

A ROMANTIC COMEDY

THE INN CROWD.



MELODY RUSH

The Inn Crowd

Melody Rush

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Also By Melody Rush

The Catch

Merry Little Misery

The Inn Crowd

When a hot billionaire comes to steal your sanctuary, you tell him off... right?

...Unless everything changes after he spends the night.

Ever feel the need to get away from it all? For like... two years straight? That's what Sarah Jane Darby's been doing ever since a humiliating scandal ended her career as a social media influencer. She created a safe haven at her late grandmother's bed-and-breakfast inn, complete with an ornery guard chicken all too eager to chase any threats away. Nothing can get Sarah Jane to leave her sanctuary.

Until Haden Miles walks in.

Haden is a real estate developer haunted by the secrets of his own past. Despite his ruthless reputation, he sees the charming inn as his ticket to a simpler life. But there's one factor he didn't account for, and that's falling for Sarah Jane and her quirky seaside community.

Welcome to the Aubie Inn. If you like irresistible billionaires, belly laughs, and cozy autumn vibes, then you're bound to enjoy your stay.

Chapter 1

Sarah Jane

“Remember Janey Dee?”

“What happened to her was so crazy!”

“Do you think she did it on purpose? Like, for attention?”

“Probably not, seeing as she disappeared after.”

“Yeah, where did she go?”

“Where is she?”

“Where is Janey Dee?”

You’d think by now, I’d no longer be starting my mornings by scrolling through social media, looking for comments about myself. It’s been two years since that mortifying day that ended my time as an influencer. I need to let it go.

Just can’t get enough of torturing myself, I guess.

But that’s enough for today. My cell phone and all the social media temptation it holds are staying behind with the rest of my belongings in the attic.

I've got an inn to run.

It's early, but I'm a morning person now. I have to be. Some people are born with the propensity to be bright and bushy-tailed at the first sight of the sun. Others, like me, get our bushy tails thrust upon us. In my case, it came with inheriting my grandmother's beloved inn, Aubie Bed and Breakfast. Also known as the Aubie.

My name is Sarah Jane Darby, and at twenty-seven years old, this wasn't what I'd planned for my life. But the inn has become my sanctuary—and, okay, a little bit of my obsession.

As I descend the stairs from my attic pad that I snarkily call The Penthouse, I spot a million little imperfections that drive me nuts. There's the chip in the paint near the left side of the ceiling, and the nick in the wallpaper just out of reach. Nothing that would bother our guests, I know, but it's enough to make my eye twitch.

The place has come a long way since I came to start restoring it two years ago, but it's still going to be a while before I feel like it's just right.

If that moment ever really comes at all.

Like always, my first order of business is checking on my inn guests. I make my way down the hall, tapping lightly on each door. Guests generally appreciate the wake-up call—they do want to catch that “breakfast” part of B&B. But if they don't answer, I don't press it. The smell of food and coffee will waft their way soon enough, and that can accomplish what my light tapping won't.

When I reach room 12, Mrs. Abernathy flings open the door with her usual enthusiasm. “Good morning, dear! You’re just in time to meet my new friend.”

Before I can ask what she means, I spot a familiar white chicken pecking at the carpet. “Doris!” The hen turns a beady black eye toward me, like she knows I’m here to shut down her fun. “How did you get in here?”

Doris lives in the coop out back, where I keep a few hens for fresh eggs to serve the guests. Mrs. Abernathy has taken a liking to Doris on her frequent visits to the coop. Today, it seems, she’s decided to bring her new feathered friend inside for an early morning chat.

I sigh, pinching the bridge of my nose. As much as I appreciate Mrs. Abernathy’s special brand of spunk, there are rules about farm animals in the guest rooms. “I’m afraid Doris will have to go back outside. The other guests will wake soon, and you know how particular Mrs. Margaret is.”

Mrs. Abernathy pouts. “Must you spoil our fun so soon? The day is still new!”

“I’m sorry, but Doris will be much happier in the coop with her friends,” I say gently. “Why don’t I take her out right now, and you can visit her after breakfast?”

“Oh, very well,” Mrs. Abernathy concedes with a dramatic sigh. “But do give her an extra treat from me!”

“Will do,” I tell her. I probably will, too. I’ll give Doris some leftovers of her own scrambled eggs, and the little cannibal

will gobble them up.

Scooping Doris into my arms, I hurry down the hall like a chicken-smuggling ninja, ducking into doorways when I hear guests stirring.

Funnily enough, this isn't Doris's first run-in with trouble. Far from it. Last year, we went through a period when even the most docile of my hens was copping an attitude with me at every turn. I thought that Randall the rooster was the ringleader of the rebelliousness among the Aubie chickens, so I sold him to a farm. But soon, I realized it was actually Doris who had been leading the chicken revolts.

I couldn't bring myself to get rid of her, though—partly because I felt bad about passing the trouble of keeping her in line off to someone else. Doris is my problem, for good.

I've almost reached the top of the stairs when I hear floorboards creaking down the hall. To my horror, Mrs. Margaret emerges from her room, peering around through sleepy eyes. I need to think of a way to hide Doris, and fast.

“Good morning, Miss Darby,” Margaret says, stifling a yawn. “I thought I heard chatter and footsteps. Is everything alright?”

“Just fine!” I reply brightly. Doris chooses that moment to let out an enthusiastic cluck from within the apron I've wrapped her in. Margaret's eyes widen.

Thinking quickly, I give a little cough. “Excuse me, I seem to be picking up a little cold.” I pretend to cough again as

Doris clucks and fidgets in my apron, no doubt feeling the temptation of rebellion calling her name.

Mrs. Margaret eyes me with suspicion. “How dreadful. I hope it’s not contagious. I have a sensitive constitution, you know.”

“Of course, my apologies. I’ll just step outside for some fresh air.” I inch toward the back door.

Margaret sniffs. “See that you do. Can’t have you infecting your guests!” With that, she retreats into her room and closes the door.

I breathe a sigh of relief, hurrying outside to deposit my feathered cargo back with her hen friends. Ah, mornings at the Aubie. They’re never dull.

“Morning, Miss Darby!” Mary, one of our regular guests, greets me from her seat on the wraparound porch, a mug of dark coffee in hand.

“Good morning, Mary!” I reply with a smile, trying to infuse my voice with as much energy as possible. My petite frame and curly auburn hair may bounce brightly with every step, but I can feel the exhaustion weighing me down. There’s no time for rest, however, when guests’ needs are waiting to be met.

“Is there anything I can get you?” I ask Mary, tucking a stray curl behind my ear.

“Actually,” she says, glancing down at her empty plate, “I wouldn’t say no to another one of those delicious scones Millie made.”

“Of course! I’ll be right back with that,” I say, pivoting on my heel and heading inside to the kitchen.

In a way, “*Is there anything I can get you?*” is a silly question, because the moment I ask it, the answer is always “yes.” Guests’ mouths instantly salivate, or their skin gets colder, or their throats dry up, at the mere possibility that I could fetch them a snack, or a blanket, or a beverage. One of these days I’ll have nothing left to offer and they’ll still come up with something, and next thing I know, I’ll be googling “*how to make miracles happen*” just to keep up with their requests.

But I don’t mind. An interaction like this is a simple way to help guests remember that I’m here to look out for their every need.

“Millie, do we have any more of your blueberry lemon scones left?” I call out, peering into the glass display case stocked with baked goods.

“Sure do, hon,” Millie says. Her warm smile, as usual, never leaves her face as she hands me a plate with a fresh scone.

“Thanks.” I rush back out to the porch to make sure Mary gets it while it’s still warm.

“Here you are, Mary,” I announce triumphantly, setting the plate down in front of her. “Enjoy!”

“Thank you, Sarah Jane,” she says, taking a bite and sighing with contentment. “You always know how to make us feel right at home here.”

I beam at the compliment. That's exactly what I like to hear. I turn away to continue attending to guests, pride swelling in my chest. This old inn might not have been the life I initially envisioned for myself, but now, I wouldn't be me without it—and I wouldn't trade it for anything.

“Miss Darby!” another guest calls out, reminding me that there's no time to indulge in daydreams.

Once the morning rush has subsided and the last guest is satisfied, I make my way to my small office, which is tucked away in a quiet corner of the inn's second floor. This is where the real work begins. As much as I love tending to our guests, it's the behind-the-scenes tasks that truly keep this place running like clockwork.

“Alright,” I mutter to myself, opening up the financial spreadsheet on my laptop. “Let's make some magic happen.”

I spend hours pouring over every detail of the inn's finances, making sure everything is accounted for—from the cost of the fresh flowers adorning each room to the exact amount spent on Millie's exquisite ingredients. After double-checking the numbers, I move on to marketing the inn online.

The internet's not exactly my favorite place these days. Not after what happened two years ago. But, just like I've done IRL, I've carved out a corner of comfort for myself online. I scroll through the glowing reviews left by recent guests and smile.

When I update our social media accounts with pics of our charming rooms and colorful breakfast dishes, it's hard not to

think back to my old life as an influencer. It still hurts to think about it—a nasty bruise left by one awful moment that wrecked everything and made me run all the way back to Auburn Cove.

It makes me paranoid—what if I let someone in again, only for them to tear me apart?

I shut my laptop and let out a deep breath. This is my world now—running the same B&B where I spent my summers as a kid, bringing the place back to its old, comfy vibes. Far from all the bullshit of the outside world that almost swallowed me up. It's safe here, but I can't get rid of that pesky, lonely feeling in my heart.

“Millie,” I call out as I enter the kitchen. “Have you seen the extra tablecloth? We have a full house tonight, and I want everything to be perfect.”

“Check the hallway closet,” Millie says, expertly flipping an omelet in the air. “Or, you know, you could always go buy another at Mrs. Owens' fabric store?”

My pulse skyrockets just thinking about venturing beyond the safe confines of the inn. “Millie...” I warn.

“I know, I know.” She's just testing me, of course. “But Sarah Jane, you can't hide from the world forever. I know it's hard, but life goes on outside these walls too.”

A part of me knows Millie is right, but my fear sticks so deeply inside me that I don't know how to break free.

“Hey,” Millie says softly, placing a comforting hand on my shoulder. “I’m always here for you, okay? No matter what.”

“No matter how much of a basket case I am, you mean.” I smile at her, but she doesn’t really smile back.

Great. When you can’t even joke with your best friend about your lack of sanity without getting that “*oh, honey*” look back, you know you’re in a bad state.

Chapter 2

Sarah Jane

“Where is Janey Dee?”

“Where is Janey Dee?”

“Where is she?”

I’m zoning out on the front porch when Millie plops down on the wicker chair beside me. It’s our favorite place to take a break from work. She eyes me as she sits down, and I try to distract her with something happy so I don’t have to admit I was once again thinking about all the hate people have for Janey Dee.

“Can you imagine what our kid selves would say if someone told us we’d live like this as grown-ups?”

“Our kid selves wouldn’t say anything,” Millie says with a laugh. “We’d just squeal. So. Much. Squealing. Squeals so high-pitched, we’d bust every eardrum in Maine.”

I laugh as I swallow a sip of coffee. It’s true; we did do quite a bit of squealing back then, spending every summer together

when I came to stay at the inn with my Grandma Jane.

“We used to sit out here and dream about living in this town together all year round, instead of just during summers.”

Millie chuckles and takes a sip of her own coffee. “Yeah. And look at us now. You’re running your grandmother’s bed-and-breakfast, and I’m the chef who keeps everyone coming back for more.”

Millie’s lived here her whole life, and she agrees with me that there’s no better view of Auburn Cove than right here on the Aubie’s porch.

My eyes wander over the peaceful scene before us: the inn’s lawn stretched out all around, while sailboats bob in the harbor in the distance, over soft white ripples in the bright blue water. Somewhere out of sight, the town’s clock tower chimes softly, its sweet melody carried on the gentle breeze that rustles the autumn leaves above us.

“Living the dream,” I murmur with a contented sigh. But then a shadow falls across my face, and I bite my lip. “I just wish it didn’t have to take... well, you know.”

Since Auburn Cove was the place where I spent my carefree summers as a kid, I’ve always seen this place as pretty perfect. Not much to get wrong when it exists in a child’s mind as a place permanently free of school. When the only responsibility to keep up with is the self-imposed challenge of finding more seashells on the beach than I did the summer before.

Auburn Cove is a coastal Maine oasis where life moves at a slower pace, free from the chaos and pressure of the world beyond. The people are genuine and welcoming, and the natural beauty is nothing short of idyllic. Rolling hills give way to quiet beaches, their sands kissed by the ever-present lapping waves.

Like I said, living the dream.

Then again, it's not exactly life as we would've pictured it in our childhood dreams.

"Remember our massive sandcastles?" Millie says, almost sadly. "Can't believe you've been here two years without coming back to the beach with me."

"Hey, I can see the beach from here," I argue. But the argument's weak, I know. It's not the same as getting the chance to run the sand through my fingers. "And you know why I can't go out there."

"Sometimes, I still can't believe you used to be Janey Dee," Millie says, with a hint of awe in her voice. "You were like... internet famous."

I chuckle, rolling my eyes. "Infamous, more like it." My stomach churns at the memory.

"Hey, at least you got out of that toxic world," Millie says with a shrug. "Besides, you were always destined to end up back here in Auburn Cove."

She's right, of course. Out here, I'm free to be myself without judgment. I never have to worry about accidentally

live-streaming something private for all the world to see, like
—

The memory grabs me. My boyfriend at the time, Tyler, bursting through the door of my high-rise apartment, eyes blazing with fury.

“What the hell is this?” He brandishes a familiar hot pink box. In hindsight, bright hot pink may not have been the best color choice for something meant to be discreet—my box of sex toys.

Mortification washes over me.

I scramble for an excuse, but before I can speak, Tyler is ranting again. “You have millions of fans who think you’re some kind of perfect, sweet princess, and here I find this!” He shakes the box at me. “You’re nothing but a lying whore.”

My face flames with shame, even now. He’s not wrong. Janey Dee was a carefully curated fantasy, a projection of the girl-next-door innocence my followers craved. The truth is, I have needs and desires, just like anyone else.

“Tyler, what the hell do you want from me?” I’m mortified, but deep down I know the truth—he has no right to shame me for this.

“Really, Sarah Jane?” Tyler looks disgusted as he tosses the box onto my bed. “This is cheating. You know that, right? You’d rather play with these than me?”

Cheating? Is he kidding?

“Maybe if I could actually have an orgasm when we’re together, I wouldn’t need them.” And maybe I shouldn’t have blurted that out.

But it’s out now, and I can’t take it back.

Tyler’s eyes narrow, and he scoffs. “You always seem satisfied when we’re done. If I come, you come. That’s how it works.”

I pause, in spite of myself, because there’s no way he just said what I think he said. “Wait... what? What do you mean, if you come, I come?”

He rolls his eyes at me like I’m the biggest idiot on the planet. Rich, considering what is spewing from *his* mouth right now. “Duh, Sarah Jane. Don’t you know anything about sex? If a dude has an orgasm, it makes the lady orgasm. And then we’re done.”

I might be allergic to bullshit, because a cough wracks my body like it’s trying to expel the sound of the stupid.

“Do you really think that’s how it works?” I manage to squeak out. We’re talking about a guy twenty-nine years old, four years older than me at the time. He hadn’t really gone this far in life believing that his snorty orgasms compelled women to climax, had he?

Tyler takes my question as a genuine inquiry, though. As if I have even less sex education than he does—which would be pretty damn tough.

“Yes, Sarah Jane. That’s how coming works.” He shakes his head at me. “You’re playing around with sex toys and you don’t even know how your own orgasm works.”

“Trust me, you wouldn’t know an orgasm if it slapped you in the face.” If he really thinks the disappointed sigh that I release when he finishes is the sound of an orgasm, then I’ve told no lie.

“Whatever. You’re just saying that because you’re embarrassed about your weird little toy collection.” Tyler wrinkles his nose. “Maybe I should give your fans the inside scoop. Show them what their precious Janey Dee is really like.”

My stomach turns to ice. He wouldn’t dare. “You wouldn’t.”

“Wouldn’t I?” he says, a dangerous glint in his eye. Then he smiles, slow and unpleasant. “I think it’s time people saw the real you... unless you give me a reason not to tell them the truth.”

I stare at him, chest heaving. I know what he’s asking, what he’s always asking for. My body, on demand. As much as the thought repulses me, destroying everything I’ve worked for is worse. I swallow hard and nod.

Tyler’s smile widens. “Good. Now, get over here and show me how you use those toys. The fans will want all the dirty details.”

I force myself to move, to go to him. If this is what it takes to keep him from exposing me, so be it. I can survive this, like

I've survived everything else. I have to.

As I walk toward him, dread churning in my gut, a faint beeping reaches my ears. At first I dismiss it, too focused on Tyler and his vile demands, but then the sound registers.

The livestream.

I'd been about to start a livestream before Tyler stormed in, and my hand must have hit the button when he startled me. My blood runs cold as it all sinks in.

I've been live-streaming this entire conversation.

My gaze jerks to the phone propped up on my dresser, red light blinking, and for a moment I can't breathe. How long has it been streaming? *Long enough*, a treacherous voice in my head whispers. Long enough for my fans to see everything.

Tyler follows my gaze and realization dawns on his face, eyes widening. His mouth drops open, working soundlessly, and if I wasn't so horrified, I might laugh at his gobsmacked expression.

"You set me up on purpose," he snarls, the accusation as bitter as it is blatantly untrue. "You want your fans to see this, Sarah Jane? Then they can see you getting dumped. We're over." He kicks the bed before he leaves.

"Shit!" I cry, fumbling to end the stream. In those agonizing seconds before I can shut it down, I'm painfully aware of the thousands of people watching Janey Dee get dumped in real time, her sordid secrets laid bare for the world to see. My face burns with embarrassment so intense it feels like I've stuck my

head in an oven. The live chat bubbles up with comments, and the words are like poison-tipped arrows aimed straight at my fragile heart.

“Janey Dee has a sex toy collection? LOL,” one person writes, followed by another saying, “I knew she was too good to be true.”

“Wow, talk about fake,” someone else chimes in, and the virtual knives twist deeper in my chest.

I slide down to the floor, cradling the phone with my now-tainted reputation in my hands. It all happened so fast. Dumped live on camera. Made to look like some kind of sex addict. All the time I put into a carefully crafted public persona has been wasted, because now the Janey Dee image has shattered completely.

All because of one careless livestream and a now-ex boyfriend with an ego more fragile than glass.

Millie seems to notice that I’m lost in the land of unlucky livestream memories, because she squeezes my hand to bring me back to the Aubie’s front porch.

“There, there.” Her soothing voice draws me into the present, her grip on my hand grounding me. “What’s done is done. You’re safe here.”

“Millie, the absolute worst part of it all wasn’t even the video itself,” I confess, my voice shaking. “It was how people treated me afterwards.”

“Really?” Millie’s brow furrows with concern.

“Absolutely.” I swallow hard. “I thought my fans loved me, you know? But after that... They were so cruel. They called me names, made viral memes about me, and just completely tore me apart. Even people I considered friends turned their backs on me, like they couldn’t distance themselves fast enough. The worst was when someone sent a giant dildo to my mom’s house with a note saying, ‘For Janey Dee, since she can’t get the real thing.’” I shudder at the memory. “And don’t even get me started on the countless unsolicited dick pics in my inbox.”

“Everyone loves a good public downfall,” Millie says, her voice heavy with sympathy. “But you’ve risen above it all, haven’t you? This inn, this town—nobody from your past has been able to follow you here.”

“Which is why this inn and Auburn Cove mean so much to me.” My gaze drifts over the picturesque town. “After that disaster, I needed a place where I could be in control of my own life again. Somewhere I can breathe without feeling like the world is watching my every move. It’s the one place where I feel safe.”

Tending to guests, maintaining the inn—it all helps me focus on what I’ve got right here, so that I don’t drift back to ugly thoughts of the past again.

I don’t mention this part to Millie, but it also helps that the guests here know me, but they don’t *really* know me. I can be friendly with someone while they’re here and then send them on their way, never to be seen again. Or to be seen on their

next visit, when I can pretend that seeing a familiar face means I've made a connection with someone.

But they're not real connections. I know that. I can keep them at a distance, keep my heart guarded, know they won't turn on me. The worst they could do is write a bad Yelp review, and I'd take one bad review over a whole internet of haters, any day.

"Don't let your past define you, Sarah Jane," Millie says. "You've built a whole new life for yourself, and that's something to be proud of."

I feel a pang of shame. Is hiding out in the inn for two years really something to be proud of? "You really think so?"

"Cross my heart and hope to die," Millie says, drawing an X on her chest before reaching over to ruffle my hair. "Now come on, let's get back to work. Those scones aren't going to bake themselves."

Just then, the mail carrier passes by, dropping a small stack of envelopes into the mailbox next to the front porch. I sigh, realizing today's the day I have to face the dreaded bills and other adulting demands. "Time to face the music," I grumble under my breath as I walk over to retrieve the mail, my sneakers crunching on the gravel path.

"Anything interesting?" Millie calls out.

"Mostly bills," I say as I rifle through the stack. My fingers pause on an envelope with elegant handwriting and no return address.

“Dear Miss Darby,” I read aloud, my mouth suddenly dry. “My name is Haden Miles, and I’ve recently become aware of your charming bed-and-breakfast inn. I’m very interested in purchasing the property and would like to set up a meeting to discuss the sale at your earliest convenience...”

“Wait, what?” Millie rushes to her feet.

“I... I...” I don’t even have words.

“Maybe it’s just a misunderstanding,” Millie suggests.

“Or maybe he wants to turn it into some soulless corporate retreat.” My hackles rising at the thought. “I can’t let that happen, Millie. This place means everything to me.”

I crumple the letter as a sob claws out from my chest.

Millie reaches for me, but I pull away. My breathing comes fast and shallow. Ever since the live-stream disaster, I’ve struggled to keep control. And now this Haden Miles wants to swoop in and take away the only thing I have left.

Over Millie’s shoulder, I spot the mailbox. Before she can stop me, I run over and frantically shove the letter inside. That’ll do it, right? Out of sight, out of mind.

But closing the mailbox lid does nothing to ease the panic rising in my chest. My peace is in jeopardy once again. And I don’t know if I’m strong enough to protect it.

Chapter 3

Haden

The blacktop road curves ahead, lined with weathered split-rail fences and gently swaying willow trees. I ease my sleek silver sports car around the bend, catching my first glimpse of the key to my future: the Aubie Bed and Breakfast Inn. The stately Victorian structure stands proudly atop a grassy knoll, its wraparound porch and peaked gables reminiscent of a bygone era.

My lips curl into a satisfied smile. This quaint country inn will soon bear my name. I imagine tearing down the faded blue shutters and painting the exterior a sophisticated charcoal gray. The old floorboards and antique furniture will be replaced with polished marble and leather.

Yes, this outdated relic is ripe for a modern redesign.

I pull up to the gates and park. The moment I step out onto the gravel, the crisp sea breeze tousles my dark hair, and I breathe in the salty air.

My silver car is sleek, but it doesn't glisten nearly as much as the blue water in the nearby harbor—or the sparkling eyes of the young woman who's walking out of the inn to greet me.

I lower my sunglasses, blinking in surprise. She can't be even thirty years old. And with those freckled cheeks and bright green eyes, she looks far too spirited and lovely to be stuck running this decaying bed-and-breakfast.

Property manager, maybe? According to property records, the inn's owner is a woman named Sarah Jane Darby. I'm guessing Miss Darby is a doddering old woman who's eager to retire, and if she's no longer running the place herself, then it'll be even easier to convince her to sell.

"You must be Mr. Miles," the woman behind the gate says, her eyes as shimmery as emeralds.

"That's me." I take her hand, momentarily lost in the warmth of her skin against mine. *Get it together, Haden.* This is business. "And you are?"

At the same time I say this, the woman says something that sounds like "I'm Sarah Jane Darby"—but that can't be right.

"Yes," I say. "Sarah Jane Darby."

She tilts her head, dipping her fiery auburn curls. "Yes."

Ah. I wasn't clear. "Sarah Jane Darby—that's who I'm here to see," I clarify, adjusting the collar of my tailored suit.

She frowns at me like I'm a fool. "You're seeing her."

I look around, past the property manager. Is the old woman sitting on the porch? Watching me from a window? What kind of game are they playing here? Maybe it's a Maine tradition to haze newcomers like this, which cannot be good for customer service.

Well, it's not like I don't know how to have fun with people. I can jab right back, so I try smiling along with the joke. "Funny, you don't look like you're eighty-six years old," I inform the woman in front of me, who still hasn't told me her name.

Her eyes take on a determined yet quizzical look, like she's not sure what game we're playing, but she's set on beating me at it, anyway.

"Small town living will do that to you," she says with a shrug. "I look like I'm only twenty-seven on the outside, even though I'm eight-six inside."

I grin. "You have no idea how much I like to hear that about small town living."

She crosses her arms, her compact little frame looking protective of all that stands behind her. "Are you going to tell me what made you assume I'd be eighty-six years old?"

"Well, not you." I clear my throat. Are we still being playful? Is she actually taking offense to this? "I had pegged Sarah Jane Darby as someone in her eighties or so."

"I *am* Sarah Jane Darby," she says.

I blink. “You?” I look around again, like she might still be playing a joke on me. “Are you named after your grandmother or something?”

She stiffens. “In a way.”

“Then can I meet the original Sarah Jane?” I chuckle, my throat dry. “I’m looking to meet with the owner of the inn, to be clear.”

That frown again. It takes over her entire face, tightening the cute little cupid’s bow of her pink lips.

“I read your letter,” she says. “So I know why you’re here. Oh, wait a minute.” She looks up at me like she’s got me all figured out. “Did you think my grandmother still owns this inn? You mean to tell me you came all this way from New York City, intending to buy this place, and you didn’t even bother to do your research about who owns the inn? That’s quite the oversight, don’t you think?”

“Uh...” I pause, considering how I might handle this. Her emerald eyes seem to pierce through me, making me feel more exposed than I’d like. There’s something about her playful confidence that is both frustrating and incredibly attractive.

Okay, so she’s right. I didn’t do much research before I came here—as in, I did hardly any research at all. But that was the whole point. I’ve picked a quaint little small town, a place I know nothing about except for its quaint little small town-ness, and I’m going to make it mine. I’m being spontaneous. Proving certain people wrong about me.

Maybe even proving to myself that I'm not who I used to be.

Besides, in my experience, deals like this don't require all that much research. I'm not dealing with other real estate investors or developers. Not trying to take over a whole boardwalk or subdivision. Not trying to convince the beneficiaries of a multi-million-dollar corporation to part with their lucrative location. And I've successfully done all of that and more in my career. But in the case of the Aubie Inn, this is just one building with just one owner. Just one independent business that's probably more trouble than it's worth for its owner and any involved family members. For deals like this in the past, I've simply handed over a check and the other party was more than happy to take it and walk away.

Sarah Jane's raising an eyebrow at me. "Well, Mr. Miles?"

"Call me Haden," I finally sputter out, regaining my composure. So this Sarah Jane Darby is a pretty young woman, not an elderly retiree. Not exactly the toughest challenge I've ever faced. I can still close this deal. "I apologize. You're right that I should've done more research. I'd love to step inside to talk, and to learn more about you and your lovely inn."

Her expression remains unchanged, and she doesn't exactly look flattered.

I keep talking. "It's safe to say I got you pegged all wrong, but you called me 'Mr. Miles' right away. How'd you know it was me?"

She eyes me up and down, then cranes her neck to look pointedly at the car behind me. “We don’t get many suit-wearing hot shots around here,” she says. “Most people come to relax.”

I smile. “Well, I’m hoping what I’ve come to offer you will relax us both.”

“Don’t count on it. Haden.”

Huh. So not only is Sarah Jane not some old woman—she’s not docile at all. I’ve got to start doing something about this wall between us.

Her defiant tone sparks my competitive nature. She clearly needs convincing that my plans for this inn are exactly what Auburn Cove needs, so I flash my most disarming grin.

“Shall we discuss the matter inside?” I reach for the gate to let myself onto the property, but Sarah Jane holds up a hand.

“Enter at your own risk,” she warns. “I’m not liable for any animal-related damages you end up with.”

I quirk a brow and look around. “You have a vicious guard dog I should know about?”

She shakes her head. “Not a dog. But you might wish she was. There’s no muzzle that can fit Doris, and she doesn’t listen to my commands.”

“Doris?”

As if the creature knows to respond to her name, a rotund white chicken comes sputtering to the top of the gate between

us like a feathered volleyball.

Where did that thing come from? I flinch. Doris squawks. Sarah Jane snorts.

“What, they don’t have chickens where you’re from?” she says. “No guard hens in the big city?”

Shit. When it comes to these real estate development deals, I’m not supposed to be showing any weakness. Certainly not supposed to be disarmed by a foot-tall animal within minutes of my arrival.

“I didn’t think chickens could fly,” I say. A poor excuse for letting the animal get to me.

“Doris is a very strong flapper,” Sarah Jane says, her face remarkably straight for a farm animal aviation explanation. “Don’t think your height will save you. She can get up there if she wants to.”

The bird cocks her head and eyes me from the gate, as if she is, in fact, considering coming “up here.”

Don’t do it, bird. Sarah Jane’s apparently a fan of yours, so I’d hate to deck you in self-defense in front of her.

“You, uh, think you could call your guard chicken off?”

Sarah Jane shrugs. “Like I said. Doris does whatever she wants. Good luck!”

With that, she turns and sashays up the front walkway.

Presumably, I’ll have to take on the chicken to follow her.

Chapter 4

Haden

I'm not letting the chicken win... Which is a statement I never expected to make regarding a commercial real estate deal.

If Doris is the only thing standing between me and Sarah Jane Darby—or me and Sarah Jane's inn—then I'm about to take Doris down.

This may prove to be harder than it looks. But in my defense, the alarmingly large hen has been described to me as a “guard chicken,” and her jerky movements are unpredictable as she eyes me from the gate. Afraid of getting clawed or plucked, or worse—I don't know what kinds of weapons this bird might keep stashed under her feathers—I pull the bottom of my suit jacket up to protect the side of my body facing Doris.

“Nice chicken,” I murmur. “Just stay right there, and we won't have any problems.”

I reach for the gate, and the chicken reacts. Not with her claws or her beak, but with her voice.

I thought chickens clucked. This one's screeching like a wheezing hyena. Doris is teaching me all kinds of new things about chicken-kind today.

“Stop right there, young man!” a thin voice calls from across the yard. A woman who looks more like the age I'd pictured for Sarah Jane Darby marches over to me and scoops the chicken into her arms. “Don't you dare hurt this sweetie,” she says, narrowing her eyes at me and cradling the hen like a baby.

“You're making enemies, Haden Miles,” Sarah Jane says from the porch. I hadn't realized she was still watching. “Mrs. Abernathy is very fond of that bird.”

“Who knew one could form such strong attachments to poultry?” I retort, trying to play it off as a joke.

She laughs, a melodic sound that makes me realize just how attracted I am to her. Amusement dances in her eyes, but she doesn't keep her gaze locked on me for long before she turns and disappears into the inn. With Doris secured in Mrs. Abernathy's adoring arms, I follow.

It's easy to see why Sarah Jane holds this place so dear. The inn is a stately old Victorian, its white paint peeling and faded from years in the salty sea air. Flowering vines crawl up the porch columns, and wind chimes dance softly in the breeze. There's a coziness to the place, a sense of gentle welcome.

