

DAY ONE

Sabrina

Sometimes I wonder why I get up so early. My bed is warm and comfy, and outside is cold and piled with snow. Snow makes me grumble. It's nice to look at, don't get me wrong, but driving in the confounded stuff makes me want to move to Bermuda. Then again, I'm not a huge fan of sand either.

Hmm, a jungle then, perhaps? Nope, too many bugs.

I get myself ready for the day and head out, bundled and booted to battle Silverton's pre-winter chill. It's not even the middle of November yet. Maybe the weather will calm down and give us another few days of autumn. One can only hope.

The silence that greets me when I unlock the door of my bakery and wander to the kitchen in the back, flipping on lights and inhaling the lingering scent of deliciousness, is something I cherish. Not sure why. Perhaps it's just the knowledge that this place is *mine*, and has been for the past four and a half years. I could do my morning routine with my eyes closed, which sometimes happens when I'm extra sleepy, and by the time the ovens are preheating and I've got dough and batter in my industrial mixers, I know exactly why I do it five times a week.

I simply love baking.

It started in middle school. One of my friends was planning her thirteenth birthday party and I volunteered to make her cake. As a child, I'd watched Grandma Nadine create magic in her kitchen, as well as helped my mom bake stuff plenty of times for the B&B, so I figured it would be a cake walk. I roll my eyes at myself. I dislike puns almost as much as I dislike snow.

Anyway, the cake was a huge hit and I was soon baking sweet treats for people all over town for all sorts of occasions. By the time I graduated high

school, I'd saved enough money to rent some equipment and lease a small space downtown. Sweet Treats Bakery was born, and has since grown into what it is today. A flourishing business, with catering options. Like for a certain wedding taking place in two weeks.

Tuesday is sourdough day—at least the baking part, since I get things ready the night before. In a couple of hours, I'll have sandwich loaves, breadsticks, bread bowls, and dinner rolls. While the fermented dough rests one last time, and I wait for my two assistants to show up, I peruse my stack of recipe cards. I'll be providing the wedding cake and a dessert of my choosing for my brother, Gavin, and his fiancée, Noelle—who asked me to be her maid of honor. I'm excited for all of it. I could do the tried-and-true brownie or chocolate chip cookie, but I'm itching to do something extra special. Something unexpected.

I pull out a few potential winners and set them aside. My hands pause as one card from the stack in particular makes an appearance. I'm not sure why I still have it, since I vowed to never make it again. My eyes drift to the trash can a few steps away. I hesitate. It's my grandma's recipe, so I have strong sentimental ties to it, but...

It's also *his* favorite.

At least, it was five years ago.

Grandma Nadine's Extra Fluffy Cinnamon Rolls.

And when he broke my heart, I vowed to never touch the recipe again. Until right now.

I stare at the list of ingredients and instructions. I know them all by heart, even after all these years. How many times did I make them, just so I could watch him devour two or three in one sitting? And then hear him tell me they were the best he'd ever had. He made that declaration every time, as if each new batch was better than the one before, even though they were exactly the same.

But then he left, and never responded to my letter.

Now *that's* something I'm definitely not going to think about.

As much as I want to crumple the card and toss it away, I can't. Grandma's recipe deserves more respect than that. So, I settle for hiding it at the bottom of the pile and continue my search for the perfect dessert for Gavin and Noelle's perfect wedding, putting cinnamon rolls and my brother's best friend—the man who demolished my poor teenage heart—out of my mind.

Conrad

The drive from the airport to my parents' house was a nightmare. I forgot how much I hate driving in snow. And Silverton must have ticked off old man winter, because he paid them a visit in the worst way.

The house is quiet when I unlock the front door and slip inside, dragging two suit cases and a duffle bag with me. They hold pretty much my entire life from the past five years during my time in the Army. And now I'm home, with little time to pause and take a breath. I glance at the clock on the mantle. Eight o'clock. I've got one hour until I need to show up at the Silverton PD station.

Getting my new job took some finagling, and not just the quickness of it. There was tons of red tape to cut through. I didn't attend the police academy in the civilian world, but my service in the Army's Military Police was enough for Captain Gusson to not only hire me, but bump me up to detective without batting an eye. And my injury wasn't a dealbreaker for him, even if it was for the Corps. An honorable discharge after only five years was not how I planned to make my exit from the service. It was supposed to be my career for at least a decade. Maybe longer.

