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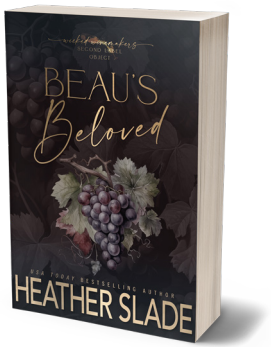
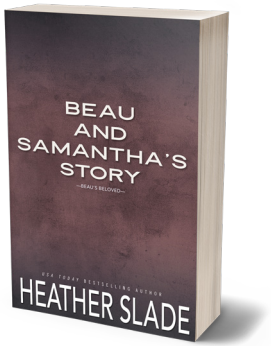
SHAMELESSLY SEXY EDGE-OF-YOUR SEAT ROMANTIC SUSPENSE





Beau's Beloved

Book One in the Wicked Winemaker Second Label Series

He's a billionaire afraid to open his heart.
She's a woman who believes she has no one.
Together, they'll find that the greatest inheritance is love.

BEAU

As a wealthy vineyard owner, I thought I had it all figured out. But when Sam called for help with a mysterious inheritance, everything changed. Her determination to uncover the truth about her family captivated me from the start. As we delve deeper into the secrets of the Lilacs, I find myself falling for her—hard. But our journey is far from over, and the dangers we face are unlike anything I expected. With Sam's life threatened and a family legacy to protect, I have to stay focused. Little did I know, our greatest challenge would come from confronting our own fears and insecurities, testing not only our skills as vintners but also the strength of our growing love.

SAM

I came to New York to solve the mystery of an inheritance I never expected. What I didn't anticipate was finding a partner in Beau—someone who saw beyond my humble beginnings and recognized my true potential. As we unravel the dark secrets of my family's past, I am forced to confront truths I never knew existed. With each revelation, the stakes grow higher, and our enemies more dangerous. But Beau stands by my side, his unwavering support giving me strength I never knew I had. Together, we face impossible odds, risking everything to claim my rightful legacy. In the midst of uncovering my roots, I discover not just my purpose, but also a love I never thought possible.

1

Sam

"What in the world?" I muttered when, less than five minutes after I fluffed my pillow and climbed into bed, I heard a loud knock at my door. Several knocks, in fact. Actually, more like pounding.

I picked up the fancy cast-iron omelet pan I'd been given as a gift but hadn't used once, except as a weapon. Not that I'd used it for that, either.

"Go away, or I'll call the cops," I shouted.

"Sam, it's me. Open the door. It's bloody cold out here."

"Argh," I growled. I set the pan down, then momentarily reconsidered. If I did hit Beau with it, maybe he'd learn not to show up again in the middle of the night.

I should tell him I was already in bed, but that wouldn't deter him. Maybe if I said I was sick. No, that wouldn't thwart him, either.

Under normal circumstances, I'd consider following through with my threat and actually call the local sheriff. However, Beau's mother had died a few days ago—on Christmas—and, according to him, he needed his best friend. *Me.*

More likely, I was the only friend who would let him in after midnight; therefore, I'd been promoted to "best" status. If only it came with a salary. Then everything I put up with might be worth it.

I looked up at the ceiling. "I didn't mean that," I said in case there was a high power who'd read my thoughts.

"Sam? Open the door!"

I scowled, flipped the deadbolt, and unlocked the rest of the devices I'd felt necessary to install as a woman living alone.

"Hi, Beau," I sighed as much as said when he swept past me.

"Who were you talking to?" He looked around my one-room-plus-kitchen-and-bath apartment, then back at me.

"No one," I snapped. "I was in bed. *Asleep.*"

Most people would apologize for waking me. Not Beau, though. Instead, he asked me if I wanted anything to drink after he'd gone into my kitchen to look for something for himself.

There should be a picture of him in the dictionary next to the word "entitled." Maybe I'd draw one in and show it to him.

"Did you not hear me say I was in bed?" I motioned to where Wanda, my cat, lay snuggled in the blankets like I wished I was.