Inside, Sarah Jane leads me into the dining area of the inn, where the scent of fresh-baked bread and lavender fills the air

and antique lamps cast a soft glow over the room. I can hear laughter beyond the hallway.

“Nice place you have here,” I say, trying to put Sarah Jane at ease. “I can see why you’ve grown attached to it.”

“Thank you.” Her tone is polite but guarded, reminding me I’m not quite welcome here yet. “My Grandma Jane left it to me when she passed away a couple years back, and it’s been my haven ever since.”

“Ah, sentimentality—a powerful force, indeed.” I pause, settling into a chair and trying to come up with a plan. My mind races through various strategies, but I keep coming back to one central idea: I need to show her that selling the inn isn’t just about business, but also about growth and opportunity. “If you don’t mind me saying so, it seems like you could use a change of scenery.”

“Then you don’t know me at all,” she says, her eyes narrowing.

I give her a firm smile. “Sarah Jane, I understand your attachment to this place, but I’m prepared to offer you a substantial sum for it.” I let the words hang in the air. People’s priorities can change when financial freedom like they’ve never known comes into the picture.

“Money isn’t everything, Mr. Miles.” She crosses her arms defiantly. “This inn is more than just a building—it’s a part of me.”

It seems the negotiation will be far more complicated than I initially thought. Sarah Jane clearly has an emotional attachment to this rambling old house and its quirky inhabitants, like the fierce chicken Doris.

“Very well,” I say, leaning back in my chair and locking eyes with her. “You’re not going to make this easy for me, but I do love a good challenge.”

“Good.” She meets my gaze without flinching.

It’s sinking in just how beautiful Sarah Jane is—and it’s not just her physical appearance. There’s something about her spirit, her unflinching care for this place, that’s putting me under some kind of spell.

I take a deep breath, trying to refocus my thoughts. The sun streams through the large windows, casting a warm glow on the meticulously set table. My eyes wander over Sarah Jane, the sunlight dancing off her curly auburn hair.

The lingering tension between us shifts to a new seriousness.

“Let me show you something,” I say, reaching into my briefcase for the proposed contract. She watches me warily, but doesn’t object.

This will get her on board. It has to.

I try to put the contract down on the table, but there’s an absurd amount of stuff in the way—teacups, plates, napkins—and I have to move some of it aside to make space.

“Hey, could you not...” Sarah Jane starts, moving quickly to rearrange the items back to their original spots, her eyes

shooting daggers at my offending hands. This happens two more times before I give up.

“Is this how you run this inn?” I ask, raising an eyebrow. “It must be exhausting trying to keep every little detail in place like this.”

“Exhausting? Not at all.” Sarah Jane sounds defensive. “I like things a certain way, that’s all. It’s called having standards.”

“Standards, huh?” I look around the room. The inn is charming and quaint. It almost feels like stepping into another era, straight out of a Jane Austen novel. But with its ancient wallpaper and suspiciously sticky carpeting, I can’t help but think that this era might not hold up to the demands of modern life.

When I look over at Sarah Jane again, her eyes are alight with challenge, as if daring me to point out any flaws in her inn.

I clear my throat and spread the contract out on my lap, no longer attempting to find space on the cluttered table. I point to the exact dollar amount of my offer and look at Sarah Jane. “Just think about what you could do with this money. You could travel, start a new business, or just live comfortably without constantly worrying about cleaning up after guests.”

I don’t mean to point her to my crotch—but I realize that’s exactly what I’m doing as I follow her gaze. I snap the contract up to my chest instead, and her flushed cheeks tell me she knows exactly why I did that.

She clears her throat. “Money isn’t everything.” Her eyes meet mine without wavering.

She said that already. Is it her personal motto or something? I can tell she’s not even considering my offer, which is becoming increasingly frustrating. I need this inn, and she doesn’t seem to understand that—but I’m not exactly eager to explain my reasons to her.

“I don’t understand why you’re so attached to this place,” I say. “You’re young. You could do so much more with your life if you weren’t tied down to an old inn.”

“Maybe.” Her eyes flash defiantly. “But you know what? It’s worth it. My Grandma Jane poured her heart and soul into this place for generations. You don’t just throw that away for a quick buck.”

“Really, Sarah Jane?” I snap, my patience wearing thin. “You’d rather continue running this place into the ground than accept an incredibly generous offer that could change your life?”

“Excuse me?” She crosses her arms over her chest. “This inn is not ‘running into the ground,’ thank you very much.”

“Isn’t it?” I gesture around the room. “Look at these faded curtains. The peeling wallpaper.”

“That’s called charm, Haden,” she says, her voice dripping with disdain.

“Charm? Is that what you call the creaky floorboards and the outdated furniture in the lobby?”

“Better than some sterile, cookie-cutter corporate hotel like you’re probably used to,” she shoots back.

“Stubborn fool,” I mutter under my breath, shaking my head. She catches my words, and her eyes narrow.

“Maybe I am stubborn,” she hisses, taking a step toward me. “But at least I know what’s important to me. Can you say the same, Mr. Billionaire?”

“Actually, I can.” So much for maintaining a personal touch—my voice is cold. “I worked hard to get where I am today, and I don’t appreciate being judged by someone who clearly knows nothing about me.”

“Then maybe you should stop judging me,” she snaps back. Her cheeks flush with anger.

“Maybe I should.” I clench my jaw. “But that doesn’t change the fact that this place is falling apart, and you’re too damn stubborn to take a good opportunity when you see it.”

“Believe me, it’s not that great of an opportunity.”

“Right, because who needs financial security when you’ve got leaky pipes and drafty windows?” My tone drips with sarcasm, and for a moment, we just stare at each other through the thick, tense air.

Sarah Jane huffs, clearly annoyed. “I’ve got work to do, so if you’ll excuse me.” She gets up from her chair, dismissing me as if I were an insignificant bug, and starts puttering about the inn, straightening pillows and adjusting knick-knacks. You’d

think somebody's life depended on the alignment of figurines right this second.

I watch as she moves from task to task, the taut lines in her shoulders never easing. The woman is a rock, dead set on keeping her world in order even as it threatens to collapse around her.

She's right that I don't know much about this place, or the people who stay here.

I can only think of one way to fix that.

If I can't persuade her with words, maybe I can show her what she's missing out on. Maybe I can make her see that there's more to life than just this crumbling old inn. And the best way to do that is to get closer—much closer.

“Sarah Jane,” I call out, interrupting her frenzied tidying. She stops, fixing me with a wary gaze. “I'd like to book a room here at the inn. For a few days.”

“Excuse me? You want to stay here?”

“Is there a problem with that?” I ask. “I mean, you do run this place as an inn, do you not?”

“Of course I do,” she says defensively. “But why would you want to stay here? You think the place is falling apart. Wouldn't want to get any peeling wallpaper pieces in your perfect over-gelled hair, would you?”

“Maybe I want to see if you're as good a hostess as you claim to be,” I say, allowing a hint of a smile to tug at my lips.

“Or maybe I just want to spend some time in this quaint little town before it’s swallowed up by modernization.”

“Sorry, Haden, but the inn is full. We don’t have any room for you.” Sarah Jane’s green eyes sparkle with triumph.

“Full? Are you sure?”

“Positive,” she says with a tight smile.

“Actually, Sarah Jane...” A woman steps into the room with a tray of freshly baked cookies. Clearly, she’s responsible for the mouth-watering scents I’ve been smelling around here. “There’s still the attic space available.”

“Millie!” Sarah Jane hisses, shooting her friend a glare that could freeze fire. Millie just smiles sweetly, setting down the tray on a nearby table.

“Look, Haden.” Sarah Jane sighs, clearly frustrated. “If you’re staying here just to convince me to sell, I’ve already told you—I’m not interested. It’s bad enough that I have to deal with you during the day; I don’t need to be tripping over you at night as well.”

“Sarah Jane, believe it or not, I can separate business from pleasure,” I say. “I promise I’ll stay out of your way.”

“Fine,” she mutters, defeated. “But don’t expect any special treatment.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” I assure her with a widening grin.

For the next few days, I’ll be right under Sarah Jane’s nose, watching her every move and finding new ways to convince

her that selling the inn is the best decision for both of us.

And who knows? Maybe along the way, I'll get her to feel something about me besides irritation.

Chapter 5

Sarah Jane

“Alright, Haden. Follow me.” I lead the man who has managed to thoroughly embed himself as a thorn in my side up the narrow staircase that creaks with every step we take. “This is what I like to call ‘The Penthouse.’ Though I should warn you, it’s probably not like any penthouse you’ve ever stayed in.”

“Can’t be that bad, right?” Haden smirks, his dark eyes twinkling with amusement.

The man actually has the nerve to be attractive, which I count as just more evidence of his devilish ways. If he’s going to show up to ruthlessly take over someone’s beloved family inn, you’d think he’d at least stop being so damn cute while he’s at it. Is it too much to ask for some overgrown nose hairs or a creepy stare to give me more ammo to hold against him?

Reaching the top of the stairs, I push open the door to reveal the attic space where Haden will be staying. The first thing that hits us is the musty smell, as if this room hasn’t seen fresh air in decades. The peeling wallpaper, adorned with faded

roses, clings desperately to the walls, while the creaky floorboards complain under our weight.

While it has basic furniture, like a bed and a chest of drawers, I haven't yet renovated the space to meet my standards for housing guests. But hey, maybe if I emphasize all the dingiest aspects of the room, Haden Miles will get scared and take his too-rich, too-attractive butt elsewhere.

"Welcome to your humble abode," I announce, theatrically spreading my arms wide. "As you can see, it's quite... cozy."

Haden steps further into the room, scanning the surroundings with a curious expression. He doesn't seem bothered by the state of the place at all. If anything, he seems intrigued.

"Cozy indeed," he agrees. He runs his fingers along the dusty windowsill, leaving a clean trail in their wake. "It has character, though. I like it."

"Really?" I can't hide my surprise. I was so sure the disheveled state of the attic would send the fancypants city man running for the hills. But then again, maybe this is just another one of his ploys—to make me think he doesn't mind the mess, only to use it against me later.

"Absolutely," he says, shooting me a measured smile. "It's got potential. Besides, it's not the accommodations that matter. It's the people you meet along the way."

He stares at me pointedly, and I raise an eyebrow. I may be slightly flattered by his words—I feel like I'm being checked out by a damn movie star, the way his unfathomably blue eyes

stare into me—but I can't let him know that. He needs to think I'm not impressed. "Well, if you insist on staying, I hope you don't mind a little manual labor. The inn requires quite a bit of upkeep, you know."

"Manual labor?" Haden grins, rolling up his sleeves to reveal muscular forearms that make my heart skip a beat. "Sounds like fun. I'm sure I can handle anything you throw my way."

Dammit—that sure backfired. Not only do I now have those damned sexy forearms to look at, but I'm picturing Haden flexing his muscles to care for the inn, and the thought is sure not helping me temper my attraction.

"Really?" I'm trying to focus on anything other than the way his chiseled jawline tightens as he speaks. "You'd even be up to cleaning out the gutters?"

"Especially cleaning out the gutters." He smirks, clearly enjoying our banter. "You might be surprised at what I'm capable of, Sarah Jane."

My cheeks flush involuntarily, and I mentally kick myself for letting him get under my skin. I need to remember why he's here—to take away my sanctuary.

"Fine," I huff, turning away before he notices the effect he's having on me. "But don't say I didn't warn you."

"Sure thing."

"Alright. There's one more thing you should know." I gesture towards a flimsy fake wall that divides the attic into two sections—this side filled with old furniture and boxes, the

other a makeshift bedroom. “I’ll be staying on the other side of this wall.”

Haden raises an eyebrow, his warm blue eyes studying me as if he can see right through my attempts to play it off like it’s no big deal. “Really?”

“Yep.” I force a smile. “I’m the only one who sleeps up here—um, before you, that is—because it’s not ready for guests yet.”

“Interesting,” Haden murmurs. His gaze lingers on the thin barrier between us. The weight of his stare sends goosebumps down my spine, and I suddenly find myself questioning whether sharing this space is such a good idea.

“Are you sure you’re okay with this arrangement?” I shift my weight from foot to foot, hoping his unease leads him to call this whole thing off before mine does. “Because if not, I’m sure we can work something else out.”

“Actually,” he says, stepping closer, his chiseled jawline catching the dim light from the single bulb overhead, “I think I prefer it this way.”

His words hang in the air between us, his lips pouting and inviting, and I swallow hard. The sexual tension between us thickens, making it difficult to breathe, let alone think straight.

“Good,” I stammer, trying to get my composure back. “Glad we’ve got that sorted.”

“Me too.” His voice is low and smooth as silk. He reaches out to brush a stray curl from my face, his fingertips grazing

my cheek, and my heart skips a beat.

“Uh, well, I guess I’ll leave you to settle in,” I say, taking a step back to put some distance between us. “And, um, I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Goodnight, Sarah Jane,” he murmurs, his eyes never leaving mine as I retreat towards my side of the wall.

“Night,” I mumble, feeling my cheeks heat as I duck behind the flimsy barrier, desperate for even the illusion of privacy.

As I lie in bed, listening to Haden move around on the other side of the wall, I have to wonder what we’ve gotten ourselves into. The attraction between us is undeniable, but so are my suspicions about his motives.

For now, though, all I can do is close my eyes and hope that tomorrow brings clarity—or at least a better understanding of this man. I crawl under the covers, my heart still pounding as it did the whole time while I washed up for bed, never forgetting for a second that Haden is here. The sheets feel cool against my flushed skin as I try to steady my breathing. Through the thin wall that separates us, I can hear Haden’s every breath, each exhale chilling the goosebumps on my skin.

I turn toward the window, trying to block out the sound of his steady breathing. But it’s like attempting to ignore a siren’s call—impossible and all-consuming.

My mind races with thoughts of Haden: his muscular arms, his impeccable jawline, and those piercing blue eyes that seem to see right through me.

I can't trust him. I know I can't. His smooth talk and charming smile are just weapons in his arsenal that he can use against me, threatening the life I've built within these walls. But that doesn't stop my traitorous heart from skipping a beat every time he looks at me or brushes against my skin.

As I toss and turn, desperately seeking sleep, I'm startled by a creaking floorboard outside my makeshift room. My heart leaps into my throat as I sit up, straining to hear any further movement.

"Sarah Jane?" Haden's voice floats through the darkness, low and uncertain. "Are you... are you okay?"

"Um, yeah," I stammer, cursing myself for the squeak in my voice. "Just... couldn't sleep."

"Me neither," he says. The silence that follows feels heavy with unspoken words.

"Goodnight, Haden," I finally say. I can't afford to let him in, not when I've fought so hard to keep everyone else out.

"Goodnight, Sarah Jane," he replies, his voice soft and tinged with something that sounds like longing.

As sleep finally begins to claim me, I'm pulled from my thoughts by a sudden noise—a quiet tapping on the wall that separates us. My heart races, and I hold my breath, waiting to see if Haden will take the first step to bridge the gap between us.

But then... nothing. Silence descends once more, and I'm left to wonder what might have been—or what might still be—

as I drift off into a restless slumber.

Chapter 6

Sarah Jane

I wake up with a start. There's something unfamiliar in The Penthouse this morning. Did Doris manage to waddle her feathers up here? No—the whole attic space is silent, and I'm alone.

Then the faint scent of masculine sweat hits me, and I remember. Haden Miles slept here.

Clearly he's not here right now—it's much too quiet for a huge, hulking man to be lumbering about without my noticing. From my experience with him yesterday, the man also doesn't know how to shut up, so I'm sure I'd hear his mouth running by now if he were here. Plus, I'd sense his presence. His movement. His annoyingly stupid too-handsomeness.

I rub the sleep from my eyes with the heels of my hands before pushing back the covers. Today is going to be a day where I stay in control and keep my sanctuary intact. Haden might think he has all the money in the world, but he doesn't own me or my grandmother's inn.

I start my rounds with knocking on guests' doors, but nobody answers my knocks. Nobody—not Mr. Corbett, who's usually awake before I am, not Mr. and Mrs. Nelson, and not even Mrs. Abernathy making another attempt to hide her feathered friend Doris inside.

Where is everybody?

I walk down the stairs to the first floor, and the first thing I hear is Haden's laughter. It's echoing from the dining room. The sound is so infectious that I almost forget how angry I am at him for trying to buy this place out from under me. Almost.

When I step into the dining room, the smell of freshly brewed coffee and warm pastries fills the air. The guests are already seated, chatting with each other, and Haden sits among them, his magnetic presence impossible to ignore. You'd think he'd turn down the irresistibility just a tad to let everybody enjoy their breakfast in peace.

"Morning, everyone," I say. I sound a little monotone when I say it—not like my usual cheerful greeting of guests. Ha. That'll show Haden. I can't even be bothered to vary the tone of my voice for him.

I am the queen of indifference.

I hold my spiteful breath and plaster a smile on my face as I greet every familiar face at the table—except for one. My smile falters as I catch sight of him, looking as handsome as ever with those extra-blue eyes matching his silky button-up shirt. I quickly make my face as expressionless as possible for my brief glance at him.

The other guests get my attention as I turn to them with homemade granola and fresh fruit salad, while pointedly ignoring Haden.

I can feel him looking at me. He probably thinks I just can't help but look back, but I refuse to make him the center of attention.

"Thank you, Sarah Jane," Haden says with a Cheshire Cat smile when I reach his chair at the table. "This looks absolutely... edible."

I nearly drop my serving spoon on the floor. Silver clatters against ceramic as I let it fall into the granola instead. The guests jump in perfect unison all around the room.

Great. I'm startling my guests first thing in the morning. This is probably the simplest task I'll have to do all day, and I'm making it look as grueling and dramatic as an Olympic sport.

Fine. I'll look at him. I turn to squarely face Haden with my best *You win, asshole* expression on my face. Will the unignorably handsome man-beast in my dining room be pleased now that I'm giving him attention?

"I think you'll find that it's more than edible if you give it a taste," I tell him. "We grow the fruit fresh here on the grounds, and I make the granola myself."

"Ah." Haden grins. "And here I didn't think it looked like anything special to offer the inn's clientele."

I raise an eyebrow at him. Mr. Businessman thinks that throwing around words like “clientele” makes him more qualified to please my guests at the breakfast table?

I could mention the part where Millie’s the one who came up with our granola recipes. But the point is, she showed me how to make it, and now—after several early batches that turned out so sickeningly sweet, they left the walls and carpets feeling sticky—I’m the one who makes a new batch at the start of every week. This week’s flavors include dried cranberries, sliced almonds, and a chai tea dusting that Millie also came up with herself.

But Haden doesn’t need to know that the culinary genius is Millie, at least not right this second. Because he’s just dipped his spoon into his granola, swirled it through a dollop of fresh whipped cream, and popped it into his mouth. And the way his eyes close in sync with his lips closing around the spoon is captivating.

I don’t at all mind the feeling that I’m personally responsible for knocking him down a peg from his know-it-all tower as he realizes how wrong he was about the granola. He opens his eyes to look at me, and he doesn’t even have to say it—in his eyes, I see his astonishment at the delightful flavor. Now I’m the one grinning smugly.

“This granola is absolutely divine,” Mrs. Nelson says, gesturing toward her bowl with her spoon.

“Thank you!” At least someone’s not shy about complimenting my culinary abilities. I smile at her and her

husband. “I hope you’re enjoying your stay.”

“Indeed we are, dear,” Mr. Nelson says with a nod.

“I have to agree with Mrs. Nelson about this granola,” Haden finally admits. “‘Divine’ is the perfect word for it.”

Hmph. It turns out he’s still annoying, whether or not he’s complimenting my granola. It’s like he thinks it’s not truly delicious unless he deems it so. Who does he think he is, the crowned prince of hospitality?

And how does he know Mrs. Nelson’s name? Is he already making friends with my guests?

I push my spiteful feelings aside and continue making my rounds. Despite my best efforts, I can’t avoid overhearing Haden charming the other guests with stories of his travels. It’s infuriating how effortlessly he fits in and captivates their attention.

“...but I’ve never tasted granola like this before.” Haden’s eyes land on me as he finishes an impossibly charming story of worldwide culinary adventure. “Sarah Jane managed to make a simple breakfast taste like a gourmet treat.”

My heart flutters and I shake my head—maybe at myself? I have to remember not to fall for this guy’s charms. But before I can come up with a way to accept Haden’s flattery without also offering to open my legs for him, Millie pops her head into the room with her mouth hanging happily open like a cartoon clown’s.

“Did you just mention my granola? Did you taste it? Do you love it?” Millie hops the rest of her body into the room to hear—no, relish in—Haden’s answer.

Because that’s just my luck. This granola is the strongest point I’ve got going for me in the *I can run this inn better than you can* challenge I have going on with Haden. And now he knows the granola recipe is not even mine. And he might think I just lied about making it, too.

“Ah. Your granola, is it, Millie?” Haden directs the question to Millie, but he’s looking at me.

The worst part of all this is that he keeps chewing on granola, little by little, and with every crunch, he does something frustratingly sexy to react to the flavor.

Crunch. His tongue darts out to lick his lips. *Crunch.* His breath makes a deep, vibrating hum. *Crunch.* His whole face ignores the fact that crunching is not supposed to be a sexy thing. If anything, crunching annoys people. It’s cringy. Who asked Haden to go make something sexy out of it?

“Well, it’s my recipe,” Millie says with her eyes lighting up, like they always do when she talks about her food, “but Sarah Jane does the mixing these days. It’s a team effort!”

I gulp. Haden smiles, and so does Millie, because she thinks she’s making both of us look good. She has no idea she’s actually exposing me as a liar whose height of culinary skill looks like scooping ingredients together and doing a little swirl-a-roo with a big spoon to mix it all together. And I’m not going to try to make her go along with the lie that gives me all

the credit, because she really does enjoy pleasing people's palettes with her food and she deserves all the praise she gets.

"Anyway," I say, clearing my throat, "I hope you all enjoy your breakfast. I'll be around if you need anything."

"Actually, Sarah Jane." Of course Haden waits until I'm trying to leave to take a break from his stupid sexy crunching. "Would you mind giving me some recommendations? I hear there's a beautiful hiking trail nearby."

"Um, sure." I'm suddenly aware that everyone in the room is now focused on our conversation. "The trailhead is just down the road from here. You can't miss it."

"Great!" Haden's smile widens as he stands up from the table. "I'll check it out. Thanks for the tip."

As I busy myself with cleaning up, a small part of me yearns to join in the laughter and camaraderie coming from the dining room. But I know better than to let my guard down around Haden Miles. He may be charming, but I have to remember what's at stake: my sanctuary, my home.

"Sarah Jane, wait up!"

I hear Haden calling after me as I step outside the inn for my daily walk. I hesitate for a moment and then reluctantly stop in my tracks, waiting for him to catch up.

"Can I join you?" he asks, flashing that all-too-charming smile of his.

I try my best to think of a good excuse for why he shouldn't, but beyond "we need to keep your absurd handsomeness

contained to the indoors,” I can’t.

“Fine,” I grumble. We set off down the tree-lined path, seagulls cawing in the distance like they’re echoing the alarm bells in my head.

“Tell me about your life before the inn,” Haden says.

Suspicion flares like a shield over my chest. “Why do you want to know?” I ask.

“I’m very curious,” Haden says, “what brought you to running an inn? It seems like such a quiet life compared to, say, living in a bustling city.”

I shrug, careful not to reveal too much about my past. “I inherited it from my grandmother and found solace here.”

“Ah, that makes sense.” He pauses thoughtfully. “It must be nice to escape the chaos of the world sometimes.”

“Definitely.” We’re getting too close to talking about what I’m escaping from, so I change the subject. “But enough about me. What about you? There must be more to Haden Miles than just being a billionaire trying to buy my inn.”

“Ah, well, that’s a bit more complicated,” he says. “Let’s just say I have my reasons for wanting this place.”

As we continue walking and talking, the easy rhythm of our conversation lulls me into a sort of trance. I don’t even notice how far we’ve come until we reach the old stone bridge that spans the creek at the edge of the inn’s property. The sight of it instantly snaps me back to reality, and my stomach clenches

like a fist. This is the furthest I've ventured from the inn in years.

Panicking, I glance around. There must be a way to hide my fear without revealing the truth about my past.

"Sarah Jane?" Haden's voice sounds far away. "Are you okay?"

"Uh, yeah," I stammer, forcing a smile. "I just remembered I need to check on something back at the inn."

He looks beyond the bridge. "Is there some danger over there I should know about? A bridge troll waiting to snatch me? Doris setting a trap?" He smiles, gentle humor warming his blue eyes.

I can only wish that warmth was enough to fix this.

"This is as far as I usually go."

"Really?" Haden looks around curiously. "Why's that?"

The fear creeps up my spine, and it's accompanied by the threat of humiliation. I know exactly where this is going with Haden. Well, okay, maybe not, since I only just met the guy. But from what I know of people and their unfortunate tendency to be... people, if he finds out what's really going on, I don't expect him to be kind about it.

Before I can stop myself, I'm lashing out.

"Is this some kind of game to you?" I snap. "You think you can just waltz in here, charm your way into my life, and then convince me to give up everything I've built?"

Haden frowns, his eyes narrowing as he takes a step back. It's obvious that I've caught him off guard, but I can't bring myself to care. My heart is racing, and all I want is to get away from him and the dangerous allure he holds over me.

“Sarah Jane, I don't understand,” he says. “What's gotten into you?”

“Nothing.” I shake my head. “I just... I can't believe I let you convince me to leave the inn like this. You've got your own agenda, and I don't want any part of it.”

“Hey, I thought we were having a nice time.” He runs a hand through his perfectly tousled hair. “If I did something wrong, please tell me. I never meant to upset you.”

I scoff, rolling my eyes. “Sure. You're just trying to get on my good side so you can buy the inn from under me. Nothing wrong with that at all.”

I turn away from him, racing back towards the safety of the inn. The wind in my ears carries the sound of Haden calling my name, but I don't stop until I push through the heavy wooden doors and slam them shut behind me. The sound echoes through the empty foyer, and I lean against the door, trying to reclaim control of my emotions.

My breath comes in short gasps as I lean against the cool wood. How could I have let Haden get under my skin like that? I spent the whole morning trying to show him I'm strong and impenetrable, and then all it took was one dumb walk to let him charm me right out of my comfort zone.

“Stupid, stupid, stupid.” I wrap my hair around my hands in frustration.

A sigh blusters through me and I put my hand to my chest, as if to physically hold back the tidal wave of emotions threatening to overwhelm me. I know I have to stay strong, no matter how much Haden makes me laugh or how his voice sends electric shivers down my spine. I have a sanctuary to protect, a life I’ve built brick by brick, and I can’t let it crumble now.

Why is it that Haden seems to see right through my walls to look at the real me?

The scariest part is, I’m not entirely sure if that’s a good thing or not.

Chapter 7

Haden

I have a morning wood problem.

The problem is not the boner itself; that's just part of being a guy, I suppose. No, the problem is navigating said morning wood while Sarah Jane sleeps mere feet away on the other side of the flimsiest wall known to man. The wall is rigid, sturdy enough on its own but not doing much to keep my raging desire from reacting to Sarah Jane. Hmm. It feels like an appropriate metaphor for my predicament.

The past few mornings, I've found ways to handle this delicate situation with minimal embarrassment. There was that first morning when I tiptoed to the bathroom, praying that the creaky floorboards wouldn't give me away. Then there was the time when I thought Sarah Jane might be awake, and I panicked, pressing my pillow against my lap as I shuffled past her room.

But it's getting harder each day—pun intended. The wall does nothing to muffle sounds, for one. I can hear every rustle of sheets, every soft sigh in her sleep. I know when she rolls

onto her side, can tell if she's having a restless night or sleeping peacefully.

It doesn't help that I'm getting used to the sight of her in those tiny shorts and tank tops, the curve of her hips and the swell of her breasts. I know the exact spot on her neck where her pulse flutters. I shouldn't know these details, but I do. I can't un-know them.

And it really doesn't help that she's started smiling at me over breakfast, shy little glances from under her lashes, like maybe this insane attraction isn't one-sided. Like maybe she wants the same impossible thing I do.

I muffle a groan, kicking off the sheets and scrubbing my hands over my face. I can already hear her moving around next door, the floorboards creaking under her feet. The wall does nothing to contain scent either, and a whiff of her shampoo reaches me, something clean and bright, sunshine in a bottle.

This is torture. Sweet, exquisite torture with no end in sight.

The creaking of the stairs signals Sarah Jane's departure from the attic, and I exhale with relief. She's gone to start her usual rounds of checking on the guests, leaving me alone with my thoughts. As much as I enjoy spending time with her, I can't shake the nagging feeling that I don't deserve to be near her. My motives for wanting to buy her bed-and-breakfast aren't exactly pure, after all.

I know what I have to do, as much as I don't want to. I'll need to find an excuse to stay in town today, to put some

distance between us. I can't be around her, not with my body reacting like this, urging me to cross the line we've so carefully drawn.

But first, I'll need a cold shower. A very cold shower. Freezing, even.

This is going to be a long day.

I swing my legs off the side of the bed and stand, but as I do, floorboards creak again.

The stairs. Sarah Jane is coming back up.

Panic swells in my chest. There's no time to hide what's tenting the front of my boxer briefs. She'll know, as soon as she steps through that door, exactly what I was about to do. The thought makes me dizzy with embarrassment.

The stairs groan under her weight, each step bringing her closer to discovering my shame. I glance around wildly, looking for some way out, but I'm well and truly trapped.

When Sarah Jane pushes through the curtain, I've resorted to clutching a pillow over my lap. My face is on fire, my heart jack hammering. This is a nightmare.

"Haden?" Her eyes widen, flickering from my face to the pillow in my hands and back again. A blush steals over her cheeks, but she recovers quickly, smoothing her expression into one of polite concern. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to intrude. Just wanted to let you know breakfast is ready if you're hungry."

She's giving me an out, an excuse for my current state, and relief floods through me. Even so, I can't meet her eyes. "Thank you," I mumble, staring at the floorboards. "I'll be down soon."

"Take your time." Her hand brushes my arm for the briefest second before she slips through the curtain again. The warmth of her touch lingers long after she's gone.

I sag onto the edge of the bed, pillow still clutched in my lap. That was too close. I can't stay here, not now. As soon as I get myself under control, I'm heading into town for the day. No more near misses. No more torture.

Distance. I just need some distance.

But first, I need to take care of this... situation. I bite my lip, silently cursing my body's betrayal, and set about handling it as discreetly as possible.

After scrubbing myself raw in the shower, I practically bolt down the stairs and out the front door of the inn, nearly colliding with an elderly couple on the porch. "Sorry!" I call over my shoulder, already halfway to my car.

The drive into town is a blur. By the time I pull up in front of Sami O'Hara's coffee and baking shop, my heart rate has finally slowed to normal. Funny how being away from Sarah Jane means I don't have to keep a pillow shoved in front of my crotch.

The block I'm walking is familiar to me now. I never expected to wander the charming streets of Auburn Cove so

frequently. But since my arrival in this quaint little town, I've been spending more and more time getting acquainted with its unique character.

Sami greets me with a smile as I open the door. "Morning, stranger! The usual?"

