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DEBBIE MASON



A Wedding on Honeysuckle Ridge



a novella

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A Wedding on Honeysuckle Ridge

Debbie Mason



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Chapter One

Sadie Gray stood at the front of the Blushing Bridal Boutique filming a segment called Say Yea or Nay to the Dress for her best friend's YouTube channel, *Abby Does Highland Falls*. Their mutual best friend Mallory was the MC for the event.

It wasn't a role Mallory was comfortable with. She was eight months pregnant, and being the center of attention on camera wasn't exactly something she enjoyed. But her six-year-old stepson Teddy, who was one of Abby's biggest fans, had won her over. Looking adorable in a black tux, Teddy stood beside Mallory to the left of the dais in front of a packed house.

The women filling the rows of white chairs had their paddles at the ready—*yea* on one side, *nay* on the other. So far none of the dresses had gotten more than a smattering of yeas. Sadie didn't think it had anything to do with the dresses. Abby, the bride-to-be, looked like she was going to a funeral instead of shopping for her wedding gown. When Abby had first begun planning her wedding, Sadie had assumed her lack of enthusiasm was because she was pregnant and had morning sickness. But lately, she'd begun to worry something more was going on.

Raised whispers coming from behind the backdrop drew the audience's attention. The shop owner—who had gone to considerable expense and effort to create a fabric wall that resembled barn board decorated with autumn leaves and pumpkins, the words *Fall in Love* just above where Abby should be standing but wasn't—shot a nervous glance at Mallory, who in turn shot one at Sadie.

Sadie reached behind her for her phone on the counter and started "Isn't She Lovely" by Stevie Wonder over from the beginning, raising the volume in hopes of distracting the audience from whatever was going on backstage.

Mallory bent to whisper in Teddy's ear. The little boy nodded,

disappearing behind the backdrop. Moments later, he returned with Abby clutching his arm.

She wore an organza mermaid wedding gown with a ruffled skirt, which wasn't much of an improvement over the high-neck metallic lace dress she'd appeared in ten minutes earlier. They were beautiful dresses; they just weren't Abby.

Mallory gave Abby an encouraging smile while reading from the notes the shop's owner had given her. Then she said, "Okay, ladies and gentleman, are we saying yea or nay to the dress?"

Teddy was the only one who gave the dress a yea, which wasn't a surprise. He'd voted the same way for every dress. But their audience didn't just let their paddles speak for them; they began explaining in detail why they'd voted nay.

Sadie didn't know who looked more defeated, Abby or the shop owner.

At the chime of bells, Sadie turned to see her cousin, Elliana MacLeod, maneuvering a stroller inside. Sadie stopped filming and hurried over to hold open the door.

"Sorry, someone was missing her mommy." Ellie grinned down at Sadie's seven-month-old daughter who babbled up at her from where she sat strapped into the stroller. The words were barely distinguishable except for one that sounded a lot more like *dada* than *mama*. It wouldn't surprise Sadie if her daughter's first word was *dada*. Not only did Chase spend an inordinate amount of time teaching her the word, but Michaela had rewarded him with her first smile and giggle too. "And her daddy," Ellie added.

Sadie missed Chase as much as her daughter did. He'd once again flown to DC to check on his grandfather. It was his second trip in the past seven weeks. Sadie waited for the shoe to drop each time he came home, positive his grandfather had convinced him to give up on the life he was building in Highland Falls with her and Michaela and return to DC.

"Mommy misses Daddy too, baby. But he'll be home tomorrow afternoon." Sadie leaned in and kissed her daughter's rosy cheek. She looked adorable in a pink faux-fur vest, gray-and-white-striped top, pink leggings, and gray baby boots. "And it looks like Auntie Ellie took you shopping again."

Ellie had come home two weeks ago to help her maternal grandfather run the Mirror Lake Inn.

“I hope you don’t mind but I couldn’t resist. They were unveiling their new fall line at Cutie Patootie when we walked—” Ellie broke off at Abby’s raised voice, narrowing her violet eyes at Sadie’s best friend standing on the dais. Ellie’s grimace seemed to validate everyone else’s opinion of the dress.

“Okay, I get the picture, ladies. I think we’re done for the day.” Abby hiked up the wedding gown and tromped offstage.

“Wait! You have to pick a dress,” the shop owner called after Abby. “I won’t have enough time to order yours in before the wedding if you don’t find something soon.”

Abby and Hunter were getting married on October twenty-third, less than a month away.

“That’s fine.” Abby smiled before disappearing behind the backdrop.

The shop owner stood wringing her hands, shooting a *do something* look at Mallory, who in turn shot one at Sadie.

Obviously sensing that Sadie was at a loss for what to do, Ellie patted her shoulder. “Don’t worry, I’m sure I can find Abby a dress she’ll fall in love with.”

Sadie’s cousin reached back to twist her long, raven-black mane into a ponytail as she walked toward the wall of wedding gowns. Removing a clip from the pocket of her brightly colored ankle-length sweater, Ellie pinned her hair on top of her head, clearly focused on the task at hand. Sadie’s cousin owned Custom Concierge, a personal shopping company she’d founded in New York years before.

Blushing Bridal’s owner hurried over as Ellie flicked through the dresses with an expert eye. “We’re closed at the moment, but if you come back later, say, in an hour, I’m sure I can find you some—” the owner began.

“Lena, she’s not looking for a wedding dress for herself. Her fiancé left her at the altar in May,” said Babs Sutherland, the owner of Spill the Tea, shrugging in response to the women hissing at her to be quiet.

Sadie stared at her cousin. Ellie hadn’t said anything to her about a broken engagement or a wedding, and they’d once been as close as sisters. It couldn’t be true. But when Sadie’s gaze landed on their grandmother looking sheepish in the front row, she had a feeling that it was.

Ellie’s exclamation of delight drew Sadie’s attention from their grandmother. Her cousin was working a blush-colored lace dress free from among the frothy white gowns. Ignoring the shop owner’s moue and negative

head shake, Ellie held up the dress, gave what looked like a satisfied nod, and made a beeline for the back of the store. She slowed to cast a disappointed look at their grandmother.

So Granny had spilled the beans after all.

Which was odd. Her grandmother didn't like to gossip, especially about family. But if Agnes hadn't told Babs, then how...? Sadie sighed. How indeed. Her grandmother had the second sight, a gift that she couldn't really control. If she'd taken Ellie's hand when she'd stopped in at I Believe in Unicorns, her grandmother's store on Main Street, Agnes wouldn't have been able to keep from blurting out whatever she saw in front of customers. She went into a trance-like state when foretelling someone's future.

"It looks like your great-granny is in hot water with Auntie Ellie," Sadie murmured as she crouched beside the stroller. "And it looks like Mommy is going to be up late editing today's video for Auntie Abby's channel. Let's just hope Auntie Ellie picked a winner."

Michaela took her fist from her mouth, offering Sadie a drooly smile before responding with a minute-long commentary in baby speak. Sadie laughed. "I think your daddy's right. You're going to talk as much as your Auntie Abby."

Her daughter validated Chase's predication by babbling nonstop for another few minutes, and, as Sadie so often did, she responded as if they were having a real conversation. "I agree. You are a very lucky girl to have so many amazing women in your life, including your Auntie Abby. I just wish she was a little more excited about her wedding."

"I don't think that's going to happen," Ellie said, coming to crouch on the other side of the stroller.

"Why not? What did she say?" Sadie asked her cousin.

"She didn't have to say anything. Her first marriage ended in disaster, so she's obviously afraid of making the same mistake."

"Hunter is nothing like Abby's first husband. He adores her, and she adores him. They're perfect for each other." The couple had been living together for more than a year at the farm on Honeysuckle Ridge.

"And that's why she doesn't want to get married. She's afraid if they do, it will change everything."

"But that's crazy. It's just a piece of paper."

Ellie shrugged. "Fears are rarely based on logic."

Sadie frowned, wondering if her cousin might be projecting after what Babs had revealed about Ellie's disastrous trip to the altar.

"It has nothing to do with me," Ellie said as if she had somehow read Sadie's mind. "And before you ask, I don't want to talk about it."

At that point, Sadie was barely listening to her cousin. She was stuck on the thought that Ellie had been able to read her mind. She leaned in to her cousin. "You didn't just put two and two together, did you? You didn't just sense that Abby's scared because her first marriage didn't end in a happily-ever-after. You read her mind."

"I don't know what you're talking about." Her cousin avoided meeting her eyes, busying herself straightening Michaela's vest. "Mommy's being silly, isn't she, sweetheart?"

"No. Mommy isn't being silly. I know you, Ellie, and I know when you're hiding something from me. Granny always told me I didn't have to worry about inheriting her gift. She said the oldest MacLeod granddaughter would —"

Sadie was cut off by a cacophony of women's voices yelling at her to start the music. "We're not done talking about this," she told her cousin.

Shuffling through the playlist on her phone, Sadie swapped out "Isn't She Lovely" with Marvin Gaye and Tammi Terrell's rendition of "Ain't No Mountain High Enough" in hopes that the change of music would bring about a change in the result. She thought it was a good sign when Michaela started moving to the music in her stroller. Sadie got up and retrieved her video camera, turning it on just in time to capture Abby walking out from behind the backdrop.

Abby had barely taken her place on the dais when Teddy's paddle went up and he shouted, "Yea!"

He was right. Abby looked gorgeous in the lace wedding gown. The dress, warm beige with a hint of peach, complemented her best friend's pale skin and long, curly red hair rather than washing her out like the white wedding dresses had. And while the other dresses had overpowered her petite frame, this one fit both her figure and her personality to perfection.

Smiling at Teddy, Mallory opened her mouth to read from her notes, but before she got out a single word, every member of the audience echoed Teddy's yea.

"Yay!" he cheered, grabbing Abby by the hand. And for the first time that

day, the bride-to-be smiled. A real smile that lit up her face and grew wider when Teddy started swinging her arm and dancing to the music. The entire front row got to their feet, clapping and waving their paddles. Within seconds, everyone in Blushing Bridal was singing and dancing to “Ain’t No Mountain High Enough.”

Sadie smiled as she captured the moment on video, her heart overflowing with love for her friends, her family, and her hometown.

“Turn off your camera and join in,” her cousin said, dancing past her with Michaela in her arms.

What the heck, Sadie thought. She had more than enough footage. She turned off the camera, set it on the counter, and danced her way to her cousin’s side.

Chapter Two

The women in Blushing Bridal were still celebrating Abby's wedding dress pick fifteen minutes later when Sadie's cell phone rang. She glanced at the screen, and her heart thumped an excited beat. She shook her head at her reaction to seeing Chase's incoming FaceTime call. Honestly, the way her heart raced you'd think she hadn't spoken to him in a month instead of a mere fifteen hours.

"Hey," she said, unable to keep her smile from spreading into an ear-to-ear grin when his gorgeous face appeared on the screen. Obviously, she had no shame when it came to the man. She was totally out there with her feelings for Chase, which was a new experience for her. And every once in a while, it gave her pause. Like now. Because the smile he offered in return was strained by comparison. "What's wrong?"

"I can hardly hear you. Where are you?"

Okay, so maybe she was overreacting. "Just wrapping up at Blushing Bridal. Abby said yes to the dress. Give me a sec."

"Is that Chase?" Zia Maria asked. Sadie barely got out a yes when her phone disappeared from her hand. Zia Maria—the owner of the best Italian restaurant in North Carolina—and her friends adored Chase almost as much as Sadie did. While he was passed among the older women, Sadie strapped Michaela into the stroller, placed the video camera and a Blushing Bridal bag with her earlier purchase in the storage basket, and then went to open the door.

"Everything okay?" her cousin asked, coming to hold the door for her.

"Yeah, just a little loud for a FaceTime call." She glanced over her shoulder. "Would you mind rescuing Chase from Zia Maria and her friends and bringing me my phone?"

"Sure. No problem."

When Ellie brought her phone outside a few minutes later with a worried expression on her face, Sadie thought her initial impression that something was wrong had been right. Which might have been why her first words to Chase were “Are you not coming home?”

“Hang on a minute, honey.” The screen went dark.

“I’ll take Michaela for a walk,” her cousin whispered.

Sadie nodded and sat down on the brick window ledge, worrying her bottom lip between her teeth as she watched Ellie push the stroller up the sidewalk. The orange, yellow, and red pattern in her cousin’s sweater matched the autumn leaves on the stately trees that lined Main Street. Sadie huddled deeper in her sage-green chunky knit sweater, feeling chilled despite the midafternoon sunshine warming her face.

“Sorry about that.” Chase rubbed the back of his head, an action that usually meant he was nervous or about to deliver bad news.

“So you’re not coming home?” She briefly closed her eyes at the plaintive note in her voice. She sounded like a clingy, whiny woman.

“Actually, I’m home now. I got in twenty minutes ago.” She noticed the yellow door behind him. He was standing outside the cottage on Willow Creek.

A relieved breath whooshed out of her, and then she realized why he was acting a little weird and winced. Chase was compulsively neat, and she was habitually messy. “Okay, I can explain the mess in the kitchen. Zia Maria gave me her recipe for tiramisu, and, surprise, I made it for your welcome-home dessert. But I had no idea it would take that long to make, and I had no time to clean up.” If she hadn’t used cottage cheese instead of ricotta in her first attempt, the dessert wouldn’t have taken her so long to make, but she wasn’t about to share that with Chase. “I had to be here at eleven. Plus, you weren’t supposed to be home until—”

“You made me tiramisu?” He gave her a smile that made her ovaries twitch. But then his smile went from downright sexy to strangely wistful, and her twitching ovaries froze.

“Chase, what’s going on? You’re making me nervous.”

He frowned. “Why are you nervous?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Maybe because your grandfather has been trying to break us up from the moment you told him we were engaged.” The judge, as Chase referred to his grandfather, blamed Sadie for his grandson refusing the

high-profile position he'd been offered with the FBI in DC.

"Right. I see where you're coming from."

Just this once, she wished he'd lie to her. Tell her that she was overreacting or imagining things. It wasn't easy knowing that one of the most important people in her fiancé's life disapproved of her.

Chase leaned back and opened the door. "Give me a minute, and I'll be right with you."

"I bet Finn was happy to see you." At Chase's grimace, she laughed. "What did he steal this time?" Finn, the golden retriever they'd adopted in June, was a canine kleptomaniac.

"Um, I wasn't talking to Finn. I was talking to the judge."

Sadie slowly came to her feet. "Like on Zoom, right? Because you would not bring your grandfather—your grandfather who is even more obsessively neat than you are—home without warning me."

"I'm sorry, honey. I didn't have much of a choice. He—"

"Chase Roberts, you get in that cottage right now and shut the door to our bedroom." Her mind raced, making it difficult to remember the state of the other rooms. "The laundry room and bathroom too."

He pressed his lips together, his eyes dancing with amusement. At any other time, she would have taken pleasure in those dancing blue eyes, but not today. "Don't you dare laugh at me. This is serious. He already hates me and thinks I've ruined your life." She wrapped an arm around her waist, glancing at the traffic crawling along Main Street to hide how much it upset her.

"Hey, look at me."

When she returned her gaze to that handsome face she'd never tire of looking at, he said, "I don't care what he thinks. You and Michaela are the best things that ever happened to me. I love you."

She sighed. She knew he did. He never gave her any reason to doubt his feelings for her and Michaela. "I love you too. I just wish you would have given me some warning."

"I didn't know he was coming. Honest, I didn't. We had a...difference of opinion, and I decided to come home early. I didn't realize he was on the plane until we were disembarking."

"He wanted you to stay in DC, didn't he?"

"He did. I know the timing isn't great, but in the end, this might be for the best. He's lonely, and he's not getting any younger. Who knows? Maybe

Highland Falls will win him over.”

“You’re thinking of moving him here?” Her voice went up an octave, garnering the attention of several women leaving Blushing Bridal. Sadie gave them a bright smile and friendly wave while moving farther along the sidewalk.

Elsa Mackenzie, the owner of Three Wise Women Bookstore, frowned at her. “Are you all right, Sadie?”

“I’m great. Really, really great.” She kept that bright smile plastered on her face. “Thanks for taking part in Say Yea or Nay to the Dress. I should have the episode online tomorrow morning so be sure to check it out.”

“We wouldn’t miss it. I hope you got my best side,” two of the women said at almost the same time, laughing as they went their separate ways.

With her smile still firmly in place, Sadie returned her attention to Chase. She wondered if she should apologize for the panic he’d undoubtedly heard in her voice. It was his grandfather they were talking about, after all.

“I’m sorry, honey,” Chase said. “I know the last thing you need right now is to deal with my grandfather on top of everything else. If you want, I can check and see if they have a room available at the Mirror Lake Inn.”

“For him or for me?”

He smiled. “The only place you’re staying is here with me.”

His feelings for her were evident in his words, in that slow, seductive smile he only ever shared with her. Ellie was right. Just like Abby’s, Sadie’s fears had no basis in reality. Nothing the judge could say or do would change how she and Chase felt about each other. “Your grandfather is staying with us too.”

