

DAY ONE

Noelle

It's more run-down than I remember. And maybe a bit smaller. Pops and Nana's house—a three bedroom, one and a half bath bungalow—was always my favorite place to visit as a child.

Now it's mine.

I shut my eyes and offer up a silent prayer of gratitude for the gift they left me, and the wonderful memories of the time I spent with them here, running through the backyard with my two cousins, gobbling up Nana's coconut chocolate chip cookies, sitting near the fireplace in the living room to listen to Pops tell amazing stories, most of which I now know were made up. Doesn't matter. I cherish them regardless.

Getting out of my car, I swing my purse over my shoulder and plant my feet on the gravel driveway, trying not to let the sight of missing roof shingles and peeling paint discourage me.

There's a lot of work to do.

Good thing the local contractor is available for the next several weeks. During that time, I'll search for a job in town, or somewhere nearby.

I glance at my watch. Mr Garland should be here to meet me any minute. We've already hashed out a game plan over email and video chat, but I wanted to be here when he and his crew officially got started. I'm a hands-on kinda gal. I've already told Mr Garland I'll be stopping by regularly. He didn't seem thrilled by the idea, but since I'm paying for everything, he doesn't have to like it.

Renovations aren't cheap, but my grandparents graciously left me more than just my new home. Those two lovable rascals never told anyone about the substantial nest egg they'd been saving for sixty-two years. A whopping five million dollars, which was evenly split amongst me, my two younger cousins—Brent and Harper—and their mother, my Aunt Helen (who is still a bit miffed that I got the house). Yep. Noelle Genevieve

Beaumont, twenty-two years young, is a millionaire. Well, not for long, since a bunch of that money is about to be spent on this renovation. I've got Mr Garland's first check burning a hole in my purse.

Yet, I'd trade it all to see Nana and Pops again. I have so many regrets...

The sound of tires on gravel signals the arrival of the reno crew. Two massive trucks, the beds filled with supplies, park to the side of my sedan, and four burly men emerge. One I recognize as Mr Garland.

The next hour is spent reviewing a few things about the plan, including two minor changes that Mr Garland reluctantly agrees to.

I go through the house once more, double-checking that everything worth keeping or donating has been removed—I rented a storage unit in town for my own stuff, as well as anything else I plan to keep. Satisfied, I head outside, letting Mr Garland know I plan to return later in the afternoon.

Getting back in my car, I head to the address already programmed into my GPS. The Blue Spruce B&B. My home for the next seven days while the bungalow is made livable. I'm second-guessing my plan to live there while the reno is still on-going, but decide to worry about it later.

It's only a ten minute drive to the B&B, which is the main reason I picked it. All other accommodations around here were too far from my reno project. Little Silverton has grown since the last time I was here, but the ice cream shop and library are still the same. I plan to visit both sometime today after I get settled. For a still-grieving soul, there are few things a hot fudge sundae can't fix.

I pull into a parking space in front of a lovely Victorian-style building, which my helpful GPS's monotone voice announces is my destination. My eyes shift to the surrounding trees, most of which are blue spruces. Hence the name of the B&B. The scene is perfectly picturesque, like something I've seen on a postcard somewhere. I furrow my brows. *Have I seen it somewhere?*

Shaking my head, I glance at the house next door—a more simple rambler—which seems to be on the same property. I assume it belongs to the proprietors of the B&B. The Turner family.

I pop my trunk, haul out my suitcase and travel bag, and begin the trek up the flower-lined walkway leading to the front door of the Victorian. I pause, wondering if I should knock or let myself in. Before I can decide, the door bursts open. I stumble back, tripping over my suitcase. I tense up, anticipating the feel of hard concrete meeting my backside. A large hand snatches my wrist and pulls me forward, directly into a broad chest. The scent of citrus and cinnamon envelopes me.

“I’m so sorry,” says a deliciously deep voice. A second large hand grasps my other arm to steady me, guiding me back into an upright position. After a few blinks to compose myself, I get a first look at my surprise rescuer.

And I promptly forget how to breathe. And think. All I can do is stare at the gorgeous, dark-haired, green-eyed, exceptionally well-made man standing before me. His warm hands are still holding my wrist and arm. *Inhale, Noelle, before you pass out.* I squeak in a breath. Great. I sound like a chipmunk. And I’m staring. If I’m drooling as well, I should just turn around and head back to my car.

“Are you all right?”

He’s speaking again. I nod. At least some part of me is working. “I’m Noelle,” I say, cringing at the abnormally high pitch of my voice.

He smiles, and I almost whimper at the magnificence. Not fair. “I’m Gavin,” he says, finally letting me go. Also not fair. “Are you a guest?”

“Yes,” I say with a mental shake, forcing myself to rejoin the Land of Coherence. “I have a reservation for a room.” Smooth. Real smooth.

“Great. Let’s get you situated.”

“You work here?” Oh, brother, I’m being really impressive, right?