My visits here have become a comforting ritual. As soon as I step inside, the rich aroma of freshly ground coffee beans envelops me, like a warm blanket on a chilly autumn morning.

"Hey, Sami. Yes, the usual, please."

Sami's probably in her fifties, a dark-skinned woman who wears a different head wrap for each day of the week. Her energy echoes through the soft hum of conversation filling the air, punctuated by the occasional clink of ceramic cups and saucers. The gentle whir of the espresso machine provides a soothing backdrop.

I'm grateful for this little oasis. There's nothing like the comforting atmosphere of the Aubie Bed and Breakfast Inn, but this place is a close second. I'm slowly becoming a part of the fabric of this town, and it's a feeling I didn't know I was missing until now. There's something about Auburn Cove and the bed-and-breakfast inn that's starting to feel like home.

I could feel a lot happier about that if it just meant making a good real estate deal, and not also tearing Sarah Jane away from her home at the inn. Dammit. I've got to find a way to keep my eye on my goal without feeling guilty at every turn.

“Here you go, Haden.” Sami hands me my usual order—a large cappuccino with an extra shot of espresso and a dash of cinnamon. “Enjoy!”

“Thanks.” I rub the back of my neck, scanning the shop for an open table.

“You look like you’ve seen better days.” She wipes her hands on a towel. “Everything alright at the inn?” Sami knows I’m staying at the Aubie, and she always asks about Sarah Jane and the inn.

“Yes. Just restless.” My eyes land on Millie sitting alone at a table near the back, a half-empty plate pushed aside as she stares out the window.

I weave between tables and chairs, coming to a stop next to her. Millie startles at my greeting, pressing a hand to her chest. “You scared the life out of me!”

“My apologies.” I gesture to the empty chair across from her. “May I?”

“Please do.” She collects herself with an embarrassed laugh. “What brings you into town so early?”

“Just needed to get out of the house for a bit.” I sip my coffee and Millie’s knowing look makes me wonder if Sarah Jane has already told her about our awkward encounter this morning. But she remains silent, waiting.

I clear my throat. “I haven’t properly thanked you yet for all your hard work at the inn. The food has been incredible.”

“Well, aren’t you sweet.” Millie’s cheeks go pink with pleasure. “I really enjoy cooking for guests who appreciate it.”

“Consider me your biggest fan. So, how did you and Sarah Jane meet?”

Millie smiles, gaze softening as she stares into the past. “Her family came to Auburn Cove every summer when we were kids. We were inseparable in the summers, and pen pals for the rest of the year. Sarah Jane was always protecting me from bullies, standing up for anyone weaker. She had the biggest heart.” Her eyes meet mine, expression turning wistful. “Still does.”

A pang stirs in my chest at the open affection in Millie’s voice. I want to know Sarah Jane like that, see all her facets, discover what lies beneath the polished exterior of the innkeeper. But I’ve already overstepped this morning. Pushing for more will only lead to disaster.

I clear my throat again. “She’s lucky to have a friend like you.”

“And I her.” Millie winks. “Now, why don’t you tell me what’s really bothering you?”

I hesitate, warring with myself. But Millie radiates warmth and understanding, and I find the words spilling out before I can stop them.

“It’s Sarah Jane. I can’t figure her out.” I run a hand through my hair, frustrated. “One moment she’s all smiles and charm with the guests, in her element as the perfect hostess. But then

she'll get this look in her eyes, like she's a million miles away, and she won't talk to anyone for hours."

Millie nods, a crease forming between her brows. "She's always been like that. Gets lost in her own head sometimes."

My curiosity piqued, I probe a little further. "You know, Millie, I've been trying to understand why Sarah Jane is so hesitant to sell the inn. She's passionate about it, that much I can tell, but there must be more to the story." I pause, gathering my thoughts. "I mean, I've made her a generous offer, and I truly believe the inn has great potential. But she's still resistant. Do you have any idea why?"

Millie hesitates, studying me carefully before answering. "I think it's just that the inn means so much to her on a personal level. It's not just a business—it's her home, and a huge part of her identity. Selling it would be like giving away a piece of herself, you know?"

I nod, understanding the sentiment, but still feeling like there's something deeper going on. "But surely there must be some underlying reason for her attachment? I feel like I'm missing something important about her past."

Worry lines pull at Millie's mouth. I can see the conflict in her eyes. She wants to confide in me, but her loyalty to Sarah Jane wins out.

"I'm sorry," she says softly. "That's not my story to tell."

I swallow my frustration and give her a rueful smile. "Fair enough," I concede, even though my curiosity is itching like a

wool sweater in July. “I just want to help her, you know? She seems... stuck.”

For a long moment, Millie just looks at me. Then she reaches across the table and pats my hand.

“You seem like your heart’s in the right place, Haden Miles. Just keep being patient with her. Showing you care. Sarah Jane will come around when she’s ready.”

“I care more than you know,” I murmur.

Millie nods slowly. “There is one thing you could try to help with, actually.”

“Anything,” I say.

“Getting her out of the inn.”

“Getting her out of the inn?” I’m confused by her suggestion. “What do you mean?”

Millie bites her lip, as if weighing her words carefully. “Sarah Jane... she never leaves the property. And it’s not because she’s busy with the inn. She just won’t leave.”

Wait a minute. Her words sink in, and I find myself startled. I quickly think back on all the time I’ve spent in town and around the bed-and-breakfast, realizing that Millie is right: I’ve never seen Sarah Jane leave.

“Hold on.” My brows furrow as I consider this. “You’re right. I haven’t seen her off the property since I’ve been here. Not once.”

“Exactly.” Millie nods. “But I think it would do her a world of good to get out and see what she’s been missing. So, if you can convince her to step outside those gates, even for a few hours, I think it could really help her.”

“Alright, Millie. I’ll do my best.”

“Hope you can get through to her, Haden,” she says.

Millie leaves the coffee shop, and as I sit alone by the window, I can’t shake the image of Sarah Jane trapped within the confines of her own sanctuary. I sip my cappuccino, replaying every interaction I’ve had with her. The way she flits around the inn, attending to guests and ensuring everything runs smoothly. Her laughter when she calls the attic “The Penthouse” and the way she blushes when she catches me staring at her. And now that I think about it, I can’t recall a single instance where she’s mentioned anything beyond the inn’s borders.

It’s baffling, the realization that someone as vibrant as Sarah Jane has confined herself to such a small world. What happened that made her so anxious about going out? Of all the places to be afraid—I’d think she’d feel perfectly safe in Auburn Cove. Didn’t Millie say she spent every summer here as a child?

I’ve encountered my fair share of mysteries in life, but this woman is proving to be the most intriguing of them all.

I leave a generous tip in the jar by the register before stepping outside into the crisp autumn air. The leaves have

begun to change, painting the town with vibrant reds and golds.

Such beauty. Such simplicity. I never appreciated places like this before, always chasing the next thrill in some exotic city. Now I crave the gentleness around here.

An idea begins to take shape in my head.

It's time to show Sarah Jane that there's a world beyond the inn just waiting for her to rediscover. And if I play my cards right, maybe she'll let me be the one to guide her.

After all, life's too short to hide away in our own personal attics—especially when there's a whole town full of people who care about us, and endless adventures waiting just outside the door.

Chapter 8

Haden

The warm glow of the dining room fireplace feels like a gentle caress against my skin as I sit opposite Sarah Jane. My eyes drift over to a photograph hanging prominently. An elegant woman with a striking resemblance to Sarah Jane stares back at me. “That’s a beautiful picture,” I say, nodding towards the photograph. “Is that your grandmother?”

Sarah Jane tenses up, her grip tightening around her coffee mug. “Yes, that’s Grandma Jane.” Her voice is tight.

“Tell me about her.” I’m curious about this woman who’s so important to Sarah Jane.

“She’s the reason we’re both sitting here right now. She opened this place herself, you know.”

I lean in, listening as Sarah Jane unravels the story behind the photograph.

“My grandfather was... not a good man. He abused my grandmother”—she pauses, swallowing hard—“but she found the courage to leave him. In that era, women didn’t just walk

away from their husbands, let alone start their own businesses. But Grandma Jane did just that. She brought her kids here, opened Aubie Bed and Breakfast Inn, and never looked back.”

“Really?”

Sarah Jane nods, pride in her smile. “Came here with my mom and aunt, and turned this big old house into the inn. She was so brave.”

Her voice trembles, and something inside me stirs. I study Grandma Jane’s defiant eyes. They remind me of my own mother’s eyes, full of quiet strength. I want to tell Sarah Jane how much her words hit close to home. I think of my childhood and the countless nights spent listening to the sounds of glass shattering and harsh shouts echoing through the house. My throat tightens, but I push the memories away, focusing on Sarah Jane instead.

“She must have been an incredible woman,” I say.

Sarah Jane’s shoulders relax slightly. “Grandma Jane was the strongest person I’ve ever known. This inn is a testament to her strength.” Her voice catches. My chest aches, wanting to shelter her somehow. I can see that same strength in Sarah Jane, even if she may not realize it herself.

I reach out and gently touch her hand, hoping to comfort her. “She would be proud of you, Sarah Jane. You’re carrying on her legacy in the best way possible.”

Sarah Jane’s expression softens and she searches my face, green eyes glistening. For a moment, everything stills between

us. Slowly, she turns her palm over and squeezes my fingers. Heat rushes through me at her touch.

“Thanks, Haden.” Sarah Jane stands abruptly, cheeks flushed. “I should check on things. Excuse me.”

I watch her hurry off, ponytail swaying. Something powerful stirs in me, seeing glimpses of the real Sarah Jane—both vulnerable and mighty. I want to know her completely. To prove she can trust me.

But how, without scaring her away? I rake a hand through my hair in frustration. Patience, I remind myself. With care and time, maybe her wounds can heal. Maybe some of mine can, too.

“Hey, I noticed you have some boxes up in the attic that need sorting,” I say. “Why don’t I give you a hand?”

Sarah Jane hesitates before nodding. “Alright, let’s head up to The Penthouse.”

I follow her up the creaky stairs, feeling the weight of our shared family histories behind us.

“Okay,” she says, pointing to a stack of dusty boxes in the corner. “These need to be sorted through and organized. Some have old linens, while others have knickknacks and mementos from Grandma Jane’s time.”

“Consider it done,” I say confidently, already rolling up my sleeves.

“Wait,” she interjects, stifling a laugh. “You can’t just dive in like that. There’s a system.”

“System?” I raise an eyebrow, curious to know what kind of method lies behind organizing dusty boxes in an attic.

“Of course.” She steps closer, showing me how to properly open each box without damaging the contents. “We want to make sure everything is preserved and treated with care.”

“Got it,” I say, feeling warmth across my face as I realize the importance of these items to Sarah Jane.

As we work side by side, the air between us becomes charged. Each brush of her fingers against mine sends a jolt down my spine, and I have to wonder if she feels it too. Despite the dust and the peeling wallpaper, there’s something undeniably intimate about sharing this space with her.

Sarah Jane releases her ponytail and then glances up, catching me staring. “What?”

“Nothing, just... you look really nice with your hair down like that.”

A pretty blush spreads over her face. She turns back to the task, lips pressed together to hide a smile.

“Here, let me show you how to do these linens,” she says. “There’s a particular way we fold things around here.”

“Of course. I’m sure I can handle it,” I say, trying to inject some humor into the situation to get to that smile of hers.

Sarah Jane demonstrates her technique, expertly folding a sheet with swift, graceful movements. “See? It’s all about the corners.”

“Alright, let me give it a try,” I say, grabbing a sheet from the pile. I fumble with the fabric, struggling to figure out how she made it look so easy. My attempt results in a lumpy mess that barely resembles a sheet at all.

Sarah Jane bursts into laughter, her eyes twinkling with amusement. “Here, let me show you again,” she offers, suppressing a grin.

She moves closer, positioning herself right next to me. Our bodies touch briefly as she adjusts my grip on the fabric, causing an electrifying jolt to shoot through me. I can feel the heat radiating off her body, and I catch a whiff of her intoxicating scent—a mix of lavender and vanilla.

“First, grab the corners like this,” she instructs, guiding my hands with hers. The close proximity makes it difficult for me to concentrate on anything but the gentle pressure of her fingers on mine, and the curve of her lips as she speaks.

“Next, pull the edge tight,” she continues, her breath warm against my cheek. I want to pull her even closer, to feel her body pressed against mine. But I push the thought away, focusing on the task at hand.

“Finally, fold it over like so,” she finishes, helping me complete the process. The sheet now lies folded neatly in my hands, a testament to our combined efforts.

“Thanks for your expert tips,” I say, my voice slightly strained from the effort of keeping my desires in check. “I didn’t think folding laundry could be so... intense.”

“Anytime,” she says, her gaze meeting mine. The air between us crackles with electricity, and for just a second, I think about leaning in for a kiss.

But I hesitate, unsure if Sarah Jane feels the same way. Just then, her cheeks flush a rosy pink, and she quickly looks away. That subtle reaction tells me everything I need to know—she’s just as affected by our closeness as I am.

“Um, I think you’ve got this under control,” she says, her voice slightly shaky. “I should probably get back downstairs.”

“Sure.” I try to keep the disappointment out of my voice. “Let me know if you need any more help.”

She nods, making her way to the creaky stairs.

“Hey, Sarah Jane,” I call out as she reaches the bottom of the stairs. “I heard there’s a food fair in town this weekend. Lots of local vendors and live music. I thought you might enjoy it.”

She tenses at my words, her grip on the handrail tightening. “No, thank you, Haden. I appreciate the offer, but I have a lot to do here.”

“Come on, just for an afternoon?” I say, trying to keep the tone light and playful. “I promise, the inn won’t fall apart without you.”

“Really, Haden, I appreciate the invitation, but I can’t leave the inn.” Her voice is firm.

“Sarah Jane, I’ve been here for a couple weeks now, and I’ve noticed that you never leave this place. Don’t you think you deserve a break?”

Her eyes narrow as she crosses her arms defensively. “What are you trying to say, Haden? Are you purposely trying to make me uncomfortable?”

My eyebrows shoot up in surprise. “That’s not what I meant at all,” I say, shaking my head. “I just want you to experience new things and not be stuck in the past.”

“Stuck in the past?” she scoffs. “What do you know about my past? Have you been snooping around?”

“Of course not!” I rush to say, feeling a surge of indignation. “I know nothing about your past, but I can see when someone’s holding themselves back.” My words come out more defensive than I intend, but it’s true—I don’t have a clue about her life before the inn, and I wish she’d trust me enough to share that with me.

“Are you insinuating that I’m hiding from something, Haden? Because I assure you, I am not.”

“Look, all I’m saying is that maybe it would be good for you to get out more,” I say, trying to defuse the tension. “I’m not trying to force you into anything. I just... I want you to see that there’s more to life than just this inn.”

I descend the attic stairs to join her in the hallway, trying to ignore the squeeze in my heart as she takes a step back from me.

“Why should I trust you?” Sarah Jane’s voice breaks ever so slightly. “Why should I believe you’re not just trying to manipulate me somehow?”

“Because...” I trail off, struggling to find the right words. How can I make her understand that I genuinely care for her, despite our initial animosity? “Because I’ve been where you are. Not exactly, but... I know what it feels like to be trapped by your past. And I don’t want that for you, Sarah Jane. I want you to be free.”

For a moment, she looks vulnerable, as if she might let her guard down and let me in. But then, just as quickly, the shutters come back up. “You don’t know anything about me, Haden.” Her voice shakes with anger. “And you have no right to assume you do.”

She looks away, seeming to find an explanation in the dusty air.

“Did Millie put you up to this?” she asks, her expression darkening.

“Millie?” I repeat, taken aback. I’m grateful for my ability to feign innocence right now. The last thing I want is to throw Millie under the bus. “No, of course not. This is just me being concerned about you.”

“Right,” she says, her eyes narrowing further with skepticism. “Well, forgive me if I don’t trust your concern. And for the record, I’m perfectly fine staying at the inn. It’s not like I need a knight in shining armor to rescue me.”

“Sarah Jane, I’m not trying to be your knight in shining armor. I just want you to be happy.”

“Thanks, but I can take care of myself.” Her tone is icy. She turns on her heel and storms off, leaving me standing there, dumbfounded.

The more her footsteps retreat, the more I feel an overwhelming sense of protectiveness towards her. Her reaction has me wondering if someone hurt her in the past, and that thought churns up a storm of anger inside me.

I close my eyes, taking a deep breath and trying to focus on the scents of the inn—the warm, inviting aroma of freshly baked bread wafting from the kitchen, the faint scent of lavender from the antique potpourri sachets hidden throughout the hall. These comforting scents anchor me, providing a brief respite from the storm of emotions raging within.

As I open my eyes, I notice a mote of dust illuminated by a beam of sunlight streaming through the window at the end of the hallway. My gaze follows its lazy path, and I feel a strange kinship with it—floating along, uncertain of where to land, or if I’ll find a place to settle at all.

And as I stand there, torn between wanting to help Sarah Jane and fearing the consequences of doing so, the shadows in the hallway seem to grow darker, closing in around me like a shroud of doubt.

I shake my head and head downstairs, passing the portrait of her grandmother. Grandma Jane’s eyes seem to follow me, equal parts wary and hopeful.

“Don’t worry,” I murmur. “I’ll look out for her.”

I find Sarah Jane in the kitchen, furiously chopping vegetables while Millie watches with concern. When I enter, Sarah Jane avoids looking at me.

“Hey,” I say. “I wanted to apologize if I overstepped earlier —”

“Forget it,” Sarah Jane says, not meeting my eyes. “It’s fine.”

“No, clearly I upset you. That wasn’t my intention.” I move closer, lowering my voice. “I just want to understand, Sarah Jane. Help me understand why you never leave.”

Her chopping slows. She glances at Millie, who tactfully excuses herself from the room.

Sarah Jane sighs, finally meeting my gaze. “It’s... complicated. This inn, it’s my safe place. Out there, I just...” She trails off, looking so vulnerable that my chest aches.

“You don’t have to explain,” I say. “Not until you’re ready. But know that you can trust me. When that time comes, I’ll be here to listen.”

Sarah Jane studies me for a long moment. “Thank you, Haden,” she says softly.

I offer a gentle smile. We still have a ways to go, but this feels like progress. Like the first step in bringing down those walls, brick by brick.

Sarah Jane turns back to her chopping, but her shoulders seem less tense now. I linger a moment, wanting to say more, but sensing she needs space.

As I exit the kitchen, I nearly collide with Millie in the hallway.

“Oh! Sorry, I was just...” Millie glances around shiftily.

I raise an eyebrow. “Eavesdropping?”

“No! Well, maybe a little.” Millie gives an impish grin. “I’m glad you two are talking. She trusts you, even if she won’t admit it.”

I chuckle. “We’ll see about that. But I meant what I said—when she’s ready, I’ll be there.”

Millie nods, touching my arm. “You’re a good man, Haden.”

I duck my head, unused to such praise. Clearing my throat, I say, “Well, I should get back to sorting. Lots still to do around here.”

With a knowing smile, Millie steps aside and lets me pass. As I walk away, I feel lighter. Hopeful. This ornery innkeeper has gotten under my skin, in the best possible way.

Chapter 9

Sarah Jane

The stairs creak under my feet as I climb up to the attic, each groan of the old wood echoing in the empty halls of the Aubie. I'm dog tired after a long day of scrubbing floors and changing sheets, but I wanted to make sure Mr. Tall-Dark-and-Thorn-in-My-Side was asleep before I turned in for the night. As much as I hate to admit it, Haden has been invading my thoughts more than I'd like.

I cautiously step onto the attic's first creaky floorboard, wincing as it groans beneath my foot. So much for not making any noise. I hold my breath and freeze, listening for any signs that I've woken sleeping beauty in the next room. All I hear is silence.

It's a delicate dance from here on out—one misstep could alert Haden to my presence. Like an amateur ballerina, I tiptoe across the room, making sure not to turn on any lights. My stealth skills are severely lacking, but I'm determined to avoid detection. With each silent movement, I feel like I'm

auditioning for a slapstick comedy film—or at least the blooper reel.

Finally, I make it to the bed. As I crawl under the covers in my ratty pajamas, I can't stop my thoughts from wandering. What does Haden look like when he's sleeping? Does that chiseled jaw relax when he dreams? Ugh, I've got to get it together. This man is the enemy.

Still... a girl can fantasize, can't she? I punch my pillow and squeeze my eyes shut, forcing myself to think of anything else—laundry, dishes, even that leaky pipe in room 3. Eventually, exhaustion takes over, and I drift off to sleep, wondering if Haden is dreaming of me, too.

I jolt awake to a strange noise coming from the other side of the attic. Bleary-eyed, I peer at the clock—2:47 AM. What on earth is Haden doing at this hour? I hear a loud thump, followed by a muffled curse. My curiosity burns. Is he building a spaceship over there? 2:47 AM might be the perfect time for stealthily rebuilding a vessel to take you back to your home planet. I chuckle at the absurdity of my own thoughts, but curiosity keeps poking at me. This man sure has a way of getting under my skin.

I have to know what he's up to over there.

Careful not to make a sound, I slide out of bed, planting my feet on the floor. Like a cat stalking its prey, I glide across the attic, pausing with each suspicious noise. My heart races, a mix of excitement and trepidation pumping through my veins.

I know I'm invading Haden's privacy, but the allure is impossible to resist.

I edge closer to the fake wall between us, the nerves in my body tingling with anticipation. The light flickers erratically, casting eerie shadows on the peeling wallpaper.

I peer around the corner, finally able to see the source of the commotion.

And there he is—Haden Miles, billionaire extraordinaire and my current enemy-of-sorts, hunched over...

...over an old sign? I blink, trying to process the sight before me. Haden sits on the dusty attic floor, wearing a white tank and surrounded by paintbrushes, cans of paint, and a beautifully crafted wooden sign.

"Is that...?" My voice trails off as I recognize the familiar lettering—it's the vintage sign that used to hang outside the inn, long before its weathered state forced me to take it down.

Haden jumps at the sound of my voice, nearly knocking over a can of gold paint. "Sarah Jane! What are you doing up this late?"

I open my mouth, but no excuse comes out. I'm too distracted by the sight of his muscular torso glistening under the bare light bulb's harsh light. A fluttery feeling swirls in my belly.

Stop that, I scold myself, tearing my eyes away. "I, uh, thought I heard something. What about you? What's with the... art project?"

He scratches his head, clearly uncomfortable under my scrutiny. “I found this sign in one of these boxes and thought it was a shame that such a beautiful piece of the inn’s history should be hidden away. So, I decided to restore it.”

“Really?” What an unexpected display of sentimentality. “You don’t strike me as the arts-and-crafts type, Haden.”

“Ah.” He smirks. “There’s a lot you don’t know about me, Sarah Jane.”

“Clearly.” I step closer, examining his handiwork. The once-faded letters now gleam with fresh coats of paint, the chipped edges smoothed out. It’s stunning. “This is impressive, Haden. I didn’t know you were so... talented.”

“Aha! A compliment from you? This is a first,” he teases, his eyes crinkling playfully. For a moment, the tension between us dissipates, replaced by a warm camaraderie that takes me by surprise.

“Is there anything else you’re hiding from me?” I ask, my voice softening as I look at him. For the first time since we met, I see Haden as more than just a handsome billionaire with dubious motives. I see a man who, despite his wealth and status, still finds joy in the simple pleasures of life.

“Maybe,” he says, his eyes locked on mine, filled with mischief and something deeper—an emotion I can’t quite place, which stirs a longing inside me.

He turns back to the sign, and I stand there watching. I can’t help but notice the way his broad shoulders flex beneath his

shirt, his strong hands expertly manipulating the tools. I feel a warmth spreading through me that has nothing to do with the dim light of the attic.

“Are you planning to watch me all night?” Haden says, glancing up at me with a wink.

“I might.” I’m trying to play it cool, but I can’t tear my eyes away from him. “Have to make sure you don’t ruin my inn, after all.”

“Trust me, I have only the best intentions for this place.” He looks at me seriously for a moment, and something in his gaze quickens my heartbeat.

“Is that so?” I take a step closer and lean down. Our faces are mere inches apart now, and the air between us seems glittery. Haden’s blue eyes flicker down to my lips, and I suddenly find it hard to breathe.

And then it happens. A crackle of electricity passes between us, sending a shiver down my spine. Our eyes meet, and I’m drawn to him like a magnet. The air around us seems to thicken, heavy with desire and unspoken intentions. My heart races, and I feel the heat rise in my cheeks.

“Sarah Jane,” Haden murmurs, his voice quiet as he leans closer to me. Our breaths mingle, and for a moment, I’m lost in the depths of his blue eyes—eyes that hold secrets I suddenly long to discover.

I can’t resist any longer. Gripped by a surge of reckless desire, I grab Haden’s shirt and crush my lips against his.

It's a soft, tentative kiss—an exploration of uncharted territory. He stiffens in surprise before melting into the kiss, his strong arms encircling me. Our mouths move together hungrily as pent-up passion ignites between us. Haden's hand comes up to cradle my face, pulling me closer, deepening the kiss until my toes are curling and my heart is pounding in my chest.

My hands slide up his muscular chest and lock around his neck, pulling him closer. His fingers tangle in my hair as the kiss deepens, our tongues intertwining. I'm lost in the taste of him, the hard planes of his body pressed against my soft curves.

We come up for air, foreheads touching, breathing ragged. The want in Haden's eyes mirrors my own. I know I should stop this now, before we cross a line, but I crave more. One kiss only left me starving for the next.

But reality comes crashing down on me like a tidal wave, and I pull away from him, my cheeks flushing with embarrassment. What am I doing? Kissing Haden Miles, the man who wants to buy my sanctuary, the one place that keeps me grounded in this crazy world.

“Sorry,” I mumble, my eyes darting away from his. “I shouldn't have done that.”

“Sarah Jane...” Haden begins, but I shake my head, cutting him off.

“No, really. It was a mistake. Just... forget it happened, okay?” My heart aches at the thought of walking away from

him.

“Okay,” he says, reluctance in his scratchy voice.

As I retreat to my makeshift bedroom, my heart pounds in my chest, leaving me with a single, overwhelming thought: I am in so much trouble.

Chapter 10

Haden

The sun warms my face as I hang the vintage sign on the front porch of the inn. The creaking of wood and the rustling of leaves create a peaceful harmony around me.

I've been finding solace in working on projects for the inn, whether it's fixing broken floorboards or repainting the walls. It's been a few days since Sarah Jane and I shared that unexpected kiss, and she's been avoiding me ever since. I can't help but wonder if I crossed a line. Sure, she kissed me first, but if she had any idea what it did to me to have her lips against mine, how hungrily my body reacted... Well, let's just say she'd know it was me who wanted to keep going, way, way beyond the line.

To keep my mind off her—or at least try to—I've buried myself in various projects. "Anything to keep busy," I tell myself. Of course, it doesn't hurt that fixing up the place will only increase its value if I manage to convince her to sell.

"Aubie Bed and Breakfast Inn," the sign reads in elegant gold lettering against a backdrop of dark green. I lean back to

admire my handiwork, pleased with how it compliments the age and character of the property. The old-fashioned lettering and weathered wood give it character, fitting in perfectly with the charm of the property. I can't deny that I've grown fond of this place, even though my original intentions were far from sentimental.

"Looks nice," Sarah Jane says, her voice soft and hesitant.

I turn to find her standing a few feet away, her hands tucked into the pockets of her apron. A light blush colors her cheeks as she avoids making eye contact with me. She's pulled her curly auburn hair back into a loose bun, revealing the delicate curve of her neck. Just seeing her again sends a jolt of warmth through my chest.

"Thanks." I'm as giddy as a schoolboy on pizza day to see that she's not avoiding me, but I try to keep my tone casual as I descend the ladder. "I think so, too. The beauty of the inn makes me look good—like I actually knew what I was doing with the sign or something."

Sarah Jane smiles, hesitating for a moment before closing the distance between us. Her eyes flicker over the sign, and I can see the appreciation in her gaze. "You've really put a lot of work into the inn," she says, her voice still cautious.

"I enjoy it." I run a hand through my hair. "It helps me clear my head, and besides, I think this place deserves some care. Frees you up to do what you do so well, taking care of the guests, so you don't have to worry about all these other details."

She finally looks at me, her green eyes meeting mine. Her tone and the way she fidgets with her fingers tell me she's not entirely comfortable right now.

“Um, yeah,” she stammers, still avoiding my gaze. “I just, uh, wanted to talk to you about something.”

I nod, gesturing for her to continue, and we both turn our eyes back to the vintage sign. Somehow, it seems to have brought a new life to the inn.

“So.” I break the silence. “What's on your mind?”

Sarah Jane begins by taking a deep breath. “I was thinking about that food fair you mentioned the other day. The one this weekend.”

My eyebrows shoot up in surprise, and a hopeful smile tugs at my lips. “Really?”

“Yeah.” She hesitates, biting her lip. “I thought... maybe... we could go together?”

“Of course!” I grin. “I'd love to take you.”

She nods, her eyes narrowing slightly. “On two conditions.”

“Name them.”

“First,” she says, looking me straight in the eye, “no questions about my past. I don't want to talk about anything personal. And second, no pushing me to sell the inn. We're going as friends, not business partners. Got it?”

“Deal,” I agree without hesitation, more than willing to abide by her rules if it means spending time together outside of our

current stalemate. “Friends it is. No questions, no pressure.”

“Good.” She nods, visibly relieved. Her shoulders relax, and I can see a hint of a smile playing at the corners of her lips.

I don’t want to pry too much after her “nothing personal” stipulation, but I’m curious. “So, what changed your mind about leaving the inn?”

Sarah Jane shifts her weight from one foot to the other, her fingers fidgeting with the hem of her shirt. “Well,” she begins nervously, avoiding eye contact, “I thought it might be good to meet with some food vendors for the inn. You know, try new things and all that.”

“Is that all?” I know there must be more to it.

She finally looks at me. “What else could there be, Haden?”

“Maybe,” I start playfully, my mouth curling into a flirtatious grin, “it has something to do with our kiss the other night?”

Sarah Jane’s cheeks turn a deep shade of crimson and she stammers, trying to find the right words. Her body tenses, betraying the emotions she’s trying to hide. “I—well—that’s not...” she splutters before finally blurting out, “No! Of course not!”

“Are you sure?” I raise an eyebrow as I take in the way she bites her bottom lip, then releases it with a puff. “Because, you know, it’s okay to admit it. If I recall correctly, it was quite a memorable kiss.”

“Stop it, Haden.” She crosses her arms defensively, but I can see a smile threatening to break through her resolve. “That’s not why I agreed to go to the food fair with you. Besides, we’re just friends, remember?”

“Of course, just friends,” I say, chuckling softly and holding up my hands in mock surrender. “But even friends can have a little fun, can’t they?”

She lets out a small laugh, her eyes finally meeting mine. “You’re incorrigible, you know that?”

“Guilty as charged.” My heart swells with pride at the sight of her laughter. It’s been such a rare occurrence lately, and to know that I played a part in bringing it out fills me with a sense of accomplishment.

“Fine.” She rolls her eyes but smiles, nonetheless. “Let’s just focus on the food fair and having a good time, okay?”

“Deal.” I’m too excited about this to worry about her downplaying our kiss.

If I’m lucky, I’ll get another chance to give her a kiss she can’t even pretend to forget about.