“Are you sure? Because I—”

“Of course I am,” she said with as much enthusiasm as she could manage with her nerves doing a panicked dance in her stomach. The plan she had to welcome Chase home would have to go on the back burner. The cottage wasn’t all that big, and the walls were pretty thin. But the judge was Chase’s family. The man who’d raised him. “It’s the perfect opportunity for your grandfather to get to know me and Michaela better.” The perfect opportunity for Sadie to win him over. If she didn’t, then surely her adorable daughter would.

Except...the judge wasn’t exactly the grandfatherly type, as their one and only visit to his retirement home had proven. There’d been no oohing and

aahing over Michaela. So maybe her daughter, who was as messy as her mother, wouldn't win him over. But thanks to Chase, Sadie had inside information on the judge that at the very least might soften him up. He loved Italian food as much as his grandson did. "I'll stop by Zia Maria's and pick up something for dinner."

"Okay, as long as you're sure..." Chase broke off with a wince. "I'd better go. It sounds like the judge and Finn aren't bonding as I'd hoped."

So she wasn't the only one with a plan to win over Jonathan Knight. If Chase's plan wasn't working out, she wondered what that said about the chances hers would.

"Everything okay?" her cousin asked.

Sadie startled. Lost in thought after Chase had disconnected, she hadn't heard Ellie approach. She turned to smile at her cousin and Michaela. "Everything's fine. Chase is home."

"You know I can see through you, don't you? And no, it's not because I've inherited the MacLeod curse."

She found it interesting that her cousin referred to their grandmother's gift as a curse but let it go. Ellie had always known when Sadie was pretending everything was fine when it wasn't. "This is me trying to channel my inner optimist. Chase's grandfather is with him, and he's not exactly on board with our relationship."

Ellie laughed. "You don't have an inner optimist. You're the most pessimistic person I know."

"And you're the most optimistic person I've ever met so tell me everything is going to be all right, and I might believe you. At least I'll try to." Her cousin grimaced, and Sadie's stomach dropped to her toes. "Tell me the face you just made has nothing to do with Chase and me."

"Sorry. I'm usually better at keeping my feelings to myself. I tend to let my guard down around people I love. When I retrieved your phone, Chase's grandfather was standing behind him. He was thinking of ways to—"

"I knew it! You did inherit Granny's gift."

"Shh," Ellie hissed, shooting a panicked glance up and down the sidewalk. "The last thing I need is for anyone to know, especially my parents."

"So it's true."

Ellie sighed. "Yes, and obviously it's not only my feelings I can't keep to myself when it comes to you. I'm sure everything will be fine but you need to

watch out for Chase's grandfather. He's here to break you guys up."

Even though her cousin wasn't telling her anything she didn't already know, Sadie's shoulders sagged in defeat. "Is there any chance you might be wrong? He was on the phone, and it wasn't like you could touch him."

"Unlike Granny, I don't need to have physical contact to read someone. I wish I did. At least it would be easier to control. It really is a curse, Sadie. I wouldn't wish it on my worst enemy."

She doubted her cousin had any enemies. Ellie was the kindest person Sadie had ever met. "Does Granny know?"

"No." She tilted her head to the side. "Maybe. But I don't think she'll say anything. She knows how my parents would react."

Sadie's aunt and uncle weren't the most open-minded or accepting people. When they'd first learned Agnes had the second sight, they'd been horrified. They'd dragged her to psychiatrist after psychiatrist, threatening to have her committed if she didn't stop. So Sadie understood why Ellie wouldn't want them to know.

She gave her cousin's shoulder a reassuring squeeze. "I promise, no one will hear about it from me. But I'm sorry it feels like a curse and that you're the one who has to bear it, Ellie. If there's anything I can do to make it easier for you, just tell me."

"I will." Ellie leaned in and gave her a quick hug. "I've missed you, Sadie."

"I've missed you too. It's nice to have you home."

Her cousin glanced at her phone. "Speaking of home, I'd better get back to the inn." Ellie kissed Michaela on the top of her head and then set off down the sidewalk. Turning as she reached the stoplight, she called out, "I'll get a room ready for Chase's grandfather. Just in case."

Chapter Three

You know what your problem is? You have a hero complex,” Chase’s grandfather said from where he sat at the opposite end of the couch from Finn, a pillow in his hand to shoo the dog away if he dared to come close. “The only reason you’re with this girl is because you think she needs saving.”

“If you knew Sadie, you’d know how far that is from the truth,” Chase said as he leaned against the island in the kitchen, keeping an eye out for Sadie’s SUV.

“I don’t have to get to know her, nor do I wish to. The investigator I hired provided enough information about Sadie Gray and her family that I know exactly the type of person you’ve gotten yourself mixed up with. You’ve thrown away everything you worked for to play house in this shack in the woods.”

Chase ground his back molars together to keep from saying something he couldn’t take back. He knew why the judge was lashing out at Sadie. In his grandfather’s mind, she *had* ruined Chase’s career, but more importantly, she was the reason Chase had left DC. The judge was old and lonely. The reminder helped Chase rein in his anger but not the need to set his grandfather straight. He opened his mouth to do just that but apparently the judge wasn’t finished making his case.

“She’s manipulating you, my boy. She’s no doubt put those hacking skills of hers to good use and discovered my net worth. Now she’s just biding her time until I die. She’ll be in for a shock when she discovers I disinherited you. You’ll not get a single penny of my estate if you stay with her.”

“Sadie wouldn’t hack into your finances.” He didn’t bother denying that she had the ability to uncover any and all of his grandfather’s secrets. Like her brother, Sadie had inherited their late father’s talents. Only, unlike their father, Sadie and Elijah Gray used their tech skills for the greater good. At

least now her brother did. “She doesn’t care about your money, and neither do I.”

“I find that hard to believe. You always had a taste for the finer things in life.” His grandfather looked around the cottage, his upper lip curling in distaste. “Obviously, that is no longer the case.”

Chase had spent the first eight years of his life going to bed hungry, never knowing where his next meal would come from. All that had changed when his grandfather took custody of him and his younger brother. But those early days had left a mark, and Chase had worked hard to ensure he’d never go hungry again, no matter what life had in store for him. Except the small fortune sitting in his bank accounts—thanks to his baby brother’s investment acumen—hadn’t filled the void. Sadie’s love for him had, and he wouldn’t let anyone, not even the man who’d raised him, damage what they had together.

At the sound of a vehicle coming down the gravel road, Chase pushed off the counter. “If you were anyone else, I would have thrown you out for what you said about Sadie, Judge. But I love you, and I understand what this is really about so I’m giving you one more chance. Don’t make me regret it.”

He saw a flicker of fear flash in his grandfather’s eyes before he covered it with a contemptuous snort. “Or what? You’ll throw me out? Choose a woman you’ve known for seven months over me, the man who raised you?” The judge gave his head a bitter shake. “I’m disappointed in you. I thought you were smarter than this. But I guess you are your mother’s son, after all.”

Chase’s cheeks burned as if his grandfather had slapped him. They rarely talked about his mother, the judge’s daughter. Twenty-four years ago, his grandfather had given her an ultimatum—either leave the man she lived with at the time or he’d have Chase and his brother removed from her care. His mother had chosen the man over her sons. Three years later, the judge’s prediction that Chase’s mother’s involvement with the man would lead to her death had proven correct. He’d killed her in a drunken rage.

Chase held his grandfather’s gaze. The old man had the good grace to look contrite. It didn’t matter. Chase wasn’t about to let him hurt Sadie like he’d hurt him. “I’ll book you a room at the inn. You can stay there tonight, and I’ll drive you to the airport tomorrow.”

“You said the girl...Sadie,” his grandfather corrected at Chase’s pointed stare, “was picking up food for our dinner. It would be rude for me to leave before we ate.”

“She’ll get over it,” Chase said as he walked to the front door.

“Wait!”

Surprised at the pleading note in his grandfather’s voice, Chase turned.

“You said you’d give me a second chance. I’d like to stay.” His grandfather stood, glancing from Finn, who was watching him warily from the other end of the couch, to the kitchen. “At least for dinner.”

Chase gave him a curt nod and opened the door. From where she sat behind the wheel of the SUV in the driveway, Sadie looked at him, her warm smile turning into a frown when she got out of the car. As Chase walked toward her, he worked to clear the anger at his grandfather from his face. It wasn’t as difficult as he thought it would be. Then again, he shouldn’t be surprised. Sadie had that effect on him. His life was so much better with her in it. He took her in his arms and bent his head to kiss her, the last of his anger fading away at the feel of her soft, welcoming lips beneath his.

She brought her hand to his cheek, breaking the kiss to search his face. “Are you okay?”

“I am now.” He turned his head to kiss her palm. “I’ve missed you. And you too,” he said when Michaela started babbling and clapping her hands in the backseat.

“Dada, dada.”

His jaw dropped. “Did you hear that?” Without waiting for Sadie’s response, he jogged around the SUV and opened the back passenger-side door. “You missed your dada, didn’t you, my sweet girl?” He kissed her button nose while getting her out of the car seat, scooping her into his arms. “Can you say dada? Come on, say it again for me. Dada.”

She gave him a drooly smile and patted his cheeks. “Dada.”

His chest got tight, and his throat clogged with emotion. He’d had a similar reaction the night he’d helped bring Michaela into the world. She’d captured his heart the moment he’d first held her.

He cleared his throat. “That’s right, my brilliant baby. *Dada*. Get out your phone, honey. We need to record this,” he said to Sadie, who’d come to stand at his side.

Sadie didn’t want to burst Chase’s bubble but it had sounded more like *blah blah* to her. She lifted her phone, suppressing a laugh as she filmed Chase encouraging Michaela to say *dada* again. Seconds later, the urge to laugh gave way to an emotion that blurred her vision. She switched from

video to photo, capturing the two people she loved more than life itself.

The sunlight glinted off Chase's honey-blond hair and her daughter's auburn curls, the two of them smiling at each other with the forest of autumn-colored leaves in the background. Sadie picked out a frame and matting for the photo in her mind. She'd give it to Chase for Christmas.

"Did you get it?" Chase reached for her phone. He frowned when she handed it over. "Are you okay? You're not upset she said *dada* first, are you?" he asked, looking a little guilty.

"No." She laughed out loud this time, taking Michaela from him so he could watch the video. "It seems only fair since you've spent every waking minute coaching her."

"I haven't spent...okay, so maybe I have." He grinned, his brow furrowing as he watched the video. He brought the phone to his ear. "Something must be wrong with your sound card. It sounds more like *blah blah* than *dada*."

"I'll have a look at it later. We should probably get inside before your grandfather wonders what happened to us." She forced a smile, reaching past him for Michaela's diaper bag. The disgruntled look Chase shot at the cottage didn't help combat the nervous flutter in her stomach. "What's wrong?"

He kissed the top of her head. "Nothing." But the smile he offered her seemed as forced as her own. He closed the back passenger-side door and then opened the front passenger side, retrieving the takeaway bag from the seat. "Smells great. What's this?" he asked, tucking their food under one arm to pick up the bag from Blushing Bridal Boutique.

"Don't—" She sighed when he looked in the bag, and his eyes went wide. "It was another welcome-home surprise, but it'll have to wait a few days until your grandfather leaves." Thinking of Chase's plan to move the judge to Highland Falls, she grimaced and opened her mouth to correct herself but didn't get a chance.

"Days? Are you kidding me? No way I'm waiting that long to see you in this, babe." He lifted the barely-there red lace negligee out of the bag and waggled his eyebrows. "I'll take the judge to the inn as soon as we've eaten. And Mommy will put you"—he gently tapped a finger on Michaela's nose—"into bed as soon as Daddy steps out the door."

She knew she should leave it alone. She was totally on board with his plan, but she couldn't help feeling Chase was keeping something from her. "I thought we agreed your grandfather was staying with us."

“He’ll be more comfortable at the inn. We’re not really set up for guests.”

It was true. But Chase’s unwillingness to meet her gaze said the change of plans had nothing to do with their lack of space.

“Let’s get this over with,” he said, confirming her suspicions.

She didn’t like to see him this way—tense and angry, no doubt worried how he was going to keep the peace between her and his grandfather. “Hey.” She reached for his hand when he went to open the door. “Don’t let your grandfather’s feelings for me cause a rift between you. I understand where he’s coming from. I can stand up for myself. You don’t have to protect me.”

“I know you can. But you shouldn’t have to.”

“Maybe I won’t. Maybe we’ll have a perfectly delightful dinner together.”

He made a face. “Don’t hold your breath.”

An hour later, as they sat around the dinner table, Sadie wished she’d kept her mouth closed. Either Chase was taking her at her word or he didn’t realize that his grandfather’s smiling face and congenial manner were a ruse. She’d spent the entire dinner tiptoeing around the conversational minefields the judge set up for her.

“So when’s the big wedding?” he said with a smile, and then winced as if he’d mistakenly stepped on the biggest minefield of all.

Sadie wasn’t buying it. The judge had an agenda. She could tell by the speculative glance he cast in Chase’s direction.

“We haven’t decided on a—” Sadie began, looking at Chase to help her out. But he was imitating an airplane with Michaela’s rubber spoon, trying to get her to open her mouth.

“I shouldn’t have asked. You’ll have to forgive an old man for wanting to see his grandson happily married before he dies.”

Sadie caught Chase’s broad shoulders rise and fall on a sigh and waited for him to say something. But all he did was make the sound of an airplane sputtering in a death spiral before crashing it into Michaela’s bowl of rice cereal—much to the delight of her daughter, who giggled.

While the two of them laughed and smiled, Sadie was left to reassure Chase’s grandfather. “I’m sure that’s not something you have to worry about, Jonathan. Chase and I just haven’t gotten around to talking about wedding plans. Have we, *honey*?” She wondered if the man she loved picked up on the *help me out here* in her voice.

“No, we haven’t,” Chase said, getting up to walk to the refrigerator.

Sadie stared at him. Did he think that was helpful? He could have been a little more enthusiastic.

“I’ve made a mess of it, haven’t I? I hope you’ll accept my apologies, Sadie. The last thing I want is to create problems between you two.”

As if she’d believe that, Sadie thought, while her gaze remained on Chase.

The judge leaned toward her and patted her hand. “I’m sure it will be different for the two of you. He was much younger when he asked Gwen to marry him.”

“Gwen?” She realized her mistake as soon as she blurted the woman’s name. She should have simply smiled and talked about it with Chase later. Instead, she’d given the judge the opening he’d obviously been looking for.

“Oh my, I seem to have put my foot in my mouth again. Sorry, my boy. I’d assumed you would have told Sadie about Gwen. She played such an important role in your life. His first love, you know. They met at Yale.”

“It was a long time ago, Judge. I’m sure Sadie isn’t interested.” Clearly uncomfortable with the conversation, Chase squeezed the banana puree he’d retrieved from the refrigerator into a bowl for Michaela with a little more force than was necessary.

But he was wrong. Sadie was very much interested in this woman who’d obviously been important to him. A woman she’d heard absolutely nothing about. “Of course I am. Please go on, Jonathan.”

Chase’s grandfather dabbed at his mouth with a napkin. “It’s probably best if I stay quiet. I wouldn’t want my grandson tossing me out on my ear. I simply thought it would help for you to have some context as to why he might be dragging his feet on setting a wedding date. He’s good at proposing, just not so good on the follow-through.”

“Gwen and I weren’t compatible. We were also too young. I have no problem setting a wedding date with Sadie. Like she said, we just haven’t had time to talk about it.”

“Not compatible?” The judge threw his napkin on the table. “I’ve never met a more compatible couple. You were both brilliant and ambitious, a power couple if I’ve ever seen one. Gwen was very disappointed that you turned down the promotion with the Washington bureau, my boy. But I’m sure you already know that. The last time Gwen and I were out for dinner together, she told me she’d called you and tried to change your mind. Gwen’s with the DOJ,” he explained to Sadie. “She helped Chase out on his last

investigation. On the quiet, of course.”

“I didn’t realize you and Gwen saw each other socially,” Chase said, spooning the banana puree into Michaela’s mouth.

“We see each other more often now than we used to. She knew how difficult it was for me when you left and visits me once a week. She’s a very thoughtful woman.” The judge smiled. It was a *cat’s got the cream* smile if Sadie had ever seen one.

Chase gave a noncommittal grunt while still avoiding her gaze burning a hole in the back of his white shirt.

Sadie’s smile was so forced it felt like rigor mortis had set in. It took a moment for her to unclench her teeth. “How nice.”

“Oh my, it appears I may have given you the wrong impression, my dear. My grandson is as loyal as they come. He’d never think of stepping out on you with another woman, no matter the temptation.”

Sadie was tempted to dump the last of her pasta on the older man’s head.

Before she had a chance to formulate a more appropriate response—with words instead of actions—Chase swiveled in the chair with an incredulous expression on his drop-dead gorgeous face. “What are you even talking about, Judge? Of course Sadie knows I wouldn’t cheat on her.”

Chase was smart—brilliant, in fact—but sometimes, like in this instance, he was clueless.