His smile falters. “For now. My parents own the place. I’m just here helping out.” He leans around me just far enough to take hold of my

suitcase, and I get another whiff of his scent. Wow. I follow him inside. I think I might follow him anywhere.

No, you won't, I scold myself. He's a stranger. And I'm not looking for a new relationship. Not after Declan. Just thinking about that awful human makes the hair on my arms prickle.

We stop at a mahogany desk in the foyer, where Gavin takes a seat in front of an open laptop. He types and clicks for a moment. "Here we are. Noelle Beaumont, seven night stay." After another few clicks, he looks up at me. "You'll be in the Gold Room on the second floor. We serve breakfast and dinner. Meal times and menus will be posted inside your room. For lunches, you can head downtown. You'll find two cafés—Hot Spot and Silver Star—as well as Ida's Diner, and The Sweet Treat Bakery—which happens to belong to my sister, Sabrina. Or Martin's Grocery will have pretty much anything you'd need. You're welcome to use the kitchen here."

"Thank you," I say, trying to pack all that info into my still-numb brain.

He nods. "If you have any questions or need anything at all, please don't hesitate to ask."

"Sunset."

His brows furrow. "Pardon me?"

Geez, if I can't get it together... "Where is the best place to watch the sunset?"

"Ah," he says, his smile returning. "There's a bit of a pond out back, which captures a nice reflection. At this time of year, I'd say eight-thirty is your best bet if you want a full show."

An invitation for him to join me is burning the tip of my tongue, but I hold it back. No need to mar his already less-than-stellar opinion of me. "Sounds great." Several seconds pass as we stare at each other, until he clears his throat and gets to his feet.

"I'll show you to your room."

Gavin

My palms are slick, making my hold on the suitcase precarious as I haul it upstairs. Two reasons.

First, I lied.

Miss Beaumont's reserved room is *not* the Gold Room, our finest. She is supposed to be in the Teal Room, but there's no way I'm putting her in our smallest, most out-of-the-way corner. Luckily, the Gold is vacant during her stay, so switching her over was no problem. No need to mention the upgrade, or the price difference. If anyone notices, I'll blame it on a computer glitch.

Second, Miss Beaumont—Noelle—is without a doubt the most beautiful woman I've ever seen. Even her name is exquisite. And she smells like vanilla ice cream. I'm only a little ashamed to admit I inhaled deeply when she was pressed against my chest as I held her on the porch. It wasn't a full embrace, sadly, but I can imagine what that would be like. And I imagine it, all right.

Which is a total mistake, since my wandering mind miscounts the number of steps in front of me and I trip, pulling the suitcase down with me. Luckily, I only fall to one knee.

"Oh my, are you okay?"

I feel the warmth of a small hand on my shoulder, and even more warmth circulating through my stupid face. "I'm fine," I say without looking at her. I get to my feet, yanking the handle of the suitcase a little too hard. The next instant, it shifts slightly to one side, and I see one of its wheels roll merrily ahead. I stare at it. Did I just break-

Noelle starts laughing, and nothing else matters anymore. The sound is clear and musical, and I could listen to it all day. I turn to look at her as she doubles over, hands on thighs. I can't help but join in. We both wipe at our

eyes; they lock together as we straighten up again. Dark chocolate truffles. That's what hers remind me of.

"I'll fix that," I say, pointing at the rogue wheel now at rest down the hall, "or pay to have it replaced."

She shakes her head, making her caramel curls bounce. Hmm, chocolate and caramel are a fantastic combination. If you add her vanilla perfume, she'd be the perfect sundae. "No need," she says. "It was on it's last legs anyway. I have another one in storage."

She smiles, and the little dimple on her left cheek is begging to be touched. Or kissed. Dang it. Pull yourself together, man. "If you're sure," I say, collecting my pride where I must have dropped it when I stumbled. I continue down the hall and stop at the last door. I remove the correct key from my pocket, jam it in the lock, and reveal the room to her, eager to see her reaction.

She doesn't disappoint.

Her eyes widen as she steps over the threshold; her gasp of amazement sends a shiver up my back. What else can I surprise her with? Setting her bag down, she spins in place, taking it all in—the four-poster bed with a tufted headboard, the ornate sofa, the gilded mirror and picture frames, the plush carpet and Persian rug—all of which have more than a few hints of gold. Just wait until she sees the jacuzzi tub with gold fixtures in the *en suite*. It wouldn't be appropriate to follow her in there, so I'll just have to be content with what I've gotten.

"This is perfect," she says quietly, facing me again. Her expression becomes more serious. "A little too perfect. The price I paid...well, it doesn't seem to fit this place."

Uh-oh. I could spin another lie, but I'm already having trouble being comfortable with the first one. I'm an honest person, usually. "I, um, gave you an upgrade."

Her eyes become dull and her hands fidget together. "I see. And you're expecting...something in return?"