Despite that disappointment, I'm not unhappy to be back in Silverton. I love this town and plenty of the people here. My parents, for one, even if they're not here to greet me. They're currently on a cruise in Mexico. They wanted to cancel so they could be here for my return, but I insisted they go ahead. I have plenty of friends I'm eager to see. One in particular.

Is it too early to call him?

I shrug, snatching my phone from my pocket and punching his reserved speed-dial button.

It rings a few times.

"Hey, Con, did you make it home?" Gavin asks.

"Just got here," I say, smiling. It's good to hear his voice. We've mostly communicated by email or text during my time away. "How's the B&B?"

"Everything's great," he says. "The past couple of months have been booked solid. I'm a natural at this owner thing."

I laugh. "Are you sure it's not your fiancée who deserves the credit? I can't wait to meet her."

"She *is* pretty incredible. I'm so glad you'll be here for the wedding. Having my best friend be my best man makes everything perfect. When do you start work?"

"In less than an hour, but I want to leave soon so I have plenty of time to deal with this crappy weather." I glance out the window and scowl. Snowflakes are just starting to fall, as if purposely mocking me. "Once I know my schedule, I'll stop by to see you, and meet Noelle."

"Sounds good." He pauses. "I know it's not how you wanted things to happen, Conrad, but I'm glad you're home. I've missed my best bud."

A lump nearly clogs my throat, though I'm not sure if it's because of my unplanned circumstances or his sincerity. Either way, I put my emotions aside. "Thanks, man. See you soon."

I don't have time to unpack, so I just carry my stuff up to my room and hop in the shower. Ten minutes later, I'm dried and dressed. My badge and

department-issued firearm will be waiting for me at the station. I have two guns of my own, but I keep one in my closet and the other in my car; both are in locked containers. Gathering everything else I need, I leave the house, psyching myself up for unpleasant drive to downtown.

I know it's common, and even expected, for "the new guy" to get razzed, but I'd rather get tased than go back on the road so soon. The snowfall is getting heavier and my mood sinks with it. But the guys demanded their morning sugar rush, so here I am pulling into the parking lot of a bakery. One that wasn't here when I left home.

The Sweet Treat Bakery.

Catchy name.

I hustle inside, shaking snow from my coat, trying not to make too many puddles as I wipe my feet on the rug. My attention is quickly seized by the amazing smell. I have no idea what's causing it—other than usual bakery items—but I want to bottle it and wear it like cologne.

The next thing I notice is the undeniable fact that I'm going to be waiting a while. The place is pretty packed. Two people—a lanky man and a older lady with bright pink hair—are behind the counter's long display case, taking orders and payment. I recognize the lady, and almost laugh. Mrs Stella Crandle. She used to babysit me. I watch the two of them move about, impressed by their quickness, while still giving each customer their attention. The wait ends up being shorter than I expect. My turn comes and the lanky man greets me with a smile.

"Welcome to The Sweet Treat Bakery, officer," he says, noticing the badge hanging from my neck. "You here for the usual?"

I wasn't told to order anything specific, so I say, "Yes, please."

The man, whose name tag reads *Rick*, grabs a box and starts loading it with the most delectable-looking pastries and baked goods I've ever seen. I want to eat one of each, even if the gorge-fest will send me into a sugar coma. I scan the trays, a frown gradually resting on my face. "Do you have cinnamon rolls?"

Rick looks up from his task. "No, sorry."

Seriously? What kind of bakery doesn't have cinnamon rolls? I mean, everything else looks fantastic, but I thought cinnamon rolls were a given. My shoulders sag in disappointment as Rick finishes up, taking the well-laden box to one of the cash registers.

"Hey, Rick," calls out a voice from somewhere unseen; probably the kitchen in the back. "Are we low on anything?"

"Eclairs and sourdough rolls," he replies as he enters my order and then looks up. "That will be thirty-nine fifty-five."

I hand over my credit card just as a door to my right swings open and a young woman walks through, carrying two trays. I stare at her, forcing my mouth to not hang open.

She's petite, with short brown hair, creamy skin, and sky-blue eyes. But a different word describes her even better. Gorgeous. My hands feel numb, and I think something is wrong with my pulse. It's much too fast. She sets the trays on a ledge behind the glass case and shifts her attention to me. Her eyes widen. We stare at each other, the room becoming electrified. Is she having the same reaction I am? Does she feel the same intensity? Who is she? Something about her is familiar, but, having been away for five years, my memory comes up with nothing. And unlike Rick, she isn't wearing a name tag.