Chapter Four

Sadie stifled another jaw-cracking yawn while she waited with Mallory for Bliss, the owner of Bites of Bliss on Main Street, to get organized for today's cake tasting at the bakery.

"That's your third yawn in the last five minutes. It's either my company or Chase must have really loved his welcome home surprise from Blushing Bridal," Mallory said with a teasing grin.

Sadie lowered her voice. The bakery was long and narrow and already crowded with people wanting to take part in the Say Yea or Nay to the Wedding Cake segment for Abby's YouTube channel. "It's not you, and my welcome home surprise didn't go according to plan. I mean, Chase liked what he saw of the lingerie in the bag but I didn't get a chance to model it for him. He got called into work on his way to the inn to drop off his grandfather, and I stayed up half the night cleaning the cottage while I waited for him to come home."

Binge-watching the latest British crime drama on Netflix was typically her stress-busting activity of choice but dinner with the judge had left her feeling inadequate, like she and Chase weren't as compatible as she thought. Certainly not as compatible as he was with Gwen.

She must have made a face at the thought of the other woman because Mallory said, "I'm taking it dinner with his grandfather didn't go well."

Sadie was a private person. Even with her closest friends, she wasn't as forthcoming as they were. But in this instance, she really wanted a second opinion, so she shared the judge's bombshell about Chase's ex-fiancée with Mallory. Sadie was probably worried about nothing, but if anyone could alleviate her fears, it would be Mallory.

"What did Chase say? Did he tell you why he's never mentioned Gwen? You'd think she'd have come up before now, especially since they'd

obviously been working together in Washington this summer.”

Okay, so maybe sharing was overrated. Mallory seemed as concerned about Chase’s relationship with Gwen as Sadie was. “We didn’t have a lot of time to talk about it. I was asleep when he got home, and he had to go into work early this morning. But it probably wouldn’t matter if we’d had the entire morning to talk. When I brought it up, he got the same look on his face that he does when Granny talks to him about unicorns and fairies or when I try to explain why Darcey still has feelings for Tom on *90 Day Fiancé*. Chase honestly doesn’t understand what I’m concerned about. He says he loves me, and that’s all that matters.”

“He does have a point. It’s obvious to everyone how much he loves you.”

The tension in Sadie’s shoulders released. Maybe sharing wasn’t overrated after all. Or so she thought until Mallory added, “But now that his grandfather knows Chase kept his relationship with Gwen a secret from you, he’ll bring her up at every opportunity in hopes of driving a wedge between you.”

“I said the same thing to Chase but he just doesn’t get it. He said the only way the judge could drive a wedge between us is if we didn’t trust or love each other as much as we do. To his way of thinking, Gwen is about as much a nonissue as Drew.” Drew was Sadie’s ex and Michaela’s biological father.

“I guess I can see where he’s coming from. I mean, you, me, and Abby didn’t exactly go into our relationships without some baggage. For that matter, neither did Gabe, Hunter, or, obviously, Chase.”

“You’re right, and maybe I’m just imagining Gwen was Chase’s perfect match because of what his grandfather said.”

Sadie smiled at Bliss, moving aside so she and her other baker could get by with the tray of cake slices. Abby’s wedding cake choices had come down to the top three vote getters: chocolate with salted caramel frosting, ginger carrot with buttercream frosting, and spiced pear with honey-caramel frosting. The winning design had already been chosen by Abby’s social media followers, and Bliss had assured Abby she could make the design work for any of the flavors. It would be a three-tier cake decorated with ruffled frosting, muted flowers, and wispy grasses.

“I swear I could eat that entire tray of cake by myself.” Mallory rubbed her baby bump and smiled. “Good thing I have an excuse.” She gave Sadie’s shoulder a comforting squeeze. “Now put Chase’s grandfather and Gwen out

of your mind and enjoy—”

“Who’s Gwen?” Abby asked as she left a group of women to join them.

Before Sadie could get the words “nobody important” out of her mouth, Mallory said, “Chase’s ex-fiancée.”

Her eyes going wide, Abby looked from Mallory to Sadie. “I didn’t know Chase had an ex-fiancée.”

“It’s not im—” Sadie began before Mallory chimed in.

“Neither did Sadie. Chase’s grandfather brought her up last night after asking Sadie and Chase when they were getting married. He thinks Gwen is the reason they haven’t set a date.”

Sadie stared at Mallory. “That’s not what I said.” She felt like she was in a game of telephone where everything got mixed up and blown out of proportion. “Anyway, we have an episode to film. We can talk about this later.”

She nudged Abby toward the table at the front of the room where they’d set up a laptop for the twelve lucky subscribers from *Abby Does Highland Falls* to join in on Zoom for the tasting. They’d shipped their boxes of cake to them a couple days before.

Abby dug in her heels. “Hang on a minute. This is too important.”

“Trust me, it’s not. But your wedding is, and so is this episode. You don’t want to disappoint your fans, do you?” Sadie shot Mallory a *now look what you’ve done* glance. They’d talked about Abby’s lack of enthusiasm for her own wedding just yesterday. Their best friend was looking for any excuse to get out of finalizing her wedding plans.

Abby blinked and then got a smile on her face that made Sadie nervous. “I know exactly how you can shut down Chase’s grandfather’s plot to break you guys up. Set a wedding date.”

“Sure. We’ll get right on that. Tonight, in fact,” Sadie said, knowing that Abby wouldn’t be satisfied with half measures or open-ended promises.

At the sudden gleam in Abby’s green eyes, Sadie braced herself for whatever her friend had come up with. Because that was definitely an *I’ve got the best idea ever* look in her eyes. Sadie should know; she’d seen it many times before. “How about October twenty-third?” Abby grinned.

“Sounds perfect. I won’t have to think of anything. I’ll just borrow all your ideas and decorations. But it won’t be October twenty-third next year, it’ll be October twenty-second.”

“I wasn’t talking about next year, silly. I was talking about this year.” Abby grabbed Sadie’s hands. “Say yes, please say yes. It’ll be perfect.”

Say no, say a hard no, Sadie told herself. She had problems saying no, especially to Abby. “Abs, I love that you want us to have a double wedding.” After what her psychic cousin had said, Sadie hoped something hadn’t gotten lost in translation and that Abby wasn’t planning a bride switcheroo. “Maybe if it was, say, eight months away,” Sadie continued, “I’d think about it. But it’s in a few weeks’ time.”

When the excitement in Abby’s eyes faded and she got a dejected look on her face, Sadie blurted, “I’ll talk to Chase,” kicking herself as soon as the words came out of her mouth. She couldn’t help it. Abby had to look like the happy bride-to-be that her subscribers, not to mention half the town, expected. Sadie would find a way to let her down gently later. They had a week before they filmed the *Say Yea or Nay to the Wedding Menu* segment.

Abby’s face lit up. “Really?”

“Yes, really. Now go before Bliss bites her fingernails to the quick.” Sadie nodded at the bakery’s owner, who stood behind the comfy, white high-back chair they’d brought in for the occasion. It went perfectly with the bakery’s robin’s-egg-blue decor.

Abby gave Sadie and Mallory exuberant hugs before winding her way through the tables, greeting the audience effusively.

“Someone is in a much happier mood than they were yesterday,” Mallory observed as they made their way to the table to the right of Abby’s. Sadie stopped at the tripod first to check the angle of the camera, which she could pause and start with a remote control. That way she could enjoy the tasting too.

She waited until they got settled at their table to share her concerns with Mallory. “You don’t think that was a play by Abby to get out of her wedding by making me the bride-to-be, do you?”

Mallory frowned, turning in her chair to look at Abby, who was welcoming everyone to the cake tasting. “No, I don’t think so. I mean, she hasn’t exactly been acting like the Abby we know and love, but I’m sure she’s just nervous. A lot of brides get pre-wedding jitters.”

“Did you?”

Mallory smiled. “No. But our wedding was spur of the moment. It was just me, Gabe, the boys, and a couple of witnesses on the beach.” Gabe had

proposed when they were on vacation with their sons at spring break. “Abby’s basically having a wedding with millions of people attending, even if the majority of them will be online. That would make me nervous too.”

“Because you don’t like to be the center of attention. But Abby thrives on it.”

At that moment, Abby turned the laptop, introducing everyone in the bakery to twelve of her super-fans, who’d won the chance to take part in the cake tasting. Concerned that the angle of the camera might not capture the fans’ faces, Sadie got up from the chair and hurried over to the tripod, apologizing to the women sitting at the surrounding tables as she did so.

Abby smiled. “Hey guys, let’s put our hands together for Sadie. She’s the one who makes the magic happen behind the scenes.”

Everyone in the bakery and on-screen clapped, and Abby led them in a cheer for her. Sadie smiled her thanks and gave a little wave. When the clapping and cheering died down, Abby grinned and said, “I have some super exciting breaking news for you guys, but I might need some help from you to make it happen.”

Abby’s announcement was met with shouts of “What is it? What do we need to do?”

Sadie glanced up from the viewfinder to find Abby looking at her with her eyebrows raised. *No*, Sadie mouthed, shaking her head, only to find that the audience’s attention was now on her too.

Babs Sutherland waved a hand. “I know, I know. Sadie set a wedding date!”

“No. Sadie has not set a wedding date,” Sadie said, thinking she was going to kill her best friend when the audience began shouting their suggestions on the best time of year for her to get married.

Abby put her fingers between her lips and whistled loudly. The room went quiet. “Okay, so as you can see, my bestie isn’t totally on board with sharing our news just yet. So it’s up to us to convince her that October twenty-third would be the absolute perfect day for her to get married.”

“We’re going to have a double wedding!” several older women cried, including Babs.

Sadie bowed her head. It felt like she was on a runaway train that she had no chance of stopping. She looked up to have her worst fears confirmed. Babs’s fingers were flying on her phone. By now, the owner of Spill the Tea

had no doubt texted the news to anyone who wasn't at the bakery. Which meant that the news would spread throughout the entire town of Highland Falls and beyond by tonight.

Abby must have picked up on Sadie's panic because she once again whistled for quiet. "Let's not put the cart before the horse. Sadie needs to talk to her fiancé first. Although why he wouldn't want to marry this incredible woman as soon as possible is beyond me."

Sadie could say the same about Abby, who'd been dragging her heels about setting a wedding date with Hunter, who was an amazing man. In the end, it had been Hunter's aunt, Elsa, who'd forced the issue, setting the date for the couple. Sort of like Abby was doing for Sadie.

At that moment, she had a better understanding of how Abby must have felt. Just like Elsa, Abby probably thought her wedding-date intervention was in Sadie's best interest. If it served to shut down the judge's plot to break them up, she supposed there might be merit to the plan.

It wasn't like Sadie didn't want to marry Chase or hadn't given it some thought over the past few months. An image of her walking down the aisle toward Chase appeared before her eyes, and Sadie found herself smiling.

"Do you see that? I think we might be winning her over, guys," Abby said. *Damn it.* "No, I just—"

"Okay, no pressure, sweetie. Well, maybe a little pressure. But just in case you're doing this, you need to pick a cake too so get over here."

Sadie narrowed her eyes as she made her way to Abby's side. "You said 'in case you're doing this,' not 'in case we're doing this.' This would be a *double* wedding, wouldn't it?"

Abby waved her off. "Of course, of course," but she wouldn't meet Sadie's gaze.

"Abby—" Sadie began, only to have Abby ignore her and turn a radiant smile on Bliss. "Let's give a big round of applause to Bliss for hosting the sampling and making the cakes." Abby clapped and cheered along with the audience. "You'll all be happy to know that Bliss has each of the cakes available for sale and to order," Abby said once the appreciative noise had died down. "So let's show her our thanks and support by buying everything she has in stock. Now, everyone ready? Forks up. Let the sampling begin!"

In between sampling the cakes, Sadie lifted her phone to film the audience. She blinked at the number of text messages on her cell. She'd

asked everyone to turn off the sound when they'd first arrived, and she'd done the same. If her grandmother needed her, she would send someone to get her. They were only a couple stores away.

She took a few minutes to film the live and online audiences' enthusiastic responses to the cakes and went back to finishing up her own. All three were amazing, but it was the chocolate cake with salted caramel that won Sadie over. So much so that she was tempted to lick the plate.

She leaned back in her chair and whispered to Bliss, "Can you reserve one of these for me?" She pointed to her empty cake plate.

Beside her, Abby laughed. "It looks like Sadie's made her pick. Let's see if you guys agreed with her. Which cake did you pick for Sadie?" The majority of people held up the number one.

"It wasn't hard. She looked like she was having an orgasm when she was eating it." Babs laughed.

Sadie's cheeks heated. "Thanks, Babs."

"Don't even think about editing that out," Abby said. Then she asked the audience, "I'm having a hard time deciding between cakes two and three, so help me out, guys. Which one did you pick for me?"

Cake number three—spiced pear with honey-caramel frosting—won out for Abby.

"Perfect, and I'll take one to go, Bliss." Abby glanced from cake number two to Mallory, who got a nervous expression on her face.

Sadie understood why when she got a look at the gleam in Abby's eyes.

"I've just had a brilliant idea. Mallory, get up here." Abby leaned over to pull another chair beside her.

"It's okay. I'm good right here," Mallory said.

"Please, for me." Abby fluttered her eyelashes. When Mallory didn't look like she was going to move, Abby started chanting, "Mallory, Mallory," and the rest of the audience joined in, clapping when Mallory finally complied.

"I'm already married and almost nine months pregnant, so don't even think about—" Mallory began as she lowered herself into the chair.

"But we weren't at your wedding," Abby said, putting an arm around Sadie's shoulders and bringing their heads together. "And neither were your other friends and neighbors. Come on, what do you say? It'll be perfect. You and Gabe can renew your vows."

If the town of Highland Falls had been excited about Abby's wedding,

they were over the moon at the idea of three best friends getting married together. Even Sadie found herself getting a little caught up in the excitement of the moment, cheering when Mallory reluctantly agreed. And then Sadie remembered. She had to consult the groom.

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Chapter Five

How are you going to break the news to Chase?" Mallory said from between her teeth, her face frozen in a strained smile that Sadie imagined mirrored her own. As the audience filed out of the bakery loaded down with boxed cakes, cookies, and cupcakes, shouting their congratulations as they left, they took their contagious excitement with them, leaving Mallory and Sadie to brood over the situation they found themselves in.

"I have no idea. I'm still trying to figure out when I agreed to it. I'm positive I said I'd think about it," Sadie said.

"It might have been how you reacted not only to the cake but the wedding talk. You looked like you were into it, even more than Abby."

"I guess I got caught up in the moment. Everyone was happy and having fun...It was contagious."

"You can't back out. You're the reason I agreed to do it. Well, you and Abby. All for one, and one for all, right?"

Sadie laughed despite the nervous jitters in her stomach at the thought of telling Chase what she'd done. "So we're the Three Musketeers now?"

Mallory grinned. "The boys were watching the movie with Gabe when I left."

"I wondered where Teddy was."

"Nothing interferes with father and sons' movie day."

"At least you know Teddy will be thrilled you and Gabe are renewing your vows."

She nodded and then made a face. "I'm pretty sure Gabe won't be."

"How are you going to break the news to him?" Sadie asked. She could use some inspiration.

"I'm not sure, but I think I'd better figure it out fast," Mallory said, giving a finger-wave to someone in the bakery window. "Same goes for you."

Sadie turned, groaning at the crowd outside that included a reporter and photographer for the *Highland Falls Herald*. “I knew the news would go viral as soon as Babs got out her phone, but I thought we might have at least a few hours’ reprieve.” She pulled her cell phone from the back pocket of her jeans. “I’d better give Chase a heads-up.” She needed to let her family know too, but it wasn’t their reactions she was worried about. They’d all be thrilled, especially her grandmother.

Abby hugged Bliss and then came over to join them, waving at the crowd. “Oh my gosh, look at how excited everyone is.” She frowned. “Everyone but you guys. What’s wrong?”

“What’s wrong? We’ve just agreed to get married—in Mallory’s case, remarried—and our grooms have no idea that we’ll be dragging them to the altar in a few weeks’ time.”

“Right.” Abby grimaced and nodded at the door. “It looks like they might have some idea what’s going on.”

Chase held the door open for Sadie’s grandmother, who pushed the stroller into the bakery, followed by Teddy and Gabe.

“Is it true?” Teddy asked. “Are we getting married again?”

Sadie didn’t hear Mallory’s answer. Her grandmother had given her a hug while declaring it was the best news she’d heard since Sadie and Chase had gotten engaged. Michaela, picking up on the excitement, squealed and clapped her hands.

Chase and Gabe, who’d become good friends while working on Sadie’s brother’s case last summer, stood shoulder to shoulder at the door—their arms crossed, heads cocked, and eyebrows raised.

“Aww, look at how gorgeous you guys are. My subscribers are going to love—” Abby began before Sadie and Mallory cut her off, saying at almost the same time, “I can explain.”

“You go first,” Sadie said to Mallory.

“Thanks a lot,” Mallory murmured.