I don't like the question, but I *especially* don't like how she's completely closed herself off. Did someone else try to...? I suddenly feel like punching something. Or *someone*. "Absolutely not," I say firmly. "If you're uncomfortable with the arrangement, I'll take you to your original room. I'm sorry if you thought anything improper was being implied." I take a step back for good measure.

"Then why?"

Another difficult question. One with an answer hardly better than what she was just thinking, even though I'd never allow my attraction to her to overstep such a boundary. I am not *that* kind of guy. "Because I want your stay here to be the best I can make it." There. All true. Now, if she suddenly asks what makes her so special to receive such attention, I might have to flee from the room.

Several seconds pass before she relaxes again, though only a little. "All right. Thank you."

I breathe out in relief. Setting the key on the small table near the door, I back out of the room. "I hope to see you around, Miss Beaumont."

"Noelle," she says, a slight smile pulling on the corners of her mouth.

She has a lovely mouth.

"Noelle," I repeat with a nod as I shut the door. Feeling oddly drained, I rest my forehead against the nearest wall. Let's hope I can make it through the next six days without making a complete fool of myself. I barely escaped this time around.

Someone calls my name from somewhere downstairs. I cast one last glance at the door separating me from the beautiful Noelle in the Gold Room before turning away.

Noelle

He isn't Declan. I tell myself that for at least the hundredth time as I leave the room, having spent the last half hour unpacking. If I run into him on my way out, I'll smile, maybe wave, but I won't stop to talk, even if I want to. I can't believe I insinuated such a thing after he told me about my room upgrade. I'm lucky he didn't take offense and kick me out.

He isn't Declan.

I keep my footsteps quiet as I descend the stairs and walk to the front door. I want ice cream and a good book. Maybe some lunch as well. Or just two scoops in a waffle cone. If I remember right, the ice cream shop makes their cones in-house.

"Hey, you must be the newest arrival!"

I wince as my hand falls away from the doorknob. Busted. The voice doesn't belong to Gavin. Pity. No, *relief*. At least, that's what I tell myself.

Turning around, I find a pretty brunette, with a cute pixie cut and eyes nearly identical to Gavin's, smiling at me. They could almost be twins, though she's clearly a few years younger. She must be the sister he mentioned. I can't remember what else he said about her. Yeah, because I was too busy ogling him.

"I'm Sabrina," she says, striding forward, an empty basket swinging in her hand.

The distinct smell of bread and other pastries wafts off her. That's right. She owns a bakery. "I'm Noelle." We shake hands.

"I was just dropping off some croissants for tonight's dinner," she says, lifting the basket. "Are you on your way out?"

I nod, telling her about my plans in town.

"I assume you mean Franny's ice cream," she says with a grin. "She's not only the best in Silverton, but the whole county."

"No argument here. I used to go there with my grandparents when I came to visit as a kid." I hesitate. "Did you know Libby and Rex Munsen?"

Sabrina's eyes widen. "The Munsens were your grandparents?"

"Yes." A sizable lump fills my throat.

Setting the basket down, Sabrina envelopes me with her slender, yet strong, arms. It must take a lot of muscle to knead bread dough every day. But my thoughts are on how *nice* it feels. I haven't had a heartfelt hug since...well, the last time I was here visiting Pops and Nana. Almost three years ago. They always gave the best hugs. Tears prickle behind my eyes. Has it really been that long? Declan was never one to show affection. He was too busy yelling and blaming...

Sabrina pulls away, looking apologetic, but not embarrassed. "Sorry if that made you uncomfortable. I'm a hugger, and I know not everyone is."

I shake my head. "It was fine. Thank you."

"The Munsens were good people," she says, retrieving the basket. "If you stop by my bakery sometime, I'll give you their favorite order. On the house."

We walk out together and head to our cars, waving goodbye. I like her. Which isn't a shock since I already like her brother. I frown as I strap on my seatbelt. I like Gavin? Heat crawls up my neck. I barely know him. But would getting to know him be so bad?

Ice cream consumed; check.

Library books checked out; double check.

I even got a library card, since I'm a soon-to-be resident of Silverton. Mrs Fulster, the librarian, had good things to say about my grandparents. I have a feeling I'll be hearing more good things in the days to come.

I make my way to the reno to see how things are progressing. Mr Garland and his crew are not there when I pull up. Must be on their lunch break. Half of the roof has already been replaced and there's a large dumpster out front, laden with discarded shingles and busted sheetrock. I hesitate to go inside, not sure if I want to see the demo stage. I ultimately decide to wait until they've started installing. I send a quick text to Mr

Garland, thanking him for his hard work so far, and then direct my car back to the B&B.

The rest of the day flies by with nothing too eventful, good or bad, though I try to ignore the pang of disappointment of not seeing Gavin again until I head down to dinner. Yes, I looked for him once or twice as I wandered the community spaces of the B&B and the pristine grounds outside. Either my luck was just terrible—very possible—or he’s avoiding me. The latter shouldn’t matter, since I’m not here for a man, but even a bruised heart longs for acceptance.