As Sarah Jane turns to head back inside the inn, I watch her retreating figure with warmth in my chest.

Before she disappears through the door, she turns back to me, her eyes sparkling with mischief. “And Haden?”

“Yeah?”

“Next time you want to tease me about something, try a little harder. I can handle a challenge.”

With a laugh, she slips inside the inn, and my god, someone please catch my heart before it gallops right off this porch and straight into the sea. If she’s telling me to try harder at teasing her about the kiss, and maybe even push her a little to venture into more-than-friends activities, then I’m in. Oh, I am so in.

I turn my gaze back to the new, old sign that hangs above my head. Doris the chicken walks by, cocking her head at me, probably judging me for grinning at a piece of wood like some idiot who lives for vintage signage.

It’s a really swell sign, that’s all. A real swell sign, indeed.

Still basking in the warmth of my conversation with Sarah Jane, I barely notice my phone buzzing in my pocket. Reluctantly, I pull it out and glance at the screen, seeing Gregory Stone’s name glaring back at me like a bad omen.

“Stone,” I answer curtly, trying to mask my unease.

“Ah, Haden, my favorite billionaire,” my colleague says with mock affection. “I heard you’ve been making some headway with Sarah Jane Darby. Tell me, have you convinced her to sell that charming little inn yet?”

“I’m working on it,” I tell him through gritted teeth.

“Not good enough, I’m afraid. That inn sits on valuable beachfront property, ripe for redevelopment. I have investors lining up to turn it into luxury condos. If you can’t seal the deal, I’ll have to intervene.”

My jaw ticks. “What kind of intervention are you talking about, Stone?”

“Let’s call it... motivating you,” he says coldly. “I don’t care how you acquire that inn, Haden, but you have one week to make it happen before I step in. And when I do, nothing will stand in the way of progress—not you, and certainly not some sentimental innkeeper.”

The nerve of this guy. “I told you I have my own plans for this property. This isn’t just about business—”

“It’s always about business.” Gregory’s laugh is harsh. “I know you think you have something to prove with this little adventure of yours, but you’ll get over it. Certain profit margins tend to have that effect.”

I gulp hard, and not just because of the ruthless way he’s talking about demolishing Sarah Jane’s beloved inn to make way for his soulless condos. I’m also cringing at how much I sounded like Gregory when I first showed up here. Talking about the money Sarah Jane could make from the sale like that was the only thing that mattered. I grip the phone tighter, wishing I could reach through it and wring Gregory’s neck.

“Don’t cross me on this one, Stone,” I warn.

He scoffs. “My investors don’t care about your tender feelings. The clock is ticking, Haden. I’d suggest you quit stalling and get the job done, unless you want the consequences to be rather... messy.”

The call ends abruptly, and I'm left grasping my phone as if it were a ticking time bomb. I know Stone well enough to know that his threats are real—he will stop at nothing to get what he wants. The thought of Sarah Jane being caught in the crossfire of this ruthless acquisition makes my blood run cold.

I don't know when I started, but suddenly I'm aware that I'm pacing on the porch, my steps heavy with newfound urgency. How can I protect Sarah Jane while still fulfilling my obligation to Gregory Stone? Is there a way to achieve both without causing the kind of damage I can't come back from?

My heart pounds in my chest and as I mentally sift through my options, I realize that the only way to ensure Sarah Jane's safety is to find a way to make her willingly sell the inn. But how do I do that without breaking the trust we've built and shattering the fragile bond between us?

"Think," I whisper to myself, racking my brain for an answer. "There has to be a way."

But as the sun sets on the day, casting long shadows across the front porch, doubt sinks its claws into my mind, leaving me with a gnawing feeling of uncertainty.

I don't even know what my goals here are anymore. But regardless, it looks like I might be doomed to fail.

Chapter 11

Sarah Jane

I'm leaving the inn. Holy crap on a croissant, I'm really doing it.

Haden's presence looms solidly beside me as we step toward the old stone bridge at the edge of the inn's property. I want to say something, to make small talk like normal people tend to do when they're taking a stroll with a friend, but it feels like my voice is stuck in my throat.

Besides, anything I'd have to say right now would be, frankly, embarrassing.

Promise we'll be back before it gets dark? I think I've genuinely forgotten how to exist outside at night.

Wow, did you know the creek bed has receded? I haven't walked this far in about two years, so I never noticed.

Can we bring Doris with us? Just consider her my emotional support chicken.

Sure. If I want Haden to question whether he ever wants to be seen in public with me, I'll open my mouth and speak.

My heart races as I take hesitant steps onto the bridge. The babbling creek below should be a soothing sound, but to me, it sounds like alarm bells. I can feel my palms growing sweaty, and my legs threaten to give out right under me. I'm afraid to look back at the inn, because then I might just break out into a sprint back to my comfort zone, but I can feel its presence fading behind me. My stomach churns.

“Are you alright, Sarah Jane?” Haden's eyes twitch with concern.

“Y-yeah.” I try to sound more confident than I feel, but the stammer doesn't help. “Just a bit nervous, that's all.”

My mind races with conflicting thoughts—why did I agree to this outing in the first place? I know deep down that I want to find out why I kissed Haden the other night, to explore what's been simmering beneath the surface between us. But with each step away from the inn, my fears grow stronger. If we're alone together, I might act impulsively again, and I'm not sure I'm ready for whatever would come next.

“Hey, it's okay,” Haden assures me, sensing my unease. “I'm here for whatever you need to get through this.”

He says the words I need to hear, but I still can't shake the feeling that this is a bad idea. I don't trust him completely, not yet, and what if he had an ulterior motive in inviting me out here? My guard remains up as we walk further from my safe haven, and I focus on keeping my breathing steady.

“Are you sure about this?” Haden asks once more, offering me a chance to back out.

“I... yes, I’m sure.” I nod. “Let’s do this.”

We turn a corner, and suddenly there it is—the food fair in all its glory. The area buzzes with life, a symphony of laughter and chatter that makes my heart race. Vibrant colors dance in front of me as I take in the scene—booths adorned with banners, balloons bobbing in the breeze, and people milling about with joyous bounces in their steps. The aroma of sizzling meats, sweet pastries, and tangy fruits wafts through the air, tempting me to indulge.

“Wow.” My anxiety spikes as I watch the crowd. “It’s... so busy.”

“Nothing like the bustle of a good food fair,” Haden says with a grin.

As we weave our way through the throngs of people, Haden stays close to my side, his tall frame shielding me from the worst of the crowd. It’s strangely comforting, and I start to feel a little more at ease. He points out various stands and shares stories about his favorite foods, subtly drawing me into conversation.

“Look!” I point at a stall selling homemade ice cream. “They have lavender honey flavor! I’ve always wanted to try that.”

“Then let’s do it,” Haden says, leading me toward the vendor. We order two cones, and as I take my first lick, the floral sweetness of the ice cream instantly transports me back to warm summer days spent in my grandmother’s garden. It’s a taste of childhood, and it makes me grin from ear to ear.

“Delicious, huh?” Haden asks, his own face alight with pleasure.

“Absolutely incredible.” I close my eyes, savoring another bite. Before we walk away, I grab a business card from the vendor—Millie will want to incorporate this ice cream into a dessert for the inn, I’m sure.

For a while, Haden and I stay lost in our shared enjoyment of the fair, tasting everything from spicy Thai noodles to tangy lemon bars. With each new dish, a spark of excitement ignites within me, fueled by the sheer variety of flavors and textures that I’ve been missing out on. Don’t get me wrong, Millie does plenty to deliver surprising, delightful flavors from the inn’s kitchen. But she can’t bring the whole world inside to me, and that much is clear as I realize there are more flavors here than I could even taste in one afternoon.

But then, something changes. The once-spacious streets fill up with people, their laughter and chatter growing louder and more chaotic. My heart races, and I find myself struggling to breathe. All around me, the crowd closes in like a suffocating vise.

“Sarah Jane, are you okay?” Haden’s voice reaches me, but it feels distant, barely audible over the din. Panic wells up inside me, threatening to sweep me away in its relentless current.

“I... I don’t think I can do this anymore,” I whisper, my vision blurring as hot tears prick at the corners of my eyes. “I thought I was ready, but this is too much. It’s just too much.”

“Hey, it’s okay.” Haden speaks softly, but as the noise and movement of the crowd intensify, I feel like I’ve made a terrible mistake. What was I thinking, leaving the safety of my inn?

“Take a deep breath,” Haden urges, worry wrinkling the corners of his eyes. “We’ll take this one step at a time, alright?”

I want to believe him, but my anxiety has taken the reins, and all I can think about is how desperately I need to escape this overwhelming whirlwind of sights, sounds, and smells.

In a split second, I decide I can’t take it anymore. My body takes over, and I bolt away from Haden, weaving through the crowd in a desperate attempt to flee the suffocating chaos. My breath comes in short, shallow gasps as I push past bodies, my chest tightening with each step.

“Sarah Jane!” Haden shouts after me, but his voice sounds so far away, and all I can focus on is escaping this nightmare.

Just as I think I’ve found an opening, a strong hand wraps around my wrist, yanking me back. My heart leaps into my throat, and for a moment, I think someone in the crowd has grabbed me. Who could it be? Some former fan of Janey Dee’s, eager to get a picture and show the whole internet that I’m back in public and more of a mess than the last time they saw me? Panic surges through me, and I struggle to free myself, my mind racing with fear.

“Hey, hey, it’s me!” Haden’s voice cuts through my panicked haze, and I look up to see his face inches from mine, his blue

eyes trying to lock on to mine.

“What—why did you...” I struggle to catch my breath.

“Sarah Jane, I couldn’t let you run off like that,” Haden says gently, his grip on my wrist softening. “I promised to help you, remember?”

My initial confusion fades as I realize his intentions aren’t malicious. Haden releases my wrist and instead takes my hand in his, his touch surprisingly comforting amidst the chaos. “Come on,” he says, his voice firm yet soothing. “Let’s get you out of here.”

With Haden leading the way, we carefully navigate the bustling crowd, his hand never leaving mine. This time, I feel confident that we’re headed to a way out, instead of panicking with the question of if I’ll ever escape. Haden expertly guides us through the throngs of people, shielding me from jostling elbows and wayward bags while murmuring reassurances. As we move further from the epicenter of the fair, my breathing gradually returns to normal, and the knot in my chest loosens.

“Almost there,” Haden whispers as we finally reach the outskirts of the fair. It’s quieter here, and I feel a wave of relief wash over me.

“Thanks.” My voice is barely audible, even to myself. “For... for helping me out back there.” It’s such a casual way to characterize the act of helping me breathe when I seriously thought my lungs were about to quit on me.

“Of course.” Haden squeezes my hand. “That’s what friends are for, right?”

Back at the inn, up in the attic, my sanctuary, I finally feel safe again. The chaos of the food fair seems like a distant memory as I take in the quiet and the familiar old smell. I’ve never been so glad to breathe in piles of old dust.

“Are you alright now?” Haden sure looks handsome with all that concern for me etched on his face.

I nod, swallowing past the lump in my throat. “Yeah.” Again, my voice is barely more than a whisper. I haven’t been able to find it much these days.

Haden’s presence, somehow, has become an unexpectedly comforting anchor.

“Good. You scared me for a minute there.” He runs a hand through his hair, and the sight of his hair looking disheveled, rather than styled for a public outing, feels so much better for me.

“Join the club,” I say, forcing a small smile. “I guess I wasn’t quite as ready for that as I thought.”

“Hey, it’s okay.” He takes a step closer, his eyes holding mine captive. “Facing our fears is never easy. But the important thing is that you tried.”

I look away. This whole situation should be so embarrassing, but he’s acting like I shouldn’t even be ashamed of the fact that I can’t even venture into a town I’ve known my whole life without feeling like I’m stepping into a volatile war zone.

“I appreciate you for not judging me,” I tell Haden without looking his way. “For just... for just being there.”

“Always,” he says quickly. Something about the way he says it makes me believe him, like it’s a promise etched in stone.

“Can I ask you something?” I’m feeling oddly exposed, and I need some answers.

“Of course.”

“Did you really want to help me today, or was this just another attempt to get me to sell the inn?”

“Sarah Jane.” He sighs, rubbing the back of his neck. “I won’t lie and say I don’t still want the inn. But today? Today was about you. I saw how much you were struggling, and I just wanted to be there for you.”

I nod. “That’s nice,” I say, the words feeling inadequate but honest.

“Anytime.” He gives me a warm smile.

As I watch Haden move toward the attic’s small window, allowing me some space, my heart swells with gratitude. He’s shown me a side of himself that I never expected, and it makes me want to try even harder to conquer my fears—not just for myself, but also to show up for him, like he’s doing for me.

“Okay,” I say, my voice stronger now. “Next time, let’s try something a little less crowded, okay?”

Haden chuckles, his eyes crinkling at the corners. “Deal.”

This works for me. Having Haden around to help works for me, and for the first time in a long time, I actually have some hope that I might get unstuck.

But what happens if I take this risk, betting on Haden being there for me—and then in the end, he gets what he came here for?

Chapter 12

Haden

The bell above the door jingles merrily as I step into Sami O'Hara's coffee and baking shop. The aroma invites me to take a deep breath and savor the scents. Shelves attached to the rustic wood panels on the wall display various baked goods, and each mismatched chair invites me to sink into it while I sink my teeth into some buttery, flaky goodness.

"Hey Haden, what can I get for you today?" Sami asks cheerfully, her brown eyes warm as she wipes down the counter.

"Morning, Sami. Just a black coffee today, please." I slide onto a stool at the counter. My gaze scans the room, taking in the lively chatter of customers catching up on gossip and sharing stories over their steaming cups.

That could be me. This could be my town. The thought buzzes within me as Sami pours my coffee and slides it to me across the counter.

“So, how are things going with Sarah Jane?” Sami asks. “You two seem to be getting along pretty well lately.”

Thanks to the Auburn Cove gossip machine, everyone seems to know why I’m in town, trying to get on Sarah Jane’s good side. And everyone seems to know that we got off on a bit of a rough start.

I take a sip of my coffee, allowing the bitter taste to linger on my tongue as I ponder Sami’s question. It’s true that Sarah Jane and I have been spending more time together, but there’s still so much about her that I don’t know. My fingers tap rhythmically on the countertop, betraying my restlessness.

“Things are... interesting,” I say with a slight furrow of my brow. “But I can’t stop wondering about her past. She’s got this air of mystery around her, and I want to learn more.”

Sami chuckles, leaning in conspiratorially. “Well, you know what they say—everyone in Auburn Cove has secrets. But I think Sarah Jane’s just had a rough go of it these past few years. Maybe all she needs is someone like you to help her turn things around.”

I smile at Sami’s optimism, but my curiosity remains unsatisfied. Why is Sarah Jane so scared of the world outside the inn? Who hurt her? And why—who on Earth would want to harm such a beautiful soul? I’m more determined than ever to uncover the truth behind her guarded facade.

The chime of the bell announces a new arrival, and I glance up from my coffee to see Travis Williams, the mayor of Auburn Cove, striding confidently into Sami’s shop. His

slicked-back hair and tailored suit stand out against the cozy, mismatched decor of the cafe.

“Ah, Haden! Just the man I was hoping to run into.” He claps me on the shoulder as he takes a seat at the counter beside me. “I’ve been meaning to catch up with you about your plans for the inn.”

“Travis, good to see you.” I force a smile on my face, trying to hide my unease at his sudden appearance. Ever since I first met this guy, I’ve gotten the feeling that he’s trying to ride my coattails in the wrong direction. “What brings you around?”

“This fine establishment is the best place to get some quality coffee around here,” he says with a charming grin. You wouldn’t know by hearing him talk that he once tried to get this place shut down and replaced with a chain franchise, as Sami told me last week. Travis’s face turns serious. “But really, I wanted to discuss the potential improvements you could make to the inn. I think modernizing it would do wonders for our town.”

“What exactly do you have in mind?”

“Picture this,” he begins. He gestures animatedly as he speaks, hands spinning in the air like he’s painting his vision on a grand canvas. “A complete renovation of the rooms—high-end furnishings, luxury linens, the works. And why not add a spa facility? People come to Auburn Cove to relax, after all. Plus, it’ll create jobs and attract even more tourists.”

The excitement is ravenous in his eyes as he rattles off ideas. Clearly he’s passionate about the inn’s potential, and I have to

admit I'm curious about how these changes might benefit both Sarah Jane and the town.

"Sounds ambitious." I take a sip of my now-lukewarm coffee. "But I'd have to discuss it with Sarah Jane before making any decisions."

"Of course, of course." Travis nods emphatically. "I just thought I'd give you some food for thought. I know Sarah Jane is caught on some old-fashioned ideas, but I trust you've got the vision to snap her out of it."

He winks, and I stare at him coldly. *Old-fashioned ideas?* What, like preserving the awe-inspiring legacy of her badass grandmother? I don't say anything, no longer interested in faking a friendly feeling, and Travis gets the hint.

"I'll leave you to it, then."

He rises from his seat and heads for the door, but not before calling back, "Tell Janey Dee I said hello, will you?"

"Janey Dee'?" I lean forward in my seat. That sounds like an oddly affectionate nickname for Travis to have for Sarah Jane. I grit my teeth as I consider that there may be a history between Sarah Jane and Travis that I've yet to uncover. Suddenly, I'm even more motivated.

If that man had anything to do with making Sarah Jane retreat from the world in fear... Well, let's just say Auburn Cove would need to find itself a new mayor.

"Janey Dee" echoes in my mind, curiosity gnawing at me. Why does it sound like a carefully crafted stage name, like a

name for a pop star or something? I pull out my laptop and decide to indulge this curiosity. If Sarah Jane—or Janey Dee—is going to be part of my future, I need to know more about her.

I search for “Janey Dee” on the internet, trying various combinations like “Janey Dee Auburn Cove” and “Janey Dee Sarah Jane Darby” to make sure I get to the right result. After wading through countless irrelevant websites showing zero connection between a Janey Dee and Auburn Cove, I stumble upon a blog post from several years ago.

“Janey Dee: The Rise and Fall of a Social Media Influencer” reads the title. My eyes widen, and I have to keep my hand clamped over my jaw to keep it from dropping open. Who would have guessed that the same woman who quietly runs her grandmother’s bed-and-breakfast was once an internet sensation?

The post describes her journey from a small-town girl to social media stardom, with thousands of followers hanging onto her every word and picture. It’s hard to believe that the reserved, fiercely protective woman I’ve come to know had once lived such a public life.

As I scroll further, I find photos of Sarah Jane—or Janey Dee—at lavish parties and exclusive events, rubbing elbows with small-time celebrities and big-time influencers alike. A pang of protectiveness washes over me as I read about the intense scrutiny she faced, both online and off. The details in the article are vague, but apparently relentless pressure from

fans and critics alike ultimately led to her sudden disappearance from the public eye. The Janey Dee that the internet once knew left behind only a cryptic message about needing time away to heal and rediscover herself.

No wonder she calls the inn her sanctuary. The strict comfort zone she's created here in Auburn Cover results from her escape from that life. Meet her today and she acts like her time as Janey Dee never even happened. But I have to wonder what kinds of scars remain beneath the surface, hidden from view.

My fingers hover over the keyboard, hesitating before I continue to dig deeper. Sarah Jane hasn't told me about her past. She doesn't want me to know about Janey Dee. Is this a violation of our fragile trust?

A charged silence fills the air, my laptop screen casting a soft glow on the remnants of my now-cold coffee. I don't know what I'm going to do with this information. Do I tell her what I know? I went looking for ways to support her, but Sarah Jane just might see this information I've found as a weapon to wield against her.

Chapter 13

Haden

I stand in the inn's front parlor, clutching a piece of paper with details about Sarah Jane's past as Janey Dee, the social media influencer. It's an article that estimates just how much money Sarah Jane walked away from when she stopped being Janey Dee, and the number is staggering.

Who knew that "influencing" the masses could be so profitable? Maybe I should tell Gregory Stone he's in the wrong business to get him to focus his greed on something other than the Aubie Inn.

I fiddle with the paper, checking once again to make sure I highlighted all the right passages. I've printed out the article to show it to Sarah Jane, because I'm pretty sure it helps me make my case for her selling the inn. Sure, she was making a considerable income from sponsorships as Janey Dee, but if she walked away two years ago and has done nothing but sink money into the inn ever since, then she can't have much left. How is she going to maintain things without that influencer-money cushion?

This property sale could get her back to the more luxurious life she used to lead. The kind of life she deserves. And then she won't have to stress about keeping up with the costs of the inn.

The more I learn about Sarah Jane, the more my interest in this place grows—for reasons both business and personal. I'm adding up those reasons in my head when the sound of footsteps catches my attention.

My heart skips as I stand in front of Sarah Jane, holding the piece of paper that could potentially change everything. Her curls frame her face, and she looks at me with curiosity and apprehension. I must have "*I've been waiting to see you*" written all over my face, like a complete dork.

"What is it, Haden?"

I'm about to tell her, to bring up Janey Dee and hope she doesn't hate me for knowing what I know, when the sound of the front door opening interrupts me.

It's late, and as far as I know, there aren't any new guests checking in today. Who's coming in the door?

"Hello? Is anyone here?" The high-pitched voice echoes through the inn's corridors. I glance at Sarah Jane, whose eyes widen as she looks back at me. Unexpected guests are a rarity around here.

"Stay here," she whispers, leaving the article in my hand as she hurries to greet the newcomer. I must be in a disobedient

mood because I follow closely behind, curiosity getting the better of me.

As we step into the foyer, a tall woman with dark hair stands in the middle of the room. Her eyes, the color of deep jade, are hooded with mystery. She wears a dark blue dress that drapes over her body, and her gaze laughs with the air of holding secrets we'll never uncover.

Maybe she really is just an unplanned guest. But something about the way this woman is eyeing Sarah Jane and I both is making me uneasy.

“Ah, there you are,” the woman says, a smile playing on her painted red lips as her eyes flick between us. “I didn’t mean to interrupt, but your door was unlocked.”

“Of course.” Sarah Jane’s tone is polite, yet guarded. She instantly shifts into her role, and I know from experience that she can’t help being a good host, even if she doesn’t trust someone’s intentions. “Welcome to my bed-and-breakfast. I’m Sarah Jane, and this is Haden.”

“Good evening, Haden, Sarah Jane. I’m Beatrice Turner.” Beatrice greets us as she strides into the room as confidently as if she owns the place. Her tan skin glows under the dim, late-night lighting.

“Evening, Beatrice,” Sarah Jane replies with a polite smile, while I give a curt nod.

Beatrice’s gaze seems to stab right through me, making the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. She speaks in a low,

measured tone that only adds to the tension in the room. “I must say, this inn has quite the fascinating history.”

“It does indeed,” Sarah Jane says, glancing back at the portrait of her Grandma Jane.

“Did you know that the original owner was a famous painter who sought refuge here during the war? He used an obscure law to claim the building. Painted some of his most renowned works within these very walls.” Beatrice runs a manicured finger along the wallpaper as she speaks.

Sarah Jane and I exchange surprised glances. In all our talks about the inn’s history, she’s never mentioned this. How does this new guest know more than she does about her own grandmother’s inn?

“Wow, I had no clue,” Sarah Jane says. “Thank you for sharing that, Beatrice. I’ll have to look into it.”

“Of course.” Beatrice’s enigmatic smile returns as she studies our reactions. “There is so much more to learn about this place, if one knows where to look.”

I get the feeling she got what she wanted, somehow, by revealing that she has information that Sarah Jane doesn’t. What else is she trying to get out of her visit here?

I watch as Sarah Jane gets Beatrice checked in. Another guest had to cut their trip early, leaving just last night, so there’s an empty room available for her. I’d been avoiding the topic with Sarah Jane, not wanting to face the possibility that I could move to that room—I have more sorting to do in the

attic, you know. So I'm a little relieved that the inn is, once again, too full for me to stay anywhere but in the attic with Sarah Jane.

Still, Gregory Stone's involvement in my plan to acquire the inn has me feeling a little paranoid about sudden new arrivals. Is this woman here on some sort of hidden agenda?

"Beatrice," I say, trying to sound casual, "how did you come across that piece of history about the inn?"

"Research is a hobby of mine," she answers cryptically. "I find it fascinating to uncover the stories behind places like this. You never know when a tidbit of information can come in handy."

"Interesting." I try to catch Sarah Jane's eye, to conjure the psychic power to say *don't trust her* without saying it out loud, but it turns out my telepathic powers are shit. Sarah Jane is too busy processing Beatrice's payment to meet my gaze.

Beatrice, on the other hand, keeps a penetrating eye on me, and I can't shake the feeling that her presence at the inn is not by chance.

"Let me show you to your room," Sarah Jane says. If she's feeling anything like I am, she doesn't let it show when she smiles warmly at Beatrice.

"Actually, I'm quite famished after my journey. Do you have anything I can eat first?" Beatrice sounds innocent enough, though her eyes flicker with something unreadable. Her gaze lingers on the piece of paper still clutched in my hand.

“Of course,” Sarah Jane says. The slight waver in her voice might be undetectable if I weren’t so familiar with her usual hosting voice. “Let me just... freshen up the dining room.”

“Take your time.” Beatrice smiles at us both before turning her attention to the antique clock in the foyer.

I follow Sarah Jane, and as soon as Beatrice is out of earshot, I lean closer and whisper, “Are you okay?”

She nods, but her face is pale. “I just don’t understand why she seems to know about the inn. Who is she? Does she have anything to do with your real estate development company?”

“I don’t know,” I admit with a grimace. I wish I could give her answers, help her feel safe. “But we should keep an eye on her.”

“Agreed.” She takes a long pause before she heads to the kitchen to reheat food for her newest guest.

By the time Sarah Jane returns to invite Beatrice into the dining room, I’m thoroughly convinced that our new “guest” is here as a plant. Because I’ve been interrogating her in just about every way, short of saying, *Are you working with my work nemesis? You know, legally, you have to tell me.* And any ordinary guest would be lodging a complaint with the management about the weird guy who’s treating her like a drug dealer might treat a suspected fed.

But Beatrice seems perfectly comfortable.

Entirely too comfortable, if you ask me. The whole time she’s eating, I’m lurking in the corner of the dining room like a

dead Victorian child with unfinished business. Beatrice shows no signs of being creeped out as she shares smiles and pleasant conversation with Sarah Jane.

While Sarah Jane entertains Beatrice with stories about the inn, my suspicion only grows. Her arrival is too convenient, and her knowledge of the inn's history is unnervingly extensive. However, I don't want to alarm Sarah Jane, so I keep quiet, closely observing Beatrice.

The way her eyes flicker from my face to the piece of paper in my hand, as if she knows something, sets me on edge. I cross my arms over my chest, trying to appear nonchalant, but I'm sure she's noticed the suspicion in my gaze.

"Is there anything in particular that brings you to our little slice of heaven?" I ask suddenly, hoping to catch Beatrice off guard.

She raises an eyebrow and meets my gaze head-on. "I've always been drawn to the tranquility of small towns. The hustle and bustle of city life can be so draining, don't you think?"

I nod slowly. Yes, I *do* think so. And the fact that she seems to echo my sentiments precisely only adds to the feeling that she knows more about my purpose here than she should.

As the night winds down, Sarah Jane and I retreat to the attic while Beatrice settles into her room somewhere below our feet. The creaking boards beneath us seem to whisper secrets in the dim light.

I perch on the edge of my bed and glance over at Sarah Jane, who stands by the window, her eyes distant and lost in thought. The moonlight catches her auburn curls, casting a warm glow around her.

“Beatrice seems... interesting,” I say, watching Sarah Jane for any reaction.

Interesting may be an understatement, but if I use language for how I really feel, she might get the impression that her inn is currently on fire.

“She does, right?” Her brow furrows. “It’s strange how much she knows about all of us here. For every story I started to tell her about the inn, she already knew the details. Not just surface-level stuff either—it’s like she’s been watching us from afar.”

“Exactly.” I’m relieved that Sarah Jane shares my unease. “I have to wonder about her motives for being here. There’s this guy at my company, Gregory Stone...” I pause. Too much information about Stone might scare her off from selling the inn. “He’s just looming over everything, so now I’m hesitant to trust anyone new.”

“Trust has become a luxury these days, hasn’t it?” Sarah Jane murmurs, looking away.

“Unfortunately, yes.” My heart aches at the vulnerability on her face. “We need to figure out what Beatrice wants and why she’s really here. But we can’t let her know we’re suspicious.”

“Maybe we’re just being paranoid,” Sarah Jane suggests with a slight shrug, though her eyes betray the unease that lurks beneath her words.

“Perhaps.” I know full well neither of us truly believes that. “But we should be cautious, at least until we know more about her.”

“Agreed,” Sarah Jane nods. “We’ll have to be careful, Haden. This inn means everything to me, but at the same time, I don’t want to jump to conclusions about Beatrice.”

“I know.” This is what keeps drawing me to Sarah Jane. It’s that quiet edge—the one that never lets her lose sight of her kindness.

As our conversation draws to a close, Sarah Jane leans against me, resting her head on my shoulder. The warmth of her body against mine is comforting, and I don’t want to break the intimacy of this quiet moment. But my eyes fall on the piece of paper I held earlier, the article about Janey Dee that’s tucked back into my briefcase. I don’t want to forget about the conversation I tried to start before Beatrice walked in.

“Sarah Jane, there’s something I’ve been meaning to ask you about your past—”

No response. When I glance down at her face, I realize she’s out like a light, her breathing slow and steady.

With great care, I lift her head off my shoulder and gently place it on the pillow, tucking a stray curl behind her ear. A

small sigh escapes her lips as she burrows deeper into the soft cushion, and I chuckle at her adorable contentment.

“Sleep tight, Janey Dee,” I whisper, pulling a blanket up to cover her. The fabric is worn with age, much like the rest of the inn—a testament to the love and care poured into this place over the years.

I stare at Sarah Jane’s sleeping face, her curls cascading over the pillow like a waterfall. There’s a peacefulness to her expression. My desire to know more about her past and her life as Janey Dee nags at me, but I can’t possibly disturb her like this.

As I stand up and stretch my stiff limbs, I allow myself a brief moment to ponder what it would be like to share more than just a stolen night in the attic with Sarah Jane. Could we find solace in each other’s arms, or would our secrets create an insurmountable barrier between us?

Focus, Haden, I chastise myself, shaking my head to dispel the distracting thoughts. We have too much at stake, and I can’t afford to let my feelings cloud my judgment.

I turn back to the lone candle flickering on the nightstand, casting a warm glow over the room. In that small circle of light, Sarah Jane’s face looks almost angelic, her features softened by sleep. As much as I want to keep that light burning, I know it’s time to let go, at least for now.

I lean in and gently blow out the flame. The room plunges into darkness.

Chapter 14

Sarah Jane

“We’re not going to make it to the next delivery.”

I sigh in Millie’s direction, and she looks up from her inventory to glance at the worn wooden pantry shelves and back at me. The shelves are almost bare, and the dwindling of supplies is a costly problem.

“Okay, so if we ration the flour and sugar, we can still offer a limited breakfast menu,” Millie says, her fingers tapping against the countertop. “We’ll just have to get creative with the recipes.”

I sigh and lean against the counter. “I don’t know, Mill. Who books a bed-and-breakfast just for the coffee and a couple eggs?”

Millie peers at me curiously. “Hey. What’s up with you? We’ve made it work with less before. Is something wrong?”