“Coffee and cake are on the house,” Bliss said, casting a nervous glance at the silent and serious men blocking her door.

“Bring me a piece when you’re done. I have to get back to the store,” Agnes said. She patted Sadie’s cheek with a fond smile and then kissed Michaela goodbye. She said something to Chase and Gabe on her way out the door that made both men sigh.

“That’s a great idea. You guys can try your wedding ca…” Abby glanced from Sadie and Mallory to Gabe and Chase. “Okay, so maybe I’ll just—” She groaned when Hunter opened the door, nudging Chase and Gabe to either side so he could stand between them. The three men shared noncommittal grunts she assumed were their version of *hey*, as well as similar *what the hell is going on?* expressions on their faces. Hunter had also bonded with Chase last summer, and Gabe the summer before.

“It’s Abby’s fault,” Sadie blurted under Chase’s penetrating stare.

Mallory nodded. “She made us do it.”

“Hey, what happened to all for one and one for all?” Abby protested. She must have overheard Sadie and Mallory’s earlier conversation, which wasn’t a surprise. Abby had a severe case of FOMO—fear of missing out.

“It’s true, Dad. Abby’s real nervous about her wedding, and it’d make her feel better if she had her friends getting married with her.” Teddy looked around at the adults. “Did I say something wrong?”

“No, of course you didn’t,” Abby said with a strained smile.

Hunter moved to his fiancée’s side, lifting her chin with his knuckle to get her to look at him. “Is that why you’ve been acting weird these past few weeks? You don’t want to get married?”

“I never said I don’t want to get married. I just…” She lifted a shoulder. “It’s been a lot, that’s all.”

“You didn’t say you *wanted* to get married either.” Hunter rubbed his head. “Neither did I, for that matter. I guess we just let Aunt Elsa ride roughshod over us and gave in.”

Abby’s eyes welled with tears. “You don’t want to marry me?”

Hunter held up his hands. “No, that’s not what I said. I’m good with whatever you want, babe. It’s not a big deal.”

Sadie winced, glancing at Mallory who did the same. This was going downhill fast.

Abby wiped at her eyes with angry swipes. “A wedding isn’t a big deal or marrying me isn’t a big deal?”

Hunter glanced at Chase and Gabe as if looking for guidance.

Good luck with that, Sadie thought. “I think we should all sit down and have some cake,” she suggested.

Hunter pulled out a chair for Abby, who took a seat and crossed her arms. Hunter sighed and took the chair beside her. Teddy dragged Michaela’s

stroller beside his chair, leaning in to say in an overloud whisper, “I don’t know what all the fuss is about. Weddings are fun.”

“Unless the groom doesn’t want to marry you,” Abby muttered.

Hunter said, “I didn’t say that.”

Taking a seat beside his wife, Gabe said, “Don’t look at me. I already did the deed.”

Mallory raised an eyebrow. “Really? You already did the *deed*?”

Gabe scooped up a forkful of cake and shoved it in his mouth.

“I didn’t say anything,” Chase said when Sadie shot him a look. “I didn’t even know you wanted to get married.”

Sadie held up her hand, the gorgeous diamond engagement ring he’d given her sparkling in the sunlight shining through the bakery window. “I said yes, didn’t I?”

“Well, yeah, but every time I brought it up, you said we had lots of time.” He cocked his head. “This doesn’t have anything to do with Gwen, does it?”

“Of course not. Why would you even think that?”

“Maybe because she’s all you wanted to talk about this morning.”

“Who’s Gwen?” Hunter and Gabe asked at almost the same time.

“Chase’s ex-fiancée, who I knew nothing about until his grandfather brought her up last night.” She glanced at the time on her phone. “Aren’t you supposed to be bringing him to the airport?”

“He heard that we were getting married and decided not to leave.”

So instead of the wedding thwarting the judge’s plan as Abby had suggested, it sounded like it might have had the opposite effect, and he was going to up his game. Abby grimaced and mouthed, *Sorry*, while Mallory reached across the table and patted Sadie’s hand.

“So was he happy about the news? I imagine he must be. He certainly was all about us setting a date last night,” Sadie said.

Chase ran a finger under the collar of his white dress shirt. “I’m sure he will be. He was just a little surprised.”

“And what about you? How do you feel about us getting married on the twenty-third?”

He hesitated, glancing from Hunter to Gabe. “Ah, good.” He must have read something on her face because he added, “Really good?”

She wondered if he heard the question in his own voice. From Gabe’s and Hunter’s pained grimaces, they certainly had. A call coming in on her cell

phone saved her from responding. It was her cousin.

“Hey, Ellie. I’m guessing you heard our happy news.” She shot Chase a pointed glance. Obviously he got her meaning because he rubbed the back of his neck.

“I did, but that’s not why I’m calling. The judge just booked a room for someone named Gwen. I got the feeling she and Chase shared a past. I hate to tell you this, but I think he’s trying to stop your wedding.”

“He’ll have to get in line. His grandson is doing a good job of that all by himself.”

“Okay, that doesn’t sound good. Listen, I’ll spend some time with the judge. Maybe then I’ll have a better idea what’s really behind this. I’ll call you once I do, and we can take it from there.”

As soon as Sadie disconnected, she pulled up WhatsApp and shared Ellie’s news with Mallory and Abby. Seconds later, both women stared at her, their mouths hanging open.

“Is something wrong?” Chase asked.

“Other than the men we love not wanting to marry us, you mean?” Abby said, pushing back her chair. “But don’t worry, we can have perfectly wonderful weddings without you guys. We’ll just marry ourselves, if we have to. Come on, ladies, we need to pick out your dresses asap or they won’t be in on time.”

Chapter Six

Chase stared out the bakery window at the three women and his daughter heading down Main Street. “What just happened?”

“You messed up,” Teddy said around a mouthful of cake.

“He’s right,” Hunter said. “What were you thinking not telling Sadie about your ex-fiancée?”

“It was years ago. Long before Sadie and I ever met,” he said defensively, at a loss as to why everyone was making an issue of it. To his way of thinking, what Hunter said was worse than an old girlfriend slipping Chase’s mind. “At least I didn’t say getting married wasn’t a big deal.”

Teddy nodded. “Yeah, that was pretty dumb.”

Gabe grimaced. “I’m not crazy about you using the word dumb, son. But in this instance, you have a point. He’s right, Hunter. Pregnant women are extremely sensitive. You have to choose your words carefully.”

“Whoa, you’re really lucky Abby and Mom aren’t here, Dad. You’d be in bigger trouble than you already are.”

“Okay, would someone like to tell me what I said that was so wrong?”

Hunter and Chase pointed at Teddy. “He’ll tell you.”

“Before or just now?” Gabe’s son asked.

“All right, I get your point. I was being insensitive to Mom’s feelings when I said I’d done the deed. But the whole renewing-the-vows thing caught me by surprise. I can see it if we’ve been married for years but—”

“It’s not like it was a real wedding. You only did it because you found out about the baby,” Teddy said.

Gabe looked stunned. “Is that what your mom thinks?”

Teddy shrugged. “I don’t know. That’s what some of the boys at school said to Dylan,” he said, referring to his eleven-year-old brother.

“Is that so, and who would those boys be?”

“It’s okay, Dad. Oliver took care of them.” Oliver was Mallory’s sixteen-year-old stepson.

“But you guys know that the only reason I married Mallory is because I love her, right?”

“Sure. But love is a verb, Dad. Without action it doesn’t mean anything.”

Gabe narrowed his eyes at his son. “Have you been reading your mother’s romance novels?”

“Maybe.” Teddy grinned and then said, “We did a class project on love in February. That’s where I learned about love being a verb and stuff.”

“Okay. So, Teddy, what do you think we should do to make this right?” Chase asked.

“You’re asking a six-year-old for relationship advice?” Hunter said, then winced. “No offense, Teddy.”

“None taken,” Teddy said amicably.

“Teddy might be six but he seems to have more insights into Abby, Mallory, and Sadie than we do. I don’t know about you two, but I’m open to any help I can get,” Chase said.

“I’m almost seven but I don’t really know much about kissing-and-making-up stuff. I don’t have a girlfriend. If me and my friends hurt each other’s feelings, we just say sorry and then we go and play. Maybe you should read my mom’s romance books.”

Gabe ruffled his son’s hair. “Maybe we should.”

Or talk to Teddy’s teacher, Chase thought. But surely between the three of them they could figure this out. After all, Hunter was former special forces, Gabe was chief of police, and Chase was an FBI agent. They’d worked a high-profile case together last summer and had a successful outcome. This was really no different.

“We need to approach this like we would any other case. First, let’s identify the crime and the players.” Chase was used to having a board and photographic evidence when presenting a case, so he moved the three cake slices to the center of the table to represent the unhappy women in their lives. “Because of our ineptitude”—he gathered up three coffee cups and lined them up to the side of the plates—“we’ve given Sadie, Mallory, and Abby the impression that we don’t want to get married on the twenty-third.”

The laughter Hunter was obviously trying to hold back came out in his voice. “I’m beginning to understand why you didn’t think it was necessary to

tell Sadie about your ex-fiancée.”

Chase wasn't sure what Hunter meant by that, but at least Hunter now understood where Chase had been coming from. However, it wasn't Hunter he needed to convince. But if they could solve this problem, Chase was positive everything else would fall into place. “We need to stay focused. It all comes down to convincing Sadie, Mallory, and Abby that we're on board with their wedding plans. Now we just have to figure—”

“But are we on board with all of us getting married on the twenty-third?” Gabe said, moving one of the coffee cups out of line. “Mallory, Abby, and Sadie are smart. If we're just going through the motions to make them happy, they'll see right through us, and we could wind up making things worse.”

“You have a point.” Chase nudged the coffee cup Gabe had moved back in line with the others. “So I guess the question is: Do our reasons for not getting married on the twenty-third outweigh our objective to make the women we love happy? I can only speak for myself, but I don't have an issue with it. If Sadie wanted to get married today, I would.”

“I guess my only issue is that Mallory and I are already married,” Gabe said. “I thought it was a nice wedding, private and kind of romantic. But after what Teddy said, maybe I was wrong. So yeah, I'm good with whatever makes Mallory happy.”

“Honestly, since all this wedding crap began, Abby hasn't been happy. She hasn't been acting like herself. But if the three of them getting married on the same day makes her happy, I'm game,” Hunter said.

“Good, so we're all agreed.” Except Chase felt like he was missing something. He went back over each of their responses to his question, and then his gaze went to the slices of cake. He picked up his fork, using it like a pointer. “Cake is beautiful. It smells amazing, tastes even better. Eating cake is an emotional experience.” He moved his pointer. “Coffee cups are solid, stoic, and—”

“Are you going somewhere with this?” Hunter asked.

Chase looked up to see the two men and Teddy watching him with their brows furrowed.

“Sorry, I tend to talk through a case.”

“You were talking about cake and coffee cups,” Gabe pointed out.

“Yes, and now I know what's wrong with our plan.”

Hunter scratched his head. “I didn't know we had one.”

“That’s true too. But now we do. When I went over our responses, I realized we were making the same mistake. We were willing to go through with the wedding, not because we necessarily want to but because Sadie, Mallory, and Abby do. We want to make them happy, which is a noble reason. Except they’re the cake and we’re the coffee cups. We need to become the cake. We need to become as invested in the wedding as they are. If they sense a lack of enthusiasm on our part, they’ll assume we don’t want to get married, and we’ll be back to square one. And, as we’ve seen, square one is not a good place to be.”

“So how do you propose we become invested in the wedding?” Gabe asked.

“We need to learn everything we can about weddings.” Chase Googled *wedding planning*, scanned through several links, found what he was looking for, and sent the page to Gabe and Hunter.

They went line by line through the list together. “Already have the venue,” Hunter said. “We’re having it outside at the farm so we don’t need to decorate.”

“I’m not sure that’s true,” Gabe said. “Mal loves to decorate.”

Chase pulled up Abby’s social media and checked out her upcoming events. “They’re voting on the decor next week so we should probably put together a few ideas.”

“Pumpkins,” Teddy said. “You have to have pumpkins.”

“Okay, sounds good,” Chase said, and checked the box.

“Music is taken care of. My brother’s band, Culloden, will be playing,” Hunter said.

“Would that be the same brother that had me chasing a nonexistent moose down Main Street?” Chase asked. Hunter’s brother was with the forestry service, and Chase had done a stint as a park ranger when he was undercover last summer.

Hunter laughed. “Yep, one and the same.”

Gabe chuckled and then looked back at the list. He made a face. “Flowers? We’re not choosing flowers.”

Chase and Hunter agreed and crossed it off their lists.

“There’s no beer on here, just soda and wine. How about a taste testing at Highland Brew? Anyone else up for that?” Hunter asked.

“Put me down,” Chase said.

“Me too,” Gabe said.

Teddy raised his hand. “Me four.”

Gabe laughed. “Good try, honey, but we’re doing a men’s night out.”

Chase looked at the next line. “Tuxes and colors? I don’t know about you guys, but I vote for a simple black tux.”

“No way, you’re both wearing kilts like me. Chase, you’re a Roberts, your grandfather’s a Knight. You’ve probably got Scots in your line somewhere. Same goes for you, Buchanan. Besides, even if you didn’t have a drop of Scottish blood in you, you live in Highland Falls so you’re an honorary Scot now at the very least.”

“Wedding planning isn’t as difficult as I thought it would be,” Chase said, holding up his phone. “We’ve pretty much completed the list. Cake’s next.” He glanced at the plates on the table. “We could get this one done right now. Bliss.” He waved over the bakery’s owner. “Have Sadie, Mallory, and Abby picked out their wedding cakes?”

“Yes.” She cast a nervous glance around the table. “Is there still going to be a wedding?”

“Of course there is. Why would you think there isn’t?” Chase asked, surprised at her question.

“The reporter from the *Herald* called. He seemed to be under the impression the wedding was off.”

“I don’t know why.” Although he could guess. Earlier, they obviously hadn’t looked like happy couples about to get married. But that was about to change. “We can’t wait for the big day, can we?” he said to Gabe and Hunter.

Hunter, who was digging into a piece of cake, gave Bliss a thumbs-up.

Around a mouthful of cake, Gabe said, “Can’t wait.” Then he added, “This is really good.”

“I’m glad you like it, especially as it’s the cake Mallory picked. In fact,” she said with a smile, “you’ve all chosen the same cake as your brides-to-be did.”

Chase shared a *we’re good* grin with Hunter and Gabe. “Would you mind showing us what the cakes will look like?”

“Oh, they’re all the same. I’ll just change the flavor for each of them.”

“That sounds great, but would it be possible for us to choose our own cake designs? It’ll be a little more personal then.” She seemed to be hesitating so Chase added, “As you can see, we’re all excited about the big day and want

to be as involved as possible.”

“Right. Of course. I’ll, um, get you the book, and you can choose what you’d like.”

It took them almost an hour to decide. Hunter overruled Abby’s design choice, proclaiming it too girly. He wanted more of a woodsy feel, which he felt suited them both better. The white frosted cake would be decorated with leaves, ferns, and feathers, and would sit atop a wooden platter that Hunter would make.

Gabe, with help from Teddy, picked an elegant cake decorated with gold-speckled accents and fall-colored roses, while Chase went with something called a semi-naked cake that was wrapped in branches. It had an outdoorsy feel that he thought would appeal to Sadie but was more delicate than Hunter and Abby’s.

Bliss proclaimed their choices spectacular and went to make up their bills. Before she did, they each took a photo of their cake.

“I’ll admit I had my doubts, but I enjoyed that. I actually feel part of the wedding now,” Hunter said.

“I think we did good. Now to see what our brides-to-be think,” Chase said. “And yes, I know Mallory is already your wife, Gabe, but let’s just go with that.”

“It’s a good idea, Dad. Mom never really got to do all the fun stuff, and now she can.”

Gabe scrubbed his face. “I really messed up. We’d both had big weddings before, and I just thought...Maybe this is a good idea after all. I don’t want Mallory to feel like she missed out.”

“It’s going to be the best wedding ever!” Teddy proclaimed.

“Yes, now we just have to convince our brides-to-be that we’re as excited about the wedding as they are, or they might go ahead and marry themselves,” Chase said.

“Is that really a thing?” Hunter asked.

“If Abby mentioned it, it probably is,” Gabe said.

Chase Googled *marrying yourself*. “Gabe’s right. It’s a thing.” He looked up from the screen. “Should we do an in-person cake reveal? They’re just up the street.”

“You can’t see their dresses. It’s bad luck,” Teddy said.

“Right, the dresses. Should we offer some suggestions?” Chase asked.

Even though Sadie would look beautiful in anything she wore, he wanted her to know he was invested.

“Abby already bought hers,” Hunter said.

“Okay, well, we could pay for them then,” Chase suggested.

“Money doesn’t buy love. My teacher said so,” Teddy informed him.

“We just bought the cakes so I don’t know if that argument holds water,” Chase said, sounding a little defensive. He couldn’t afford for this to go wrong. “But what you said about you and your friends was a good idea, Teddy. We need to apologize for earlier, and then we should probably ask them to marry us again. They seem to have forgotten we asked when we put a ring on their fingers.”