Dinner is a buffet-style soup and salad bar, allowing us to move about freely. I catch Gavin’s eye a few times, but neither of us make the effort to speak to each other. He’s clearly busy, and I’m too nervous to do anything other than look. I’m not ready for anything more, and might never be.

The meal is delicious, especially Sabrina’s croissants. I’m eager to try more of her goods. The other guests—a trio of widows, who obviously like to see which of them can talk the most—fill the evening with harmless gossip and laughter. I’m content to sit out of the way and listen. And steal more glances at Gavin. I really should stop.

Just before eight-thirty, I head outside to the pond in the backyard, a wool cardigan wrapped around my shoulders. The early fall temperatures aren’t yet cold, but when the sun is gone, there will be a chill. I slow my steps as I see someone placing a chair at the edge of the water.

Gavin.

With that gesture alone, a tiny crack finds its way into the protective wall around my heart, and warmth spreads through me. Is simple kindness all it takes? It’s been so long.

He turns, the fading light giving his face an ethereal glow. I’m really trying not to stare, but he’s just so handsome. And thoughtful. Two things a girl could really get used to. Even if said girl isn’t looking for such things. I’m not, right? He runs a hand through his dark hair; my pulse races. “I hope you don’t mind,” he says, tapping the back of the chair.

I shake my head. “Thank you. That was kind.” Again, I have an urge to invite him to stay with me, but I refrain. Not tonight. Am I leaving the door open for later? I think I am, which is more than a little scary for me.

“Well, I hope you enjoy our sunset,” he says with a wink.

I can’t help but laugh. “I’m sure I will.”

“Goodnight, Noelle.”

“Goodnight.” I watch him return to the B&B; he glances back before disappearing inside. With him gone, it’s easier to focus on why I came out here. Well, *somewhat* easier.

I sit in the chair, taking in the splendor of the colors painted in the sky. Gavin was right. The reflection on the pond is glorious. Again, I have the feeling I’ve seen this setting before—that I’ve run along this exact embankment. Another postcard moment? Maybe my grandparents brought me here during one of my visits? I let out a long sigh.

“I’m here, Pops and Nana,” I whisper. “It’s the same sun, the same sky, but it’s not the same without you.” I don’t bother wiping away the tears sliding down my cheeks. I can’t count the number of sunsets I watched with them over the years. After they passed, I made a promise to watch again, even if I have to do it alone.

DAY TWO

Gavin

I wanted to join her. If I'd asked, would she have said yes? Not that I need her permission to be anywhere on my family's property, but I didn't want to intrude. It seemed important to her. So, like a stalker, I watched her from the window until darkness claimed her from sight. I'd like to ask her about it—in a casual way, of course—but she hasn't come down for breakfast yet.

I've been cleaning up slowly, just in case she appears. If she doesn't, I'll leave a couple of Sabrina's muffins and a few choices of fruit on the counter. With a note? No, if Mom sees it, she'll start asking questions. Or worse, making plans.

I can make my own plans, thank you very much. Various possibilities have already crossed my mind. Like, asking Noelle if I can show her around town. Or taking her on my favorite hiking trail near the mountains to the west. If she enjoys hiking, that is. Maybe my first plan should be finding out what she likes, besides sunsets.

Or maybe I should just treat her like a normal guest.

Yeah, a bit too late for that.

Unable to prolong my kitchen duties any further without Mom noticing, I finish up and then head to the laundry room, where piles of clean towels and bedding are waiting for me to sort and fold. The "dirty" hamper isn't high enough to do a new load, so I'll worry about that later today. After I go buy more detergent.

As I work, I keep my ears alert for sounds of anyone approaching the kitchen or a certain voice that might call out for assistance, but nothing comes. The other guests—three feisty widows who have stayed with us several times before—have already gone out for the morning. Mom is at the check-in desk, and Dad...

I release a sigh. Poor guy. He hates his current immobility—or, as he calls it, *being a useless bum*—but he’s got a long road to recovery ahead of him. Breaking a femur at his age could’ve been much worse. The timing, despite the unfortunate circumstances, couldn’t have been more fortuitous. I’d been thinking of changing careers for a while—working in a competitive office was slowly draining my will to live—so coming back home to help out is just the spacer I need before deciding what to do next with my life.

Working at the B&B isn’t difficult, but neither is it exciting. Well, not until yesterday. I know it’s unwise to be anything more than polite to our guests, but there’s something about Noelle I just can’t ignore. Even if I really should. She’s leaving in six days, and I’ll never see her again. Why put myself through unwanted heartache? I stare at the stack of towels on the table, having an urge to sink my face into their fluffiness.

Footsteps from above grab my attention. I hasten out of the laundry room and dash down the hall, stopping myself before entering the foyer, though I’m close enough to see the stairs. The person descending is...

Just my mom. Shoulders drooping, I return to my current chore. Is Noelle still asleep? Is she planning to hang out in her room all morning? Or did she already leave without my noticing? I was, um, watching for her, so I doubt it’s the latter. Unless she slipped out when I was distracted by Mrs Wilson’s teasing remarks about my lack of a girlfriend. She offered to set me up with her niece’s daughter. Or was it a neighbor’s niece? Either way, I tactfully declined.