I sigh again. If sighs could pay bills, we wouldn’t have any money problems around here.

Of course something's wrong. Where would I even begin? I'm in a constant state of paranoia about people coming for my inn—I don't even want to tell Millie about my suspicions about our new guest, Beatrice Turner, because it might be a sign that I'm going a little crazy. Not to mention, the one guy who *is* confirmed to be trying to take my inn from me? That would be Haden, aka the guy I'm currently sharing an attic with and lusting over at every turn. Because *that* seems like a solid way to protect myself from the threat.

I pick one thing to focus on, because as embarrassing as it is to talk about, at least it's not "*I'm fighting the urge to open my legs to the enemy*" embarrassing.

"I need to tell you something," I begin. "Remember the food fair last week? Well, I had a full-blown meltdown in the middle of it all."

My thoughts drift back to my embarrassing freak-out. The memory of my anxiety taking over while hundreds of strangers surrounded me still makes my cheeks burn with shame.

Millie's eyebrows shoot up. "Oh, Sarah Jane. That must've been awful. What happened?"

"Everything was going great at first..." Even just recalling the incident, I can feel the familiar tightness in my chest. "But then, out of nowhere, the crowd seemed to close in on me, and I couldn't breathe. I ran out of there like my life depended on it."

"Sweetheart, that sounds like a panic attack." Millie places a comforting hand on my arm.

Panic attack. That sounds about right. Even just hearing a possible term for it helps me breathe a little easier, like I'm not the only weirdo who's been down this road.

"You know, maybe you should try something smaller and less intimidating for your first outing after such a long time."

"Like what?" I'm glad Millie's offering solutions instead of just telling me I'm a hopeless freak who had the right idea when I refused to go out in public.

"You could start with a walk around town, or a small gathering with people you know and trust. A stroll with the inn guests, maybe?" Millie's kind eyes meet mine. "You need to ease yourself back into social situations gradually, Sarah Jane. You can't expect to jump right back in without feeling overwhelmed."

I nod. "That's a good idea. I'll give it a try. I just don't want to feel that way ever again."

"Take it slow, and remember, I'm here for you." She gives my arm a gentle squeeze. "Now, let's tackle this breakfast menu, shall we?"

I smile, grateful for the distraction. As we return our focus to the kitchen crisis, I make a mental note to take her advice and start rebuilding my confidence, one small step at a time. And if there's hope for that, then maybe there's hope for our kitchen crisis after all.

The next morning, however, I find myself standing in the same spot—with a very different attitude.

What the hell happened here? The pantry is a huge mess. The shelves that once held our stocks of jams and preserves have been emptied, their contents smashed on the floor, leaving a sticky, glass-littered disaster.

Who would do such a thing?

“Sarah Jane?” Haden calls out from the doorway. “I just wanted to check on you. How are you holding up?”

“Still trying to figure out how this happened.” I sigh, shaking my head. “It’s so strange. It looks like someone deliberately sabotaged us.”

“Maybe it was just an accident,” he suggests, though his tone betrays doubt.

“An accident doesn’t shatter every single jar.” I frown at the wreckage.

“True.” Haden hesitates before continuing, “Listen, I wanted to ask if you’d be interested in joining me for a day trip to the city. There’s an art exhibit I’ve been wanting to see and thought it might be a good distraction for you.”

My heart races at the idea of leaving the inn, and not in a good way. The suggestion triggers all my anxieties about venturing beyond the familiar walls of my sanctuary. “Haden, I appreciate the offer, but I can’t leave the inn right now. Not with all of this going on.”

“Are you sure? I think it could be really good for you.” He looks around at the mess. “Especially now.”

My thoughts keep circling back to Millie's advice to start slow. Maybe there's a way I can take a small step without diving headfirst into my fears.

"What if we start with something smaller?" I say. "Maybe we could visit a local art gallery or a coffee shop with an open mic night?"

I fidget with the hem of my dress, waiting for his response. Haden's eyes meet mine, and I can see the wheels turning in his head.

"Actually, that sounds like a great idea." His eyes crinkle at the corners as he grins. "There's this little gallery not too far from here that showcases local artists. It's usually pretty quiet, so it might be a good way to ease into things."

"Really?" The relief in my voice is palpable as Haden instantly understands my need to take things slowly. "That sounds great."

"Of course," he says, his tone reassuring. "We'll take it one step at a time, Sarah Jane. I'm here to support you in any way I can."

I'm feeling pretty lucky as we make plans to visit the gallery together. Between the advice from my best friend and the companionship of my... Haden, the whole "learning to be a human being again after being a freak who stayed in one place for two years" thing doesn't feel as impossible as it used to.

"Maybe after the gallery, we could grab a bite at that new café everyone's been raving about?" I suggest tentatively,

surprising even myself with my growing confidence. “Or maybe we could walk along the river?”

“Sounds like a lovely idea.” Haden’s eyes shine as he agrees. “But only if you feel up to it, of course.”

“Right, only if I feel up to it,” I echo. “Promise me one thing, though. If I start freaking out, don’t let go of my hand.”

“Deal. I won’t let anything happen to you, Sarah Jane.”

I picture myself mid-panic attack again, clawing to get away from him like a feral cat on Red Bull, and I hope he knows what he’s signing up for. Maybe this is a bad idea.

Or maybe Millie’s advice was right after all; sometimes, all it takes is one small step to change your life forever.

Chapter 15

Sarah Jane

Haden leads me by the hand down a cobblestone side street lined with charming shops and cafes. We stop in front of a small gallery with a bright red door, tucked away between a bookstore and an antique shop. My heart's still racing, just by nature of being outside of the inn, but the idea of exploring this hidden gem, with Haden's guidance, eases my nerves.

“Are you ready?” He watches me closely.

“You know what? I think I am,” I tell him, surprised by my own enthusiasm. He grins and pushes open the door, ushering me inside.

Natural light fills the art gallery, illuminating the paintings and sculptures that adorn its walls. The scent of oil paints and varnished wood disperses in the air.

It's quiet. Small, but spacious. I don't feel like I have to bump against or talk to any strangers, unless I want to. I'm outside of the inn, but unlike the food fair, this place feels like I can breathe.

Haden leads me through the space, stopping to admire the works of local artists.

“Look at this one,” he says, gesturing towards a stunning landscape painting. “It’s by Anna Kelleher. She specializes in depicting the beauty of the region.”

“Wow, it’s gorgeous.” I look at it up close, marveling at the way the colors blend together so seamlessly. “How do you know so much about these artists?”

Haden smiles, almost sheepishly. “I made it a point to learn about the local art scene when I came to town. Just curious, I guess. Then I got really into it. It’s amazing how much talent exists around here, right under our noses.”

The guy knows more about my local scene than I do. What a dork—and I’m not sure if I mean him or me.

As we continue to stroll through the gallery, Haden shares more tidbits about the artists whose work is on display. I’m impressed by his knowledge and passion for their craft. It’s clear that he genuinely appreciates their creativity and skill, and damn if that doesn’t just make him even more attractive in my eyes.

“Have you heard of Ingrid Sterling?” he asks, pointing to a series of vibrant paintings in a comic book style. “She’s been making waves in the art world lately.”

“Actually, I think I’ve seen her work on Instagram.” I recognize the bold shapes and lines. “Her style is so unique.”

“Definitely,” Haden agrees. “She was inspired by her grandmother, who was also an artist. It’s amazing how art can connect generations like that.”

“Not just art...” I think about Grandma Jane. Our version of a shared canvas is the inn. “This is helping me see a whole new perspective.”

Haden smiles, his eyes crinkling at the corners. “I’m glad. There’s so much more to see and experience out here—and I want to show it all to you.”

We keep exploring the gallery and I’m drawn to a series of abstract paintings of sharp, layered colors and shapes. Each piece seems to hold a story of its own, inviting me to dive into its depths and lose myself in its world.

“Wow,” I breathe out, my eyes taking in every detail, “these are incredible.”

“Ah, Fatima’s work.” Haden recognizes the artist behind the masterpieces. “She’s a Nigerian American woman who’s been gaining popularity around here. Her use of color is truly mesmerizing.”

Just then, a tall, graceful woman carrying rolled-up canvases enters the gallery. Haden’s face lights up. “That’s her! That’s Fatima.”

“Really?” I whisper, watching as she approaches the gallery owner, Verna, to drop off her new paintings.

“Would you like to meet her?” Haden asks with a mischievous grin.

“Are you kidding? Of course!” My enthusiasm surprises me a little, seeing as this is the first time in a while that I’ll meet someone new without saying, *“Let me show you to your room.”*

Haden leads me over to where Fatima and Verna are talking. As they finish their conversation, he clears his throat politely to get their attention. “Excuse us, ladies, but I wanted to introduce my friend Sarah Jane here. She’s a big fan of your work, Fatima.”

The artist’s warm smile immediately puts me at ease. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Sarah Jane. I’m so glad you like my paintings.”

“Like them? I love them!” I gush. “Your use of color is absolutely breathtaking.”

“Thank you,” Fatima replies, clearly touched. “I try to create art that evokes strong emotions, and color is such a powerful tool for that.”

As we chat with Fatima, Haden glances at one of her paintings—a large canvas with a striking red and blue color scheme. “This one would look fantastic in the Aubie, Sarah Jane.”

“You think so?” I stare at it, and you know what? He’s right. “You really know my inn, I guess.”

Haden smiles at that. He turns to Fatima. “Would you mind if we purchased this piece?”

“Of course not! I’d be honored for it to have a home at your inn.” She grins graciously.

Haden arranges payment and delivery with Verna, who leans on her cane for an extra spring in her step as she leads him to the register. We say our goodbyes to Fatima and Verna, and I feel like a shot of fresh energy has bolted through me.

I’ve been missing out on more than I thought.

Stepping out of the gallery, the warm hues of the setting sun paint the sidewalk in a golden glow. A street musician strums his guitar nearby, his notes flitting through crisp autumn leaves along with a cool breeze. It’s a little chilly, but Haden’s hand is holding mine and I feel more alive than I have in ages.

“I didn’t realize how much I needed this,” I say, turning toward him.

He smiles, his blue eyes bright. “It’s been my pleasure, Sarah Jane. Seeing you light up like that was worth everything.”

Before I can respond, he leans down and captures my lips in a tender kiss. Breeze? What breeze? I feel like I’ll never be chilly again as his warmth envelops me. The rest of the world fades away, leaving only the two of us and our soundtrack, the street guitar.

As we break apart, a smile replaces the kiss on my lips. Why does this feel so right? Connecting with Haden is both exhilarating and terrifying, all at once. But we stand here, our fingers intertwined and our faces nuzzling, and something

feels like it's clicking into place, just like it was always supposed to be.

My cell phone suddenly rings, the shrill sound slicing through the peaceful atmosphere. Really? The one time in two years that I'm having a nice time out, and someone's trying to interrupt. I dismiss the call as quickly as possible to silence the thing.

But when it rings again, I notice Millie's name flashing on the screen, and a knot forms in my stomach.

"Everything okay?" Haden asks.

"I don't know." I press the phone to my ear. "Hey, Millie, what's going on?"

"Sarah Jane, something happened at the inn." Her voice sounds full of movement, and tight with worry. "You need to come back right away."

"What happened?" I say, panic rising in my chest. But Millie doesn't answer, her busy silence only fueling my anxiety.

"Alright, we're coming," I promise, hanging up the phone. I look at Haden, his face full of frown lines. "We need to get back to the inn. Something's happened, and it doesn't sound good."

He gives my hand a reassuring squeeze. "Let's go."

As we hurry back towards the inn, the earlier serenity of our day feels like a distant memory. My mind races with possibilities, each one more unnerving than the last. With each

hurried step, Haden's hand in mine feels like an anchor, keeping me from letting my fears take over completely.

“Whatever it is, we'll handle it,” he says, his voice steady and reassuring.

“I know,” I breathe out, trying to focus on the rhythm of our footsteps and the warmth of his hand as we navigate the familiar streets back to the inn. My mind can't help but conjure up images of disasters—fires, break-ins, accidents.

“Maybe it's just a small issue, something easily fixed.” Haden must not want to be caught in public with a panicking Sarah Jane again, because he's clearly trying to ease my anxiety. “Millie might be more worried than necessary.”

“Maybe.” My gut tells me it must be more serious than that for Millie to sound so panicked, though. We round the corner, the inn now in sight, and my heart lurches at the scene before us.

Sirens wail, painting the quiet street in alternating shades of red and blue. Guests—some in bathrobes, others clutching luggage—gather on the lawn, their faces flashing with concern and confusion. As one, Haden and I come to a halt, taking in the chaos that erupted in our absence.

“Deep breaths,” Haden murmurs, squeezing my hand as we both inhale slowly. The cool evening air fills my lungs, a temporary balm against the fear that threatens to swallow me whole.

Chapter 16

Haden

Whatever is happening at the inn, it feels like a disaster.

As Sarah Jane and I step into the lobby, a haze of smoke greets us and makes my eyes water. The acrid smell of burnt food hangs in the air, with tendrils of smoke still snaking their way out of the kitchen.

“What the hell?” Sarah Jane fans herself with one hand. “What happened here?”

Before I can respond, Millie rushes over, her face flushed and smudged with soot. “Oh, Sarah Jane, Haden! I’m so sorry about all this,” she pants, wringing her hands together. “There was a small fire in the kitchen. Don’t worry, though! Everything’s under control now.”

“Are you okay, Millie?” Sarah Jane asks. As much as she loves this old inn, her first priority is to make sure her best friend’s okay.

“I’m fine,” Millie assures her, offering a shaky smile. The two women grip each other’s arms up to the elbows. “No one

got hurt, thank goodness. But I am sorry for the mess.” She sniffs. “And the smell.”

“Accidents happen, Millie,” I say. “The important thing is that everyone’s safe.” Though I mean what I say, I can’t shake the feeling that something isn’t quite right.

As if on cue, a firefighter approaches the three of us, his heavy boots thudding against the wooden floor. He removes his helmet, revealing a grim expression. “I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but our investigation shows that this fire was intentionally set.”

“Intentionally set?” Sarah Jane repeats, her voice trembling.

“Like, on purpose?” I sound like a doofus, dumbing it down this way, but I need to make sure we’re real clear about this.

If somebody’s sabotaging Sarah Jane, I *need* to know.

“Whoever did it made the fire look like an accident and contained it to a small area,” the firefighter continues. “But we can confirm that it was set on purpose. We’re looking into it further.”

My blood boils, roaring through my head with a sound like I’m standing under a rushing waterfall. Someone intentionally endangered Sarah Jane and her home.

I clench my fists at my sides and struggle to keep my voice steady. What would a man who’s in control, instead of seeing red, have to say right now?

“Thank you for letting us know, and for your quick response in putting out the fire.” I sound like a robot, because if I allow

myself emotion, I might explode.

“That’s what we’re here for,” the fireman says with a nod before turning to leave.

And I am now officially here for one reason only: to get to the bottom of this. I know I have no right to feel as protective as I do, since it’s Sarah Jane who had her inn targeted. And yet, my face is just as hot, my body every bit as tense as if someone had come after my property. My *home*.

Most importantly, my woman.

Whoever did this won’t get away with it—not on my watch.

My gaze snaps to the corner of the lobby, where Beatrice watches us from the shadows. The timing couldn’t be more blatant. Ever since she checked in a few days ago, the inn has had problems—big ones. Not like the obstacles I had to deal with when I first arrived.

In retrospect, I could have done a lot worse than an overzealous chicken and a disarmingly beautiful host.

But this, a fire as sabotage, is the most dangerous, costly, and sinister act yet. Would Beatrice take such an enormous risk on Gregory Stone’s behalf? Would Stone be so ruthless?

Somewhere inside me, I know the answer. Stone would have no qualms about ruthless behavior, as long as he didn’t have to get his own hands dirty. As long as he had a scapegoat like Beatrice, I wouldn’t put anything past him.

I excuse myself from Sarah Jane’s side and follow Beatrice as she saunters outside.

“Beatrice,” I call out, catching up with her in a dimly lit hallway. She turns to face me, her dark hair framing her face like she’s posing for a royal portrait.

“Ah, Haden. What can I do for you?” Her voice drips with false innocence.

“Cut the act,” I snap. “What do you know about the fire?”

“Fire? Oh, you mean that little accident in the kitchen?” She smirks, feigning surprise. “I assure you, I had nothing to do with it.”

“You expect me to believe that?” I narrow my eyes, searching her face.

“Believe what you will.” She examines her nails like she doesn’t have a care in the world. “But if I were you, I’d be more careful about keeping Sarah Jane here at the inn. You never know what might happen when the owner’s away.”

“Are you threatening her?” My molars snap together so hard, I wouldn’t be surprised if one popped from its socket.

“Me? Threaten darling Sarah Jane?” Beatrice laughs, a chilling sound. “No, I have no need to threaten her. But you could say I’m here on a mission.”

“Tell me what you’re planning.”

“Gregory Stone sent me.” Her smile doesn’t even falter while she confesses. “He knew you sounded a little too infatuated with Sarah Jane. And he thought it might get in the way of acquiring the inn. So, he tasked me with interfering.”

“Interfering how?”

“Ah, now that would be telling,” Beatrice purrs. “But I assure you, Haden, it’s nothing personal. Just business.”

“Stay away from Sarah Jane.” My warning sounds cold and hard. “I won’t let your twisted games hurt her.”

“Your concern for her is touching.” She taunts me with a final smirk before slinking away.

When she reaches the bottom of the porch steps, I have to shout one more warning. “Stone’s never been caught taking such illegal measures to acquire properties, you know.” It’s true. I wouldn’t put anything past him, knowing Gregory as well as I do, but the man’s public record is that of a legitimate, upstanding businessman. “What do you think is going to happen when he needs someone to throw under the bus for all this?”

Beatrice pauses, but she keeps her back to me, then resumes retreating.

My mind’s racing with protective thoughts as I return to the hazy lobby. I’ve got to keep a close eye on Beatrice and stay one step ahead of her—not just for the sake of the inn, but for Sarah Jane’s safety. And if it means striking out against Gregory Stone, so be it. I won’t let anyone hurt her.

I take a deep breath, trying to calm my nerves before returning to Sarah Jane. I can’t let her know what I just learned from Beatrice; it would only scare her and disrupt her delicate

sense of safety at the inn. She doesn't need any more worry in her life.

“Are you all right?” Sarah Jane asks as I rejoin her. Her face is lovely, even with concern carved into it. The lobby still swirls with smoke, and the smell of burnt food hangs heavy in the air. In the background, a firefighter's radio crackles with voices, like the chaos of this scene extends even beyond where we can see.

“Yep. I'm fine.” Sarah Jane doesn't need to see my stress. “Just needed a moment to gather my thoughts.”

“Did you find out anything about the fire?” Her eyes search mine for answers.

“Nothing conclusive,” I lie, hating myself for keeping secrets from her. “Just that it was contained to a small area and didn't cause too much damage.”

“Thank goodness,” she sighs. We stand side by side, but tension and unease linger between us. Guilt gnaws at me for not being honest with her, but I know it's for the best.

With any luck, I'll be able to shut down Gregory and Beatrice's twisted operation before she even knows what's going on.

Chapter 17

Haden

The next morning, I dial Gregory Stone's number, my jaw ticking as I march away from the inn, out of earshot. The phone rings for what feels like an eternity before Gregory finally answers.

"Stone," I say, not bothering with pleasantries.

"Ah, Haden." His voice drips with arrogance. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"Cut the crap, Gregory," I bark. "I know you're working with Beatrice, and I won't let you destroy Sarah Jane's life just to get your hands on her inn."

There's a pause, and I can almost hear the gears turning in Gregory's head as he tries to figure out how much I know. Finally, he chuckles, clearly underestimating me. "You really think you can stop me, Haden? You're just one man, up against my resources and connections."

"Sarah Jane deserves better than being manipulated by the likes of you." I refuse to give him any ground. "I will do

whatever it takes to protect her and the inn.”

“Bold words, but actions speak louder, don’t they?” Menace laces his voice. “Perhaps you should consider whether you want to make an enemy out of me.”

“I’m not worried about you,” I shoot back. “Know this, Gregory—if you come after Sarah Jane or the inn, you’ll have to go through me first. Consider that a promise.”

The line goes silent, and I’m left staring at my phone. I hate that my hands are shaking, but it’s not because he’s rattled me. It’s because my hands are itching to leap through the phone and strangle his noodly little neck.

My pulse pounds as the realization sets in—there’s no time to waste now that Gregory Stone is hell-bent on seizing Sarah Jane’s sanctuary. I take a deep breath, trying to calm my nerves, and pull up my contacts on my phone.

“Hey, it’s Haden,” I say, my voice surprisingly steady as the call connects. “I need your expertise.”

“Long time, no hear, buddy!” comes the familiar voice of my old friend, Reed. His relaxed tone brings back memories of simpler times, but there’s no room for reminiscing right now. “What can I do for you?”

“I need someone who knows security and protection like the back of their hand.” I pause for a moment, then add, “It’s about the inn I’m trying to buy, and the woman who runs it.”

“Sounds serious, man. What’s going on?” He sounds like he’s moving, setting aside whatever he was up to before I

called, and I appreciate his willingness to help even after all this time.

“Let’s just say there are some powerful people who aren’t happy about my plans,” I explain vaguely, not wanting to divulge too much over the phone. “Can we meet? I’ll fill you in on the details.”

“Of course, Haden. You know I’ve always got your back.” Reed’s loyalty is one reason we’ve stayed friends for so long. “I’ll clear my schedule and be there as soon as possible.”

“Thanks, Reed. I owe you one.” I hang up, feeling slightly more at ease knowing I have someone I trust on my side.

I pace the gravel, trying to think of what more I can do to take on Stone, but all I can see is Sarah Jane’s face, her eyes filled with trust as she handed me the keys to her world. She reminds me of why I wanted the inn in the first place—to find some peace and stability in my chaotic life. I can’t let Gregory destroy that for her, or for me.

A few days later, my phone buzzes with a text from Reed. He’s arrived at the inn and wants to meet. I find him standing near the reception desk, his giant frame making the room seem even smaller. His eyes are scanning the space, evaluating every corner for potential threats. It’s been years since we’ve seen each other, but our bond is still strong.

“Hey, Haden.” Reed smiles, pulling me into a bear hug. “It’s good to see you again, man.”

“Likewise.” I clap him on the back. “Thanks for coming on such short notice.”

“Of course. You know I’m always here for you. So, what’s going on? Why do you need my help?”

I glance around before lowering my voice. “It’s complicated. There’s someone trying to take this place away from Sarah Jane—the owner—and I want to protect her and the inn. I don’t trust that they’ll stop at anything.”

“Who are we dealing with?” Reed asks, his eyes narrowing with concern.

“Gregory Stone—and he’s got connections. His methods are escalating, and I’m worried about what he’ll do if we don’t stop him.”

“Sounds like a real piece of work. Don’t worry, man. We’ll make sure this place is as secure as possible.”

“I appreciate it, Reed.” I pause, hesitating over how much to reveal about my own reasons for wanting the inn. “You know, there’s something about this place... It’s like finding an oasis in the middle of a desert. It’s peaceful, and Sarah Jane... she’s special. I haven’t felt this way in a long time.”

Reed’s grin takes over his whole hairy face. “Ah, so it’s not just about the inn, huh? Sounds like you’ve got it bad, man.”

“Maybe.” Warmth heats my face as I dare to admit it. “But let’s focus on keeping her safe for now.”

“Absolutely.” Reed claps me on the shoulder. “Let’s get to work.”

Over the next few hours, we survey the property and discuss various security measures. Reed's expertise is invaluable, and I feel a growing sense of confidence that we can protect the inn from any threat.

"Hey, Haden." Reed interrupts my thoughts. "I've got an idea for a security system that should cover all our bases. Let's go over the deets."

"Sounds good," I say, pulling my gaze away from the window. This isn't just about the inn anymore—it's about Sarah Jane's future and the happiness she deserves. Which means I'm going to have to let Reed in on everything.

"Actually, Reed, before we dive into this, there's something you should know." I lower my voice. "Something Sarah Jane can never find out about."

Chapter 18

Sarah Jane

The sabotage at the inn is getting worse by the day.

Millie and I exchange worried glances as we look through the window, surveying the damage. These attacks have gone from annoying to dangerous. The misplaced keys and missing reservations only led to some uncomfortable room mix-ups. But now, with last week's fire and today's situation—broken glass and shattered flowerpots all over the garden—our once peaceful sanctuary has turned into a battlefield.

Not even Doris the guard chicken can help us fight this—I've had to keep her and the other hens locked up in the coop for their own safety. So much for our defenses.

“Sarah Jane, I know we don't have proof, but it has to be Beatrice,” Millie whispers. She's connected the same dots I have—it's not hard to draw the line between when Beatrice arrived and when the trouble began.

“I know.” My fists tighten under my apron. “But we can't accuse her without evidence.”

“Hey, Sarah Jane, Millie.” Haden walks towards us with his tall, confident stride. He’s been such a rock these past few weeks, helping me rediscover my love for the world outside the inn. But right now, his jaw is set, and his dark blue eyes are focused on the chaos in the garden.

“Have you two noticed the increasing amount of... issues around here?” he asks, wrinkling his mouth.

“Hard not to.” I sigh. He already knows I share his suspicions about Beatrice, but he doesn’t want to be the one to say it. “And we’re pretty sure it’s Beatrice causing them.”

“That’s it,” he announces, fists clenched. “I’ve had enough of these ‘mishaps.’ They’re dangerous, and if word gets out, it could ruin the inn’s reputation.”

He paces back and forth, muscles rippling beneath his snug t-shirt. “We need to catch her red-handed.”

“Right.” There’s nothing like seeing him get all tough in defense of the Aubie, but now’s not the time to get distracted by how much I’d like to get my hands all over him. “Do you have anything in mind?”

“Since the sabotages seem to be escalating, my guess is that Beatrice will go after the generator next. It’s essential to the inn’s operations, and if she wants to sink the business...” He trails off, his eyes troubled. I shudder at the thought of what could happen if someone tampered with the generator—a power outage at best; a bigger fire at worst.

Haden outlines his plan, detailing how we'll set up a hidden camera near the generator. The thought of catching her on tape makes me feel like some kind of secret agent, and I shiver with excitement.

"Are you sure about this, Haden?" Millie asks.

"Trust me," he says, his gaze meeting mine. "We need to protect this place and the people in it."

"I know that much," Millie says. "I just don't know about us pulling off all of this."

Apparently, Millie's not quite as confident in our secret agent skills as I am.

"We can do this," I say.

"Great." Haden grins. "And when we catch Beatrice, we'll make sure she never sets foot in this town again."

"Damn straight," Millie chimes in, her warm smile returning. Haden's resolve is contagious.

Haden's concern touches me, but I still have to wonder what's really driving him to go to such lengths for the Aubie. There's still so much I don't know about him or how he ended up here.

But I can't stop to think about that right now. We've got work to do.

Millie and I distract Beatrice in the lobby while Haden sneaks off to set up the camera. I chat with Beatrice about the inn's history, asking her opinion on some new decor ideas. She

hates my ideas and is all too happy to tell me so, completely oblivious as Haden slips out the side door.

After a few minutes, the lights begin to flicker. Beatrice frowns, excusing herself to use the restroom. As soon as she's out of sight, Millie and I exchange a knowing glance and hurry to the fuse box outside.

We find Haden crouched behind the generator, his eyes fixed on the small screen in his hands. But as we join him, confusion clouds his handsome features.

"It's not Beatrice," he mutters.

"What?" I frown. "Then who is it?"

Haden turns the screen so we can see. There on the grainy footage is a familiar strict face, concentrating as she fiddles with the wiring.

"Mrs. Margaret?" Millie breathes in disbelief.

We hurry around the corner to find the elderly woman still tinkering with the generator. She jumps back, shame filling her eyes.

"Oh heavens, I've been caught." She shakes her head, seemingly at herself.

"Why?" I ask. Mrs. Margaret is the strictest regular guest I've got when it comes to making sure everyone is following the rules. But she's always been harmless. What could motivate her to sabotage the inn?

She hangs her head. “I was trying to distract that horrid Beatrice woman. She’s planning something dreadful, I just know it. I thought if I kept her away from the generator, I could prevent another disaster like that fire last week.”

“Wait,” I say, my mind racing. Maybe Mrs. Margaret can still give us the proof we need to catch Beatrice. “You’re saying Beatrice started the fire?”

Mrs. Margaret shakes her head sadly. “No. It was me.”

My heart sinks as I realize how flustered and confused Mrs. Margaret seems. I don’t blame her for the sabotage. I’m just furious with Beatrice for taking advantage of this frail, rule-abiding woman.

“Beatrice manipulated you,” I say. “Tell us what happened last week.”

She takes a deep breath and begins. “Beatrice told me that something illegal was going on here at the inn. She said she needed my help to get to the bottom of it. I couldn’t refuse.” Of course she couldn’t. “She asked me to cause a distraction with the fire, so she could sneak into Haden’s room in the attic to retrieve a file. It was just supposed to be a little smoke to set off the alarms, I swear!”

“Hold on. A file?” Millie asks.

“I don’t know what the file was,” Mrs. Margaret says, her gaze downcast. “But Beatrice seemed desperate to get her hands on it.”

Haden's face has gone pale at the mention of the file. Does he know what Beatrice was after? His eyes flicker, but he remains silent.

Before any of us can ask further questions, I hear the click of heels on the wood floors. Speak of the thief—it's Beatrice herself, strolling toward us with a smug look on her face.

"Well, well, what do we have here?" she purrs, eyeing the generator.

Haden steps forward, blocking her path. "We know what you've been up to, Beatrice. The sabotage, the fire—it's over." His voice is cold steel.

Beatrice's eyes widen briefly before her expression smooths back into nonchalance.

"Looks like the jig is up," Millie says. "You're exposed."

"Exposed?" Beatrice sniffs. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"We know everything," I tell her. "How you used Mrs. Margaret, how you lied to her, and how you're trying to destroy this inn."

Beatrice's face darkens. Haden steps forward, giving her a choice: "You can stay here while we report you to the authorities, or leave this town and never come back again."

At first, Beatrice hesitates, her calculating eyes darting between all of us. Then, just as quickly as she appeared, she turns on her heel and flees the inn, the front door slamming shut behind her.

“Good riddance,” Millie mutters, shaking her head.

“Indeed,” agrees Mrs. Margaret, her wrinkly hands entwined together.

The relief I feel is guarded. Beatrice is gone, at least for now. But Haden’s secret still lingers in the air like smoke from a snuffed-out candle. Our troubles are far from over.

“Wait!” Haden calls out, rushing after Beatrice. I pause, wondering if I’m making the right choice, before trotting after them.

The cold evening air stings my cheeks as I step outside, straining to catch sight of Haden and Beatrice in the dim twilight. They’re just beyond the inn’s property line, their silhouettes barely visible against the darkening sky. I’ve enjoyed my recent outings with Haden, but it still gives me the willies to go beyond the property line. So I hold back, watching as Haden catches up to Beatrice, his hand on her arm, stopping her in her tracks. They don’t know I’m here, listening to every word.

“Let go of me!” Beatrice claws at Haden’s hand, trying to wrench herself free.

“Tell me what you stole from me,” Haden demands, his voice tight with anger.

“Like you don’t already know.” Beatrice sneers. “You’re just too afraid to face the truth.”