“And I actually put a wedding ring on Mal’s.”

“Dad.”

“Yeah, yeah, I remember. It’s a do-over. Maybe you two should take a page out of my book and start fresh,” Gabe said to Chase and Hunter.

Chase nodded. “I’ll Google *best wedding proposal ideas*.”

Chapter Seven

Sadie, Abby, and Mallory sat on the plush pink chairs in Blushing Bridal, sipping nonalcoholic champagne from crystal flutes. Lena, the owner, had taken one look at them when they walked in and offered them a drink. Sadie could use a shot of the real deal but didn't think it was fair to Mallory and Abby. Michaela sat in her stroller beside her, eyeing them cautiously over the bottle of apple juice she had in her mouth.

"Everything's okay, baby." Sadie leaned in and kissed her daughter's hand. "I think she picked up on the tension at the bakery. I imagine Teddy did too. Poor little guy. Sorry about that, Mal."

"What are you apologizing for?" Mallory said. "I was the one who overreacted. I knew what Gabe meant. I felt the same way, more or less. So I don't know why it bothered me as much as it did."

"I'm sure Gabe understands you're more emotional right now. It's not like he's a newbie at this," Sadie said, and then sighed. "I, on the other hand, don't have an excuse for snapping at Chase. It's no wonder the poor guy was surprised. He's brought up setting a date a couple of times."

"I wouldn't worry about it, Sadie. Chase is a smart man. I'm sure he wasn't surprised by your reaction. Not with his grandfather trying to break you guys up," Mallory said.

"Except he has no idea how far the judge is willing to go. But Chase was right. I let my worry about Gwen goad me into agreeing to the wedding. And that's a terrible reason for getting married."

Beside her, Abby sniffed, swiping at a tear that rolled down her cheek. Sadie wrapped an arm around her shoulders. "Don't cry, sweetie. I'm sure just like Chase and Gabe, Hunter understands what set you off. Your hormones are all over the place, and you've had a lot on your plate."

Abby shook her head. "No. You heard him. He doesn't want to marry me.

He said so himself.”

“No. What he said was that his aunt steamrolled you guys into setting a wedding date. But, Abs, be honest. Is it any surprise that Hunter might think you don’t want to get married? You haven’t exactly been acting like a happy bride-to-be.”

“Sadie’s right, sweetie.” Mallory looked around. It was just the three of them. “You can tell us anything, you know. Nothing you say will go further than here. Do you want to get married?”

Abby chewed on her bottom lip and then shook her head. “I love Hunter with all my heart. I just don’t want to marry him.”

“Because you don’t think he’s your one?” Sadie asked, looking for an opening to get at what Ellie sensed was the real reason that Abby didn’t want to get married.

Abby’s eyes went wide. “Oh my gosh, how can you even say that? I thank God every single day that Hunter’s in my life, that he loves me. He means everything to me, absolutely everything.” Her eyes welled with fresh tears. “I knew this was going to happen. I knew the wedding would ruin everything.”

“Abs, Hunter isn’t Chandler,” Sadie said, referring to Abby’s first husband. “He adores you. You guys are perfect together. And a wedding and a piece of paper aren’t going to change how much you love each other.”

“How can you say that? It already has. Hunter doesn’t want to marry me.”

“Take it from me, as someone who has ‘done the deed,’ as my husband says, not once but twice: the love you and Hunter have for each other doesn’t go away just because you get married. Over time and with life’s ups and downs, your love evolves. In most cases, it gets stronger. But sometimes, like with you and Chandler, you discover you weren’t meant for each other after all.”

“Chandler did the deciding, not me. Things changed between us right after the wedding. It was like I couldn’t do anything right in his eyes from that day on. The more time he spent with me, the more he realized I wasn’t what he wanted. He...he fell out of love with me. And now it’s happening again. This wedding is changing everything.”

“Unlike with Chandler, you and Hunter have been living together for more than a year. Up until you started planning the wedding, I’ve never seen you happier. The same goes for Hunter. Everyone says so,” Sadie said.

“You see, even you can tell that the wedding has ruined everything.”

“Um, no. What I think is that you’ve been acting like it will. You’re creating a self-fulfilling prophecy, and you really have to stop that, sweetie. This isn’t good for you or the baby, or for you and Hunter.” Sadie took Abby’s champagne flute from her and put it on the table. Then she took Abby’s hands in hers. “It’s time for you to put your past with Chandler behind you. It has nothing to do with your relationship or future with Hunter. You—”

“Actually, I don’t think that’s true,” Mallory said.

“See?” Abby said. “I told you. Even Mal agrees with me.”

“No, I don’t. I think Sadie made a good point about you creating a self-fulfilling prophecy because you’re scared. But you gave Sadie and me some really good advice not that long ago.”

“I did?”

Mallory smiled. “You did. You told us that we had to go through the storm to find our rainbow. Chandler was your storm. Hunter, he’s your rainbow.”

“He is,” Abby whispered. “He really is.” She closed her eyes and bowed her head. “I’ve messed everything up, haven’t I?”

“If you have, so have we,” Sadie said. “But that’s okay. We can make things right, because we were lucky enough to fall in love with amazing men who love us too. This was just a blip.”

“You’re right.” Abby wiped her eyes. “But my blip was bigger than your blips. I need to do something special to make it up to Hunter. I’ve been acting like a crazy person these past few weeks. A witchy, hormonal crazy person.”

“So,” Sadie asked tentatively, “is the wedding still on?”

“Yes. I mean, I think so. If that’s what Hunter wants.” She looked from Sadie to Mallory. “What about you guys? I kind of steamrolled you into agreeing to get married on the twenty-third, just like Elsa did to me and Hunter.” She held up her hand. “Before you answer, I want you to know that today was the most fun I had planning the wedding. There’s nothing I’d love more than for the three of us to get married on the same day. And it has nothing to do with the number of views and subscribers for my channel going through the roof.”

“I’m sure.” Sadie laughed. “But I’m game if Chase is.”

Mallory rolled her eyes. “That’s as romantic as Gabe saying we did the deed.” She smiled. “But if Gabe is good with it, so am I.”

“Yay!” Abby pulled them in for a hug.

Michaela, who'd dozed off, jerked awake and started clapping.

"Oh my gosh, we have to get her a dress too. We'll have to call Cutie Patootie." Abby grinned, hugging them again. "We're going to have a blast. Once we get Hunter, Gabe, and Chase on board, that is."

The three of them turned as the bells over the door chimed, watching as a stream of women filed into Blushing Bridal. The majority of them were members of the Sisterhood, a group of the town's most influential women. Sadie, Abby, and Mallory were also members.

Before they could ask what was going on, Hunter's Aunt Elsa said, "I just got off the phone with that new reporter at the *Herald*. He said the wedding is canceled."

Abby blinked. "What? Where did he hear that?"

Babs, who was not a member of the Sisterhood, said, "That's what I asked him when he called me for a quote. I'm the *Herald's* go-to person for the inside scoop, so you can imagine my surprise when he scooped me. Anyway, he said that his source was a close family member."

"Don't look at me," Elsa said. "I've been campaigning for this wedding since the two of them moved in together. Long before I found out about the baby."

"It wasn't me," Sadie's grandmother said. "I've got my dress picked out, and Colin is renting a tux as we speak." Colin and Agnes had been dating for several months and seemed to be serious.

"Since it wasn't Chase, Hunter, or Gabe—" Sadie began.

"Remember our blip? We can't know that for sure." Abby slumped in her chair.

"Yes, we can. Reporters use precise language. He would have said it was one of the grooms, not a close family member," Sadie said. "And I bet I know exactly who he got the quote from." Just as she was about to text her cousin, Ellie rushed into the store.

Her cousin looked from the crowd of women to Sadie, Mallory, and Abby. "You already heard."

"That the *Herald* is reporting our wedding is canceled? Yes, we heard. I was just going to text you to see if the judge had talked to the reporter," Sadie said.

Ellie wrinkled her nose and nodded. "He did. But don't worry, he didn't say anything about Gwen."

When several of the women, including her grandmother, asked who Gwen was, Sadie groaned. Ellie filled them in. Much to Sadie's surprise, all the women, with the exception of Babs, considered Gwen a nonissue. The same couldn't be said for the judge.

"We need to get him on board," Elsa said, and the other women agreed.

"Sadie, do you know why he has a problem with you?" asked Winter Johnson, the mayor and one of the founding members of the Sisterhood.

"I think I might be able to shed some light on that," Ellie said. "The judge hoped that Chase would marry someone like his grandmother. He credits her for his successful career."

"Ah, I see." Elsa nodded. "So that's where this Gwen person comes in. She lives in Washington and has the connections the judge believes his grandson needs."

"Yes, and the judge believes that one day Chase will regret giving up his chance of having a high-powered career," Ellie said.

"If you ask me, the judge should take a good long look at his life. His fancy career didn't seem to make him a happy man. His wife and his grandson did."

Sadie smiled at her grandmother. It was just like Agnes to get at the heart of the matter.

"All right, ladies. We have our work cut out for us and not a lot of time," Elsa said. "The judge needs to get a life. We need to find him a place to live and some friends, and a new love interest wouldn't hurt either."

"Jonathan seems happy at the inn, and I'm more than happy for him to stay there. He's company for my grandfather," Ellie said.

And Sadie was sure her cousin could use the guaranteed income from the room rental. Ellie's grandfather had let the inn fall into disrepair. It was a bone of contention between Ellie and her mother, who wanted to sell the inn.

"All right, we have a place for the judge to live for now, and a friend, but I think we can hunt him up some more. So now we just need a love interest. Any suggestions?" Elsa asked.

"Don't look at me," Sadie's grandmother said. "I'm already taken."

"What about Zia Maria?" Ellie suggested. "The judge loves Italian food."

"Perfect. Now girls, pose with your champagne flutes in the air, and I'll take a photo and send it to that reporter." Elsa held up her phone and then lowered it. "Since the reporter's quoting Chase's grandfather, maybe we

should get the grooms in the picture.”

“I think we’d better talk to them first,” Abby said. “We had a small... really small”—she pinched her thumb and forefinger together—“disagreement earlier at the bakery. We just need to sort a few things out.”

Several phones started pinging with incoming texts. Ellie looked up from her screen and grinned. “I think Mallory and Gabe’s disagreement is all sorted. I’ve just had a special reservation made for this evening that I should go and take care of.”

“Really?” Mallory ducked her head with a smile, her cheeks pink.

Agnes looked up from her phone. “And it looks like my little sweetheart is spending the night with me. Seems Chase has plans for you, girlie.”

Her grandmother’s news burst the bubble of worries and fears that had been growing in Sadie’s chest since they’d left the bakery. She felt like she was floating. But the smile that was spreading across her face fell when Abby, who was staring at her screen, began crying.

“What’s wrong?” Sadie and Mallory asked at almost the same time.

“Hun...Hunter canceled the cake my subscribers picked.” She held up her phone. “He picked this one instead.” She was crying so hard that it was difficult to make out what she said, but it sounded like Hunter was also going to carve the cake stand. “He...he really does want to marry me.” Abby’s phone pinged two more times, and she hiccupped on a laugh. “Chase and Gabe picked yours too.” She turned the screen to show Sadie and Mallory, and then pulled them in for a hug. “They really do want to marry us.”

“Why are the three of them carrying on like that?”

“Pregnancy hormones,” the mayor said. “I cried at the drop of a hat.”

There were murmurs of agreement, and then Babs said, “Wait a minute. Sadie isn’t pregnant, is she?”

Chapter Eight

Chase began to second-guess his wedding proposal idea the moment he saddled up Lula Belle. The white horse belonged to Agnes and played the starring role in Sadie's children's book series, *Lula Belle the Unicorn*.

After several tries, Chase had managed to attach the gold unicorn horn but his attempt at weaving wildflowers into the horse's mane and tail had only served to irritate Lula Belle. Chase and the horse were already on shaky ground so he didn't think it was in his best interests to further tick off Lula Belle, especially since he was a novice rider.

From where he now sat on the horse in the meadow, half-hidden by a tree, Chase watched for Sadie's SUV. His phone pinged with an incoming message. Lula Belle shook her mane and then went back to beheading the yellow flowers in the meadow. Chase gingerly adjusted the unicorn horn that had slid over her eye before retrieving his phone from the back pocket of his jeans.

He opened WhatsApp and checked out Hunter's latest text, smiling at the photo of Bella and Wolf, the couple's dogs. Bella, a tiny Yorkshire terrier, wore a pink frilly dress with a sign around her neck that read *Marry Me*. Beside her, Wolf, a white dog who was actually part wolf, wore a tuxedo with a sign around his neck that read *On October 23*.

Above the photo, Hunter texted:

She said yes.

Chase replied with a thumbs-up and a smiley-face emoji. Seconds later, Gabe did the same.

Gabe followed up with a photo of a bed covered in red rose petals and then a selfie of him and Mallory sitting at a small table on a balcony,

enjoying a candlelight dinner with a view of Mirror Lake in the background. From the smiles on the couple's faces, Mallory had said yes too. Which Gabe confirmed seconds later. Both Chase and Hunter responded with thumbs-ups and smiley-face emojis.

They were followed by a text from Hunter:

Seriously? Emojis? How about 'You rocked it'? Or 'Best proposals ever'?

Then another text from Hunter:

Sorry. Abby got hold of my phone.

Chase laughed and texted Abby's suggestions to both Hunter's and Gabe's phones, adding fireworks and a couple of confetti horns. Then he typed, *Still waiting for my bride-to-be*. Raising his hand, he took a selfie of himself sitting on Lula Belle. Seconds after he'd posted the photo to their group chat, he received a line of laughing/crying emojis from each of his friends.

Lose the shirt, Fabio.

Chase glanced down at the white Henley he wore and typed, *Who's Fabio?*

How should I know? That was Abby again. Please keep your shirt on.

Then Gabe wrote:

A male romance-novel cover model. But don't listen to Abby. You're going to rock your proposal, Chase.

Just FYI, I do not read romance novels. That was Mallory.

Chase typed, *This is a private group chat. Keep your phones with you at all times*. He added a wedding chapel and a bride emoji so Hunter and Gabe

would get his point. They were using the group chat to discuss their wedding plans.

At the sound of a car driving down the gravel road, he looked up from the screen. It was Sadie. He stuck the phone in his back pocket and gathered up the reins. “Okay, Lula Belle. It’s showtime.” He gently nudged her sides with the heels of his hiking boots to get her moving as Sadie’s SUV approached. “Come on, girl. Stop eating. We’re going to miss our window of opportunity.” He tugged on the reins, and Lula Belle stamped her right hoof without lifting her head.

Sadie’s SUV drove by.

Chase opened the saddlebag and pulled out an apple, leaning over to give Lula Belle a look at what he had in his hand. She gave the apple the side-eye.

“You want it, girl. You know you do.” He drew his arm back and pitched it a solid ten yards in a straight line down the meadow. “Yes,” he said when the horse lifted her head. But his *yes* quickly turned into a *no* when Lula Belle took off at a gallop instead of the easy trot he’d envisioned.

They passed Sadie’s SUV. Chase, who was hanging on for dear life at that point, didn’t dare raise his hand to wave. “Whoa, Lula Belle. Whoa.” He tugged harder on the reins. The landscape whizzed by. “I said whoa, not go!” he shouted, as they raced past the cottage.

Up ahead, a downed tree loomed in their path. Chase frantically tugged on the right rein to get the horse to change direction before it was too late. A sharp whistle rent the air. Lula Belle stopped short less than a foot from the tree. Chase slid sideways off the saddle.

Heart hammering, Chase was pulling himself upright when Lula Belle started moving again. He was relieved she appeared to be heading back the way they’d come, but he was ready for the ride to end. “Whoa, girl. Whoa. Stop!” he shouted when she shot off at a gallop. Hanging sideways off the saddle, wildflowers slapping him in the face, Chase made out the woman he loved running toward them.

“Lula Belle!” Sadie called, and then whistled.

The horse came to a dead stop. Chase slid the rest of the way out of the saddle, landing flat on his back in the meadow. Breathless, Sadie ran to stand over him, phone in her hand, tears streaming down her face. She dropped to her knees at his side. “Honey, are you okay?”

He raised a hand to her face. “Other than a little battered and bruised, I’m

fine.” His ego was certainly battered and bruised, but he doubted the rest of him was.

Her shoulders were shaking, and that’s when he realized the tears on her face weren’t from fear but from laughter. If there was any doubt, the gurgle in her voice when she confirmed that he was all right alleviated it. She must have called emergency services.

“You can cancel the ambulance.”

She lay down beside him on her back and held up her phone. Gabe and Mallory and Hunter and Abby appeared in boxes on the screen. They were laughing hysterically.

“Best proposal ever, bro,” Hunter said, swiping tears from his face.

“No way anyone will top that,” Gabe said.

Chase stabbed the phone with his finger, ending the call.