I suddenly smack myself in the forehead. The presence of Noelle’s car, or lack thereof, will answer my question. I walk back to the foyer, crossing the space as I give a totally low-key wave to my mom, who’s once again seated at the desk, and head out the front door. I don’t need to go more than a few steps off the porch to see that Noelle’s car is gone. I kick some leaves on the walkway in disappointment. I can’t just go back inside or my mom will know something’s up. So, I walk around the house and enter

through the rear door. I feel stupid, and dejected, and wonder what the heck I'm doing. *Get her out of your head, man.*

And yet, my next thought is, *Maybe I'll see her in town when I get more laundry detergent.*

Noelle

It's a good thing I skipped breakfast at the B&B because, apparently, my grandparents' favorite order at Sabrina's bakery is enough to feed a small family. Two hazelnut cinnamon muffins, a slice each of lemon chiffon cake and carrot cake, three giant oatmeal chocolate chip cookies—Pops would eat two and Nana would eat one—and two mugs of hot chocolate topped with whipped cream. I pare the feast down to one of each item to save myself from a stomachache or early diabetes, fully intending to save the cake slices for later. The thought of sharing them with Gavin pops into my head, but I quickly dismiss it. He has better things to do. Before leaving this morning, I stopped by the kitchen, wanting to thank him again for his sunset location suggestion, but chickened out when I saw him busily helping the other guests. The three widows, I must admit, are a bit intimidating.

“So, how long are you staying at the B&B?” Sabrina asks as she refills a tray with the fudgiest-looking brownies I've ever seen. I'll have to get one of those another day. And a loaf of sourdough. I glance at the other trays, surprised by the lack of cinnamon rolls. I assumed every bakery had them.

“I check out on Wednesday,” I say, tearing my gaze away from the display of scrumptious goodies, “but I'm not leaving town.

Her eyes widen. “You're staying? That's great! Are you looking for a place to rent or buy?”

“Actually,” I say, as I reach for my cookie, “my grandparents left me their place, and I'm fixing it up. I hope to find a job in the coming weeks.”

“That’s awesome!” she exclaims. “Who’s working on the house?”

“Kyle Garland,” I say, to which Sabrina gives an approving nod.

“He’s good,” she says. “He helped with some minor repairs at the B&B last year.”

I’m glad to hear it. I’d already checked his references, but hearing a positive review in person is a bonus. “He and his crew won’t be finished for another month or so, but I just need it to be livable.”

Sabrina’s nose scrunches. “You sure you want to stay there in the mess? Dust and debris everywhere? I bet you could get a discount at The Blue Spruce if you booked a longer stay. Though maybe not in the Gold Room.” She laughs. “I was surprised Gavin put you in there.” Her head suddenly tilts to the side, a thoughtful expression crossing her face. “Actually, maybe I’m not surprised at all.”

Do I dare ask why? His own reasoning was based on hospitality. What other reason could there be? I finish my cookie, which was delicious, and move on to the muffin. “What makes you say that?”

She smirks. “Because you’re smokin’ hot.”

I choke, and proceed to cough like a mad woman, with Sabrina racing around the counter to whack me on the back, which doesn’t help all that much. When I’ve calmed down, I sip on my hot chocolate. More like a tepid chocolate now, but it’s no less tasty.

“Sorry,” Sabrina says, returning to her position. “But you do know you’re gorgeous, right? If Gavin hasn’t figured that out, there’s no hope for him.”

I steel myself. “You think he thinks I’m...” I can’t say the word. The voice of Declan rings in my head, pointing out every flaw in my appearance, then moving on to my intelligence, attitude, abilities... He said plenty of terrible things.

“Gorgeous,” she finishes for me, and I almost flinch. If she notices, she doesn’t comment. “My brother isn’t half bad, I can admit. Any interest on your part?”

Wow, she just goes for the jugular, doesn't she? Maybe if I choke on something else, we can change the subject. I'm not sure I can tell her the truth. I *am* interested—Gavin's breathtaking smile may have made a brief appearance in my dreams last night—but I'm also terrified of the vulnerability that comes with letting such interest blossom. My heart was stomped on for almost two years by a man who once claimed to love me, even though most of his actions and words were emphatic proof of the opposite. Shame and fear of being alone tethered me to him until three months ago, when he hit me for the first time. The same day I found out Pops and Nana died in a car accident. It was the worst day of my life.

"I'm going to apologize yet again," Sabrina says with a sigh. "I tend to talk before I think, and it can get me into trouble. Sorry. You don't have to answer. And I'll understand if you want to avoid me from now on."

That thought never crossed my mind. I shake my head. "I don't want to avoid you. But I don't think I can answer your question." Not until I sort through the damage I'm still healing from. But there's no hurry. Silverton is my home now.