I clear my throat. "Hey, good morning." My voice comes out a bit strangled and I cringe. Could I sound any more lame? I steady my breath and offer a winning smile. "I'm Detective Conrad Goodwin, the newest addition to the Silverton PD."

Her expression suddenly becomes stony, rivaling the frostiness of the weather. The change doesn't make her any less beautiful, but I'm taken aback. Does she not like policemen?

Breaking her gaze from mine, she turns to Rick. "Did you include an apple fritter for Captain Gusson?"

"Of course," he says, handing my card back to me. I take it, my eyes still on the mystery woman, who seems to dislike me a great deal. I don't enjoy being disliked, especially when I don't know *why*. And even more so when the one doing the disliking is a living representation of my dream girl.

Her eyes dart to me again before she busies herself refilling the eclairs and rolls, effectively dismissing me.

I want to ask questions—too many to count—but the customer behind me steps up and I have no choice but to move out of the way. I'll have to come back. I *will* come back. I head for the door, glancing over my shoulder, finding her watching me. She quickly turns her head, but I notice a pink tint in her cheeks.

Interesting.

Maybe she doesn't dislike me as much as I thought after all.

The drive back to the station is a blur. The box of treats is well received and emptied in seconds, leaving me with nothing but an image of the woman's beautiful face lingering in my mind. I have to find out who she is. Taking a seat at my desk, I turn to my neighbor, a middle-aged guy named Bruce Waters, who may or may not have caught Gavin and me toilet-papering the high school the day after graduation. I wonder if he remembers. "Hey, Bruce, do you know everyone who works at the bakery?"

He glances at me, chewing the last bite of his poppyseed muffin. "Probably."

I temper my impatience. "I met Rick," I say. "Nice guy. Mrs Crandle was there too. And there was another woman, with short brown hair."

Bruce's forehead creases. "You mean the owner?"

She's the owner? Wow, good for her. I automatically nod.

He brushes crumbs off his shirt. "Who also happens to be the sister of your fellow vandalizer from high school."

I flinch. I guess he does remember. Wait, did he say sister? I lean back in my chair. Sabrina? No way. Heat crawls up my neck, making my tie feel much too tight. How in the world did I not realize it was her? Well, because the last time I saw her she was sixteen, and still mostly a child. She's definitely not a child anymore. I almost curse. This isn't good. I cannot be attracted to my best friend's sister. Gavin is the nicest guy I know, but

He.

Will.

Kill.

Me.

Despite my inner turmoil, I think I know why she seemed so upset with me. Who could blame her? I'd feel bad if someone I'd know all through childhood didn't recognize me either.

I have to see her again. To apologize. That's my reason to go back now. A sourness settles in my gut. That can be the *only* reason.

Sabrina

I feel supremely stupid as I wipe at my eyes. Seeing Conrad out-of-the-blue was enough of a shock—I had no idea he was coming back to Silverton!—but when it was clear he had no idea who I am...

I kick an empty bucket, sending it skittering across the storage room. Stupid Conrad! Stupid Gavin for not telling me! Stupid Sabrina for the brief hope I felt that he'd come for me, finally ready to give a response to my

long-awaited feelings. Stupid feelings that haven't gone away, despite years of trying to convince myself I was over him.

Nope. He's still *The One*, and probably always will be. And I'm just a nameless face to him.

So why did he look at me like *that*?

I shiver at the memory of his eyes drinking me in. He was attracted to me. I scoff. Yeah, because he didn't know he was looking at his best friend's little sister. And when he figures it out? Fresh tears leak down my face.

A knock on the storage room door makes me jump. "Yes?"

"We're all cleaned up out here," says Stella, her voice muffled. "See you tomorrow."

I look at the clock on my phone. Four o'clock. The day seemed to drag after Conrad left, mirroring my mood. On five separate occasions, Stella asked if I was okay. I wasn't, but I pretended to be. "Thanks, Stella."

I listen to her receding footsteps, and then wait another minute before emerging from my hiding place. But not before making sure my face is tear-free.

I need a distraction.

And some chocolate.

