes shoot daggers my way, a tiny wrinkle forming between her perfectly arched brows—apparently, I’ve offended her. “I’m not sure what you were trying to imply there, but I know the hours and I assure you that I’m up for it.” She squares her shoulders, causing her breasts to poke out a tiny bit more—yes, I notice—and she raises her chin in defiance.

She’s calling me out and a part of me likes it. A grin tugs at the corners of

my mouth but I hold it back. “I wasn’t trying to imply anything. It’s just that you’re young. I’m sure you have a full life already. I mean, friends, boyfriends, dates, and parties...” I think back to when I was her age and it was nothing but endless parties and fun.

She straightens her tight, white blouse. “All my friends already have full-time jobs, and I broke things off with my boyfriend when I moved back home. Right now, I just need a job so I can get out of my parents’ place. I’m a typical student that ended up back at home when college ended. I just want my own space, my own life.” Her green eyes focus on mine and I can see the desperation in them.

I nod. “Okay then. Tell me what you would do here. I’m looking for someone I can trust. Someone that will not only take care of my daughter, but will also take care of the house while I’m gone. I don’t want to work twelve hours a day and have to come home to cook and clean.”

She nods. “I’m more than willing to clean up while I’m here. In my previous babysitting jobs, I made all the meals. I cleaned the house, did the laundry, ran errands, and I always tried to have projects to do with the kids. I’m not a *‘here’s an iPad, leave me alone’* kind of babysitter. I do projects that help develop children’s motor skills and teaches them at the same time.”

I admit, on paper, she’s damn near perfect. However, she seems so innocent, so young. She can’t possibly know what she’s doing. She doesn’t have any children of her own. And my daughter is only two, so she needs constant attention. I know how young people are nowadays. They spend too much time on their phones and social media to pay attention to anything else. It feels like hiring her would be taking a chance with my daughter’s life.

“Would you be okay with random drug screenings?” This is the question that chased most of the others away. Even if they weren’t addicts, most of them liked to dabble in things once in a while. Her mouth drops open in surprise. “Um, sure,” she says, wrinkling her brow.

“I know it seems odd, but this is my daughter and I can never be too

careful. I don't allow drugs of any kind in my home. I don't allow people that I don't know to be around my daughter, which means no friends or boyfriends are to come over when you are here."

She nods and holds out her hands towards me, palms up. "I completely understand."

"One more thing: how do you know Celeste? She seemed to think you'd be perfect for this job."

She smiles. "She's my daddy's lawyer. She's always coming out to the farm for their meetings and she usually ends up staying for dinner. She's really sweet."

"Thank you for interviewing. I will call some of these references and will get back to you."

She offers up a smile, but it's not the same as before. Standing up, she holds out her hand. I finally reach forward and shake it. The moment I touch that soft skin of hers, my hand burns and tingles. The numbness moves up my arm, drops down to my stomach, and then shoots to my groin. My dick twitches with excitement.

"I'll show myself out," she says, spinning and heading for the door.

When it closes and I'm alone, my head falls forward. "What the fuck was that shit?" I ask my man parts. They don't respond—not that I expected them to—and I let out a long breath as I throw myself back on the couch. I close my eyes as I try to release the stress built up inside of me. My body's reaction to her touch confuses me. It's been nearly two years since my wife's passing, and I haven't been with a woman since. I haven't even thought about having sex with another woman. The only woman I've ever loved, the only woman I've ever wanted, is gone. I've vowed to never move on in any way whatsoever. When a need in my body arises, I take care of it myself. Sure, I miss being intimate. I miss the soft touch of a woman. I miss that overwhelming feeling that consumes me when I slide into her, but I know it will never be the same with any other woman.

There's no use in trying.

And I know one other thing: Brennan Crawford will not get this job. No way. No how.

I grab my keys and head for the door. Climbing behind the wheel, I start toward Drake's. Twenty minutes later, I'm pulling into the gravel driveway, dust floating around the old truck.