Sabrina and I exchange phone numbers and make plans to have lunch sometime soon. She puts my cake slices in a to-go box, and I head out, eager to spend some time getting reacquainted with downtown, and later touch base with Mr Garland at the bungalow.

The various shops—some I recognize and others that are more recent additions—fit the atmosphere of the small town, and their owners are just as friendly as Gavin and Sabrina. Each time I mention my grandparents, someone has something kind to say about them, which makes my heart glow.

I spend several cheerful minutes visiting with Mr Rose, who coincidentally owns the flower shop, listening to numerous stories about his friendship with Pops while we share my cake. After saying our goodbyes, I practically skip to my car, thinking I should write these wonderful stories down. I pull out my phone to send a text to Mr Garland to let him know I'm on my way.

“Hey, Babe, what’re you smiling about?”

I stop short, my chest tightening at the tone of the stranger’s voice. It’s too much like Declan’s when he was about to start complaining about something I did wrong. I glance to my left, seeing two men leaning against the building near my car, both eyeing me like I’m a piece of meat and they’re ravenous dogs. Alarms blare in my head, making my limbs cold. I want to turn and run the other direction, but I have a feeling they’ll follow. If I can get inside my car-

“You deaf, Honey? Need someone to clean your ears out?”

They laugh, the sound intentionally cruel.

“Please leave me alone,” I say, unable to stop the tremble in my voice. It was obviously the wrong thing to say. Both men push away from the wall and move toward me. I have about three seconds before they’re close enough to touch me. Not enough time to unlock my car and get inside. I take a few steps back, but I know it won’t do any good. As one of the men reaches for me, I prepare myself to scream, but he’s suddenly shoved to the ground, landing flat on his backside. Stunned, I whirl around.

Gavin is standing over the lout, chest heaving. “You’ve got ten seconds to get out of my sight.”

Being the cowards they truly are, the two men scramble away without a backward glance.

I can’t move, but there’s no need to. Gavin turns to me and pulls me into his arms. I sink into him, my trembling hands grasping his shirt as if it’s a lifeline. A sob erupts from me as flashbacks from my past echo in my mind, and Gavin holds me tighter. I hear his voice saying something, but I can’t make out the words. I think he’s saying my name.

It doesn’t take long for me to calm down. Being in his arms, soaking in the warmth of his body, is like a balm to my soul. If I could stay right here, I know, without a doubt, I would be safe forever.

“Noelle,” he says, more clearly this time. He pulls away just enough to look down at me, his face inches from mine. I’m not sure which of us moves first, but the next instant, our lips are connected. The tenderness of

his kiss stirs a dormant fire within me, and I can't get enough. The wall that protects my tender heart has been blown to smithereens.

He. Is. Not. Declan.

One of Gavin's hands slides up my back to my hair, his fingers weaving through my curls, pressing me against him, which I willingly allow. Who needs space when the alternative is more Gavin? I don't want to move, but I *do* need to breathe. The kiss ends slowly, giving me a chance to fill my lungs. He whispers my name again as he rests his forehead against mine.

What just happened? And when can it happen again?

"I'm not sorry for that," he says quietly, "but I can understand if it was unexpected. Or maybe...unwanted."

Unwanted? Do I need to kiss him again so he knows for sure? A laugh escapes before I can stop it. "If that was me *unwanting*, are you prepared for me wanting?" Oh, boy, I might be a wee bit euphoric, saying flirty things like that.

With a soft growl, he kisses me again.

A honking horn startles us both as a car passes by. And now comes the embarrassment of being caught in public making out with a man I barely know. Maybe I can blame it on my morning's sugar rush. I pin my face to his chest, which rumbles with a chuckle or two. Nope. The fault is entirely on the shoulders of this handsome, wonderful man. I may not know much about him, or even more than a few things, but I *do* know he makes me feel safe—a far cry from how I ever felt with... I don't even want to think his name. I'm done with him.

With one last squeeze, Gavin releases me but takes my hand. "Do you want to file a report with the police?"

For a moment, I don't understand the question. Oh. Right. Those creepy jerks who tried to grab me. I was properly distracted by something far more pleasant. "Do you think I should?" They didn't actually touch me, after all.

“Yeah,” he says. “So at least they’ll know to watch out for two troublemakers. I didn’t recognize either of those guys, so hopefully they’re just passing through.” His jaw tightens. “If not, they’d better change their plans.”

I want to kiss away his tension, but more cars are passing, and I know this isn’t really the place for that. “Okay, let’s go.” I pause. “That is, if you’re coming with me.”

“Of course,” he says, giving me one of his delicious smiles. “I’ll drive. We can come back for your car later.”