I make a beeline to the kitchen and my personal stash of triple chocolate brownies hidden in a cupboard no one else uses. As I stuff a piece into my mouth—so good!—I peruse the three recipe cards I left on the counter this morning. The wedding reception dessert will either be vanilla macarons with three types of filling; mini dark chocolate tortes with hazelnut creme; or beignets with a honey-orange glaze. I give each of them a stare-down, my brain going over the logistics. The first two contain nuts, which could be good or bad depending on allergies, and both can be made ahead of time. Beignets are better when fried to order, meaning I'd be standing in front of

a fryer all night. But, I mean, who doesn't love deep-fried carbs? I need a second opinion.

A loud thud from outside makes me jump for a second time. The noise is followed by unintelligible shouting. I roll my eyes. My new neighbors. The recently opened laundromat is run by two guys—Paul and Dwayne—who seem to hate each other, given the almost-daily arguments I hear. I miss the nail salon that used to be there. Mrs. Tran was a hoot.

I grab the three recipe cards and put them in my purse as I walk to the front of the shop, ready to leave for the day. Noelle has been working on smoked pork ribs for dinner at the B&B. At least this wretched day can *end* with something good.

I lock up and head to my car. The shouting-match next door seems to have ended. If I was more nosy, I'd try to listen in one of these times...

“Sabrina?”

I stumble to a halt, my pulse leaping into marathon mode; I don't even run marathons. I know that voice. I used to dream about it. I almost ignore him and keep walking, but I'm a sucker for a handsome face, so I slowly turn around.

Big mistake.

Longing mixed with anger shoots through me. “Figured it out, huh? Or did someone have to spell it out for you?”

Conrad ducks his head, pushing against a pile of slush on the sidewalk with one shoe. “Mostly the second option,” he says. He finally looks up at me again. “In my defense, you look completely different now.”

I'm not sure if I should take that as a compliment. Either I was hideous before and now I'm a babe, or it's the other way around. Should I make him explain? I force the tension in my jaw to loosen. “Why are you here?”

He gives a half smile, and I nearly swoon. Curse you, handsome man! “Are you asking why I'm back in Silverton or why I'm at your bakery for the second time today?”

I cross my arms. "Both, I guess."

"Well, I wanted to apologize for not recognizing you. You were clearly... annoyed by that."

I snort, but say nothing.

"As for the other reason..." He hesitates. "I guess Gavin didn't tell you I was injured."

I stiffen as deep concern sudden hits me in the chest, knocking my anger aside. "No. He didn't." I'm going to throttle Gavin when I see him later. I take a step closer. "Are you okay?"

He shrugs. "I'm healed. I was lucky."

There's more to the story, but he doesn't seem willing to share at the moment. We're silent, each of us casting quick glances at the other. Does this have to be so awkward? Why does he still have to be so dang hot? If he's finally going to give me an answer for the things I wrote in my letter, I wish he'd just get it over with. Good or bad. The seconds drag on.

"Why didn't you write to me?" I blurt out.

That gets his full attention. "I didn't know you wanted me to."

Is he serious? Anger once again surfaces. "That's usually what happens when someone sends you a letter. You write back."

His brows furrow. "You wrote to me?"

I can't believe what I'm hearing. My letter must have been pretty insignificant for him to forget about it. Well, he forgot about *me* easily enough. The sight of him, no matter how pleasant, is making my head hurt, not to mention my heart. "Goodnight, Detective Goodwin." I stomp around him and don't look back as I get in my car and drive away, too upset to care that I'm once again crying.

I wish I would've brought the rest of my secret brownie stash with me.

DAY TWO

Conrad

The scene is a mess. A lot like how I feel inside. I've been wracking my brain for hours, trying to remember seeing or reading a letter from Sabrina. I come up empty.

The CSI team—which is just two people here in Silverton—is giving me their preliminary findings and I have to force myself to pay attention. It seems like a typical burglary, save for the unnecessary destruction the perp left behind. Holes in the walls and floors, furniture broken, even pillows are torn to shreds. What a jerk. I jot down some notes and move to the homeowner to ask some questions, even though he's already given a statement. I have a knack for getting answers that shed the right kind of light on a case.

It's one of the reasons Captain Gusson was so keen to hire me.

Finishing up for now, I drive back to the station, finding myself taking a slight detour to pass by Sabrina's bakery. As tempted as I am to go in and see her, even if all I get from her is a glare, I want to figure out the mystery of her missing letter before I try to talk to her again.