I climb out and Drake steps out of the barn. "What's up?" he asks, motioning toward the barn.

I follow him in and he hands me a beer. I sit it aside. "How was Milly?"

He nods. "Good. She's always good, and Celeste loves watching her."

"You two need to get busy and make one of your own," I reply.

He laughs. "Nah, it's not the time for us yet. There's no way I could raise a child by myself every three months. And I don't want to make things harder for Celeste. She's traveling too much to handle a pregnancy and a baby right now."

"So marry her already and move her in full-time." Seems like the perfect idea. Then I wouldn't have to worry about this nanny nonsense.

"We're just not there yet. I mean, I love her, she knows that, and I'd love to marry her, but now isn't the time. We're still all over the place. She's traveling every three months, and when she leaves again, I'm planning on going with her."

"You? In California?" I can't hold back my laughter.

He chuckles. "I know. Seems fucked up, right?" He shakes his head. "I don't know what the hell I'll do there, but I can't live without her. I can't go three months without seeing her, touching her. So, until she makes up her mind on where she sees our future, we'll be going back and forth."

"Wait, you're letting her decide where you end up?"

He nods. "That's right. I don't care if I'm here or there, as long as she's with me. If she wants a city life, that's what we'll have. If she decides she wants a quiet country life, we'll be here."

I shake my head. “You got it bad.”

He laughs. “Come on. Let’s go see how those girls of ours are doing.” He wraps his arm around my shoulders and leads me toward the house. A part of me envies him. I want that life again. A life where my wife is alive. A life where my daughter has her mother. A life where I’m actually happy. It’ll never happen. I might as well not even think of it. It will only make me feel twice as worse as I already do.

CHAPTER 2

“**H**OW'D the interview go?” my mom asks when I walk back into the house.

I drop my purse onto the counter and pour myself a cup of coffee. I let out a long breath. “Not very good,” I answer. “Something seemed off about it.”

“What do you mean?” she asks, pulling out a chair and sitting at the table. She pats the space across from her, wanting me to sit with her.

I take my cup across the room and seat myself in front of her. “I don't know exactly. It just felt weird, you know? It felt like he didn't want me to have the job. He said things like, *‘are you sure a full-time job can fit in your schedule of friends, boyfriends, and parties?’*”

Mom giggles. “I mean, it is strange that a woman of your age wants to take a job as a nanny. That's usually something women my age do to make a little money on the side of their social security.” She flashes me a smile.

I shrug. “I mean, I guess. But it's not like this town has a whole lot of options. The job I wanted didn't want me. And I refuse to get a job making minimum wage at the grocery store. I'm a college-educated woman. I just want to be able to afford my own place.”

“Well, honey, it's probably for the best. You know how your daddy feels about the Slade family anyhow.”

I roll my eyes. I know how everyone in this town feels about the Slade family.

“You know, there is an opening at my doctor’s office. The receptionist quit last week to stay home and take care of her sick mother.”

I guess that would be fine. “Can I apply online?” I ask, suddenly full of hope again.

“I believe so. Why don’t you go check it out while I get started on supper?”

I take my cup of coffee into my room and sit at my desk. As I’m pulling up the website, my phone rings. It’s Celeste.

“How’d it go? Did you get the job?” Her voice is full of excitement. I hear a child squealing in the background.

“I’m pretty sure he hated me,” I answer.

She sucks in a loud breath. “What? No way! Why do you think that?”

I tell her about the interview, but she blows off my worries. “Trust me, that is just Colton. You’re his only option. I saw the rest of those applications. Milly, no, no. Don’t jump on the couch like that. You’ll fall and get hurt.”

I press my lips together. “Ummm, I don’t know, Celeste. I don’t know if I even want the job now. He’s kind of an ass. I mean, it’s natural to be protective of your kid, but the things he said, the way he said it... And I just found out that the doctor’s office is hiring.”

“No! Please, take this job, Brennan. You’re the best person for Milly. I just know it.” There’s a lot of background noise. It sounds like she’s wrestling a bear.