Gavin

I’m not dreaming, am I? I kissed Noelle. More than once. What does it mean? I know what I *want* it to mean, as crazy as it might be. We’ve only known each other for twenty-four hours, for crying out loud! Don’t care. I want her to be my girlfriend. But she’s leaving soon. I don’t even know where she’s from. My mind races with thoughts of a long-distance relationship. I’m getting ahead of myself. For her, this could be nothing more than a sweet vacation fling. I glance at her sitting in the passenger seat of my truck. The smile on her face and lingering blush on her cheeks tell me she’s not a fling sort of person. She turns, catching my gaze. Her adorable dimple is calling out to me. If I wasn’t currently driving, I’d answer it with a kiss. Or three.

Our stop at the police station takes about thirty minutes. Deputy Mark Kilton, a friend from when I played high school basketball, assures us that an extra patrol will be scheduled for the next few days to keep an eye out for the two jerks. Just thinking about them raises my temperature to rage levels. I’m not sure what I would’ve done if one of them had actually touched Noelle. That’s not true. My fist and his face would be a bloody mess right now.

As I open the passenger door and help Noelle climb inside my truck, I pause, keeping her hand in mine. She gives me a questioning look. Now is as good a time as any. Just rip the band-aid off. “When you leave the B&B next week, where will you go?”

Smiling, she squeezes my hand. “Can I show you something before I answer?”

The wait might kill me, but sure. Nodding, I hasten around to the driver’s side and start the engine. “Tell me where to go.”

She gives directions, which take us to a part of town I’m not overly familiar with. The neighborhood is quiet, with bungalow-style houses on either side.

“Pull over here,” she says, gesturing to the curb on the right. Judging by the two heavy-duty trucks, large dumpster, various tools, ladders, and piles of sheet rock in the yard, the house is obviously being renovated. Noelle gets out of the truck, and I follow, walking to her side. “This place used to belong to my grandparents,” she says, brushing strands of hair out of her face as she gazes at the house. “Now it’s mine.”

I slowly turn to face her. “Yours?”

She looks up at me, her expression hesitant. “This is where I’ll go when I leave the B&B next week.”

My brain fumbles the words for only a second. She’s not leaving Silverton. I react before I can think, reaching for her waist and lifting her off the ground. We spin around a few times, her laughter ringing in my ears like a bell. When I set her down again, I cup her face between my hands. I almost blurt out my feelings, my hopes—both of which I’m still figuring out for myself—but there’s no rush now. She’s staying. So I do the next best thing, which is actually *the* best thing, and kiss her. Her lips spread into a smile beneath mine, so I move to her jaw and then nuzzle her neck. She laughs again.

“I guess you like my news.”

It's not the only thing I like. "Very much," I say, leaving a kiss on the tip of her nose. "Want to give me a tour?" I ask, nodding toward the house. "Or wait until it's done?"

She ponders for a moment. "Both, so you can see a before and after. Unless you need to get back to the B&B?"

I do, but a few more minutes won't make much of a difference. "Speed tour," I say, grabbing her hand again and pulling her up the walkway.

The noise within won't allow for much discussion, so we mostly just look around. I see Kyle. We also went to high school together, though he's a couple years older than me, so we didn't hang out much. I heard his wife passed away a few years ago, leaving him and their son behind. Fortunately, his parents still live in Silverton, so he has their support. I shake his hand and exchange a brief greeting, but I don't linger, not wanting to get in the way. About ten minutes later, Noelle and I are back outside.

"I think I can visualize how things will turn out," I say as we get into the truck. "You said the house was your grandparents'? Where are they now?"

She lets out a long sigh. "Heaven."

I wince. "Sorry, that was thoughtless." I suddenly frown as realization dawns on me. "Rex and Libby."

I knew the Munsens died in a car accident a few months ago. Sadly, I wasn't able to make it to the funeral. The two of them were more than just good people. "Rex was my basketball coach in high school," I say softly. "He retired after my senior year. And Libby made the best chicken pot pie. She used to feed us after practices." I hear a snuffle beside me, and I'm worried I've made things worse. "Can I hold you?"

Nodding, she scoots closer, but it's not close enough. Despite the awkward angle, I lift her out of the passenger's seat and set her on my lap, wrapping her up tight. She snuggles against my chest, her body shaking as she cries. I press my lips to her head as I try to recall ever seeing a granddaughter during the years I knew the Munsens. Is it possible Noelle and I met, or at least saw each other, before yesterday? I can't help but

hope we did, and now we're together again. I send a silent prayer of gratitude to Heaven, thanking God for the Munsens, and Noelle.

My time in town, and with Noelle, has set my usual schedule back, but I wouldn't change a thing. Mom gives me the stink-eye when I come inside, though it softens when she sees who's with me. I'm sure I'll get plenty of questions later. Bring it on, Mom.

Noelle and I chat about random things as we eat lunch together—we picked up burgers and fries on our way—and then I buckle down to catch up on my list of chores, while she takes a walk around the property. Just when I think I have a moment to find her, everything in the universe seems to conspire against me. Our afternoon assistant, Lisa, calls in sick; the faucet in the Plum Room springs a leak; the neighbor's poodle runs loose in the yard, and I chase it for at least twenty minutes; one of the widows—Mrs Atkins this time—waylays me with one of her granddaughters on the phone (the conversation, thankfully, is short after I let her know I recently started seeing someone); and a plethora of other tiny mishaps consume my entire afternoon.

