

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'm beyond grateful 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). That's right. 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.