“He hasn’t even offered me the position yet,” I point out. “And I doubt he will.”

“He will. I know he will,” Celeste says, sounding very sure of herself.

“I don’t know, Celeste. I’ll have to think about it. I’m not sure he liked me very much, and I don’t want a job that makes me feel uncomfortable every day.”

“Trust me, Brennan. This is the perfect job for you.”

“I’ll talk to you later.” I hang up the phone without another word. I close my laptop and move to lay down on the bed. My eyes flutter closed, and I see Colton. I see his chocolatey brown eyes as they focus on mine. I see his dark hair that he had pulled back into the smallest ponytail I’ve ever seen with a dirty cap on his head. I can see his thick, tanned, tattooed arms and that scruffy beard on his face. He’s a big man, and he looks just as intimidating as he sounds. I can see the hate his eyes hold—for me or for life in general, I’m not sure, but it’s there and easy to notice. The way he looked at me when he opened the door steals the air from my lungs and causes my heart to pound in my chest, but I’m not sure why. Everything about him is exciting and confusing all at the same time.

“Brennan, looks like you got some company, hun,” my mom calls out, snapping me out of my thoughts.

I sit up and push myself to my feet, wondering who it could be. I walk through the house and to the back door. Standing on the back porch, I look toward the big red barn and toward the driveway where a familiar blue car sits. My shoulders fall when Nate climbs out.

I cross my arms over my chest and head in his direction.

He smiles wide. “Hey, babe.”

“What are you doing here, Nate?” I ask, looking up as he towers over me.

“I missed you,” he says, hands finding my hips as he pulls me to his chest.

My eyes flash to the kitchen window that I’m sure my mama is looking out of right now. I take his hand in mine and lead him into the barn for some privacy.

“Nate, we broke up. You shouldn’t be here,” I tell him, turning to face him.

“I know, but I missed you. And the only reason we broke up was because of the distance.”

“The distance is still there,” I remind him. “Unless they’ve moved

Montana closer and nobody told me.”

He pulls me to his chest again, his lips finding mine. At first, I feel nothing. Things are over between us. I haven't seen him since we left college two months ago. We've talked on the phone a few times, but without the physical contact, feelings drifted away quickly for me. But as his tongue moves with mine, something inside of me comes alive. His hands squeeze my hips and move around to my ass. Something happens in my head because, suddenly, it's not Nate I'm kissing. It's him, the stranger I met today, the one that looked at me with hate and annoyance. The one I shouldn't be thinking about but am.

“Whose car is that?” my dad says, causing me to push Nate away.

“Come on.” I take Nate's hand and lead him back outside. My dad is getting ready to step into the barn.

“Dad, this is Nate, a friend from school. Nate, this is my dad.”

“Nice to meet you, sir,” Nate says, shaking my dad's hand.

Dad grunts but shakes his hand anyway. “Friend, you say?” He starts pulling off his work gloves, shoving them into his back pocket.

Nate's eyes flash to mine and then back to my dad. “Well, sir, to be totally honest, Brennan and I dated. We were together for the last year. We only broke up because school was over and we both had to go back home.”

I feel my shoulders slump. I never mentioned to my parents that I had been dating anyone. My family is very traditional. They would've insisted on meeting him. Nate and I aren't destined to be together, so I didn't feel the need to mention him.

“And where exactly are you from?” Dad asks.

“Montana, sir,” Nate answers, straightening his back as he slides his hands into his jean pockets.

“Montana? So you're a country man?” Daddy inquires, squinting his dark eyes in his direction.

Nate nods. “My family has had a cattle ranch for the last hundred years—

passed down from generation to generation. So, yeah, I know a thing or two about the country life.” Nate’s smile widens.

Dad looks at me. “He seems like a good man, Bre. Why didn’t you ever tell us about him?”

I shrug as I move my hands behind my back and clasp them together. “It just never came up. It wasn’t anything serious.”