“Tell me, damn it!”

“Gregory Stone has everything he needs now,” Beatrice says, venom dripping from her words. “He’ll take this place away from her, and there’s nothing you can do about it.”

“Sarah Jane doesn’t deserve this.” Haden’s voice is a growl. “She’s been through enough.”

“Does she know?” Beatrice taunts, her voice low and malicious. “Does she know she doesn’t even legally own the Aubie Inn?” She clicks her tongue. “Tsk, tsk. Keeping secrets from the woman you claim to care about. Bad form, Haden.”

“Shut up,” Haden hisses, but I can tell he’s rattled by her words.

What the hell is this about Gregory Stone? And how the hell could I not own the inn? I own it fair and square. I know I do. But a sick feeling in my gut says otherwise. Haden knows something—something important.

And he’s been keeping it from me all this time.

“Face it, Haden,” Beatrice continues with a cruel smile in her voice. “You can’t protect her.”

“Watch me.” His voice is hard as steel.

I retreat toward the inn, my thoughts racing. The words echo in my head, bouncing off the walls of my skull like some twisted game of pinball: Gregory Stone. No legal ownership. Haden’s secrets. What does it all mean?

As I wrap my arms around myself, it feels like the ground beneath me has shifted. I feel sick. The one person I’ve started

to trust has been hiding the truth. I don't know what to believe anymore.

Back to my sanctuary, my illusion of safety and control. But now there are cracks in the walls I didn't see before. Cracks that may bring everything crumbling down.

I step inside the inn, my heart pounding in my chest like a wild animal trapped in a cage. The soft hum of conversation and clinking of silverware seem foreign to me now, as if I've entered an entirely different world from the one I just left.

Millie looks up from stacking clean dishes as I return to the kitchen. "There you are! Is everything okay?"

"Um, yeah, I'm fine," I stammer, trying to shake off the unease that's settled over me. How can I tell Millie what I just heard? That I might not even own this place, our sanctuary, and that Haden may be hiding something from me? "Beatrice won't be causing any more trouble," I add. At least that part is true.

Millie nods, satisfied, and returns to her task. The guests chat and laugh, blissfully unaware of the confrontation outside. Of the secrets being kept from me.

The door swings open and Haden strides in. He crosses the room in three long strides and wraps me in a tight hug, as if he's afraid I'll vanish if he lets go.

"It's over now. You're safe," he murmurs.

His arms feel like a cage. I stand rigid, fists clenched at my sides. Haden doesn't seem to notice. He just holds me tighter.

“Aww,” coos one of the elderly guests at the table nearby, clearly charmed by the display of protection. But I only stiffen in Haden’s embrace, the weight of his secrets pressing down on me like a heavy blanket.

He finally releases me, his eyes searching my face. “Sarah Jane? Are you alright?”

I force a smile, choking back the accusations on my tongue. “I’m fine. Just... shaken up. It’s been a long day.”

He brushes a strand of hair from my face. “Get some rest. I’ll take care of things here.”

I escape upstairs before he can read the turmoil in my eyes. But I can’t avoid the truth forever. I’m going to find out what Haden’s hiding.

Even if it means nothing will be the same again.

Chapter 19

Haden

Sarah Jane and I stand in the attic, surrounded by dusty memories and forgotten trinkets. Despite the heavy air, a sense of relief envelopes me, as Beatrice is now miles away from Auburn Cove.

“Things should be better now that Beatrice is gone,” I say, trying to sound reassuring. “I know we still have some things to sort out, but we can trust each other, right?” I take Sarah Jane’s hand, searching her face.

“Trust?” Sarah Jane yanks her hand away. Her hair falls over her forehead, hiding her eyes before she pushes it back, revealing a storm on her face. “Is that what you call it? Hiding the truth from me?”

“Sarah Jane, I—” I stammer, caught off guard. What is she so angry about?

“I heard you last night,” she says.

I freeze, pulse pounding.

“That’s right. I was there when you were arguing with Beatrice.”

“Wait. You were outside with us?” My heart drops like an anchor, sinking deep into the pit of my stomach. Does that mean she knows the truth?

I never wanted her to find out this way.

“I heard every last word, Haden,” she hisses, her voice shaking. “What she said about how I don’t really own this place. How she took some file from you to give to Gregory Stone.”

“Sarah Jane, please let me explain,” I plead. I want to reach out to her.

“Fine.” Sarah Jane’s arms cross over her chest like fortress gates. “What did Beatrice mean when she said I don’t legally own the inn?”

My heart races, and sweat beads on my forehead. This is it—the moment I’ve been dreading. Once I tell her the truth, everything between us will change. She’ll never trust me again.

“Sarah Jane, before I say anything, please know how much I care about you and this place,” I start. My hands tremble at my sides, but I force myself to look into her eyes.

“Tell me the truth, Haden.”

And how could I deny her the truth when she looks at me that way? Eyes gleaming, lips pouty, fear on her face.

“Alright.” I sigh, resigning myself to the inevitable. “The truth is... my real estate company already owns this inn.”

“Excuse me?” Sarah Jane’s face flushes, her eyes blazing with wildfire. “That’s not possible. My Grandma Jane bought this house decades ago. When she passed away, she left it to me.”

“Technically,” I clarify, hating myself for what I’m about to say, “Grandma Jane never legally owned the inn. At the time, it was illegal here in Auburn Cove for a woman to own a business without having a male co-signer. It’s one of those bizarre, outdated county laws that’s technically still on the books, but never recognized.”

Never recognized until someone like me comes along to take advantage of it. I feel like an ass.

“But she paid off the mortgage.” Sarah Jane’s voice rises, incredulous. “She lived here for years!”

“I know.” I’m trying to deliver this as gently as possible. “But she fell behind on property taxes right before she died. That’s when the bank claimed the inn and my company stepped in.”

I hate having to explain this predatory crap. Sarah Jane looks like I just slapped her. I brace myself for the impact of her anger, her hurt, but all I see in her eyes is raw devastation. The sight of it twists my insides into knots.

Sarah Jane shakes her head like she’s trying to dislodge a headache. “Why didn’t I know about any of this?” She sucks

in a sharp breath, eyes flashing. “How could I have been caring for this property for the last two years without even knowing that I didn’t legally own the place?”

I want to reach out and comfort her, but I know I’m the last person she wants that from right now. Instead, I take a deep breath and reluctantly explain. “This is what my real estate company does—developers like Gregory Stone wait for elderly property owners to die, find obscure laws that allow them to claim the property on a technicality, and then let the inheritors revitalize the property before swooping in to kick the new owners out.”

As the words leave my lips, I feel sick to my stomach. It’s a predatory practice, and I know it hurts families like Sarah Jane’s. The look in her eyes only intensifies the guilt gnawing at me.

I grimace. “Look,” I say, running a hand through my hair in frustration. “I don’t agree with my company’s methods. That’s why I’m leaving. Even before I met you, I had planned to take this property for myself and start a new life here in Auburn Cove. I wanted to convince you to sell instead of forcibly seizing the property, like Gregory would have done.”

“Is that supposed to make me feel better? You lied to me!” Sarah Jane’s eyes brim with tears. “Is this why you’ve been staying here? Why you’ve tried to get close to me?”

“No!” I lean toward her. “I wanted to get to know you better, to help get you to sell. But now...” I trail off, knowing I can’t

imagine taking this place from her now. She means entirely too much to me.

“Now that I’ve gotten to know you, Sarah Jane, I see how wrong I was. Now I’d never make you leave your sanctuary here at the inn.” And then, the other confession I’m not yet ready to say aloud: “I have feelings for you.”

Her expression shifts from disbelief to anger in an instant. “You expect me to believe that? You’ve been sneaky from the start, withholding information. All this time, spending time with me just to take my inn away! You knew how anxious it made me to leave the inn, and you pretended to care. Just to lure me out of here.”

“Sarah Jane, I swear—” I begin, but she cuts me off with a glare that could shatter glass.

“Save it, Haden. Just save it.” Her voice is ice cold, and I can feel the distance growing between us with every word she speaks.

“Let me speak,” I plead. I don’t beg, as a general rule, but I’d get down on my knees for her. “Please.”

She crosses her arms, chin held high, but the storm in her eyes refuses to abate. “I’m listening.”

“Look, you think I wanted to hurt you, but I deliberately tried not to. I never used your past against you, for example. I learned about Janey Dee, but I never once brought it up or tried to use it to manipulate you.”

Her eyes widen, and she takes a step back. “How did you...? How long have you known about Janey Dee?”

“I found out shortly after I arrived here in Auburn Cove.”

“Then why didn’t you say anything?” Her face flushes with embarrassment. “Were you just waiting for the right moment to throw it in my face?”

“No! No. I didn’t want to bring it up, not until you were ready. I held back for you. For us.”

“Us?” She scoffs and shakes her head. “There is no us, Haden.” Her voice trembles as she continues, “You knew about Janey Dee, and you said nothing. How can I trust you when you keep secrets like that?”

“Isn’t that the point, though?” I grip my chest, trying to think of how to explain. “I didn’t use it against you. It’s your past, and it’s clear that you’ve moved on. We all have things we’re not proud of. I respected your privacy, Sarah Jane. I wanted you to tell me when you were ready.”

I take a step closer. “I’m not here to hurt you. I care about you, more than I ever thought possible. All I want is to protect you and this inn, and I thought that’s what I was doing when I had that conversation with Beatrice.”

She shakes her head, her arms wrapped tightly around herself. “I don’t know if I can believe that, Haden. Every time I start to trust you, something else comes up. I just... I can’t handle being betrayed again.”

“Please, just give me a chance to prove myself.” My heart is physically aching to make things right. “I promise I’m not trying to take advantage of you or the inn. I truly want to help.”

“Help?” Her anger boils over. “Is that what you call it? No, Haden. This isn’t helping. This is betrayal.”

“Sarah Jane, I swear, I never meant for any of this to happen.” I reach out for her hand. She flinches away, and I force myself to respect her boundaries. “All I want is for you to be happy.”

“Then get out,” she says, her voice strained. “Just... go.”

“Sarah—” I try, but she cuts me off.

“What, are you going to tell me I can’t legally kick you out? I guess it’s true, isn’t it? You can be here, and there’s nothing I can do about it, because I don’t even own the place.” She reaches out and touches a wall, as if it’s the last time she’ll get a chance.

Technically, she’s right about the ownership, and the guilt of it is killing me. “This inn is yours, Sarah Jane,” I tell her. “I don’t want to go. But if you want me to leave, I’ll leave.”

“Then leave.” Her eyes brim with tears, and the sight of her pain is like a knife twisting in my gut.

My chest tightens as I realize the only thing left to do is walk away—for now. I take a deep breath, trying to find the right words to convey my sincerity. “I’ll give you space, Sarah Jane,” I say softly, meeting her reddened eyes. “But I believe

in us, and I truly hope you'll see that I'm not the person you think I am. I want to prove that to you.”

She doesn't respond, just watches me with a look of hurt and anger that crushes me. I force myself to turn away, making my way to the door with each step feeling heavier than the last. As I reach for the handle, my heart aches with the need to go back to her, hold her, and make everything right.

I want to say more, to convince her that my feelings are real and my intentions have changed. But as I watch her turn away from me, tears streaming down her cheeks, I know there's nothing I can do right now to fix this.

All I can do is hope that, one day, Sarah Jane will find it in her heart to forgive me.

“Goodbye, Sarah Jane.”

I trudge down the stairs from the attic, my footsteps heavy and slow. I pause on the landing, glancing back up at the closed attic door.

Sarah Jane is up there hurting because of me.

I run a hand roughly through my hair, cursing under my breath. I should have told her the truth from the beginning. Should never have kept secrets about the ownership of the inn, no matter my good intentions.

I had thought I could fix things quietly on my own. Take over the property from my soulless company and give Sarah Jane the legal ownership she deserved. Without ever having to reveal how close she'd come to losing it all.

But I'd been naïve. Sarah Jane was right—I betrayed her trust in the worst possible way.

I step outside into the cool night air, the inn doors swinging shut behind me with an air of finality. Jaw clenched, I stalk across the gravel driveway to my car. I will find a way to make this right. To prove to Sarah Jane that I'm on her side. That I'll always protect her and the legacy she holds so dear.

Even if I have to take on the corrupt system that failed us both.

Chapter 20

Haden

“Hey, watch it!” The guy I’m passing on the sidewalk has to clap at me, actually put his hands in front of my face and clap, because that’s what it takes to snap me out of my thought hole long enough to step out of his path.

I mumble an apology without really looking at him. I’m too busy having my thoughts consumed by everything I’ve done wrong, especially to Sarah Jane. If only I could turn back time, maybe I’d be brave enough to let her in to show her who I really am and what was really going on.

But then, maybe I never would’ve gotten a chance to get to know Sarah Jane. And maybe that would’ve been for the best. For her. Because she deserves so much better than me.

I shove my hands in my pockets, shoulders hunched against the chill. This used to be my favorite time of day in Auburn Cove, when the town was just waking up, full of promise. Now it just feels empty.

As I walk through town, memories of the food fair and art gallery with Sarah Jane fill my mind. I can almost taste the sweet funnel cake we shared that day, laughing as powdered sugar dusted our noses. Those carefree days already feel like a lifetime ago.

For two nights now, I've been staying at the Grand Hotel, avoiding Sarah Jane since our argument. The high-thread-count sheets provide little comfort as remorse gnaws at me, reminding me how my drive for wealth and power has led me to bully people like her out of their property.

I stop outside the art gallery, remembering the day Sarah Jane and I came here together. She had been so lively, eyes shining as she took in the paintings. Her face lit up at that one painting by Fatima. I bought it for her on the spot.

With a sigh, I push open the door. The bell chimes overhead, announcing my presence. Verna, the gallery owner, glances up from behind the counter and offers me a warm smile, her wrinkled face as inviting as always. I nod in greeting and wander through the aisles, taking in the familiar paintings.

In the back corner, I find the Fatima collection. I trail my fingers over the gilded frames, memories washing over me.

"It's good to have you back, dear." Verna's voice makes me jump. She chuckles. "Didn't mean to startle you."

I rub the back of my neck, feeling suddenly exposed. "Just reminiscing, I guess."

Verna regards me kindly, but I see the shrewd intelligence in her eyes. She has a way of looking into your soul. “It’s been too long since your last visit. Busy with your work, I suppose?”

I nod, throat tightening. “Trying to prove myself,” I say hoarsely.

Verna touches my arm. “And have you? Proven yourself?”

My breath hitches. If there’s one thing Sarah Jane’s bravery has taught me, it’s about how important it is to face what’s really driving you from the past.

I’ve been trying to prove myself at the Aubie Inn, but it was never about real estate. It wasn’t about Gregory Stone, or about moving myself to a small town to build a new life at a slower pace. It wasn’t even about Sarah Jane—not at first, anyway.

I picture my father’s rage, my mother’s anguish. The empty pursuit of more money, more power. And Sarah Jane’s face, so full of hurt and betrayal.

“Have I proven myself? No,” I whisper.

Verna guides me to a bench. “Sometimes, all it takes is an honest conversation.”

The story spills out from me in halting pieces. “Growing up, my father was abusive. Then my mom died. She was still young. I can’t prove it, but I’ll always believe the stress of dad’s abuse caused my mother to die prematurely.”

She was only in her fifties. *Natural causes*, said the paperwork explaining her death. My hands ball into fists. “I’ve never been able to escape the feeling that I had to prove myself. I go around with this bone-deep belief that I have to be more successful than anyone else around me in order to be loved.”

Verna listens, dark eyes brimming with compassion. “Oh, child. You never needed to prove anything. Not to your father. Not to anyone.”

I swipe at my eyes, overcome. My gaze lands on the painting before us. Who knew that swirls of paint could feel like they’re swallowing all my emotions up and tossing them right back at me?

“Sarah Jane—” I catch myself as I say her name. “A friend of mine loves Fatima’s work.”

“Ah, your friend has excellent taste.” Verna nods with a knowing smile on her lips.

“About my friend.” I hesitate, still unsure why I’m opening up this way. “I hurt her, and I don’t know how to make it right.”

But Verna’s not ready to move on from our last topic of conversation. “Your mother sounds like a friend of mine,” she says, her eyes softening with a hint of nostalgia. “But in my friend’s case, she escaped an abusive husband and lived a long life before passing away a few years ago.”

The wrinkles around her eyes deepen as she smiles. “All women deserve that kind of peace, don’t you think?”

“Y-yes, they do.” I rub the back of my neck like the action could stamp out my nerves.

Verna’s words strike a chord, and guilt stabs through me as I think of Sarah Jane. She deserves peace too, but my actions have only brought her more turmoil. I need to apologize properly to her, to show her I’m not just the cold-hearted businessman I’ve pretended to be.

I’m just not sure where to begin.

Verna studies me for a moment, then asks, “Do you remember what made you feel loved as a child?”

I pause, considering her question. The answer comes to me slowly, wrapped in memories of my mother’s warm hugs and whispered reassurances. “Feeling safe and protected, I guess.”

“And do you feel that pursuing wealth and power makes you lovable now?” Her voice is gentle but probing, forcing me to confront the truth I’ve been avoiding.

“No,” I admit quietly, feeling the weight of my mistakes press down on me. “It doesn’t. I realize now that it never has. All it’s done is leave me feeling empty inside.”

“Then perhaps it’s time to let go of those pursuits. Find what truly fills your heart.”

Her words resonate, stirring up emotions I’ve long kept buried. I feel lost and confused, but also strangely hopeful. I had once thought buying the inn would bring me satisfaction,

but now, I know that's not the answer. Maybe what I really need is to focus on building genuine relationships, on connecting with people who truly care about me.

Maybe there's still a chance for me to change for the better.

"Thank you, Verna." I swallow hard, too late to stop my voice from cracking. "You've made me see things more clearly."

"Sometimes all we need is a little perspective," she says, giving my shoulder a nudge. "Now, go make things right with your Sarah Jane. She needs to know that there's more to you than your past mistakes."

It's not until I'm halfway down the block that it hits me: The old friend that Verna mentioned could very well have been Sarah Jane's Grandma Jane.

What an unbelievable coincidence.

Or maybe it's not a coincidence at all. Maybe it's the magic of this little town, conspiring to open my eyes.

I shake my head in wonder. Auburn Cove works in mysterious ways. Right now, its magic has set me on a path toward reconciliation with Sarah Jane.

Hope blooms in my chest as I step into the sunshine and I set off down the street with purpose. There are things that need to be said, forgiveness that must be earned. It won't be easy, but I'm ready to do the work. To show Sarah Jane that I want to be the man she deserves.

With open eyes and an open heart, I walk onward toward the inn, toward Sarah Jane. Toward a new beginning.

This town has given me a second chance, and I won't waste it.

Chapter 21

Sarah Jane

Three days since I last saw Haden, and I can't shake the feeling of emptiness that seems to have settled in my chest. What's that old saying? Absence makes the heart grow fonder? That must be it. Except, in this case, it's more like absence makes me want to throw a pillow at his stupid handsome face.

The smell of cinnamon and apples fills my nostrils as I step into the kitchen. Millie's got two pies cooling on the counter, and I'm sure they're tasty, but I barely glance their way before sinking into a chair at the worn oak table.

"You're moping again," Millie says, not even turning from the sink where she's elbow-deep in soapy water.

"I am not." Even to my own ears, the denial sounds weak.

Millie shuts off the faucet and dries her hands on a towel that's seen better days. She takes the seat across from me, eyes searching my face.

"It's been three days, hon. Don't you think it's time to bury the hatchet with Haden?"

My shoulders tense. “Millie, he came here to take my inn. And he’d already bought it! Who knows what else he’s lied about?”

“People make mistakes, Sarah Jane. Maybe you should give him a chance to explain.”

“There’s nothing he can say.” I slump down in my chair. “He’s not the man I thought he was.”

“Alright, I get how you’re feeling,” Millie concedes. “But there’s something I want to show you.”

She pulls out her cell phone, and I roll my eyes. “I know you have the internet’s best collection of funny cat videos saved, but I don’t think it’ll be enough to cheer me up right now.”

“It’s not that. I think it’s something you need to see right now.”

Against my better judgment, I lean over to see what she’s pulled up on her screen. As soon as I catch a glimpse, I cringe.

My entire body recoils. “Millie, please tell me you’re not making me watch an old Janey Dee video.” I’m already edging towards the door. “I’d rather do a trust fall with Gregory Stone than relive that part of my life.”

Millie puts a firm hand on my arm to stop me. But I can take her, right? At this point, I’m eyeing the walls, wondering if I can scale them like Spiderman to dodge her and get the whole entire hell out of here.

“Sarah Jane, you can handle this. It’s just one clip, not even the whole video. What’s the worst that could happen?”

“Oh, trust me, I’ve thought about this,” I tell her. “The sheer force of my shame would create a sinkhole that would open directly under me and swallow up the whole inn. That’s the worst that could happen, Millie.”

She just looks at me. I guess she’s not buying it.

“Fine, fine, I’ll watch it,” I grumble, slumping in my chair like a petulant teenager. Millie grins and presses play on her phone.

As the video starts, I’m hit with a wave of nostalgia and embarrassment. There I am, as Janey Dee, wearing bangs in my hair and beaming at the camera. “Wow, I can’t believe how tan I used to be,” I say, glancing down at my arm. “Didn’t realize staying inside the inn all this time left me with the skin tone of a corpse.”

“Focus, Sarah Jane.”

“Alright, alright.” I force myself to watch while Janey Dee—me—prattles on about makeup tips and fashion trends, all while maintaining that flawless social media smile. It’s surreal, seeing this version of myself after so long. It’s like watching a stranger, yet every gesture and mannerism is achingly familiar.

“This is the part I wanted you to see,” Millie says in a hushed tone.

In the video, Janey Dee starts gushing about Tyler, my ex-boyfriend who turned out to be a total jerk.

“Tyler is just so amazing,” the on-screen version of me swoons. “He’s everything I’ve ever wanted, and our

relationship is literally perfect. I'm so lucky to have him!"

My stomach turns as I watch myself fawn over Tyler. It's obvious now that I was faking it, trying to convince my fans—and myself—that he was right for me when he really wasn't. The memory of our humiliating breakup still stings, and I cringe at how blind I was to his true nature.

Janey Dee goes on and on about Tyler's positive qualities, but all I can see now is the truth. Tyler wasn't kind or patient or supportive. He belittled me, criticized me, tried to control me. In the end, it was my sexual pleasure, of all things, that drove him away, because he didn't care one bit about my pleasure or happiness.

But in this video I was putting on an act for the cameras, pretending to be deliriously happy because that's what my fans expected.

"I was lying to myself," I whisper. "Just like I lied to all of them." My heart feels pulled in two different directions, both relieved and sad to see how far I've come since then.

Millie nods. "Tyler seemed perfect, but he turned out to be all wrong for you. So maybe, despite all the reasons Haden should be wrong for you, he could actually be the one who's just right for you."

Her words make me pause, my heart clenching at the possibility. Could she be right? Could Haden be the one I'm meant to be with, despite all the obstacles we've faced? My mind races, considering all the reasons Haden might be good

for me—his thoughtfulness, his patience, the way he makes me feel safe and cherished.

“Maybe,” I say slowly, my voice guarded. “But I can’t forget that he lied to me, Millie. He came here intending to take my inn away from me.”

“I know,” she says, her hand squeezing mine. “But people can change, Sarah Jane. Just look at how much you’ve changed since you left your life as Janey Dee behind. Don’t you think it’s possible that Haden could change, too?”

I look at Janey Dee, strained smile and odd tan and all. I think of the Haden who held me through my panic. The Haden who brought me purple tulips from the flower market and upgraded the birdseed for my ornery hens. The Haden who was willing to give up his company for a chance at real happiness. I’ve been so focused on his lies that I forgot the truth of who he really is.

Maybe it’s time I gave Haden another chance to explain.

Stepping onto the front porch, I fumble with my phone, trying to find Haden’s number in my contacts list. My fingers shake slightly, betraying my nervousness. What if he doesn’t answer? The thought of having to go look for him, to leave the inn without his reassuring presence by my side, terrifies me.

What if he’s already given up on me?

Come on, Sarah Jane. You can do this. I hit “call” before I lose my nerve.

My throat goes dry as I hold the phone to my ear. But before it can even ring, movement at the edge of the property catches my eye. I glance up, and my heart leaps into my throat.

It's Haden.

He's just outside the iron fence bordering the yard, standing at the property line like a hesitant soldier awaiting orders. His tall, broad-shouldered figure is unmistakable, even in the fading sunlight. Our eyes meet across the distance, blue on green, and goosebumps dot my skin.

I end the call and slowly descend the porch steps, drinking in the sight of him. His dark hair flaps in the breeze, cheeks reddened from the chill in the air. Haden looks tired, shoulders slumped, like he hasn't slept since I banished him from the inn. From me.

Relief, joy, and tenderness wash over me, but I swallow them down, reminding myself that I'm supposed to be upset with him. I want to run to him, to feel those powerful arms around me again, to breathe in his woodsy scent. But the hurt of his betrayal holds me back, rooting me to the spot.

He hesitates for a moment before taking a step towards the gate. It's the same spot where Doris kept him from entering the first day he arrived, but there's no sign of my guard chicken today. She must be taking Millie's side, wanting me to give Haden a chance to explain.

"Can... can I come in?" Haden asks with caution.

I bite my lip, fighting back the urge to smile at the sound of his charming voice again. Instead, I cross my arms and lift my chin defiantly.

“Fine,” I say, trying to sound more annoyed than I actually am. “But you better make it worth my while.”

Haden nods solemnly and steps onto the porch. He inches closer to me, maintaining eye contact as if I might change my mind any second. This must be how Doris felt on that first day when he tip-toed her way. Finally, he stops just a few feet from me.

“Sarah Jane, I’m so sorry,” he begins in a heavy voice. “I shouldn’t have kept my intentions from you. It was wrong, and I understand why you’re angry with me.”

Haden searches my face, as if looking for any sign that I might push him away again. But I won’t. I’m ready to listen. He takes a hesitant step forward, and then another, until he’s standing right in front of me.

“I never meant to hurt you or betray your trust. I was selfish, and I couldn’t see past my own pain.”

“Your pain?” I ask, raising an eyebrow. If this man is about to claim it causes him “pain” to not be able to go around taking any property he wants, then I’m going to have a few choice words for his spoiled butt.

He takes a deep breath, his shoulders visibly sagging under some invisible weight. “My childhood... it wasn’t easy,” he admits, looking down. “My father was an angry, violent man.

And my mother... she died when I was young. I think the stress from my father's abuse contributed to her passing. After she died, I did whatever I could to escape. Then I worked my way up in business, chasing more and more power and success because I thought it would fill the emptiness inside me."

I can't help but soften my gaze, empathy washing over me. "Haden, I had no idea. I'm so sorry you had to go through that."

The raw honesty in his confession makes my heart ache. I reach out and place a hand on his arm, urging him to continue.

"Owning an inn like this," he says with eyes glistening, "it represents stability and comfort—something I've never had before. But I've been ashamed to admit that, even to myself."

"Haden," I say, squeezing his arm, "you don't have to be ashamed here. Not with me."

A small, grateful smile tugs at Haden's lips before he continues. "I wanted to step away from the rat race I've been in my entire career. Away from the drive to be more and more ruthless, to do whatever it takes as long as it means making money and building success. I wanted to prove that I wasn't predictable. That I could be more than that. I thought I was trying to prove it to other people, but really, I wanted to prove it to myself." He shrugs. "I didn't really stop to think about who I'd hurt along the way."

His voice has gone rough with emotion. "I should have been honest with you from the start. I never meant to hurt you, Sarah Jane. All I wanted was a place to call home."

His words resonate within me. Haven't I been doing the same thing here at the inn, trying to create a stable sanctuary for myself? Slowly, the hurt and anger I've clung to over the past few days begins to thaw.

I step closer to him, searching those crystalline blue eyes. "I think I understand now," I say.

"I need you to understand that it changed everything for me when I came here," he says. His eyes meet mine, stark with pain. "When I met you, I mean. For the first time, I felt like I'd found a home. Somewhere I could belong." He gives a ragged sigh. "I should have trusted that you'd understand. I'm so sorry, Sarah Jane."

My heart aches for the little boy Haden once was. The one who endured abuse and loss no child should ever face. I reach for his hands, lacing our fingers together. It's as if a missing puzzle piece has finally fallen into place, allowing me to understand why he acted the way he did. The desire for stability, comfort, and safety—it all makes sense now.

"You can trust me," I tell him. "You can tell me anything. We all have wounds from our past, Haden, and it doesn't make you any less worthy of love." I squeeze his hands. "I care about you. And I'm here for you, if you'll let me in."

"I meant what I said before," he says as he leans closer. "I don't want to take the inn from you. More than I ever thought possible, I care about you."

I tilt my head up, meeting Haden's gaze. His eyes are soft, hopeful. Questioning. I smile, reaching up to cup his cheek.

“I believe you,” I whisper. And then I’m pulling him down to me, and his lips meet mine.

The kiss starts out slow and searching, as if we’re both remembering the sweetness of what we once shared. But soon passion ignites between us, hot as flame. Haden’s hands slide down to my waist, tugging me against him. I can feel the warmth of his breath stirring in my hair, the steady beat of his heart.

We stand there for a long moment, drawing comfort from each other’s embrace. The last of my anger and doubt melt away, replaced by a deep affection—and desire.

Is it possible for someone to get even more handsome after they’ve peeled back their emotional layers? Because the way I want this man now is simply out of control.

I can feel Haden’s need for me—where “need” means a big bulge poking at my center. If he’s as hard as I am wet, then his need must be pretty damn strong.

I give him another kiss and desire wraps around us like a cocoon, sheltering us from the world outside. When we finally break apart, I find myself panting and dizzy. Haden watches me breathing for a moment before his masculine arms envelop me, holding on as though he’s afraid to let go. The feeling is mutual; I don’t want to lose this connection we’ve found.

“Come upstairs with me,” I whisper, leading him by the hand toward the attic.

The second the door closes behind us, we come together again, kissing fiercely, hands roaming. I tug at his shirt, desperate to feel his bare skin against mine.

In the dim light of the attic, our bodies press against each other, hungry mouths exploring and hands roaming with unbridled passion. Every touch, every caress, intensifies the connection growing between us, and I yearn for even more, clawing at him and at my own torso until our shirts fall to the floor.

“Sarah Jane,” Haden murmurs between kisses, “you have no idea how much you mean to me.”

We tumble onto my bed in a tangle of limbs, urgent with desire. His hands and mouth blaze trails of fire over my most sensitive areas. When he presses his fingers over my pants, between my legs, I shoot upright and arch into him, gasping his name.

Haden lowers me back onto the mattress, yanking my pants off and bracing himself above me on his forearms. I reach up, threading my fingers through his hair and pulling him down for another kiss. His fingers dance over my body with aching tenderness, leaving hot desire in their wake.

I don't even notice I've closed my eyes until the touching stops and I open them urgently, eager for more.

It turns out Haden had the best reason for pausing his touch. He was removing his pants, and now I get to look at his huge penis in all its glory, just as stupidly handsome as all the rest

of him. He rolls on a condom and positions himself between my legs.

“Are you sure?” he asks, his thumb caressing my cheek. “I don’t want you to feel pressured into anything you’re not ready for.”