Mail is important to military folks, so a letter going astray is not common, especially when the receiver is more accessible while attending basic training. Those first few months were grueling, but every contact from someone back home made it bearable.

I suddenly frown. Those first few months...

The flood in our barracks.

A burst pipe damaged the interior, forcing us to move to another building my third week there. What if Sabrina's letter was waylaid or misplaced because of that? Even the well-oiled machine that is the mailroom of Fort Vance could've made a mistake—unprecedented though it may be—given

those circumstances. Now, what are the chances, five years later, that an unopened envelope is sitting in my old cubby in that mailroom? Not likely. But, still...

The moment I'm back at my desk, I start digging for a phone number. When I find it, I make the call, my hands shaking a bit.

"Fort Vance mailroom," a voice drawls in my ear, "this is Sergeant Bloomburg."

I almost bark out a laugh. Sergeant Bloomburg is still manning the post. This could be my first bit of good luck. "Hey, Sarge, this is Conrad Goodwin. You might not remember me-"

"I remember everyone, Corporal," he interrupts. "That's why they pay me the big bucks."

There's the snark I remember.

"Thought you were a civilian now," he adds.

"Yeah," I say. "Bullet to the chest. Had to have part of one lung removed."

"Yeesh. Tough break. What can I do for you?"

I remind him about the flood in my barracks, give him my theory, and then ask the question of the hour. "Is it possible my letter is still there?"

He lets out a grunt. "You're not questioning my ability to do my job thoroughly, are you Goodwin?"

I swallow. "Of course no-"

"I'm just messin' with you," he says with a chuckle. "I'll let you in on a little secret. Twice in my twelve years here, a letter has gotten wedged in those cubbies. Your missing letter could be lucky number three. Lemme take a look." I hear a beep as he puts me on hold.

My heart hammers and a layer of sweat coats my palms. I see Captain Gusson looking at me from across the room, one eyebrow raised as he points at his wrist. There's no watch there, but I get the message. We've

got a meeting in the conference room. I hold up a finger, praying he won't be annoyed by the delay.

Come on, Bloomberg, I chant to myself.

Another beep sounds in my ear. "Corporal, you're one lucky son-of-a-gun."

"You found it?" I nearly shout.

"Yep. From a Sabrina Turner, post marked almost exactly five years ago. I assume you want me to forward it to you?"

"Yes, please," I say, though waiting for it might give me a coronary.

"Before you do that, though, is it possible to scan and email it to me today?"

"You want me to open your letter?"

I wince. "Yeah, but don't read it. Not that I think you would."

He snorts. "I've got better things to do."

My chest deflates. Does that mean he's not going to scan it for me?

"What's your email address?"

Never in my life have I wanted a meeting to end more than I do now. And if I keep glancing at the clock, someone is going to notice my distraction.

The burglary we investigated this morning is one of four in the past week and a half. Since I'm a fresh pair of eyes, Captain Gusson is hoping I'll see something the rest of them have missed. Which means I need to focus instead of thinking about a certain email waiting for me.

"So, what's your take, Goodwin?" asks the captain.

I thumb through my copy of the files. "I think the first three are the same person, or people, but today's is too different. They weren't just looking for something. They were angry about having to go to the trouble. It was personal." I point out what I think is an obvious link among the first three—

the size of the foot prints, the broken rear window, the missing jewelry— getting a kick out of the “ahhs” of understanding that follow. Gusson gives out orders to contact every pawn shop in the county.

The meeting raps up soon after, and I walk casually to my desk, though my insides are screaming. A few clicks on my computer show me the email from Bloomberg. The cursor hovers over the link, but I hesitate. Whatever Sabrina sent me was important enough to cause her live with five years-worth of hurt due to my lack of a response. Reading it after all this time may not be what she wants. But I have a right to know, don't I? Exhaling slowly, I click the mouse and the scanned letter pops up.

Dear Conrad,

I've never called you dear before. At least not out loud. This is hard for me because I don't really know how you'll react. You'll be gone for a while, but hopefully not forever. I need to tell you this one thing. If nothing else, just write back to me, even if it's to say you're sorry.

Here it goes.

I'm in love with you.