“Bre, come and help me with dinner, will ya?” Mom yells out.

I glance from the back door where she’s standing to Nate and back. “I should get going. How long are you going to be in town?” I ask him, confused by the fact that he’s here to begin with.

“Actually, I was hoping to talk to you a little more.” Nate nods towards me.

Dad nods his head toward Mom. “Go on in and help with dinner. Nate here can help me in the garage and stay for supper. That is, if it’s okay with you?” Dad asks him.

Nate smiles and nods. “Yes, sir.”

I don’t bother saying anything. There’s no arguing with my father. I walk into the house and find Mom standing in front of the stove, frying some chicken.

“What do you need help with, Mama?”

“I need you to wash your hands and get busy on that pie.”

I look at the island and see the pie crust sitting empty with at least a dozen apples setting nearby ready to be peeled and sliced.

I’m really not feeling up to making a homemade apple pie from scratch, but again, there’s no use in arguing.

An hour and a half later, the four of us are sitting around the dinner table. Fried chicken, mashed potatoes with gravy, homemade buttermilk biscuits, and garden-grown green beans adorn the center of the table.

Nate rubs his hands together. “This all looks and smells delicious, Mrs. Crawford.” He gives my mom that same flirty smile that got me to agree to

our first date.

Mom's cheeks turn pink and she giggles. "Thank you, Nathan. It is alright if I call you Nathan, isn't it?"

He nods. "Yes, ma'am."

Mama says a quick prayer and Daddy picks up the potatoes, giving himself a healthy serving before passing the bowl.

"So, what brings you around these parts, Nathan?" Mom asks, taking a biscuit and passing the basket.

Nate looks up at her with a shy smile. "Well, Brennan does, ma'am." His eyes flash to me and his cheeks flush. I know it's all a ploy, but my mom falls for it, hook, line, and sinker. "I was hoping that she'd take me back. I'm more than willing to relocate. I just gotta find a place to stay and a steady job."

"Isn't that wonderful?" Mom says around a wide smile, looking at me.

I pick up my biscuit and take a bite, so my mouth is too full to answer her. In all honesty, I wanted to move on from Nate. He wasn't exactly the best for me. This little act he's putting on for my parents is the same act I fell for time and time again. But deep down, I know that's all it is: an act. This isn't him. He's mean, verbally abusive, and always pushed me for sex. Being twenty-four and living out on my own, you'd think sex would be normal for me. However, my V-card is still intact. While I've done plenty of other things with him and a couple other guys, I've never gone all the way.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not the type of girl that feels that her virginity is special and is only meant for the man she's going to marry. I just never felt a strong enough connection with anyone to want to go all the way with them. Out of all the guys I've dated, Nate came the closest...until he showed me his true colors. One night in particular, we'd gone to a party. He got a little too wasted, and when I tried to pull away, he got angry. He called me a tease, said that there wasn't anything special about me, and that he could get what he wanted from any other girl on campus. His words hurt, but I blamed it on the alcohol. Since then, I've tried pushing him away and keeping him at

arm's length, but he's always managed to weasel his way back in. I thought moving back home would put an end to it, but now, here he is again.

I stand up quickly, so quick the chair skids across the hardwood floor. "Please excuse us," I say, grabbing Nate's hand and pulling him toward the door.

I walk down the porch steps and into the yard with him following along behind me. When I turn around, I'm surprised to find him pulling me against his chest.

"Finally, we can be alone," he whispers, moving his mouth to mine.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alexis Winter is a contemporary romance author who loves to share her steamy stories with the world. She specializes in billionaires, alpha males and the women they love.

If you love to curl up with a good romance book you will certainly enjoy her work. Whether it's a story about an innocent young woman learning about the world or a sassy and fierce heroin who knows what she wants you,'re sure to enjoy the happily ever afters she provides.

When Alexis isn't writing away furiously, you can find her exploring the Rocky Mountains, traveling, enjoying a glass of wine or petting a cat.

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