I smile, reaching up to trace the line of his jaw. “I’ve never been more sure about anything,” I tell him. And it’s the truth.

Haden exhales in relief, tension easing from his expression. He captures my mouth again, kissing me with a slow, drugging passion that leaves me dizzy with want. He nudges my legs apart, settling between my thighs. I gasp as he slides into me, filling me completely, the sensation almost too much to bear. We move together slowly at first, reveling in the feeling of becoming one.

But soon the tempo increases, passion overtaking us. Haden’s fingers dig into my hips as he drives into me, harder and faster. I cling to him, nails raking down his back, crying out with each thrust.

“Oh, Sarah Jane,” he gasps, his voice strained with pleasure. “You feel incredible.”

“Please, Haden,” I beg, tight with need. “Don’t hold back.”

The pleasure builds and builds inside me, and I know I’m about to shatter.

But then I hear it. The voice in my head is impossible to ignore. It’s Tyler, that sniveling ex-boyfriend of mine, telling

me that I'm no good, that pursuing my pleasure means there's something wrong with me.

Damn him for getting in the way of this.

I'm about to apologize to Haden, to tell him I'm entirely too messed up in the head to enjoy this, so he should move on without me, when he grips my face in both hands. He must have noticed me slipping away.

“Are you with me?” He pants like a beast between thrusts. “I'm right here. I got you. I want you to feel good, Sarah Jane.”

That's all it takes. Hearing him say those words, while I watch his deep blue eyes drink me in like I'm the prettiest thing he's ever seen, I hit my orgasm, tightening around him and coming apart in his arms. He follows soon after, burying his face against my neck as he finds his release.

And there's no shame in it at all. There's only goodness. Just feeling so, so good.

We lie there afterward, breathless and sated, wrapped up in each other. Haden presses a kiss to my temple, his arms tightening around my back.

Our breathing slowly returns to normal, and the enormity of what just happened sinks in through my sensitive skin. For the first time, I feel truly connected to someone on a level I never knew existed.

Somehow I feel stronger for it, like I can take on anything.

Which is good. Because I haven't forgotten that fighting for my inn is about to take everything I've got.

Chapter 22

Haden

The scent of sizzling bacon and fresh coffee fills the air as I make my way downstairs. Guests mill about the lobby, chatting amiably as they wait for breakfast to be served. Sarah Jane flits from table to table, refilling coffee and delivering plates of food with a radiant smile.

Her smile has taken on extra exuberance ever since we started making love, and I can't lie. Seeing her reacting to my touch this way has me strutting around like a self-satisfied peacock.

Until the call I received this morning, that is. Sarah Jane glances my way and her smile falters, brows furrowing ever so slightly.

"Everything okay?" she asks, sidling up next to me.

I run a hand through my hair and let out a weary sigh, not wanting to kill the cheerful atmosphere. "Let's talk outside," I say.

"Alright."

I lead her out the back door into the garden, where the idyllic glow surrounding the inn embraces us. Butterflies flit lazily among the flower beds as a light breeze rustles the leaves. Birds sing sweetly as they hop between branches, and the fragrance of flowers in bloom flavors the air.

It's this tranquility that makes me even more determined to protect the inn and everyone within it.

"Alright, spill it," Sarah Jane says, her green eyes wide with apprehension. "What's going on?"

I take a deep breath. "I heard from my friend Reed this morning. He said Gregory Stone is planning to seize the inn within the next few days."

Her face pales, but her jaw sets with determination. "We won't let him."

"Of course not."

"Has Gregory tried this kind of hostile takeover before?"

I nod. "Yes. It's how he built his empire, actually. Legal loopholes, underhanded methods, you name it. He won't add this place to his list of conquests."

I pull Sarah Jane in for a hug, holding her close. Over her shoulder, I take in the rambling ivy and blooming magnolias surrounding us. No, I won't let Stone destroy this sanctuary. I'll do whatever it takes to protect Sarah Jane and the life she's built here.

"Sarah Jane." I place a hand on her shoulder. "I know you want to fight this, but you need to take care of yourself, too."

You can't win this battle if you're running on empty. Let me help you find a little distraction from all the stress."

"A distraction?" Sarah Jane looks up at me.

"Like a date?" I'm suddenly nervous as the words leave my lips.

"Are you asking me out, Mr. Billionaire?" Her tone is teasing, but there's a nervousness behind her smile, too.

"Only if you say yes, Miss Darby."

Sarah Jane smiles. Man, I love that smile. "I'd really like that."

My heart lifts. "Great. I'm looking forward to it." What is this bashful feeling? "It's been a while since I've been on a proper date."

"Me too."

We linger outside the inn, neither quite ready to go back inside yet. A warm autumn breeze rustles through the trees, carrying the faint scent of honeysuckle, like some echo of summertime trying to hang around. Sarah Jane tilts her face up to the sun, eyes closed, looking as peaceful as a pasture.

Unable to resist, I step closer and brush my fingertips along her cheek. Her eyes flutter open, lips curving into a soft smile as she meets my gaze.

"What are you thinking about?" I ask.

"You," she admits. "Us. This."

She gestures between us. I slide my hand around to cradle the back of her neck, leaning in until our foreheads touch.

“I can’t stop thinking about us either,” I confess. “I’ve never...”

I trail off, unsure how to put my jumbled thoughts into words. But Sarah Jane seems to understand. She loops her arms around my waist, eliminating the last bit of space between us.

“Me neither,” she whispers.

And then we’re kissing, slow and tender at first, then building in urgency. Sarah Jane’s fingers twist into my shirt, holding me against her. I lose myself in the taste of her, the feel of her in my arms.

We break apart, breathless. Sarah Jane glances around, cheeks flushing. “What if someone sees us?”

“Let them,” I say, my voice husky with desire. But then I reconsider, realizing that it might not be the best idea for everyone to know about our budding relationship just yet—especially considering the current situation with Gregory Stone. So I press one last kiss to her forehead. “You’re right. We should probably be more discreet.”

“Discreet” is hardly what comes to mind when we turn back toward the inn. The porch is lined with guests and staff, their eyes glued to us, some even holding up their smartphones. A chorus of cheers erupts from the assembled crowd.

Sarah Jane’s eyes widen, and laughter erupts from me.

“I guess the secret’s out,” I say, both embarrassed and oddly touched by their support.

Sarah Jane buries her face against my shoulder, giggling. I wrap my arm around her, waving to our enthusiastic audience.

“Seems so,” Sarah Jane replies, laughing along with me. “But you know what? I think it’s sweet that they care about us.”

“You know, I do too.” My heart swells.

Inside the inn, I’m instantly surrounded by a gaggle of enthusiastic guests. Everyone wants a part in helping me get ready for my date with Sarah Jane.

“You’ve got to wear something nice!” says Betty, the elderly lady who knits scarves for all the guests. “A nice blazer and slacks. You want to impress that girl!”

“No, no, he needs something more casual,” argues her husband, Earl. “Don’t want to come on too strong. Just wear those nice jeans we saw you in the other day.”

“Jeans?” Betty scoffs. “For his first real date? Honestly, Earl.”

“Definitely go for the blue shirt,” Mrs. Margaret says, holding up a neatly pressed button-down. “It’ll bring out your eyes.”

“Are you kidding?” Mrs. Nelson interjects, rolling her eyes. “That’s way too casual. He should wear a tie.”

“Let’s not forget about the perfect location,” Betty adds. “There’s that lovely little Italian place down the street.”

“Or the cozy café by the water,” Earl chimes back in, riling up Betty again.

As they bicker good-naturedly, I stand in the center of it all, trying not to laugh. Their hearts are in the right place, even if their fashion advice is questionable.

Truth be told, I’m grateful for the distraction. Now that it’s real, now that I’ve actually got a date with Sarah Jane, my nerves are starting to get the better of me. I keep my expression neutral, nodding along to their suggestions, but inside, my thoughts race.

Where should I take her? What if I say something stupid? I’ve never felt this way about someone before. I don’t want to mess this up.

It’s ridiculous, really. I’ve faced corporate sharks and cutthroat investors without breaking a sweat. But the thought of disappointing Sarah Jane? That wrenches my stomach.

I guess that’s what happens when you fall for someone.

“Haden?” Millie’s voice interrupts my spiraling thoughts. She gives me a sly look, amusement dancing in her eyes. “You ready?”

I make my best effort to collect all the air in the room in my cheeks, then blow it out. I nod. It’s time.

When I step into the foyer, my eyes immediately find Sarah Jane. She’s chatting with a few guests, dressed in a flowy blue

dress that matches her dangling earrings. She looks up, meeting my gaze, and smiles softly.

My heart stutters to a stop. I've seen beautiful women before, but Sarah Jane—she takes my breath away.

How did I get so lucky?

Sarah Jane says her goodbyes and walks over to me. Her cheeks are slightly flushed, green eyes shining.

“Hey,” she says.

“Hey yourself.” I can't stop staring at her. “You look gorgeous.”

She glances down, suddenly shy. “Oh, this old thing?”

I gently tilt her chin until our eyes meet again. “I mean it. You're beautiful, Sarah Jane.”

Her lips curve into another smile, and she links her arm through mine. “Come on, let's get out of here before our audience gets any more ideas about our date.”

With a shared laugh, we head out into the night together.

Chapter 23

Haden

The dimly lit restaurant is bustling with life as Sarah Jane and I settle into a compact corner booth at the Silver Spoon Diner. Sarah Jane's eyes widen as she looks around. It's been years since she last visited this classic local staple, back when she spent her summers at the inn as a child.

“Wow, this place has really changed since I was last here,” she says, scanning the updated decor. “I'd come with my grandma and eat ice cream sundaes at the counter. I remember thinking it was the fanciest place in the world.”

“Well, I'm honored that you'd accompany me to such an iconic location,” I say with a grin.

I glance around to see what she sees, taking in the modern lighting as well as the kitschy throwbacks—vintage advertisements, sun-faded paintings of Auburn Cove landmarks. Before long, my eyes land back on Sarah Jane. She fidgets with the silverware, lining up the fork and knife in parallel. When she stops, it's only to fold and refold her napkin, smoothing it over her lap.

She opens her mouth, breathing in before she speaks. “I have to admit... I’m feeling nervous being away from the inn again, especially after Beatrice’s fire last time.”

I reach across the table to take her hand. “Nothing like that will happen again. Reed has implemented new, top-notch security measures at the inn. You don’t have to worry about any more surprises from Beatrice or anyone else.”

Sarah Jane takes a deep breath and relaxes her shoulders. “You’re right. I know I need to stop obsessing. It’s just hard to shut off that part of my brain.” A smile tugs at her lips. “But I am happy to be here with you.”

I give Sarah Jane’s hand a light squeeze, taking in her beauty across the candlelit table. Her auburn curls frame her face softly, and the flickering light brings out the flecks of gold in her green eyes.

“I’m happy we’re here too,” I say. “It’s nice to see you relaxing and enjoying yourself outside of the inn.”

Sarah Jane smiles, a faint blush coloring her cheeks. “I have to admit, I’d forgotten how charming this little town can be.”

She gestures out the diner’s large windows, which give us a view of the town outside. Strings of lights illuminate the quaint shops and restaurants along the main street. The sidewalks are bustling with people walking dogs and holding hands.

“Besides,” Sarah Jane adds playfully, “I still need to find out more about your quirks. Who knows, maybe you secretly

collect antique thimbles or something. I learned that about a long-time guest once, when a suitcase full of them tumbled down the stairs and flew open.”

“Antique thimbles?” I laugh, shaking my head. “No, but now I’m tempted to start a collection just to surprise you.”

“As long as you don’t pile them up and unleash them down the stairs at the inn,” she chuckles.

Our food arrives, and we continue chatting lightly about happy memories from Sarah Jane’s childhood summers. With every wistful story she shares, I’m reminded of how much of life she has missed out on, shut away in the inn after her public downfall.

She wants to know more about me, as if to live vicariously through my experiences. Her eyes sparkle with amusement as I regale her with the story of the time I accidentally walked into a women’s restroom during a business meeting in Tokyo.

“Did you at least learn some valuable Japanese phrases from that experience?” She playfully nudges my foot under the table.

“More than you can imagine,” I confirm, laughing. “Especially ones related to apologies.”

Our hands brush against each other as we both reach for the last piece of calamari. I let her take it, but not before our fingers linger for a moment longer than necessary.

We’re enjoying our dessert—a decadent chocolate soufflé—when I can no longer ignore that the more I know about Sarah

Jane, the more curious I am about her past as Janey Dee.

I know it's a painful subject. The only time we've ever talked about it was during our big argument, when emotions ran high. But now, with the candlelight flickering across her lovely face, I feel compelled to pry open that trunk once more.

"So I know we haven't really talked about it," I begin, trying to gauge her reaction, "but I'd like to understand more about why you left your social influencer life. If you're okay talking about it."

She looks down at her dessert, spoon pausing mid-bite. Her smile fades, fingers fidgeting with the hem of her napkin.

Immediately, I worry that I've pushed too far.

"Listen, if you're not comfortable talking about it, that's okay," I say quickly, feeling guilty for putting her on the spot. "I just want to understand you better, but I don't want to push you into anything you're not ready for."

Sarah Jane studies me, her spoon still suspended in the air. She seems to contemplate whether to open up, and I hold my breath, hoping she'll trust me enough to let me in.

I watch as she wets her lips with her tongue before she speaks. "I've been avoiding talking about it, but I think I'm ready now."

Chapter 24

Sarah Jane

I glance around the low light of the restaurant, stomach swirling as I muster up the courage to tell Haden why I started hiding away. The soft clinking of cutlery and murmuring conversations blend into the background. None of these people have any idea who I am or what I'm about to reveal.

Hard to believe I'm about to relive the most humiliating moment of my life, and nobody had to drag me kicking and screaming to do it. Not many months ago, I was completely incapable of talking about this—and then, incapable of talking about it with anyone but Millie. But it's time to face my past. And I trust Haden more than I ever thought I'd trust anyone.

He looks at me with those understanding baby blues, giving me a gentle nod as if to say, "I'm here for you."

"Alright," I sigh, fiddling with the silverware. "So there I was, Janey Dee, at the height of my moment as a social media influencer... unknowingly live-streaming the absolute most mortifying moment of my existence."

Haden raises his eyebrows but doesn't interrupt.

"It involved my ex-boyfriend, Tyler," I continue. "Tyler was pretty conservative about sex. Like, he thought there was only one way to do it, one configuration, one... position." I blush as it occurs to me that Haden and I have already far exceeded Tyler's range of positions in the short time that we've been sharing a bed.

"Anyway, one day Tyler found my box of, uh, special toys. Vibrators and dildos." I know nobody else can hear me, but I whisper that part like a library mouse, anyway. "He started lecturing me about how 'ladies shouldn't need those things' and how I must be some kind of freak."

Haden's eyebrows are high enough to run off into his hairline now, but he remains silent, waiting for me to continue.

"Tyler was an idiot," I say, rolling my eyes. "He had no understanding of the female body whatsoever. When he found the box, he freaked out and started yelling at me about how I was 'cheating' on him with... silicone."

I make a show of rolling my eyes dramatically and Haden chuckles.

I bite my lip. "Well, um, he was ranting at me about this when I realized my phone was live-streaming the whole thing to all my fans and sponsors."

Haden winces. "Ouch."

"Yeah." I give a self-deprecating laugh. "It was bad. Tyler dumped me on the livestream. I was mortified. I shut

everything down and just... disappeared.”

I shudder, feeling exposed once again. The restaurant lighting, as low as it is, feels like a spotlight on me. I glance around just to be absolutely sure nobody is listening in on our conversation. Thankfully, we’re tucked away in a quiet corner, and I let myself feel a little braver for sharing my story with Haden.

“Wow,” he says. “That sounds horrendous.”

I nod. “My whole universe crumbled in an instant. My fans—those people who said they loved me?—a lot of them turned on me. I felt so alone. So judged.”

Haden’s warm fingers intertwine with mine.

“Tyler really had no clue what he was talking about, did he?” Haden chuckles, like he’s trying to lighten the mood, but it’s not the full Haden smile I’ve come to love.

“Absolutely clueless,” I agree, laughing despite myself. “He actually thought women shouldn’t think about their own orgasms. As if it was some sort of luxury reserved only for men.”

“Unbelievable,” Haden shakes his head. He looks downright pissed now, like he’s lost the battle within himself to be light-hearted about this.

He rubs the back of my hand, offering tenderness in his touch despite the hardness on his face.

“I’m sorry you went through that,” he says. “There’s nothing shameful about owning sex toys. Tyler was just an insecure,

ignorant pisshead of a boy.”

My throat tightens and I stare down at the table. I didn't realize how much I needed him to affirm that I'd done nothing wrong back then. It should be enough that I know it for myself, but, well, I hadn't left the inn in two years, so clearly I could use some backup in the validation department.

“Thank you for listening,” I say.

Haden nods. “I'm honored you trusted me enough to share it.” He brushes his thumb over my knuckles. “I'm glad I'm lucky enough to know you, Sarah Jane.”

As we step out of the restaurant and into the cool night, the fresh air invigorates me. I feel lighter, as if sharing my past with Haden peeled away a layer of heaviness I didn't know I was carrying. He slips his hand into mine, joining me as I bounce on the springy clouds beneath my feet.

“Do you ever think about returning to the social media spotlight?” he says. “You know, making a Janey Dee comeback?”

My immediate instinct is to say no, but the word sticks in my throat.

“I don't know,” I admit. “A part of me would like some closure. As far as everyone knows, I just vanished, you know?”

Haden nods, listening as we stroll down the lamp-lit street. “What kind of closure are you looking for?”

I have to think about it for a second in order to put my feelings into words. “I never publicly acknowledged what happened or officially said goodbye to my fans. And I think that has affected me more than I realized.”

I’m struck by this realization. For two years, I’ve been hiding from the world in my grandmother’s inn, too afraid to face the mess I left behind. I’d thought returning to the scene of the crime, aka as Janey Dee on the world wide web, was the last thing in the world I’d ever want.

But maybe it’s time.

Haden stops walking to look at me. “Whatever you decide, you know I’ve got your back.”

He is just so absurdly sweet to me. As we continue to walk beneath the starry sky, I feel brave. Hopeful. Ready to face the world again.

We leave the twinkling lights of town behind, wandering down a tree-lined path that eventually leads to a secluded corner of the nearby park. There’s a familiar scent of lilacs in the air. I grin. This area is a hidden gem I used to frequent during my childhood summers. The moonlight casts a serene glow on the small clearing, and a sense of peace washes over me.

“Wow. This is a pretty spot,” Haden says.

“Isn’t it?” I step closer to him. “I haven’t been here in years. It feels like just what we need right now.”

I love this spot—not just for its beauty, but also for its privacy. Out here, it feels like we have the world to ourselves.

I've never felt so connected to someone before, so understood and valued. It's so clear to me right now how much I want Haden. Hell, with my nipples going hard as diamonds under the soft fabric of my dress, it's hard to miss.

Haden's eyes meet mine, and I see all his desire and tenderness. He leans in, capturing my lips in a passionate kiss that leaves my head spinning. Our bodies rush against each other, hands exploring one another with a newfound urgency. I release a long, low moan, feeling alive like I haven't in years.

Haden's hands hook around my waist, pulling me into him. Our lips meet hungrily, the kiss deepening as desire mounts. I pull at his hair, which is quickly becoming one of my favorite hobbies, my body pressing into his firm chest.

He backs me against a sturdy oak tree, never breaking contact. It's like I'm between a rock and a hard, hard place, and he's by far the harder of the two. My pulse races as his hands explore my curves over my dress, sending tingles across my skin.

Breathlessly, with my eyes locked on his, I say, "Haden, make love to me."

His smile is bright enough to illuminate this entire park from the dark. "Your wish is my command," he murmurs, and suddenly, he's pulling me up into his arms, pressing his lips against mine. I straddle him as he lowers me gently onto a soft patch of grass.

I fumble with the buttons of his shirt, craving the feel of him. He shrugs it off before returning his attention to the delicate folds of my neck, trailing kisses down as I sigh in pleasure.

Roughly, he pushes my dress up and my panties down, groaning like it hurts him to have anything between him and my bare skin. The night air feels cool as I wrap my legs around his sturdy waist. The scents envelop us as we bury into each other: damp earth, fresh grass. Our urgent breaths mingle in the air, and as he slips on a condom, Haden gazes into me, his intense blue eyes boring like beams through the darkness.

He licks my sex generously until I cry out for him to fill me up, and then, under the stars, he plunges into me until he's all the way inside. I've already learned to mold to him, arch at him, fit with him just like he likes it—because he likes it best when it feels good to me.

So I chase my desire, feeling him pump into me and rub against my clit until I reach my peak and fall apart.

Haden rises to his feet and lifts me up with him, not finished with me, pinning me to the oak tree and keeping me there, brawny arms flexing beneath my hips as his pace quickens, chasing release.

I come again, just as he does, and everything else falls away. Nothing exists except his body against mine, our gasps and moans mingling. We are one powerful wave crashing together as we peak.

Panting, he lowers me gently back to my feet. Our foreheads touch as we catch our breath, still entwined in each other's

arms.

“That was...” I begin, at a loss for words.

“I know.” His strong fingers caress my face. I’ve never felt so seen, so understood. So safe in my vulnerability.

We lay under the stars for a while. I try to wrap my mind around the contrast between this moment and my mortifying experience with Tyler two years ago. Back then, I felt ashamed of my sexuality. Scrutinized. But right now, with Haden, I feel free—free to be vulnerable, to embrace my desires without judgment.

I press a kiss to his chest. “I’m really glad I got to find this part of myself again.”

Haden smiles down at me. “You look stunning when you’re happy.”

My response is a contented sigh.

A beat of silence passes, punctuated by the gentle rustle of leaves in the breeze. Haden’s fingers trace patterns on my arm, warming over goosebumps.

“Are you cold?” he asks.

“Only a little,” I admit, snuggling closer to him. “But I don’t want to move just yet.”

“Then let’s stay here, just a little while longer. I’ll be your blanket,” he adds, laughing as he rolls over me to protect every inch of me from the cold.

I'm laughing, too. It sounds like a new laugh. Not the one of the former Janey Dee, the girl scarred by her past, but of Sarah Jane Darby, a woman ready to face the world.

Chapter 25

Haden

We're the underdogs. At least that's how it feels as I rack my brain, trying to think of a way to stop Gregory Stone from taking Sarah Jane's inn. He's got so many damned resources at his disposal, it's like going up against a god as a mere mortal.

I've got plenty of resources myself. I'm not used to being outmatched, and I don't like it, especially not when it comes to looking out for Sarah Jane.

I grip her hand as we walk along the shoreline near the inn. The salty breeze tugs at her hair, while the waves lap gently at our feet. The soft sand beneath us, the foamy tide kissing the shoreline—this could have all the makings of a romantic evening, but the feeling of imminent doom doesn't quite fit the mood.

“Okay. So what do we have that Gregory Stone doesn't?” Sarah Jane's clearly thinking along the same lines I am, trying to get around the fact that Stone has more at his disposal than we do.

I gaze out at the wet shore ahead of us, not yet touched by our feet. “You’ve got history. Roots. Foundation.” Such things may seem like mere sentimentality, but there’s got to be a way to use them to our advantage. “You’re still digging into obscure local laws, aren’t you?”

“Sure am. I’ve practically got the whole town charter memorized by now.” There’s some pride about that in her rueful little grin. It was an obscure law that invalidated Grandma Jane’s ownership of the inn, and I know Sarah Jane would just love to use an obscure law to reclaim it.

I smile at her. “Look at you becoming an expert on civic regulations. This is good. I have a feeling your knowledge will come in handy.”

“We also have the support of the town on our side.” Sarah Jane frowns. “I think? I know I haven’t exactly been the friendliest neighbor, but Gregory is an outsider, so that means something, right?”

“What?” I stop walking so abruptly that the seagulls near our ankles decide to bail. “What do you mean, you ‘think’ you have the town’s support? Why wouldn’t they support you? What, because you stayed confined to the inn for two years?”

Sarah Jane shrugs, looking away. Confirming that she believes what I’ve just said is true.

I wait until she’s ready to look at me again before I speak. “Sarah Jane, I don’t know if you realize this, but you don’t have to *do* anything to earn love from people in this town. The people of Auburn Cove love you because you’re one of theirs.

And you're not as isolated as you think. You order from local suppliers. You tip your delivery drivers. You send guests into town to support local businesses. People around here know the inn. They knew your Grandma Jane. And they still know you, too. They remember the sweet little inn girl from the summer. They wouldn't have cared if it took you another ten years to leave the inn, Sarah Jane. They would've still been here for you, wishing the best for you, ready to welcome you back, whenever you were ready."

Maybe I should've stopped talking when she first started tearing up, because she's full-on blubbering now, and I have no idea what she's trying to say. But she's so very adorable, with her red cheeks and pink puffed-out lips, that all I can do is laugh and kiss the tears on her cheeks.

"That's the sweetest thing I've ever heard," she finally sputters out in words I can understand.

"It's all true. I'm just the messenger." For the way the people of this town make my girl feel loved, my fondness for them has just reached a whole new level. Now I know why people say that the people in their lives make them feel richer than money ever could.

An idea begins to form in my head. "Hey. What if we got the whole town involved? Held some kind of rally to show support for the inn staying independent? It'll make it clear to Gregory that he's not just fighting us, but the entire community."

Sarah Jane's eyes go big, and I know she's seeing it in her head already. "I love it! Millie would be pumped to help plan something like that. She's great with events, and we can gather others from town to join in. I bet we could even get some businesses involved, too!"

"Yes. Great thinking." Stone would hate to establish a new real estate venture with local businesses against him. It's no way to build a large-scale development. "We may not even need legal intervention if we can show Gregory that taking this place is not worth the trouble."

"I'm gonna still look for legal intervention anyway, just in case," Sarah Jane says, nudging me.

"You read my mind."

"Sometimes creativity and heart can beat money and power," she says with a cunning smile that makes my heart do a backflip.

"Then you're unstoppable, Sarah Jane."

Back at the inn, Sarah Jane and Millie waste no time getting started on planning the rally. They're back at it first thing in the morning, and soon the guests are eagerly volunteering to join the cause.

"We should make t-shirts!" Betty says from her knitting corner by the fireplace. "I could iron on 'Save Our Inn' messages if we can grab hold of a few supplies."

"Ooh! How about 'Keep Auburn Cove Authentic: Save the Inn'?" Millie suggests.

“Love it!” Sarah Jane scribbles the slogan down on a notepad.

“I can make signs for everyone to hold. I’m good at that stuff,” offers a teenage boy who’s visiting with his family. “We’ll paint them on the art table in the lounge.”

“Maybe we can ask Mr. Pierson from the hardware store if he’d be willing to donate some supplies for our signs?” Millie flips through her contact list on her phone.

With Sarah Jane and Millie as coordinators, the inn is abuzz with activity. Sarah Jane doesn’t miss a beat as she steps into her leadership role. Is this what “influencing” looks like? Either way, I admire her.

When the time comes to spread the word in town, I expect Sarah Jane to ask me or Millie to go. But to my surprise, she grabs a stack of flyers and heads for the door.

“I’ll be back in a few hours,” she says matter-of-factly. “Wish me luck!”

She looks so sure of herself as she heads off, and I beam with pride. The woman who once feared stepping outside her own walls is now venturing out to fight for what she holds dear.

“Good luck out there,” I call after her. She turns back and flashes a determined grin before disappearing into the crisp autumn air.

Hours later, Sarah Jane returns, her cheeks flushed with success. “You wouldn’t believe it. *Everybody* wants to help,”

she says. “They all have their own reasons for wanting to save the inn—some have fond memories of staying here, others are crazy about the charm and history it brings to Auburn Cove.”

“Plus, it’s you. How could they say no to you?”

She wrinkles her nose at me. “They care about this place as much as I do,” she says, touched by the support.

With the town behind us, we’re not just fighting for the inn. Against a man who cares about this town as little as Gregory Stone does, we’re all fighting for each other, too.

And that’s a fight I refuse to back down from.

The night before the rally, the inn is alive with laughter and the aroma of home-cooked food. Sarah Jane has brought the community together for a dinner to celebrate our unity against Gregory Stone’s takeover attempt. The atmosphere is electric, and I can’t stop smiling—which has never been the case before for the night before a stressful real estate showdown.

At one table, I overhear a first-time guest complimenting the inn’s homey feel.

“It’s a real hidden gem,” she says. “This place is like family.”

“Can you pass the potatoes, please?” a local librarian asks, peering down the table over her glasses.

“Of course.” A barber hands her the dish with a wink. “You know, Millie, this might be the best meal I’ve had in ages.”

“Why, thank you!” Millie beams. “I’m glad you’re enjoying it.”

“My bestie is the best chef in town!” Sarah Jane declares.

“Now, wait a minute...” Friendly bickering begins as residents and tourists alike cast their votes behind Millie and other contenders for the title of Auburn Cove’s best chef.

All night, the room flows with lively conversations. It’s not just Sarah Jane who’s getting to know her neighbors—people who have lived alongside each other for years find a newfound appreciation for one another across the table. It’s humbling to witness the connections being formed, knowing our fight for the inn has played a significant role in bringing everyone together.

“Isn’t this amazing?” Sarah Jane whispers, her hair bouncing against my cheek as she turns to face me. “I never thought we’d pull something like this off.”

“I didn’t exactly picture this when we first met either,” I admit with a laugh. “But look at us now. We make a pretty great team.”

We share a bright smile. This autumn has been a wild ride, but I wouldn’t trade it for anything.

“Everyone,” Sarah Jane says, standing up from her chair and raising her glass. “I’d like to propose a toast. To the inn that has brought us all together, and to the community’s unwavering support. No matter what happens tomorrow, I

want you all to know how grateful I am for each and every one of you.”

“Here, here!” her supporters echo, raising their glasses in unison.

The room erupts into applause so lively, it feels like magic is in the air. The hope is irresistible. We might just have a real shot at saving the inn from Stone’s clutches.

“Ready for tomorrow?” I ask Sarah Jane as she sits back down.

She nods. “Tomorrow, we fight.”

I plant a firm kiss on her hand. “Tomorrow, we fight.”

Chapter 26

Sarah Jane

I watch as Gregory Stone strides toward the inn, hair so oily it looks like arrogance incarnate as he clicks his polished shoes over the gravel.

He's here to finalize the seizure of my sanctuary. Dread creeps up the back of my neck as he gets closer.

But I'm not alone. My friends and neighbors form a human barrier behind me, standing between Gregory and our precious Aubie Inn.

"Mr. Stone," I call out, stepping forward to meet him. "I don't think you'll find the reception you were expecting today."

"Miss Darby." He addresses me coldly, attempting to look past the protective barrier around the inn. "I'm here to finish our business."

"Looks like you've got some opposition." I cross my arms. My friends shout in agreement.

On the lawn behind Stone, the rest of the crowd has already closed in on him—business owners, neighbors, and loyal inn guests, holding signs reading “Save Our Sanctuary” and “Auburn Cove Stands With Sarah Jane.”

Gregory’s lip curls at the sight of them. “Well, isn’t this... quaint?” he sneers.

I step forward. “You’re not taking my inn, Gregory.”

“We won’t let you!” Mrs. Margaret chimes in with a surprisingly steady voice. “We’ll fight for every weary traveler who’s ever found solace here.”