Sure, I'm only 16, but we've known each other for almost that many years. Not only are you the hottest guy in Silverton, but you're also the kindest, even to your best friend's little sister. You always took the time to talk to me and make me feel important. Did you know I perfected Grandma Nadine's cinnamon roll recipe just for you? I've been saving all my baking money, and when I graduate, I'm going to open up my own bakery and sell dozens of those cinnamon rolls every week! I hope you'll be proud of me.

Well, now you know my feelings. Is there a chance you could ever feel the same about me?

Yours forever,

Sabrina

I have no words. I read through it again, my chest tight with...*something*. I had no idea she felt this way. Even looking back, I only see a sweet girl with a fun personality, who also happened to be a great baker. I loved eating her cinnamon rolls. And now she doesn't make them anymore because I unknowingly broke her heart.

Yet, if I'd read her letter when she sent it, and wrote a reply, I think I would've broken her heart anyway. My plans back then didn't include romance or settling down. And even if they did, little Sabrina Turner was nowhere on my radar in *that way*.

But so many things have changed...

I can't stop thinking about her.

I shake my head. I can't go there. I most definitely should *not* think of how beautiful she is now, or how much I want to see her smile. She always did have a great smile. I square my shoulders. I've read her letter and can give a response. I'll offer the apology she deserves, and then let her down gently. Hopefully, she'll finally be able to move on. It's the best thing to do. The only thing.

When lunchtime rolls around, I head out. In minutes, I'm at the bakery. My legs are stiff as I walk inside, but when I see her, an unexpected calm washes through me. There's definitely something special about her. My humming heart agrees. Another second passes before her eyes connect with mine. She doesn't smile or frown, but neither does she look away as I walk toward her.

"Do you have a minute to talk?" I ask quietly.

She merely nods and gestures for me to follow. We head through the side door and enter a small office. She stands beside a desk topped with a laptop, a few cute knick-knacks, and framed pictures of her family and friends. I try not to be too obvious in my perusal of the photos, wondering if I'm among them.

"What do you want, Conrad?" she asks, hands on hips.

I open my mouth to say what I had planned, but the words won't come out. I don't want to say them. They wouldn't be true. If there's a chance she still has feelings for me, even if it's no longer love, I selfishly don't want her to move on. So what does that mean? She asked what I want. I think I want *her*. "Will you consider making and selling Grandma Nadine's cinnamon rolls?"

She stares at me, her mouth falling open. I'm tempted to put a finger under her chin and lift, but I'm pretty sure she'd smack me. "I...I don't think I can," she says.

"Because of me?"

She looks away. "Maybe."

"I found your letter."

This brings her gaze right back to me. Color drains from her face. "You did?"

Hmm. I think I was right when I assumed she might not want me to read it now. Knowing what it says, I can understand her wariness, especially if she's now afraid of what I'll say about it. I'm afraid too, but for the opposite reason. Which means... I mentally shake my head, refocusing on the matter of her letter. "It was stuck in my old mail cubby at Fort Vance and left there when we changed barracks because of a flood."

Her eyes narrow. "That sounds made up."

I stifle a laugh. "I know, but it's true. The mail sergeant is sending it to me."

She looks away, her fingers fidgeting together. “You don’t have to read it.”

My insides tighten. “Are you sure?”

She nods. “It was a long time ago. Things have...changed.”

Meaning, her feelings for me have changed? I don’t like that one bit. I’ve only been home for a little over a day and it seems I’ve already missed my chance with someone I never expected to have, or want. I *should* be relieved. It means I don’t have to worry about what Gavin will do to me when he finds out I’m interested in his sister. He’ll never know, and neither will she. I have an urge to punch something.

“So,” I say, ignoring the ache beneath my ribs. “Back to the cinnamon rolls...”

Sabrina

I have to find out the exact moment that letter arrives so I can burn it. Not because I stopped loving Conrad Goodwin. Quite the opposite. I love him more than ever, but I can’t handle his rejection. Reading it in a letter five year ago would have been painful. Hearing it in person now might destroy me.

After the bakery closes for the day, I start a test batch of macarons. Noelle loved the idea of vanilla macarons with different fillings when I told her about my narrowed-down options last night. Now I just have to decide *which* fillings. One will be dark chocolate, because *delicious*. Another will be something fruity. The third...

I tap the rubber scraper in my hand against my cheek. I’d like it to be something unusual. As I look around my kitchen, my gaze comes to rest on

the container of cinnamon, which automatically makes me think of Conrad and cinnamon rolls.