“I’m sorry but I had to call them. It was just too—” She broke off when Lula Belle came over to nuzzle his cheek, her unicorn horn falling off her head and onto his face.

Chase sighed, turning his head to look at Sadie, who buried her face in his chest, no doubt in an attempt to muffle her laughter. She raised a finger. “Just give me a minute to get—”

“I was going for a romantic proposal, you know. Not one that would send you and our friends into fits of laughter.”

Lifting her head from his chest, Sadie smiled and wiped the tears from her face. “I’d take an unforgettable proposal over a romantic one any day of the week. Besides,” she said, pressing a sweet kiss to his cheek, “you did romantic the first time.”

“Are you forgetting I fell out of the rowboat?”

She pressed her lips together, her eyes sparkling with amusement. “Don’t make me laugh again. My stomach muscles can’t take it.”

“You’re so beautiful.” He took her hand, pressing a kiss to her knuckles. “Especially when you laugh.”

“You’re the only man who’s ever made me laugh, Chase. I’m happier with you in my life than I’ve ever been or than I ever thought I could possibly—”

“Hold that thought.” He released her hand and pushed himself to his feet. Hiding his pained grimace, he did his best to walk to Lula Belle without a limp.

“You are so hurt,” Sadie said, getting up to come to his side. She wrapped

her arm around his waist. “Let’s get you to the cottage and get some ice on your ankle.”

“We can’t. You’ll miss the best part of my proposal.”

“Better than you riding Lula Belle?”

“Yes, especially considering how that turned out.”

“How was it supposed to turn out?”

“After I wowed you with my equestrian skills, I was going to sweep you off your feet and onto the back of Lula Belle, and we were going to ride to Blue Mountain and—”

“Watch the sun set over the valley. Oh, Chase, that was an extremely sweet and romantic idea.” She wrapped her other arm around him and tipped her head back. “But you didn’t need to propose to me again. You have nothing to make up to me for. If anything, I’m the one who should be going all out with a romantic proposal after the way I acted. I’m really sorry, you know.”

“You have nothing to apologize for. But I wouldn’t say no to you making it up to me tonight. Say in that little red number you bought from Blushing Bridal.” He waggled his eyebrows.

“Oh, Mr. Roberts, you can count on getting very lucky tonight.”

An hour later, Chase sat with Sadie on the rock that jutted out over the valley. At least this part of his proposal had gone as planned.

Sadie sniffed as she looked through the photo album. “How did you manage to put this together so quickly?”

“I was going to give it to you for Christmas but I thought you might need something other than words to convince you how good we are together.” He turned the pages of the photo album, stopping at one Abby had taken. It was the day he’d proposed to Sadie in the yellow-flower-bedecked rowboat. “What you said in the meadow, it’s the same for me, Sadie. I never expected any of this: falling in love with you, becoming a father, leaving Washington to move here. You’ve changed my life...” He gave her a rueful grin. “Honestly, I don’t think I had a life until you.”

“Now look what you’ve done. You’ve made me cry.” Blinking back the tears in her eyes, she put down the photo album and framed his face with her hands. “Thank you for today, for your proposal, for this gift. It couldn’t have been more perfect.”

He turned his face to kiss her palm and then leaned to the side to drag the

saddlebag toward him. “There’s something else.” He pulled out a rolled piece of paper tied with a pink ribbon and a blue velvet box, handing the paper to Sadie first. “I pulled some strings. I hope you don’t mind.”

Sadie frowned as she untied the ribbon and unrolled the paper. Her gaze shot to his. “Is this what I think it is?”

“If you think it’s Michaela’s adoption papers, it is.”

“Take it, take it.” She shoved the paper into his hands. “I’m going to cry all over it and ruin it.” She covered a sob with her hand, shaking her head. “I didn’t think we needed a piece of paper to prove that you’re Michaela’s father. You’ve been more of a father to her than her own since the day she was born. But this…” She pointed at the paper. “It’s important. For Michaela. She’ll know that you wanted her, that you’ve made her your own. Thank you for loving her as much as you do. Thank you for—”

“Stop,” he said, wiping the corner of his right eye. “You’re going to make me cry.”

She took his hand and gave him a watery smile. “You cried the day she was born. You didn’t think I noticed but I did. I fell a little bit in love with you then.”

“Thank God Nate didn’t notice. He never would have let me live it down,” he said, his voice still gruff with emotion. Nate Black had worked with him undercover last summer. They’d had a rocky start, but now they were as close as brothers.

“I’ll let you in on a little secret if you promise not to tell him. Nate cried too.”

“Yeah?” He pocketed the blue box, deciding he’d give it to Sadie the night before the wedding. They’d cried enough for one day. His cell phone pinged with an incoming message and then kept pinging. So did Sadie’s.

“Michaela’s fine,” he said, knowing what she was thinking because it had been his first thought too. “Your grandmother texted us fifteen minutes ago.” He didn’t want anything to intrude on their night together but he glanced at his screen. The first line of the message had him opening the text. He rubbed the back of his neck. “Babe, is there something you want to tell me?”

She frowned and opened the messages on her phone. “I don’t believe it.” She turned to him. “I’m not pregnant. It’s just a big misunderstanding. Abby, Mallory, and I got a little emotional at Blushing Bridal, and someone assumed I must be pregnant too.” She sighed. “Babs. It’s probably all over

town by now.”

“That’s a given,” he said, wishing he hadn’t opened the message from his grandfather. It was putting him in a bad mood, which probably came out in his voice. “Just so you know, no one would have been happier than me if you were pregnant. But I’m just as happy to wait another year.” This, at least, was something he and Sadie had talked about, and he knew they were on the same page.

“Who texted you?”

“No one important.” He put down his phone and wrapped an arm around Sadie’s shoulders. “And we have a sunset to enjoy.” His phone rang. He hit Decline. Seconds later, it rang again.

“It’s your grandfather, isn’t it?” Sadie sighed when he nodded. “Take his call, Chase. I bet he’s heard the latest gossip and thinks I’m using my supposed pregnancy to trap you into marriage.”

She was probably right but he wasn’t about to let his grandfather ruin their night. “I’ll call him in the morning,” he said and went to decline the call.

But Sadie was faster and grabbed his phone. “Hi, Jonathan. It’s Sadie.” She paused and then said, “He’s busy at the moment but I have a feeling I know why you’re calling and wanted to set your mind at ease.” She frowned. “I’m sure I can if you’d just hear me out.”

Chase retrieved his phone and whispered, “Trust me, you won’t get a word in when he’s on a roll.” Then he said to his grandfather, “It’s me, and you should know better than to listen to small-town gossip. Sadie isn’t pregnant, but even if she...Oh, so now you think she’s faking her pregnancy because of Gwen? Honestly, I don’t know how...What do you mean you invited Gwen to Highland Falls?”

Chase glanced at Sadie, and she made an apologetic face. She must’ve known. “This has to stop, Judge. I love Sadie, and I’m marrying her. And if you don’t cancel Gwen’s visit, I will,” he said, and disconnected.

“Sorry, I forgot to tell you about Gwen. It’s kind of why Abby, Mallory, and I left the bakery the way that we did. Ellie called to give me a heads-up that your grandfather booked a room for her at the inn.”

“So I was right. Gwen’s the reason you want to get married.”

“No, of course not...Okay, so maybe she was in the beginning. Abby thought if we set a date your grandfather would realize he couldn’t use Gwen to come between us. Obviously, that didn’t work. He just upped his game.”

Chase put his phone down and took her hand in his, rubbing her engagement ring with his thumb. “There’s nothing I want more than to marry you, Sadie, but if the only reason you agreed to this is because of my grandfather and Gwen, I think we should hold off,” he said, struggling to keep the disappointment from his voice.

“It may have started out that way, and then I got caught up in the excitement and I wanted to make Abby happy. But all that changed when I was at Blushing Bridal, thinking about how I’d messed up at the bakery and about how much I love you.” Sadie took his hands and brought them to her cheeks. “There’s nothing I want more than to pledge my love to you in front of our family and friends, so please, will you marry me?”

“Nothing would make me happier than to marry you.” He waggled his eyebrows. “Except maybe seeing you in that little red number from Blushing Bridal.”

She grinned, settling herself between his legs and resting her back against his chest. “We have a sunset to watch first.”

“You’re right, and I have a grandfather to shut down.” He reached for his phone.

“No, don’t.” She covered his hand with hers. “We might as well deal with this head-on. Tell your grandfather you’ve had a change of heart, and Gwen is welcome to come for a visit. That way he’ll see there’s nothing between you and her, and he’ll let it go.”

Chapter Nine

Thirty minutes into their lunch date with the judge and Gwen at Zia Maria's on Main Street, Sadie was kicking herself for not letting Chase cancel Gwen's visit two days ago. The sophisticated blonde was as beautiful and as brilliant as Sadie had feared she would be.

As much as Sadie didn't want to admit it, she could see why the judge believed Chase and Gwen were the perfect match. Not only were they both gorgeous, they looked fantastic together, and they were finishing each other's sentences within minutes of sitting down at the table. They knew all the same people and clearly had a long history together.

Sadie tuned back into their conversation when Gwen reached over and smoothed a wayward lock of Chase's hair with a familiarity that caused Sadie to tighten her grip on the knife in her hand. Sadie never ate pizza with a knife and fork, but moments before, as she'd lifted a slice to her mouth, she'd caught the judge and Gwen sharing a raised-eyebrow glance.

"Oh, darling, you're too modest," Gwen trilled. The woman had an annoyingly shrill voice, which seemed only fair considering everything else about her was perfect. "They never would have solved that case without you."

Okay, no one was prouder of Chase's accomplishments than Sadie. He was brilliant, his IQ was off the charts, and he probably did have the highest case clearance rate of anyone at the FBI. He'd caught not one of America's Most Wanted but two, for goodness' sake. But seriously, was that all these people could talk about?

Sadie glanced at Chase. He appeared as uncomfortable with Gwen's praise as he had been the last twenty times the woman and the judge had regaled Sadie with stories of his brilliance.

Thinking it was time for a subject change, Sadie said, "So, Gwen, how are

you enjoying your time in Highland Falls?”

“I only arrived last night so I haven’t had much time to take in the sights,” she said with a patronizing smile.

Right. Sadie should have come up with something else. But it’s not like she could ask about Gwen’s job. They’d already heard ad nauseam how important she was to the Department of Justice. Maybe Sadie should have asked her how she was able to take time off to visit.

“But honestly”—Gwen reached for both the judge’s and Chase’s hands—“if not for my two favorite men, I wouldn’t be caught dead in this backwater.” Gwen released their hands to bring her own to her mouth. “I apologize, Sadie. That was rude of me. I’m sure it’s a lovely little town. It’s just that I much prefer big-city living.” She turned to Chase. “You were always the same, darling. You can’t tell me you’re actually happy living here.”

Chase smiled, the kind of smile that crinkled the fine lines at the corners of his eyes. It was the first time he’d truly smiled since they’d sat down at the table, Sadie realized. “I’m happier than I’ve ever been, actually. I’ve become a fan of small-town living, especially this town. Then again, I might be slightly prejudiced.” He turned his breath-stealing smile on Sadie. “After all, I found the love of my life in Highland Falls.”

The judge cleared his throat, effectively ending the smile Sadie and Chase shared. Chase leaned in to kiss her cheek before turning back to his grandfather and Gwen. “Loves of my life, I should say. I’m sorry you weren’t able to meet our daughter, Gwen. She’s not at the pasta-eating stage yet.”

“Unless you blend it for her,” Sadie reminded him. “And turn her spoon into an airplane.”

Chase laughed. “She loves that, doesn’t she? We really should have brought her with us, honey. It’s never too soon to introduce children to the pleasures of dining out.”

His grandfather harrumphed. “I, for one, would disagree. There’s nothing more annoying than having a fine meal interrupted by a whining and crying child.”

Chase’s gaze narrowed on his grandfather. “Michaela doesn’t whine or cry at dinner time. She loves to eat, as you saw for yourself, Judge.”

“Perhaps. But that infernal airplane noise you make while feeding her is just as annoying.”

Afraid the lunch was on a death spiral that would bring Chase and his grandfather's relationship down with it, Sadie intervened. "Well, it's a moot point. Michaela couldn't come even if we wanted her to. Ellie took her to Cutie Patootie to look for her dress," she reminded Chase.

"Was that today?" At Sadie's nod, he heaved a disappointed sigh. "I thought we were taking her. Ellie's not choosing the dress for her though, right?"

"No. She's just putting a couple options on hold for us. She was worried their new holiday line would be picked over if we waited another day." She patted his hand. "Don't worry, Daddy. You'll get to have your say."

Gwen tilted her head to study Chase as if he were an alien from outer space. "Do you always involve yourself in the choice of Sadie's daughter's clothes?"

"*Our* daughter," he corrected Gwen. "And no, I don't. But this dress is special. It's for our wedding, and I want to be involved."

"Really," Gwen said in a disbelieving tone of voice.

"Oh yes, Chase is *very* involved," Sadie said. "He chose our wedding cake design, and yesterday he and his fellow grooms-to-be had a meeting with the florist."

"Now, honey, I told you, we didn't have a meeting with Winter. She's the mayor and owns Flower Power on Main Street," he explained to his grandfather and Gwen, who were staring at him with almost comical expressions of horror. "We just happened to be walking by and noticed her window display. All we said was that adding the feathers and ferns to the bouquets of garden roses, dahlias, and peonies would go well with our ideas for the wedding decor."

"Funny, that's not what I heard. Winter told Abby the three of you had actually ordered more garden roses, dahlias, and peonies than would fit in her coolers." And as much as they were happy that the men wanted to be involved, they hadn't expected them to take over.

"We might have gotten a little carried away," he said with a sheepish grin. "You're not mad, are you?"

"No, not at all. But you might want to talk to Abby before you change anything else. Her subscribers have been helping plan the wedding. They're really invested."

Chase frowned. "No more invested than we are. Surely they'd understand

if we tweak a few things.”

“I’m sorry,” Gwen said. “I don’t mean to interrupt your scintillating conversation, and please don’t be offended, Sadie, but I feel this must be said. Chase, I’m worried about you. I find all of this remarkably unlike you. In a matter of months, you’ve moved from the city you love—and your grandfather, I might add. You accepted a job that effectively takes you out of the running for either directorship of the FBI or attorney general, career aspirations that you’ve had for as long as I’ve known you. My God, you ended our engagement because I refused to sign on with the FBI.” She held Chase’s gaze. “I thought you’d eventually come around. I was willing to wait. Had I known that—”

“I don’t know what’s brought this on, Gwen.” The castigating look Chase sent his grandfather said otherwise. “But you know as well as I do that your decision not to join the FBI had nothing to do with our breakup. I’d realized I was marrying you to make my grandfather happy, not me. Besides, we’re too much alike. We would have driven each other crazy.”

Covering Gwen’s hand with his, Chase gave her a gentle smile. “I’m sorry. This really isn’t the place to have this conversation. But you’re right, I’m not the same man you remember. This past year, thanks to Sadie and Michaela and the people in this town, I’ve discovered what really matters. I hope one day you will too.”

Zia Maria rushed through the door, stopping short at the sight of them. Her hand went to her hair, which she’d obviously had freshly done.

“Why did you not tell me you come for lunch today?” Maria said as she approached their table.

Sadie and Chase had decided to keep their lunch date with the judge and Gwen between them and made the reservations in another name. They’d known exactly what would happen if anyone in town had found out about it.

“I would have made you something special.” Maria glanced at the judge’s plate. “Ah, now you have good taste. Just like your grandson. Did you enjoy your linguine di pesce?”

The judge nodded. “I must admit I was pleasantly surprised at the caliber of your cuisine. My only criticism is that the tiger shrimp were somewhat overcooked.”

Maria crossed her arms. “You say my Marcello cooked the shrimp too long?”

“Don’t be too hard on your son. No one else but me would notice. I’m somewhat of a connoisseur when it comes to Italian food, you see,” Jonathan said, completely misreading the situation. No one but Maria criticized her son.

Chase, who by now knew Maria as well as Sadie did, intervened. “My meal was perfection, Maria. The gorgonzola cream sauce...” Chase brought the tips of his fingers to his lips and kissed them.

“Ah, you are such a good boy.” She came over and pinched Chase’s cheeks. “Look at that face. So handsome,” Maria said. Then she glanced at Gwen. “And your carbonara, did you enjoy?”

“Very much, thank you. It was excellent,” Gwen said, her voice subdued.

Obviously, the lunch hadn’t gone as either Gwen or the judge had planned.

Maria looked at Sadie’s plate and slapped her palm to her face. “Pepperoni pizza. Madonna! You have the taste buds of a teenager.” She flicked Chase’s shoulder with her finger. “What are we going to do with her?”

“I wouldn’t change a single thing about her, Zia Maria.” Chase turned a heart-melting smile on Sadie. “She’s my perfect match.”