By the time we gather for dinner, I haven't seen Noelle since lunch. Sure, it was only a handful of hours, but it felt like longer. I missed her. Hopefully, we can spend more time together this evening. I fully intend to make that happen and—fingers crossed—work in a few more kisses.

She's sitting beside Sabrina at the long dining table as I bring in Mom's chicken and rice casserole. Our eyes meet, causing my heart to dance in my chest. Man, I'm a goner already.

I sit across from her, since it's the only seat left, and enjoy the direct view of her lovely face. Even if we were sitting next to each other, there wouldn't be much of a chance for a private conversation. Not with several watchful eyes around us. I'm certain Mom already suspects something has happened between us.

The food is passed around, and everyone begins eating. The widows dominate the conversation, as expected, which includes a mention of my brief phone call with *The Granddaughter*.

“I had no idea he was already taken,” Mrs Atkins says to my mom with a huff. “Could’ve saved my poor Jen the embarrassment.”

Mom looks from me to Noelle, her mouth twitching as she reins in a smile. “Sorry, Gerty. He never tells me anything.”

Noelle and I exchange glances, both of us blushing. I really hope she’s on the same page as me regarding our relationship; otherwise, it might be the shortest relationship I’ve ever had. She suddenly sets down her fork and pushes her chair back as she jumps to her feet. My heart sinks. Maybe I was wrong about us...

“Are there peppers in the casserole?” she asks, one of her hands slowly moving up to her throat.

“No,” Mom says, but then frowns. “But there’s paprika. Do you not like-”

“I’m allergic.”

I’m out of my seat and at her side in three strides. “What can I do? Do you have an EpiPen? Should I take you to the ER?”

She shakes her head. “It’s a mild allergy, so just some antihistamine.” Her voice sounds raspy now, which I don’t like one bit.

Sabrina dashes out of the dining room, I assume to fetch the medication. I feel helpless, and stupid. Guests can add that sort of information when they make their reservation. If she included her allergy, I completely missed it. Sabrina is back, giving Noelle three small, white tablets.

“I found some fast-acting stuff, but it also might cause drowsiness,” Sabrina says, her brows pulling together.

Noelle downs them with several gulps of water. I watch and wait. Setting her empty glass on the table, Noelle rests her hand on my arm.

“I probably should lie down for a while,” she says, “but I’ll be fine.”

I should believe her, since it's her body, but I can't help the worry writhing in my gut. "I'll walk you to your room."

Mom, looking shaken, apologizes profusely, but Noelle assures her none of us are at fault. Her kindness is one more reason to do everything I can to get to know her better, and perhaps never let her go.

We make it upstairs, my worry lingering. "Will you be okay alone? I mean, should I come check on you?"

Rising up to her tip-toes, she kisses my cheek, which melts my heart into a useless puddle. "You can if you want, but I already feel the medicine working."

"I'll knock before I come in," I say.

She unlocks the door but doesn't go inside. She looks back at me. "Make sure your mom is okay. I probably should've mentioned my allergy when I arrived."

That clears up some of my concerns. I wasn't neglectful after all. "Any other allergies or medical issues we should know about?" I try to sound more lighthearted, even if I don't feel it.

"Well..." She ducks her head. "Being away from you makes my heart hurt."

Could she be any more adorable? "I'll do my best to keep that pain to a minimum, then," I say, leaning forward. She meets me halfway, our lips colliding in a burst of fire. I need her, want her, but I have enough self-control to end the kiss. There will be others. Many others. Smiling, she shuts the door. My thoughts and pulse continue to race. This woman...

Noelle

I awaken slowly. My eyes and mouth are dry, and my head feels like I'm wearing a helmet made of fog. I usually try to avoid the sleepy antihistamines for this very reason, but it was either that or wait to see how

much my throat decided to swell or if a rash would appear somewhere. I didn't my entire portion of the casserole, so my reaction might not have been much of a problem, even without the medication. I lie still for a moment. The room is dim, but not dark. If it's still Friday evening, maybe I haven't missed it...

I get out of bed and shuffle to the window. It's not a direct view of the western horizon, but it's enough. The sun is already halfway hidden. I watch until it's gone, grateful I was able to continue my routine.

Sitting back on the mattress, I look around the room, smiling as I see a plate filled with an assortment of sliced veggies, buttered bread, and cookies on the bedside table. My car keys and a folded piece of paper are next to the plate. Turning on the small lamp attached to the headboard, I pick up the note and read:

Just in case you get hungry. Not a pepper in sight. -Gavin

P.S. I borrowed your keys so Sabrina and I could bring your car back.

He's amazing. I wonder how many times he came to check on me while I slept. I reach for the plate and set it on my lap. I'm still tired, but my gurgling stomach can't wait. And I can hardly wait until I can see Gavin again.