When he asked if I'd add them to my bakery, I wanted to cry. I can't count the number of times over the years when I almost gave in and whipped up a batch. Those silly rolls used to bring me such joy, and not just because of Conrad. Making them with Grandma for the first time was like being taught to paint by a master artist. She was *that* talented. I would've counted myself lucky if mine turned out half as good. Luck was on my side in that regard. Mine were just as delicious as hers.

But five years of neglect could change all that. I'm afraid I'll no longer be able make them like I used to.

That's the main reason why I'm reluctant to agree to his suggestion.

I puff my cheeks and let the air out slowly, I get busy separating eggs and measuring almond flour. An hour and a half later, I have a dozen pairs of light, airy goodness and two small piping bags, one with lemon curd and the other with raspberry buttercream with bits of the fruit mixed in. When I make a sandwich of both and give them a taste, my palate leans toward the raspberry. I fill the rest and store them in a container to take home. Mom and Dad will appreciate a sample or two. I'm not sure if I'll let Gavin have any. I'm still mad he didn't tell me Conrad was coming home.

As I head out to my car, I glance over at the laundromat. All the lights are off, even though I'm pretty sure it's usually open until midnight. I glance at an old truck parked out front, then back at the laundromat. Someone must be inside. In the dark. Curiosity gets the better of me. Looking around to make sure no one is here to witness my nosiness, I jog over to one of the side windows. I cup my hands around my face to block out the glare of the setting sun and peer through the glass. No one is visible, and none of the machines are powered on. But, in the far corner, I see a shaft of light behind a partially closed door. I think I remember it being an office. Paul or

Dwayne could be going over paperwork. That's one side of owning a business that I do not enjoy.

At least there was no yelling today.

Shrugging, I make my way back across the alley to my car. As I pull out of the parking lot, I see a man leave the laundromat, carrying a cardboard box around the corner to the dumpster. I didn't get a good look at him, but I'm pretty sure he wasn't Dwayne or Paul. The odd incident lingers in my mind for only a moment as I head home.

When I pull into the driveway, I study an unfamiliar SUV parked at the curb between our house and the B&B. Could be a guest. I hasten through front door with my macarons, setting my coat on the back of the couch. Voices and laughter carry from the kitchen. I slow my steps, able to identify the owner of each. Mom, Dad, Gavin, Noelle, and Conrad. Part of me wants to whirl around and sneak to my room, but the glutton-for-punishment part wins out and takes me straight to the man who unknowingly holds my heart in his hands.

He smiles when he sees me, causing the hairs on my arms and neck to prickle with pleasure. I wish he'd stop being so gorgeous! I set the container on the counter and step back, intending to casually lean against the fridge behind me. Too bad I don't notice the stray ice cube on the floor, right where my foot lands. The room suddenly upends, or at least it seems to, and I'm heading for the tiles below, my limbs flailing.

A pair of strong arms catch me, pressing me against a muscular chest. I look up at Conrad and lose all ability to function. This is the closest I've ever been to him. His hazel eyes, just a few inches from mine, seem to change to a dark brown. Or I'm delusional.

He sets me upright, his hands lingering a little longer than necessary as he pulls away. Everyone else is watching us.

"Are you okay, dear?" Mom asks.

I nod, too stunned to use words.

“We saved some dinner for you,” she goes on, gesturing to the casserole dish on the stove.

The conversation around us resumes, though I don’t catch a single word. I think I need to escape. My feet get the memo, taking me out of the kitchen and down the hallway. I don’t move fast enough, though, and feel a hand on my shoulder. Stopping, I turn.

“I can leave if you want me to,” says Conrad. “This is your home, after all.”

He thinks my retreat is because of him. Well, it *is*, but not for the reason he thinks. I’m just embarrassed, and desperate to be in his arms again. “No need. I’m tired. You and Gavin have a lot to catch up on.” I offer a small smile.

“I could say the same about us,” he says. His hand moves from my shoulder, trailing down my arm, igniting my skin. He needs to stop doing that. Or keep doing it. Which one do I want? I almost take a step closer, making the answer obvious. Being touched by him is addicting. Is it possible he feels something for me? Should I let him read my letter and see what happens? There’s a slim chance I won’t encounter Round Two of him shattering my heart into a million pieces.