Chapter Ten

Three days after their lunch date, Chase and his grandfather were still not talking. The only positive that came out of it was that Sadie no longer worried about Chase's ex-fiancée. She'd actually felt sorry for the woman when they'd said their goodbyes. It had been obvious the judge had gotten Gwen's hopes up. In the end though, it wasn't only the other woman's hopes that had been dashed. According to Ellie, Chase's grandfather was barely eating and moped around the inn like he'd lost his best friend.

Sadie glanced at Chase as she buckled Michaela into her car seat. As much as he tried to hide it, she knew it bothered him that he and the judge were on the outs.

"Did you mention the tasting tonight at Highland Brew to your grandfather?" Sadie asked casually. "I'm sure he'd enjoy hanging out with you guys."

"He won't be here. His flight leaves at three," Chase said, and slid behind the wheel.

Sadie kissed Michaela. "Be a good girl for Daddy," she said before closing the door and rounding the car to come to Chase's side.

He was meeting Hunter, Gabe, and Gabe's sons at the tailor's to pick out their kilts, after which they'd head to the pumpkin patch at Owen Campbell's farm.

"I'm sorry, honey. Maybe he'll be back for the wedding."

Chase shrugged. "It's probably for the best that he isn't. I don't want anyone to ruin our special day."

"How could anyone ruin our wedding when you and your fellow groomzillas have thought of everything right down to the smallest detail?" she teased in hopes of distracting him from his disappointment that not a single member of his family would be attending.

The night before last, his brother had called to give his regrets. He had a conference that same weekend. But no matter what Chase had said after ending the call, he'd been disappointed. So disappointed that Sadie had been tempted to go bridezilla on both his brother and his grandfather. It didn't matter that Chase was a treasured member of their family as far as her grandmother and brother were concerned. Or that he'd grown incredibly close to Gabe and Hunter. Chase's grandfather and brother were important to him, especially the judge.

Chase raised his hands from the wheel, his lips twitching at the corners. "I had nothing to do with the candy apple stand. That's all on Gabe. But in his defense, he was under a lot of pressure from his sons. The twins are addicted to candy."

Sadie knew this to be true. She'd witnessed the twins' candy addiction firsthand. "Actually, I was thinking of the menu change you guys tried to sneak through. Abby and her subscribers weren't impressed."

"Again, that wasn't on me. But I think Hunter is right. A couple guy-friendly appetizers couldn't hurt, could they? I mean, who doesn't like grilled chicken wings and nachos?"

"Abby's subscribers?" She kissed his cheek. "Don't worry though, I defended you in our *Abby Does Highland Falls* video chat."

"You mean your What Are the Groomzillas Up To Now? segment." He gave her a raised-eyebrow look, but the amusement in his eyes gave him away.

Sadie laughed. "You wouldn't believe how popular that segment was. It's gone viral."

Michaela banged her bottle on her car seat. "Dada, dada."

"Okay, sweetheart, we're going," Chase said to Michaela before returning his attention to Sadie. "And we'll see you later." He curved his hand around her neck and drew her in for a kiss.

Which might have gone on longer if their daughter didn't start banging her bottle again. Sadie withdrew her head from the window, blowing a kiss to Michaela as she did so. "You two have fun," she said, adding as an afterthought: "And no more tweaks to the wedding plan." Her eyes narrowed at the blank expression on his face. An expression she'd come to think of as his *I'm up to no good* tell. "Chase, I'm serious."

"Have I told you how much your serious expression turns me on?"

“Not in the last thirty minutes.”

He grinned, calling out his open window as he backed out of the gravel drive, “Check your file before you go shopping. I sent you a few more wedding dress ideas.”

She bowed her head. Between Ellie, Abby, Mallory, and Chase, she had at least eighty wedding dress suggestions already. They were right though. She had to get on that today. Mallory had decided on her dress a few days ago.

However, as Sadie stood at the open door to the cottage, waving until Chase’s car faded from view, wedding dresses were the last thing on her mind. She kept seeing Chase’s face the other night when he’d told her no one from his family would be attending the wedding.

At least he had Nate. But then she remembered, Chase wouldn’t have Nate at his side. The NCSBI agent worked undercover more often than not and couldn’t afford to be seen by millions of people. It could be dangerous to him and the people he loved.

Sadie pulled out her cell phone and called Abby. There must be something they could do to ensure that Nate could take part in the ceremony. Five minutes later, she disconnected from Abby, who’d promised to figure something out. But she’d sounded far less optimistic than she usually did when coming up with a plan. If Nate’s attendance wasn’t a guarantee, Sadie had to somehow get Chase’s grandfather and brother on board.

Sadie walked into the cottage, glancing at Finn, who looked forlorn. “Don’t worry, boy. They’re coming back to get you for the trip to the pumpkin patch,” she said, and headed for her bedroom to get dressed. Her grandmother and Ellie were meeting her at a bridal boutique in Jackson County in an hour.

As Sadie pulled a cream-colored sweater over her head, an idea came to her. Ten minutes later, she hugged Finn goodbye, locked the cottage door, and headed for her SUV.

Sadie glanced at the time and called her cousin. “Hey, Ellie, can—”

“Thank goodness, I was just going to call you. The judge is leaving, and there’s nothing I can do to stop him. Trust me, I’ve tried.”

“I know, but do you think you can stall him? I’ll be at the inn in fifteen minutes.”

“I’ll do what I can. But his bags are packed and waiting at the door, and he just called an Uber.”

“Cancel his ride and hide his bags.”

Twelve minutes later, Sadie pulled into the parking lot at the inn. She spotted the judge on the dock, his hands clasped behind his back as he stared out at the crystal-blue lake. The anger Sadie had been nursing on Chase’s behalf left her as she made her way across the damp grass and down to the dock. The judge looked dejected and incredibly sad.

“Jonathan,” Sadie said as she approached him.

Beneath his dark suit, the judge’s shoulders rose on a sigh. “If you’ve come to talk me out of leaving, it won’t do you any good,” he said without turning.

“I was hoping we could talk, just for a few minutes.” When he glanced at her over his shoulder, she gestured to the Adirondack chairs. “Please. Come sit with me.”

“I don’t have long. My driver should be here any minute now.” He raised an eyebrow. “I’m taking it you’re the reason Ellie canceled my first ride and hid my luggage.”

“I plead the Fifth,” she said, in an attempt to lighten the mood.

It didn’t appear to work. He took the seat beside her, folding his hands neatly in his lap, looking every inch the Superior Court judge that he used to be. Sadie’s stomach danced with nerves.

She stiffened her spine. This was too important to Chase for her to cave under the older man’s steely gaze. “I know I’m nothing like the woman you’d hoped Chase would marry, but I’m also not the woman you seem to think I am.”

His only response was to stare at the waves lapping against the dock.

Sadie soldiered on. “Chase and I didn’t have the best examples when it came to our parents. But we were both blessed to be taken in and raised by grandparents who loved us, and who we respected and loved—love—in return. Despite what it might feel like right now, Chase loves you, Jonathan. He loves you very much.”

Again, he didn’t say anything, but Sadie caught the softening in his expression. “And while you and I have our differences, there are a couple of things we do agree on. We both love Chase and only want the best for him.”

He turned his head. “And you think that’s you.”

“Me and Michaela.” She nodded. “Yes, I do. I didn’t feel that way in the beginning though. At least about myself. I didn’t think I was worthy of his

love. But Chase convinced me otherwise.” She took the photo album Chase had made for her and offered it to the judge.

He tapped the album’s cover. “And this is your evidence?”

“Yes. As a mother, I would protect my daughter with my life. You’ve been a father to Chase, as well as a grandfather, so I understand where you’re coming from. But as parents, all we really want is for our children to be happy. Isn’t it?”

“I thought he was,” the judge murmured, and opened the album.

As he slowly paged through the photos, she told him when and where each one was taken. When he reached the last page, she took out her phone, pulling up some of her favorite photos of Chase. “I took this one a few weeks ago. He’s become quite the fly fisherman.”

“My grandson fishing? I never would have believed it if I didn’t see it with my own eyes.”

“I don’t think he could either.” She smiled, bringing up a photo of Chase laughing with his head thrown back at a bonfire with Gabe and Hunter, another of him playing fetch with Finn in the meadow at sunset, and one of him dancing with Michaela in his arms under the harvest moon at last month’s Fall Festival.

“I’ve never seen him so happy. I thought I had, but I hadn’t.”

At the touch of sadness in his voice, Sadie decided to lighten the mood and played videos of Chase trying to teach Michaela to say *dada*. She ended with the video of Chase’s botched proposal on Lula Belle the day before. The judge laughed almost as hard as Sadie.

As he dabbed away his tears of laughter with a hankie, Sadie said, “I know all the changes Chase made this past year have been difficult for you to understand and accept. But none of them had anything to do with how he feels about you. He worries about you, you know. He wants you to move to Highland Falls.” She tentatively reached out to cover his hand with hers. “I’d like that too. I want you to be part of our family, Jonathan.”

He rubbed the corner of his left eye with his hankie and then cleared his throat. “I loved my wife. She was the best thing that ever happened to me. She was my best friend, the best life partner that I could have asked for.”

“You must miss her.”

“I do, very much so.” He handed her back the album. “She’d be disappointed with how I’ve behaved this past week. I’m sorry for how I’ve

treated you, Sadie. I was rude and unkind.”

“Thank you. I’m sorry too. I should have come to you sooner. My only excuse is that planning this wedding has taken over my life.”

“And not only yours from what I understand,” he said with a touch of amusement in his voice. “Ellie was watching What Are the Groomzillas Up To Now? on your friend’s YouTube channel the other night and asked me to join her. It was...enlightening.”

Sadie smiled. “Living here has been good for him. Maybe it would be good for you too. The seniors in Highland Falls are very active in the community. I don’t know if you’ve heard from the mayor yet, but she mentioned that an opening is coming up on the town council, and she thinks you’d be a perfect fit.”

“I’ve heard from quite a few people in town, actually. Some with very interesting proposals.” His smile faded, and he looked down at his hands. “Only I’m not sure Chase wants me to stay here any longer.” He held up a finger when Sadie went to protest. “I know that he did. But he was also very clear that he wanted nothing more to do with me if I hurt you.”

“Trust me, he wants you here. We both do. And as much as I’d like to sit here all day and enjoy the view, we have things to do.”

“We do?”

“Yes. You need a tux if you’re going to be in the wedding party, and I think you should go to the pumpkin patch with the groomzillas. I don’t trust them not to change our wedding decor to pumpkins and bales of hay. And there’s the beer tasting at Highland Brew tonight. You definitely don’t want to miss that. Plus, who knows what those three will get up to? I need you to keep them in line, Jonathan. You have a way about you that I think they’ll respect.”

“My wife would have liked you, Sadie. Just now, you reminded me a little of her.”

“That’s the nicest compliment you could have given me. Thank you.” Her phone pinged, and she glanced at the screen. “Oh no, I forgot I was supposed to meet my grandmother at the bridal shop.”

“I thought you would have bought your dress by now.”

“You and everyone else. I haven’t found the one I want yet. They’re all so fussy and frilly. I just want a simple dress with elegant lines.”

“I may have what you’re looking for. I’ve kept my wife’s wedding gown.

It's very much like you described, and you're a similar size. If you'd like, I can have it sent to you."

Her throat tightened, and it took her a moment to get the words out. "I... I'd be honored."

"You're not going to cry, are you?" he said with a touch of alarm in his voice.

"No." She sniffed. "I'm..." Despite her best efforts, she cried, throwing her arms around the judge. "Thank you. Now our wedding really will be perfect."

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Chapter Eleven

Sadie, Abby, and Mallory learned the hard way that weddings are never perfect. Something invariably goes wrong. In their case, it wasn't the groomzillas taking over the wedding planning, it was the weather. Fifteen minutes before they were set to walk down the aisle, the skies opened up, the storm providing a light-and-sound show they could have done without.

Luckily, their guests and the other members of the wedding party made it into the barn in time and were relatively dry. The bales of hay their grooms had substituted for chairs didn't fare as well. Now that the storm had passed, there was a mad scramble to set up the chairs that the men had stored in the barn.

Abby had already canceled her subscribers' online viewing of the wedding, so the big screens hadn't been set up. She hadn't canceled only so that Nate could participate in the wedding. She'd done it for all of them. She wanted their actual wedding day to be special and private. No one had been happier with her decision than Hunter.

Her subscribers had been pretty good sports about it. Probably because Abby had promised she'd host an After the Wedding episode with the groomzillas in attendance—something she conveniently forgot to mention to Hunter, Chase, and Gabe.

As the first strains of Israel Kamakawiwo'ole's "Somewhere Over the Rainbow" drifted through the screen door and into the farmhouse, Abby turned to Sadie and Mallory. "I love you guys. You've turned a special day into an unforgettable one. I—"

"No. No more," Sadie and Mallory said, waving their hands in front of their faces. "Don't say anything else. You'll make us cry," Sadie added, close to tears. She'd already cried once today when she put on Chase's grandmother's dress. It was an antique-lace V-neck sheath wedding gown

with three-quarter-length sleeves and a gorgeous rose sash adorned with pearls, crystals, and rhinestones. She couldn't have envisioned a more perfect wedding dress.

Abby's twin sisters opened the screen door, looking beautiful in their pumpkin-colored bridesmaid dresses. "Come on, Abs. It's time."

Abby took a deep breath and smiled. "Here we go." Her mother and stepfather joined her on the porch, handing her Bella. Wolf was standing with Hunter, along with his brother.

As they began walking down the steps together, Mallory's father came to stand with his daughter. "Are you ready, honey?"

Mallory, who looked stunning in a pale peach wedding gown, gave her father a watery smile and nodded. Her father surreptitiously wiped at his eyes, as emotional as his daughter. It was the first time he'd walked Mallory down the aisle.

"Look, look, here she comes!" Teddy cried as Mallory and her father walked down the steps. Snowball, the family's tiny white dog, barked, making the five boys standing with their father laugh.

As Sadie's grandmother and brother came to take their places on either side of her, Ellie, looking beautiful in her pumpkin-colored bridesmaid dress, handed Michaela to Sadie. In the end, it hadn't been Sadie or Ellie who'd picked Michaela's outfit, it had been Chase. She looked adorable in the creamy tulle dress, the sash and the bow in her hair the same plaid that Chase wore.

Finn, Nate, and Chase's grandfather were his groomsmen. Sadie smiled, thinking back to the moment she'd dropped off Jonathan at the tailor's. Chase had been as happy as she had known he would be. Although the judge hadn't been as good at keeping the groomzillas in line as Sadie had hoped. Owen had delivered a wagonful of pumpkins to the farm early this morning.

As Ellie walked ahead of them down the leaf-strewn aisle, Agnes leaned in to Sadie. "Look at Nate. He can't take his eyes off your cousin." Sadie's grandmother adored Nate and treated him like a grandson. She'd also been trying to set him up for the past three months so Sadie thought she'd better warn Ellie and Nate.

But then Chase turned to watch her walk down the aisle and thoughts of anyone else but him scattered. He looked beautiful in his black jacket, white shirt, and plaid bow tie that matched his kilt. But it was his smile that stole

her breath. She blinked her eyes, afraid she'd cry. The last thing she needed was mascara running down her cheeks. Just when she thought she couldn't hold the tears back any longer, Michaela saved the day. She yelled, "Dada, dada" and reached for Chase, making grabby hands.

Everyone laughed, including her grandmother and brother, who leaned in to kiss Sadie's cheeks. "I love you, girlie." "I love you, sis."

"Love you too," she said, once again struggling to contain her tears as she went to stand with Chase.

"Hi." She smiled.

"Hi." He grinned, bending down to kiss both her and Michaela. "You're so beautiful," he whispered in Sadie's ear.

"So are you," she whispered back.

"I love you."

"I love you more."

"Okay, you two," Abby called over. "The sooner the mayor marries us, the sooner we get to the fun part."

The mayor stood in front of a wooden arch draped in peach- and cream-colored roses and rust-colored vines. The flowers looked a little worse for wear after the storm but were still beautiful and smelled divine. Sadie cast Winter an apologetic glance.

The mayor gave her a *no worries* smile and began the ceremony. They said their vows together. Chase interrupted them in the middle of the ring exchange. "I need a minute." He crouched beside Finn, taking a blue box from the pocket of the plaid tux the golden retriever wore. Straightening, Chase opened the box to reveal a tiny diamond ring on a delicate chain.

"Oh, Chase," Sadie murmured.

"I wanted Michaela to have something special to remember today."

"She has you." Sadie sniffed, helping him fasten the chain around Michaela's neck and then kissing him. "It's beautiful."

"Thanks a lot, Chase," Abby said. "Now you've made us all cry."

"I'm not crying," Hunter said.

"Neither am I," Gabe added.

"You kind of are, Dad. So are you, Hunter," Teddy said.

The judge blew his nose and then shrugged as he tucked his white hankie in his breast pocket. "There's nothing wrong with a man shedding a tear or two on a special occasion such as this." He winked at Sadie. "I've gained a

granddaughter and great-granddaughter, after all.”

Chase wiped at his eyes, sharing a laugh with Sadie when Nate did the same.