“And for that beautiful sunset skyline the locals love!” someone else says.

“For that time when the whole town gathered here during the flood,” adds Mr. Pierson from the hardware store. “For the epic board game battles fought that night!”

“Let’s not forget the countless weddings, baby showers, and birthday parties we’ve had here,” says Lily, who runs the flower market. “This inn is us.”

“This inn is where I met my husband, God rest his soul,” Betty says. “We shared our first dance in that very parlor. You can’t put a price on memories like that.”

“What? God rest my soul? Good God, woman, I’m standing right here!” Earl squawks.

Gregory Stone, however, remains unfazed. “You can trot out your buddies all you want, Miss Darby, but you’ve already lost.”

He pulls out the file that Beatrice stole from Haden's room. My heart sinks at the sight of it. I already know what's inside, but the rest of the town will be shocked to hear the truth.

Gregory thrusts the file folder into the air with a triumphant flourish. "Want to guess what this is? It's proof that Sarah Jane here has no legal claim on this property whatsoever."

Gasps rise from the crowd. My heart sinks as their devastated whispers rise around me.

"Decades ago, when Sarah Jane's grandmother purchased the inn, there was a local law prohibiting women from owning a business without a male co-signer," Gregory explains with a smirk. "It was that obscure law, combined with dear old Grandma Jane falling behind on paying her property taxes, that allowed our real estate company to claim the inn. It's thanks to my colleague, Mr. Miles, that we were able to find this gem. Isn't that right, Haden?"

Gregory looks around smugly. He thinks he's won. He probably expects the crowd to turn on Haden with pitchforks and torches.

But Haden is happy to accept the invitation to speak.

"Right. Speaking of obscure laws..." He steps forward, a glint in his eye. He pulls out a thick, old-looking document from his briefcase, making sure Gregory has a good view. "I have here the town charter. And according to a series of little-known laws and loopholes, Sarah Jane's ownership of the inn is, in fact, legally valid."

“Impossible.” Gregory doesn’t look nearly as sure of himself as he did a few seconds ago.

“As it turns out,” Haden continues, “when I signed to purchase the inn on behalf of our company, I actually became the male co-signer that Sarah Jane needed for ownership. Thus, making her inheritance of the inn legitimate. The process voided the company’s claim to the property, shifting co-ownership to me. This all means the inn officially belongs to both Sarah Jane and myself.”

Stunned silence. Then the crowd erupts in cheers.

Mrs. Abernathy shrieks, throwing her arms around me. Earl hoots, pumping his fist.

“Looks like you lose, Mr. Stone,” I say. I couldn’t hold back the pure satisfaction in my voice even if I tried.

Gregory stands rigid, face mottled with rage. “This isn’t over,” he snarls.

With a sudden screech, Doris the chicken comes flapping out from behind the porch steps. She charges at Gregory, pecking viciously at his ankles.

“Agh!” He stumbles back, swatting at her. “Get away, you wretched fowl!”

Gleeful giggles pepper the crowd as Doris chases Gregory all the way to the gate. He spews curses about us “looney townies,” declaring that he doesn’t want to own property in this crazy town, anyway.

Good riddance!

I scoop Doris up, laughing. “Who’s a good guard chicken?”

She clucks happily as I scratch her head.

I’ve never seen a more beautiful sight than Gregory Stone’s car peeling away from the property, gravel stones pelting his vehicle as he’s all too eager to speed away.

Oh, wait. On second thought, the grin Haden’s giving me when I turn back to him is definitely the prettiest thing I’ve ever seen.

I smile back, warm tingles fluttering through my chest. My sanctuary is safe. And I have this community of wonderful weirdos to thank for it.

Suddenly, I’m swept up into more hugs and handshakes in the next two minutes than I’ve had in my whole last two years. I can’t stop laughing as I’m hoisted around, congratulated, and loved on.

Wow. I’d forgotten how wonderful it can feel to be part of a joyful gathering.

As my feet find the ground again and people mill around to continue their celebration, I notice someone standing at the edge of the crowd, her eyes locked on me.

It’s Beatrice, the saboteur who damaged my inn.

She meets my gaze, then looks down, shoulders hunched.

Haden notices her, too. He steps between us protectively. “You’ve got some nerve showing your face here after what you pulled.”

I touch his arm. “It’s okay. I want to hear what she says.”

Beatrice slowly steps forward, not quite meeting my eyes.

“Hi, Sarah Jane.” Her voice is tentative, barely audible over the commotion. “I... I wanted to apologize for everything I did.” She keeps her gaze low. “I never meant for things to go that far.”

“Then why did you work with Gregory Stone?” I ask.

“Because I was blinded by ambition. I was in a bad place in my life, and I wanted to be part of something big. Something that would make me feel important.” She pauses, swallowing. “But watching all of you today, standing up for what you believe in... Well, it reminded me of what really matters. Of how special this place is.”

She wrings her hands. “I don’t expect you to forgive me. But I needed you to know how I see it now.”

Her words hang in the air, and I can feel Haden tense beside me. But something in Beatrice’s expression tells me she’s sincere. And lonely—a feeling I know all too well.

I exhale, trying to let go of my anger. “Apology accepted,” I finally say, surprising both myself and Haden. “But we won’t ever forget the damage you caused here.”

“Thank you,” Beatrice says. “I won’t forget either.”

As she walks away, Haden turns to me, raising an eyebrow. “Are you sure you’re okay with this?”

I nod, feeling closure. “We all make mistakes, Haden. It’s how we learn from them that truly matters.”

As the celebrations continue around us, Haden’s hand finds mine, and with a gentle tug, he leads me away from the crowd.

“Come on,” he says, a playful smile dancing on his lips. “I want to show you something.”

I let him guide me through the inn and up to the attic—our attic.

“Close your eyes,” he says as we reach the top of the stairs. With a confused smile, I do as he says, wonder rising in a fun bubble inside me.

“Okay, open them,” he says after a moment.

Twinkling fairy lights blanket the attic, strewn in waves across the ceiling, bathing the room in a soft, dreamlike glow. It looks so cute and inviting. I really can’t believe this is my dusty old attic.

“Wow,” I gasp. “Now, that’s a penthouse.”

Except there’s still one thing I don’t like: that flimsy fake wall still divides our bedrooms.

I eye it mischievously. “You know, I never did like this wall.”

Before Haden can react, I take a running start and try to kick it down. My foot connects with a dull thud, but the wall stubbornly refuses to budge.

“Ow!” I yelp, hopping on one foot. “Well, that was a letdown.”

Haden chuckles. “Here, allow me.”

His back muscles flex like wild animals as he rips the wall away in one smooth motion, tossing it aside.

I burst out laughing. “Show-off.”

“Maybe,” Haden admits, pulling me close. “But I did it for you.”

“My hero!”

Our laughter dies down as we find a new energy humming between us.

No more barriers.

Haden caresses my cheek. I close my eyes, leaning into his touch. When his lips meet mine, heat pools in my core. Our tongues dance together, tasting each other both anew and familiar, all at once.

We come together hungrily. I wrap my arms around his neck as he sweeps me up in one motion and carries me to the bed.

On the bed, I sober, meeting his earnest gaze, overcome with gratitude for this man who came to me like a storm and turned everything upside down in the most wonderful way.

Last night, I used a vibrator for the first time since Tyler threw all mine out on his way out of my apartment two years ago. It was a little pink thing that I’d kept in my bedside drawer, so it had survived when the others didn’t.

This time, when I got “caught,” it was Haden poking his head over to my side of the attic, wearing an impish grin as his eyes landed on the source of the buzzing sound.

This time, there was no shame.

This time, Haden held me and watched me while I brought myself to orgasm, and when I did, he kissed me and told me he was proud of me.

It was so damn affirming that I cried.

“I’m really glad you came into my life,” I tell him now.

He brushes a loose curl from my face. “I am, too. I love you, Sarah Jane.”

“I love you so much, Haden.”

This feels right. I’ve been alone for so long, shutting people out. Haden understands that hurt, that need to protect yourself. And slowly, gently, he’s shown me I don’t need those walls anymore.

I hope our supporters stay busy celebrating outside for a while, because we’re about to make enough noise for every guest to hear every sound, even without their hearing aids in.

Because I’m about to make love to Haden while flying high on this feeling of being free.

Our love, like the inn, will endure.

Chapter 27

Sarah Jane

The lights are hot on my face as I adjust the tripod. My heart pounds against my ribs as I check the microphone for the hundredth time, assuring myself, once again, that it works just fine. This is just like old times, getting ready to go live. But this time feels different. More significant.

It's been a week since Haden, our Auburn Cove community, and I stopped Gregory Stone from taking over the Aubie Inn. I never thought I'd be in this position again, but today, I'm about to go live on camera for the first time since the day I stopped being Janey Dee.

I put a hand on my chest to center myself. Haden's warm lips press against my cheek. "You've got this, love."

I give him a playful nudge. "Shoo, I need to do this solo."

He winks and slips out the door. The familiar pre-live jitters bubble up, and I shake them out from my fingertips and steel myself.

It's time.

I press the 'go live' button, my heart skipping a beat as the red light blinks on, signaling that I'm now live. Thousands of viewers flood the chat. I give them a smile.

"Hey everyone. Rumors of my return may not have been greatly exaggerated." I pause for a small wave. "It's me, the one and only Janey Dee."

The chat explodes. I take a steadying breath.

"I know it's been a while. Two years, to be exact. Two years since I disappeared from social media. Since I disappeared from everything. And I'm here to share an explanation."

I meet the camera dead-on. I'm not hiding anymore.

"Many of you might wonder where I've been these past two years. The truth is, I've been in hiding—not just from social media, but from the world itself."

My stomach churns as I recall the vitriol that flooded my feed after my last public appearance, when Tyler exposed me in the most humiliating way possible. But I push through the discomfort. I'm making sure these viewers see my growth.

"During that time, I've been really hurt by all the judgment from people who used to be my fans. But I've also learned a lot about myself and what truly matters in life." I hope my vulnerability resonates with some people watching. I know I'm not the only one who has struggled through judgment from others.

"I didn't mean to live-stream my breakup. I assure you, it was an accident, and it didn't get me the kind of 'attention' I'd

ever want. When that video happened, I was devastated. Mortified. The jokes, the accusations, the rumors... They crushed me. I know my reputation took a huge hit. But what really hurt was realizing how little support I had. How few true friends I had. I felt so alone.”

My voice wavers and I blink back resentful tears.

“Maybe I was too sensitive for the spotlight. But I started questioning my self-worth. Wondering if I even deserved to show my face anywhere. So I hid. From all of you, and from myself.”

I take a shaky breath, exposed but resolute.

“During my time away, I realized that it’s so important to treat people with kindness. We’re all just human beings, with our own flaws and desires and—yes, sex toys. But kindness matters.” My gaze drifts toward the door, where Haden stands on the other side, and I smile softly. “I was lucky enough to have someone in my life who showed me that true kindness still exists. And that’s when I started healing. It was kindness that helped me overcome my anxiety and find the strength to step back in front of you all today.”

I take a deep breath and steady myself. This is it.

“Before I go, I have an announcement to make. I won’t be making a comeback to social media as Janey Dee. That chapter of my life is closed.”

I pause, letting it sink in.

“But I also won’t be hiding anymore. I’m focusing on my personal life now. And on this place.”

With a smile, I pick up the camera and give my viewers a glimpse of the comfy space around me. The fireplace crackles warmly in the background, its flames casting a soft glow on the antique furniture in the room.

“This was my late grandmother’s inn,” I explain. “It’s become a place where I can heal, grow, and find peace. So while you won’t be seeing Janey Dee online anymore, know that I’m here, living my life authentically and finding happiness beyond the screen. I hope you seek out what makes you truly happy, too.”

My voice catches. This is all I ever really wanted to share with my audience. If they get it, that’s great, but some won’t, and I can live with that, too.

“I’m not sure what the future holds. But I feel hopeful. So thank you for listening. And be kind to each other. We all need more of that in this world.”

With a final wave, I end the stream. The inn feels warmer, my spirit lighter. It’s over. I shared my truth, said goodbye to my fans. A new chapter begins.

Haden appears in the doorway. “That was everything,” he says, wrapping his arms around me. “I’m so proud of you.”

My cheeks flush as I bury my face into the crook of his neck, inhaling his comforting scent. “Thank you. I’m glad I did it. I feel like I can finally move forward.”

He pulls back, cradling my face in his hands, and plants a tender kiss on my forehead. “You’re stronger than you’ve given yourself credit for, Sarah Jane. I’ve always known that about you.”

I gaze at him, the man who saw me at my lowest but still believed I could rise.

We head upstairs to the attic, our shared bedroom now that the dividing wall is gone. I glance around at the sparse furnishings, barren walls.

“I should really make this room more livable,” I muse. “New curtains, a fresh coat of paint...”

Haden grins. “Well, I’m here to stay. We can fix this place up together. Make it truly ours.”

Joy swells within me. “So you want to stay? To live here with me?”

“Now that you’ve let me in here, I’ll never leave your side.” He kisses me. “I love you, Sarah Jane.”

“I love you too,” I whisper.

We hold each other close while our imaginations light the room up with possibility. The decorations. The furnishings. The days and nights together.

The next chapter of our lives begins here in this little inn, the home I’ve made my own.

Epilogue

Haden

I step out onto the hot sand, squinting against the summer's morning sunlight. The sound of crashing waves follows me as I make my way to the simple wooden archway on the beach. Decorative shells and sea glass line the makeshift aisle between the white chairs in rows on either side.

Seagulls cry out overhead, circling in the blue sky above our gathered friends and family. Lanterns of pastel colors sway gently in the cool ocean breeze that caresses my face.

And then I see her.

My breath catches as Sarah Jane appears, walking toward me in a simple white dress that flows softly around her. The sunlight ignites the subtle red highlights in her hair, making her glow, her radiant smile lighting up the world like nothing else could. She beams at me, full of a confident lightness that makes me feel like the luckiest man alive.

“Isn't she stunning?” Millie whispers to Sami standing next to her, both of them beaming. I glimpse Mrs. Abernathy

dabbing her eyes with a handkerchief, her face crinkling with happiness. The inn's current guests are all here too, strangers turned friends in this tight-knit community Sarah Jane has created.

No trace remains of the guarded, distrustful woman who once shunned the world outside the iron gates of the inn. In her place stands an open-hearted lioness, ready to join her life with mine.

Every day, I marvel at how the inn is thriving. The once-crumbling building now stands proudly, its fresh coat of paint more inviting than ever. Gardens flourish, laughter fills the air, and every guest leaves with a bit of Auburn Cove magic tucked into their hearts.

We may jointly own the inn now, but I often joke that there's no question Sarah Jane rules the roost—hell, even Doris the chicken defers to her authority. I wouldn't have it any other way, though; Sarah Jane is the heart and soul of that place.

Sarah Jane's growth over these past months has been a wonder to behold. Last fall, her world was confined, and now her spirit soars as free as the gulls wheeling above. She greets each new day with optimism, embracing every experience as an adventure. Her wonder reminds me not to take the beauty around us for granted.

I've also discovered a newfound sense of peace within myself. Gone are the days when my self-worth was measured by the size of my bank account or the approval of others. The simple pleasures of life—sharing a home-cooked meal with

friends, tending to the garden, or laughing with Sarah Jane as we dance barefoot on the beach—have replaced the hollow pursuit of wealth. I spend my time funding local artists and watching their projects bloom.

I no longer dwell on the pain of my past, the scars left by my father's abuse and my mother's untimely death. Instead, I've found healing Sarah Jane's embrace and the soothing rhythm of small-town life.

As my bride reaches me, our eyes lock and we join hands. Sarah Jane's curls tumble over her bare shoulders, her feet sinking into the sand.

“Ready to marry me, Mr. Miles?”

My bowtie might be in danger of snapping off, I'm nodding so vigorously, unable to form words as my throat swells with emotion.

“Friends and family,” begins Verna, our officiant and Grandma Jane's old friend. “We gather here today to celebrate the union of Haden Miles and Sarah Jane Darby, two souls who have found their way to each other, despite the odds.”

I can't take my eyes off Sarah Jane's joyful smile. The crashing waves behind us match the happy rhythm of my heart.

“Who would've thought,” she begins her vows, “that I'd find so much happiness outside my own front door?”

She makes me sound like some kind of magician, the man who helped her see the world outside of her little sanctuary. So

in my vows, I remind her that the magic is all hers.

“Sarah Jane, you made a fairy tale believer out of me. Because that’s what this feels like: one of those impossibly dream-like tales come true. I promise to cherish you, respect you, and be your partner in all things.”

I slide the ring onto her graceful finger and she does the same for me with a delicate touch.

“By the power vested in me,” Verna proclaims with an infectious grin, “I now pronounce you married. Haden, you may kiss your bride!”

Our lips meet, sealing our union to the cheers of our community—including Doris, who has somehow managed to claim a chair in the front row.

The reception that follows is a lively affair, perfectly befitting our unique community. For once, Millie’s not the one cooking—she took her maid-of-honor duties far too seriously to also have time to cater. Instead, we have all the mouthwatering dishes from the food fair where Sarah Jane and I first ventured out together.

I spot the dessert table, laden with treats, including a special granola parfait made with the very recipe Sarah Jane served me on my first morning at the inn.

“Remember this?” I ask her, my voice teasing.

“Of course!” she trills, grinning. “It’s the granola Millie and I still argue about.”

“Ah, yes.” I chuckle. “The great granola debate. For what it’s worth, I still think it was you who made it so delicious.”

Our wedding guests gather around us, positively giddy about our love. Among them, I spot Fatima the artist, her colorful maxi dress billowing in the ocean breeze, and Betty and Earl, who are too busy dancing for their usual bickering.

“Your grandmother would be so proud of you,” Verna tells Sarah Jane as she leans against me. “You’ve made her dream for the inn come true, and then some. And Haden, though I didn’t know her, I know your mother would be proud of you, too.”

“Thank you, Verna. I’m pretty sure you’re right.” I picture my mother seeing me now, finally finding my place in this world, here with the woman I love, and my eyes go warm with tears.

Sarah Jane wraps her arms around my neck as we sway to the gentle guitar music.

“Hey,” she says, eyes sparkling. “Think Doris would mind if we asked her to join us for a dance?”

I laugh, picturing our feisty guard chicken strutting her stuff on the dance floor. “As long as she doesn’t try to lead, I’m game.”

She giggles, resting her head on my shoulder.

“Aren’t you glad I made an honest woman out of you?” I murmur. “Now you won’t go trying to sign any legal papers without your husband there to add a man’s touch.”

“Pffft, don’t even joke,” my new wife warns. She’s been working on getting that outdated law about male co-signers changed—as well as a few other bizarre local laws that require, among other things, a notarized witness for any and all popsicle consumption.

“Did I ever tell you how grateful I am that you walked into my inn that day?” Sarah Jane says, smiling softly. “Love works in mysterious ways, doesn’t it?”

“Indeed it does.” I pull her closer.

“Hey, Mr. Miles,” she whispers, her breath tickling my neck. “Do you think we can sneak away from our own wedding reception for a little... celebration?”

“Mrs. Miles, I thought you’d never ask.”

As we slip away, hand in hand, I find Doris keeping watch from her perch on a wooden post. I chuckle and scratch the feathers on her head. “Keep everyone safe,” I tell that cantankerous hen before I sweep my bride off her feet to begin our new adventure together.



Want to read more by Melody Rush? Keep reading to preview the first chapter of [The Catch](#), the standalone first book in the 90-Day Billionaires Collection.

Sneak Peak: The Catch

An Enemies-to-Lovers, Grumpy-Sunshine Romantic Comedy

Chapter 1

Jessa

I can't tell you yet what it's like to be on a reality TV show, but I can tell you what it's like to show up late for your first day of filming one.

You get dirty looks, a rushed makeup job, and nobody available to do your hair. That means your hair looks just like it did when you rolled over in your hotel bed this morning, saw what time it was, and panicked. And that, in my case, means my hair looks like I stuck brown barbed wire on either side of my head and called it a day.

You should know that this is so not me. I'm not the type of person who shows up late. Or goes on a reality TV dating show.

But my life is changing.

I'm in Northern California at the filming location, an obnoxiously gorgeous luxury resort owned by that media giant family, the Sincourts. I'm vaguely aware of the green, grassy hills and bright blue sky around me, but right now I don't have time to appreciate the view.

"Holy cat-crackers, I still can't believe I'm late. I'm never late. I'm so sorry I'm late."

The short woman in front of me barely takes the time to spare a glance in my direction, and I get the feeling I should stop reminding people of my tardiness. Unless I want them to resent me, that is.

"What's a cat-cracker?" she says.

A valid question. And a much better topic of conversation than my tardiness.

"Oh, don't ask me, I have no clue," I tell her. "Though if I had to guess, a literal definition might involve kibble, catnip, and an experiment in panini press technology."

She ignores my experimental thinking and introduces herself as Sophie, the show producer assigned to me on set. I almost feel like apologizing to her for that, too.

"I made up the phrase 'cat-crackers,'" I continue, as though this is a normal conversation. "I'm trying to find non-sweary ways to swear, since there's no cursing on *The 90-Day Catch*. By the way, which one sounds better: 'holy cat-crackers' or 'holy cat-cakes?'"

“You know they’ll just *bleep* out any swear words you say when the show airs, right?”

The Catch airs on network television at 8 p.m. In other words, at a time when impressionable young children might still be up trying to resist bedtime instead of letting their parents relax and enjoy their trashy television. That means the language is censored, because if it wasn’t, you’d have little kids giving their classmates inappropriate vocabulary lessons on Friday mornings.

“Don’t get me wrong, I’m usually not opposed to dropping an f-bomb if the situation calls for it,” I say. “But I don’t want to get *bleeped* too much, you know? If I should lose myself in passion for one reason or another, I wouldn’t want to lose half my passion to *bleeps*.”

Besides, I’ve done my research. I don’t tell Sophie this part, but I happen to know that contestants who get *bleeped* too much never win. The show might keep them around for the drama, since they’re the ones most likely to go off on a colorful rant about how they’re hot for the *Catch* or want to destroy the other contestants.

But the most-*bleeped* contestant will never be enough of America’s sweetheart to win this thing. The network wouldn’t stand for it.

And not winning is *not* an option for me.

I touch the rose gold locket necklace on my chest, picturing what’s inside—my favorite picture of me and my little sister, Ella—to remind me why I’m here.

If I have to come up with some creative non-curse words to get around the censors and win this thing, then that's exactly what I'll do. It may seem silly, but this obsessive level of preparation makes sense, I swear. Or rather, I don't swear. That's the whole point, isn't it?

Remind me to keep that explanation on hand in case someone finds me muttering "cat-crackers, cat-cakes" to myself as I try to decide which phrase packs more of a punch.

Sophie leads me down a hall, then changes her mind and doubles back to make a sharp turn to the right. I nearly trip over myself turning to follow her.

I'm trotting to keep up, because for some reason it takes me several steps to match just one of hers, even though she's several inches shorter than I am. It must be something about her energy—the portly, red-haired woman seems like the type who doesn't even need caffeine to go a million miles a minute, but gulps down more than her fair share of coffee anyway.

"Don't mind me, I'm a little scattered today. Only had one cup of coffee this morning," she says, flashing me a smile. "Usually I've had three times that much by now!"

Yup. Called it.

She turns her smile away just as quickly as she flashed it, like more than a half-second spent pleasantries will take away from her efficiency.

She's confident, assertive, and all business. I'm late and tired and my hair looks like a bird's nest after an electrical storm.

This isn't how today was supposed to feel. I was supposed to be cool, calm, and collected. I've done a ton of research on the show, and as a successful data analyst, I know what I'm doing when it comes to research.

Being late was *not* part of the game plan. Being on time feels like being in control. And I do not like feeling like I'm not in control. Why, why, *why* did I have to oversleep today, of all days?

It was a bad, bad idea to stay up last night and binge-watch past seasons of *Catch* on my laptop at double speed. I know this now. I knew this then.

I half-expected to wake up this morning with my mouth repeating a cliché line like "He's the one for me." I pictured myself unable to say anything else, like that episode of *Dexter's Laboratory* that had Dexter stuck saying "*omelette du fromage*" for everything from panic to seduction.

"He's the one for me!" I'd shriek inconsolably, trying to convince the producers that I broke my noodle and I need a brain doctor to look at it ASAP.

Sophie interrupts my replay of this catastrophic scenario with, "So you're going by Jess?"

I'm glad I don't have to answer in terms of cheese omelettes.

"That's me!"

Yep. That's me. I'm going from being Jessalyn Hargrove, sensible human with a sensible job in data analytics, to living life as "Jess!"

Jess! speaks in exclamation points (I've been practicing). Jess! says things like "holy cat-crackers." Jess! is the kind of girl who gets her nails done. I, on the other hand, am not used to having the extra half-inch of acrylic on the tips of my nails. So this morning when I was rushing to zip up my suitcases, I got the cursed nail on my ring finger caught in one of the suitcase zippers, causing a pain that caused a sound that would surely get *bleeped* by the censors.

Bleep you and your fashion sense, Jess.

Jess is also the kind of perky go-getter who believes in true love and is actually excited about signing up for a dating reality television show.

Not like the me who's Jessalyn, who's dreading the whole ordeal, and asking herself, not for the first time, what the hell she was thinking when she decided to do this.

I'm going to stop thinking of myself and my alter ego in the third person now. Wouldn't want to make it a habit and speak this way out loud in a cringe-tastic display of weirdness on camera.

"Maybe we call you Jess H.?" Sophie suggests, her face looking as unsure as her voice sounds. "There are four other contestants named Jess."

"What, is there a *New Girl* convention in town?" I joke.

Sophie stares at me blankly. Don't tell me someone this quirky has missed out on the quintessential quirky girl sitcom.

And Jess H.? Really? It's so—

“It’s so elementary school, though,” Sophie says with a wrinkle in her nose. Because Sophie seems to be able to read my mind. “Maybe we call you Jessa instead?”

I hesitate. It’s not that I have an issue with being called Jessa. In fact, that’s what all my family and close friends call me. But that’s kind of the problem. Jessa is *me*, no exclamation mark, not the reality show persona I’m trying to embody for the next ninety days.

“Sure. Jessa works,” I say anyway. If Sophie thinks it’s better, then I’ll go with it. A big part of my foolproof plan to win is my Reality Show Rules, and one rule is to follow the producers’ advice, because they clearly know what they’re doing. Still, it stings a little—I thought I was so prepared, ready to be Jess! with the hair and the nails and the quirky aversion to swearing, but everything I’ve planned so far has gone just slightly wrong.

But I do have one thing to be grateful for: Quint Sincourt won’t be seeing me in my disheveled state today. Quint’s the man I’m about to compete for, the one who’s now known as “the Catch” on the show.

The man I’m about to compete for. I do hear myself, in case you’re wondering, and I can hardly believe I’m doing this either.

Throwing myself desperately at a man while cameras roll for all the world to see? I don’t care how hot he is or what he’s got going on behind those good looks of his. I’ve never in my life met a man who deserved to have twenty-four women compete

for the chance to marry him after knowing him for only ninety days.

There was a time when I thought I wouldn't be caught dead going on a show like this. But believe me. I have my reasons.

I touch my locket again, thinking of my sister.

Sophie stops in front of a wide, black curtain, so I guess we've reached our destination.

I'm hoping I'll have time to settle in and get some alone time before I have to be with the rest of the cast, but as I stop to listen, I hear them already.

The sound of two dozen women on the prowl.

They're murmuring and giggling and milling about, probably halfway through orientation already.

And every single one of them is gorgeous.

Okay, so I can't know that for sure. I can't even see them yet. But trust me, when it comes to "the look" for this show, I can be sure that several of them were born with supermodel looks, while others achieve aesthetic perfection every day with their makeup, fillers, and probably diabolical powers they picked up from a deal with the devil. That's just how the casting for this show goes.

Sure, I can clean up nicely enough, seeing as I also managed to get cast. But here I am, with the mess of tumbleweeds I'm trying to pass off as "hair" paired with my wrinkly jumpsuit (sure didn't have time for ironing this morning, or this bad boy would've been smooth as paper).

I had my doubts before, but it's only just now sinking in how small the odds are of winning this. I've obsessed about my research and figured out exactly what it takes to win, but do I really stand a chance against these made-for-TV beauties?

My chest tightens and when I put my hand to it, my locket touches me. I grab hold, letting it cool my palm.

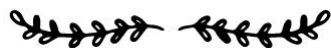
My sister needs me. I have to get myself together.

"They're already shooting one of the opening segments," Sophie whispers. "We'll have to wait for a break to get you in."

Just knowing I won't have to immediately rush in there helps relief wash over me.

"I'll be back in a flash," I tell Sophie.

Her eyes widen, and before she can tell me I have to stay right here, I duck her gaze and slip away.



I just need a moment to breathe. It shouldn't be difficult to find a spot to be alone—it would take the population of a whole city to pack this place to the point of being crowded.

I find a pretty little alcove tucked into a throughway between two buildings. This is as good a place as any. I can't wander off too far, or poor Sophie might just drop dead from the stress.

The bench feels cool beneath me as I sit, plant my feet on the ground, and close my eyes.

Then I take in a deep breath—just to swallow it with a gasp when a male voice enters the space around me.

“You’re not supposed to be over here, you know.”

I stand up and look around, my heart pounding and chest hurting from that sharp intake of breath. That’s when I see them—two tall, dark-haired figures looming down the hall from me.

The taller guy, who’s hot enough to melt an ice sculpture, is the Catch himself, Quint Sincourt. Seeing him in person is like seeing a model step off the pages of a magazine. His face is more clean shaven than I’ve seen in photos, revealing a chiseled jaw and impeccable cheekbones.

What a face. What a stunningly handsome face.

A face I’m not supposed to see until next week.

Oh, holy cat-cakes.

The good news is that the guy who spoke wasn’t talking to me. They haven’t even seen me yet. This might actually count as great news, if not for the fact that I’m about to explode with a hiccup that will surely give my presence away.

That’s what swallowing a bunch of air will do to you. So much for the benefits of deep breathing. I knew it was a scam.

With my hands clamped over my mouth, I slip silently around a corner to where they can’t see me. I can still peer through slats in the wall to keep my eyes on them.

“Not supposed to be here? I can be wherever I want,” Quint answers the other man. “It’s my show, remember?”

He certainly sounds sure of himself. That must come with the territory of being a billionaire at birth and having women vie for your eligible bachelor attention.

The other man snorts. “Your show, huh? Try telling that to our control freak producers.”

I really shouldn’t be listening to this. I’m not even supposed to see Quint in person yet, let alone be privy to his private conversations. But I’m already feeling behind the other women, being late and all, and this could be an opportunity to learn more about our Catch and get an edge.

Again, this is so not me. Showing up late *and* breaking the rules as soon as I get here? This made-for-TV version of me is something else.

“We’re way too close to where they’re filming the contestants,” the other man continues. “The girls could see you and it would ruin everything.”

“Oh, please do ruin everything,” Quint says. “The producers know as well as you do that I do not want to be here.”

What? This throws me off so much, I almost take my hands off my mouth before I remember I’m fighting hiccups.

It was supposed to be a given that this guy’s trying to find true love. That was the easy part. Now, it turns out he doesn’t even want to be here?

What the *bleep*?

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