“Maybe another time,” I say, even though it’s so tempting to make that time right now. “Goodnight, Conrad.”

One corner of his mouth lifts. “I’m not *Detective Goodwin* tonight?”

I blink at him. Is he flirting? “Would you prefer that?” AM I FLIRTING?!

His expression becomes somber. “No.” He looks down at the floor for a moment, and when he meets my eyes again, my breath catches. There’s something there, something I can’t put a label on, but those eyes are piercing through me, making me aware of every beat of my heart. That’s not the way a man would look at woman who is *just* his best friend’s sister.

Or maybe my delusions have multiplied.

“Are you still mad at me?” he asks.

Though his story about my missing letter still seems a bit far-fetched, I know he wouldn't lie to me. Years of hurt and anger are no longer residents in my soul. Now the tenants are worry and fierce longing, and they don't cohabitate well. Which will win? "I'm not mad at you."

His smile returns. "I'm glad. I want us to be...friends."

Worry has gained the upper hand. Friends. I think I despise that word. Looks like a certain letter must be destroyed after all. "Sounds like a plan."

Conrad

It's late. Mr and Mrs Turner said goodnight a couple hours ago, and Noelle left soon after. I really should be in bed so I'm not zombified for work in the morning, but reconnecting with my best friend is just what I need. I was fortunate to forge great relationships with the men and women I served with in the Army, but nothing compares to the deep ties of home. Gavin and I were inseparable for nearly twenty years. Though we've both changed and encountered different life events—he's getting married in a week and a half!—nothing will break the bond we share.

Nothing except these unexpected feelings I have for his sister.

Feelings of friendship.

Yeah, right.

"So, we're thinking of combining the bachelor and bachelorette parties into one shindig a couple days before the wedding," Gavin says. "Since you're the best man and Sabrina's the maid of honor, the two of you could work together to plan something. Nothing extravagant, of course. We could do it at the B&B or maybe the bakery. Just our family and closest friends."

I'm stuck on the part about working together with Sabrina. Does he suspect my secret and this is a test? "Sure, no problem." Ugh, my voice cracked. Gavin raises an eyebrow.

"I'm really happy for you, Gavin," I rush on. "It's obvious you and Noelle are perfect for each other." And I'm trying really hard not to be envious.

He lets out a happy sigh, leaning back against the couch. "Yeah. Can you believe we knew each other as kids, even though it was just for a day or two?"

The story still amazes me. Meeting, separating, finding each other again. I can't ignore the similarities to Sabrina and myself.

"Have you thought about dating?" Gavin asks.

I almost choke on my own spit. I know he means in general, but my thoughts are still on Sabrina. She seems to be there a lot lately. "Not really." Liar.

His eyebrow lifts again, and I start to sweat. "If you change your mind," he says, "I'm sure we find someone to set you up with. In fact, Noelle recently met the new teacher at the elementary. I think her name is Eva. We'd be happy to do a double date thing." He pauses. "Unless there's someone else on your mind."

I make a noncommittal noise and avert my eyes. There's no way he knows. Right? "I don't have the time right now," I say evasively. "I haven't even unpacked everything."

The conversation drifts, thankfully, and then we call it a night. I head out to my car, nearly slipping on a patch of ice at the curb. Good thing no one is outside to witness my lack of gracefulness. I see, however, a light in the west corner window of the Turner home. Sabrina's room. Did the curtain just move? Was she waiting, watching for me to leave? I'm tempted to walk over there and tap on the glass. It wouldn't be the first time. I remember sneaking outside with Gavin late one night after the three of us watched a scary movie. Rapping on Sabrina's window not only elicited the loudest

scream I've ever heard, but a stern chastening from Mr Turner. Needless to say, we didn't do it again. I wonder if she remembers that.

Chuckling softly, I unlock my car and climb inside. As I insert the key in the ignition, I pause at the sound of a rumbling engine creeping down the road. The vehicle, an old pick-up, slows even more as it approaches the Turner's. I can't see the driver, and I doubt he or she sees me, but something about the whole thing sets off an alarm in my brain. I don't like it. I debate whether or not a confrontation is in order, but don't get the chance as the truck suddenly speeds away. I spin around, trying to catch sight of the license plate, but fail. I follow it with my eyes until it turns a corner and disappears. Not much I can do about it now.

I glance back at the house. Sabrina's window is dark.

What am I going to do about her?