“Hurry up and marry them before they flood us all out, mayor,” someone called from the back row.

They were all still laughing when Winter declared them husbands and wives. “You may now kiss your brides.”

Gabe and Mallory’s boys started groaning seconds into their kiss, Wolf started howling minutes into Hunter and Abby’s, and Nate told Sadie and Chase to get a room.

But when Sadie’s grandmother cried, “Look, look,” they all broke their kisses to follow the direction of Agnes’s pointed finger. And there, over the farmhouse, was a gorgeous double rainbow.

Standing in the circle of Chase’s arms and holding Michaela close, Sadie caught her best friends’ eyes and shared a smile. Mallory and Abby nodded, believing, like her, that it was a sign. The three of them had each gone through a storm and had come out the other side to be blessed with the men they had just married.

About the Author

Debbie Mason is the *USA Today* bestselling author of the Highland Falls, Harmony Harbor, and Christmas, Colorado series. The first book in her Christmas, Colorado series, *The Trouble with Christmas*, was the inspiration for the Hallmark movie *Welcome to Christmas*. Her books have been praised by *RT Book Reviews* for their “likable characters, clever dialogue, and juicy plots.” When Debbie isn’t writing, she enjoys spending time with her family in Ottawa, Canada.

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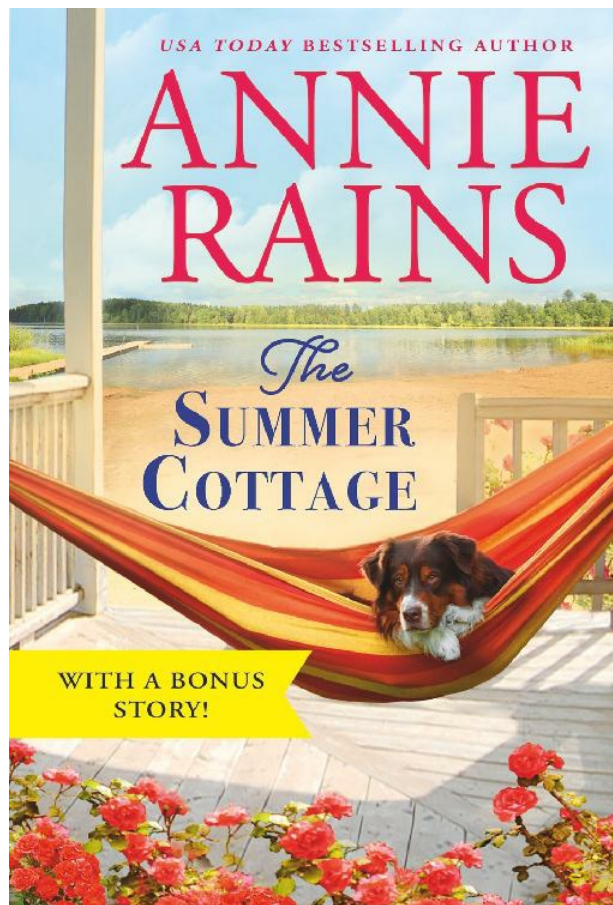
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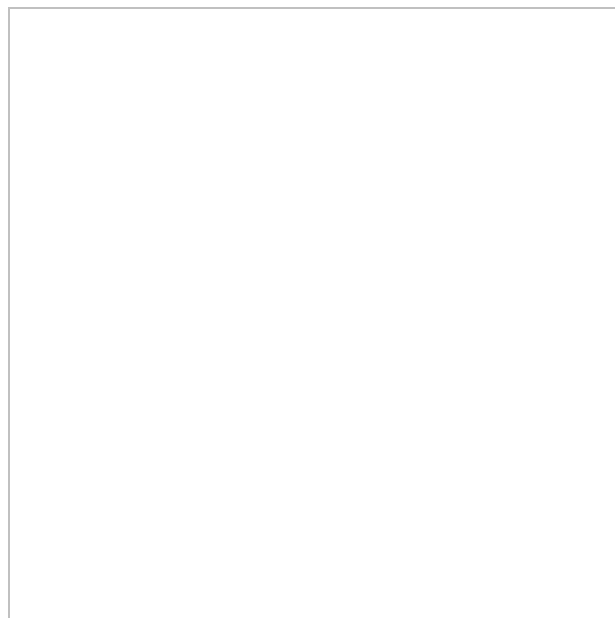
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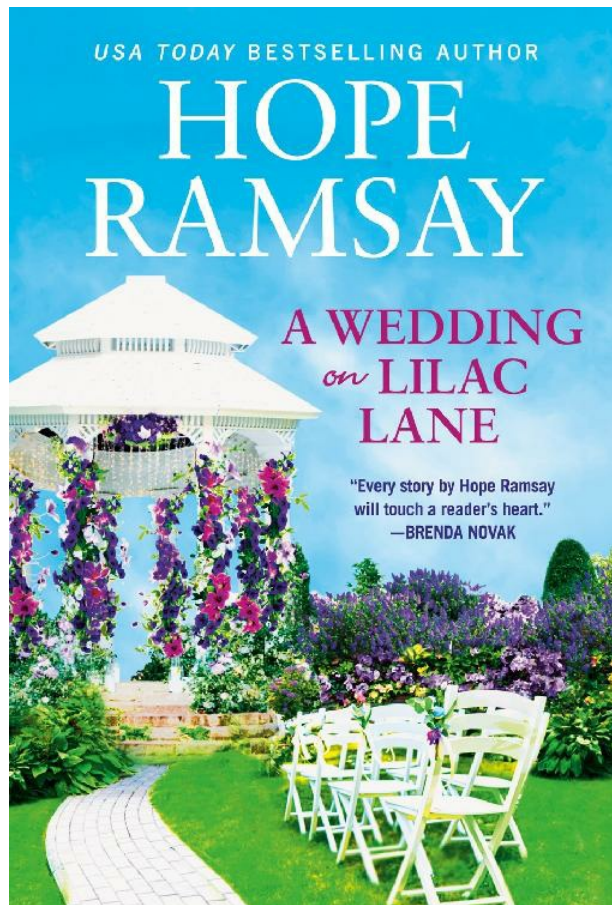
Somerset Lake is the perfect place for Trisha Langly and her son to start over. As the new manager for the Somerset Cottages, she's instantly charmed by her firecracker of a boss, Vi—but less enchanted by Vi's protective grandson, attorney Jake Fletcher. If Jake discovers her past, she'll lose this perfect second chance. However, as they spend summer days renovating the property and nights enjoying the town's charm, Trisha may realize she must trust Jake with her secrets ...and her heart. Includes a bonus story!



***FALLING IN LOVE
ON WILLOW CREEK***
by Debbie Mason

FBI agent Chase Roberts has come to Highland Falls to work undercover as a park ranger to track down an on-the-run informant. But when he befriends the suspect's sister to get nearer to his target, Chase finds that he's growing closer to the warm-hearted, beautiful Sadie Gray and her little girl. When he arrests her brother Elijah, Chase risks losing Sadie forever. Can he convince her that the feelings between them are real once Sadie discovers the truth?

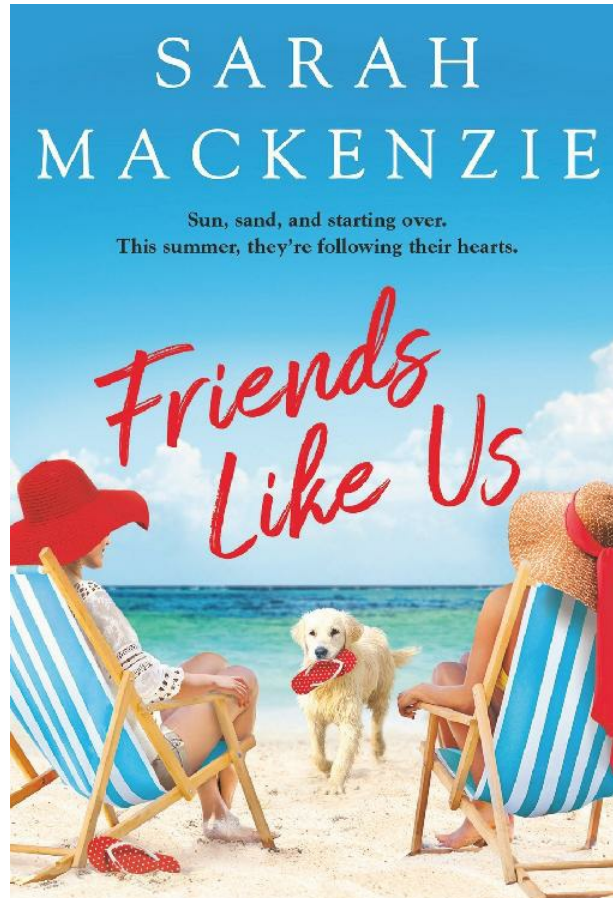
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A WEDDING ON LILAC LANE
by Hope Ramsay

After returning home from her country music career, Ella McMillan is shocked to find her mother is engaged. Worse, she asks Ella to plan the event with her fiancé's straitlaced son, Dr. Dylan Killough. While Ella wants to create the perfect day, Dylan is determined the two shouldn't get married at all. Somehow amid all their arguing, sparks start flying. And soon everyone in Magnolia Harbor is wondering if Dylan and Ella will be joining their

parents in a trip down the aisle.



FRIENDS LIKE US
by Sarah Mackenzie

When a cancer scare compels Bree Robinson to form an *anti*-bucket list, she decides to start with a steamy fling. Only her one-night stand is Chance Elliston, the architect she's just hired to renovate her house. Bree agrees to a friends-with-benefits relationship with Chance before he returns to the city at the end of the summer. But as their feelings for each other grow, can she convince him to risk it all on a new life together?

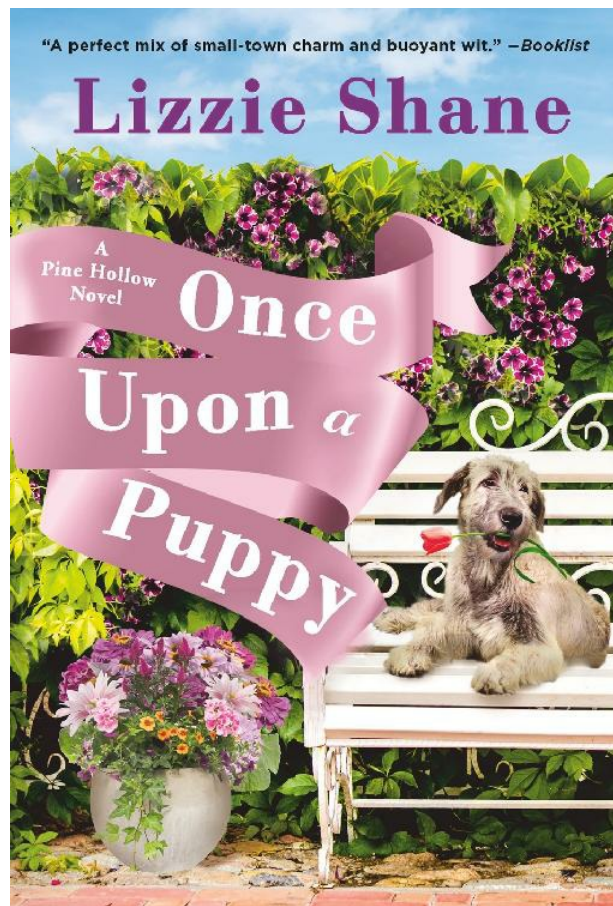
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SUMMER AT FIREFLY BEACH
by Jenny Hale

Hallie Flynn's adores her aunt Clara's beautiful beachside house, yet a busy job and heartbreak over the years have kept her away. But when her beloved aunt passes, Hallie returns to fulfill her final wish: to complete the bucket list

Hallie wrote as a teenager. With the help of her childhood friend Ben Murray, she remembers her forgotten dreams ...and finds herself falling for the man who's always been by her side. But to have a future with Ben, can Hallie face the truths buried deep in her heart?

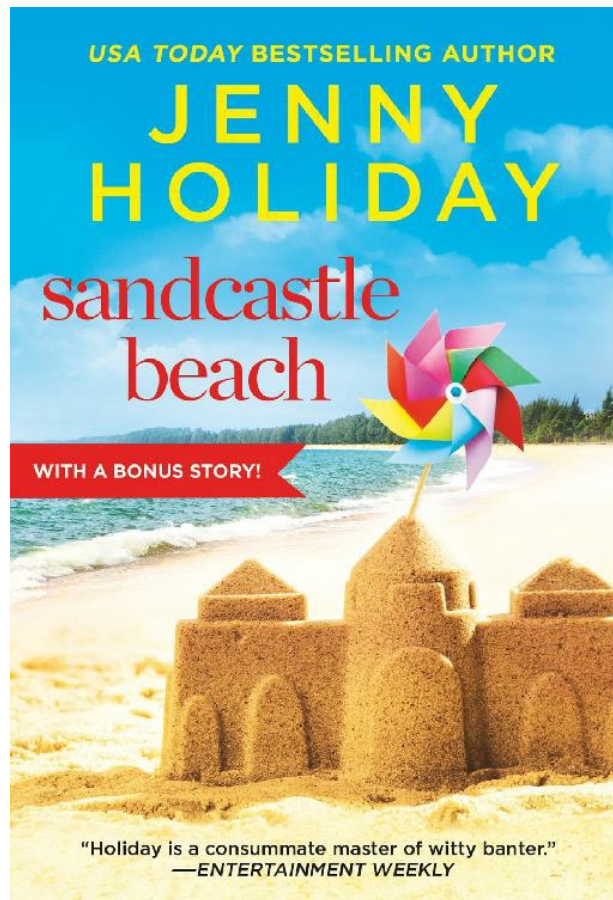


ONCE UPON A PUPPY
by Lizzie Shane

Lawyer Connor Wyeth has a plan for everything—except training his unruly mutt, Maximus. The only person Max ever obeyed was animal shelter volunteer Deenie Mitchell. But with a day job hosting princess parties for kids, the upbeat Deenie isn't thrilled to co-parent with Max's uptight owner ...until she realizes he's perfect to impress her type-A family. As they play the perfect couple, their feelings begin to feel all too real. Can one

rambunctious dog bring together two complete opposites? Includes a bonus story by Hope Ramsay!

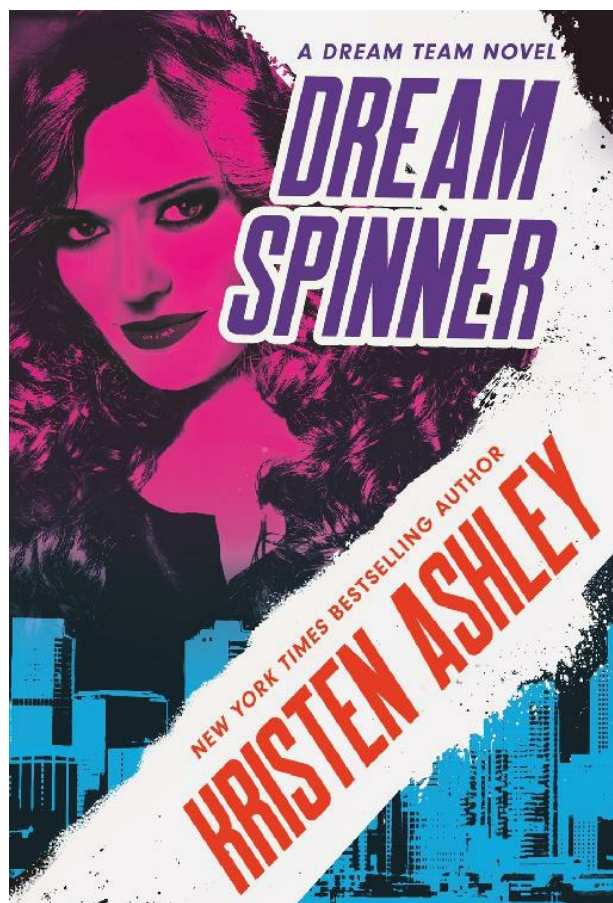
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SANDCASTLE BEACH
by Jenny Holiday

What Maya Mehta really needs to save her beloved community theater is

Matchmaker Bay's new business grant. She's got some serious competition, though: Benjamin Lawson, local bar owner, Jerk Extraordinaire, and Maya's annoyingly hot arch nemesis. Turns out there's a thin line between hate and irresistible desire, and Maya and Law are really good at crossing it. But when things heat up, will they allow their long-standing feud to get in the way of their growing feelings? Includes the bonus story *Once Upon a Bride*, for the first time in print!



DREAM SPINNER
by Kristen Ashley

There's no doubt that former soldier Axl Pantera is the man of Hattie Yates's dreams. Yet years of abuse from her demanding father have left her terrified of disappointment. Axl is slowly wooing Hattie into letting down her walls—

until a dangerous stalker sets their sights on her. Now he's facing more than her wary and bruised heart. Axl will do anything to prove that they're meant to be—but first, he'll need to keep Hattie safe.

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