He pulled one of the two stools sitting near the kitchen counter out and took a seat, then motioned to the other. When I bought them, I'd thought long and hard about purchasing more than one, especially with how expensive they were. At the time, I told myself I might have visitors occasionally, so why not splurge? Now, I regretted it.

Rather than sitting on the bed, which would only make me want to crawl under the covers more than I was already longing to, I sat next to him.

Space was tight, so he shifted my stool until I faced him, then put his long legs on either side of mine.

He held out the glass of wine he'd poured. "You didn't answer when I asked if you wanted some. We can share."

"No, thanks." I covered my mouth when I yawned. Maybe I shouldn't have. Why be polite when he never was? "I'm really tired, Beau."

"Sleep," he said, motioning to the pull-out couch that served as my bed.

"I will as soon as you leave."

"It wouldn't be the first time you've nodded off when I was here."

"Why *are* you here, Beau?"

The playful look that had been on his face since he walked in quickly morphed into one of sadness. "Can't sleep."

I got it. I really did. In the weeks following my mom's death, I hadn't been able to sleep, either.

"We could watch a movie," I offered.

"You wouldn't mind?"

I shook my head and rolled my eyes. "As if it would make a difference if I said I did."

"What shall we watch?" he asked, grabbing the remote for the flat-screen television he'd purchased then mounted on the wall for me. Actually, it was more for him since I almost never watched it unless he was here.

"You pick," I said like I always did.

While he flipped through the channels, I fluffed my pillow, stretched my arms over my head, then got in bed and pulled the sheet and blanket up to my chin. I rolled to my side and wrapped my arms around Wanda as if she were a pillow. A heated one.

It was always cold at this time of year, more so close to the ocean. I lived a mile away from it, not in one of the grand mansions dotting the shoreline. My apartment was smaller than one room in houses like that, but it was mine—as long as I paid the rent every month—and I loved it.

After I was settled, Beau kicked off his shoes, walked over, straightened the blanket on the other side of the bed, propped up two pillows, and sat down.

"Are you asleep already?" he asked, peering over my shoulder since my back was to him.

"Yes."

He sighed. "I'm a wanker for doing this to you, aren't I?" he ventured, overexaggerating his English accent.

"Yes," I repeated.

"If you really want me to leave, I will."

"Good night, Beau."

I got up once in the night to use the bathroom. The TV was still on, and he was in the same position, sitting up, but sound asleep. I covered him with the extra blanket I kept at the end of the bed for occasions like this and went back to sleep. The next time I woke, shortly after dawn, he was gone.

Rather than getting out of bed, I snuggled the cat, my sole companion when I wasn't at work. I'd heard her meowing at the back door of the wine bar where I worked and had gone out to give her some scraps from the kitchen. When she purred and wrapped herself around my leg, I fell in love.

It had been two years, almost to the day, since I brought the kitten home. I was grateful for her company, especially now that my best friend had married and lived in Mexico the majority of the year. I didn't mind being alone, though. It was exponentially better than dealing with roommates like I'd been forced to do for most of my adult life.

Once my boss promoted me to manager and gave me a raise, I decided to finally get a place of my own. Most of my income went to rent, but it was worth it.

When Wanda shifted out of my reach, I closed my eyes, hoping to catch another few hours of sleep since I had the day off. Normally, I was lucky if I got six or seven in.

This time of year was when I banked as much rest as possible. Stave, the wine bar and tasting room where I worked, was closed from Christmas Eve until the middle of January, so I still had fourteen days before I'd have

to get back to what was beginning to seem like a daily grind. I hoped after some time away, I wouldn't still feel that way.

"Not again," I growled when I heard another knock at the door. I jumped up to answer it, not bothering to grab my robe in my haste to give Beauregard Barrett—the most inconsiderate human alive—a piece of my mind.

Instead, I came face-to-face with a man in a uniform. "Samantha Marquez?"

"That's me."

"I need you to sign for this."

Once I had, he gave me a large envelope. The minute he placed it in my hands, a feeling of dread swept over me as if whatever was inside was about to change my life—and not for the better.

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